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I - UNICEF IN THE LEVANT

The Noble City

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The coast on the easternmost side of the Mediterranean goes in a diagonal line which starts at the Gulf of Iskenderun in the North and ends somewhere near the Egyptian town of Al-Arish. Halfway along these Levantine shores, a triangle of land thrusts itself into the everblue waters as if to assert its presence as a watchtower on this "sea in the midst of lands" which historians regard as the melting pot of civilizations.

The capital of Lebanon, Beirut (Berytus under the Romans), is located on this triangle of land, and it is at the tiptop of that triangle, in the area called "Ras-Beirut" that, in 1952, UNICEF chose to establish its "Eastern Mediterranean Area Office" (EMAO) which was later transformed into a Regional Office (*). The choice was a sensible one, not only because Lebanon represents a turntable on the roads to Asia, Africa and Europe, but also because the Ras-Beirut area selected by UNICEF was, for a long time (i.e. until the mid-70s when the disastrous civil disturbances broke out), an oasis of peace, a sort of "noble city" within the city and a highly cosmopolitan place where a galaxy of mutually-enriching cultures, nationalities, universities and enterprises thrived in an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance. For an Agency with a message like the one which UNICEF sought to promote, no better choice could be made.

(*) There was already in 1951 an UNRWA/UNICEF Co-ordinating Unit in Beirut where UNICEF was represented by Hans Ehrenstrale (a national of Sweden) who, in 1952, was given the responsibility of establishing and heading EMAO. The latter office reported to the UNICEF Regional Office in Paris which covered Europe, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean and was headed by Charles Egger (Swiss)

UNICEF and I

My own acquaintance, as a Lebanese, with UNICEF goes back to 1948. Around that period, the young men and women of my generation were very much aware of the challenges facing the countries of this Region after their recent accession to independence from the French and British "mandates" and other forms of colonial presence (*). We were generally moved by the UN Charter as elaborated at Dumbarton Oaks and later solemnly proclaimed at San Francisco, but certain happenings, Alas, had a fairly sobering effect on the hopes and dreams which our generation had built around these declarations. It is at this point (1948) that the United Nations Children's Fund (then still known as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) came to the rescue of our shaken hopes.

We were all, in fact, very much impressed by the prompt and effective relief action which UNICEF was able to initiate during that year in favour of the Palestinian children and mothers who sought refuge in Lebanon, and this successful undertaking by a UN Agency, which we could observe at short range, greatly helped redressing our feelings towards the United Nations as a whole. Later on, UNICEF's beginnings in the fields of health and nutrition in Lebanon and the neighbouring countries, as reported upon by the local press, further enhanced these feelings, especially as we noticed that it was trying to go about its purposes in a rational style that contrasted sharply with the work systems and procedures

(*) The "mandate" system was an attenuated form of colonialism which the League of Nations had devised after World War I for the countries of the Levant.

then existing in our part of the world. Such rationality was, in fact, seldom perceivable in our social sector where activities were traditionally left in the hands of an array of civic groups, leagues and other socially-oriented bodies whose actions generally remained short-sighted, short-lived and often motivated by old-fashioned "charitable" considerations.

Meanwhile, the Middle East certainly needed more than sentimentalism for dealing with its health and other social / problems. In this context, I could, for instance, say that there was general concern at that time about the gravity of the problem of malaria, which in the 40s and the early 50s was widespread in the Region, having been seriously aggravated during World War II by the passage of foreign armies which comprised large contingents from Africa and Asia. Other health problems also existed and required complex and large-scale control campaigns, including such crippling diseases as Bejel^(*) and Mycosis in the northern part of the "Fertile Crescent", Bilharziasis in Egypt and Trachoma in Jordan, Libya and elsewhere. On the other hand, it was common knowledge that only rudimentary efforts were attempted here and there in the field of maternal and child health around small projects of the "goutte-de-lait" type which were greatly in need of upgrading and reorientation. On the nutrition front, countries like Iraq, Iran and Egypt had bountiful supplies of milk which could constitute a major asset for them if modern conservation methods were applied in their management. All these challenges

(*) A form of treponematosiis which could be transmitted by simple contact with a person attained by the disease.

could only be met by rational approaches, and UNICEF's attempts seemed to be going in the right direction.

In September 1953, I had the privilege of being accepted in the UNICEF family, thus becoming the first Arab to take an international post in the organization. The preliminaries of that included a number of meetings which I had with Hans Ehrenstrale, an urbane Swede who was in charge of EMAO as "Chief UNICEF Representative". The decision on my appointment, however, was taken by Charles Egger on the recommendation of Ehrenstrale and after a long interview which Egger gave me during one of his visits to Beirut. The responsibility which I then assumed was that of Representative to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, which post I took over from Fred Hamilton (British). For the management of that responsibility a room of reasonable proportions was assigned to me at EMAO but, due to limitations in personnel, I was not given any assistant except a secretary, Georgette Khoury, who eventually proved to be worth her weight of gold (*).

And this is how I started on a fascinating journey with UNICEF which lasted for 30 years.

(*) The daughter of a Greek-Orthodox priest, Georgette had a saintly soul and a priestly devotion to duty. She never complained about the crushing amount of work which we had to handle (see the following pages), and invariably produced a close-to-perfection work up till the day of her retirement in early 1978. I don't think that any words of praise or gratitude could ever suffice to acknowledge her outstanding services.

* * * * *

II - THE HEROIC ERA OF THE FIFTIES

UNICEF "EMAO" and its Men

After 1952 and all through the 50s, whoever visited the UNICEF office in Beirut would have noticed the exceedingly modest conditions under which that office was operating.

The premises, offered free of charge by the Lebanese Government, consisted of seven or eight rooms on the ground floor of what used to be a barrack of the French Army. The place, which was continuously in need of maintenance, was also hardly amenable to embellishment, no matter how substantial the cosmetics used. Being of the less-than-standard type, the furniture and other facilities available were in perfect harmony with the general environment. One thing, however, which did contrast with these humble surroundings was the quality of the men who worked there.

Hans Ehrenstrale, the Chief UNICEF Representative, was not only an amicable person, but also a born diplomat who gave UNICEF a dignified and agreeable image. His leadership within EMAO was probably not of the type that constantly engenders novel and thought-provoking ideas, but it certainly assumed an excellent catalytic value whenever collective thinking was called for. Happily enough, the "Team" surrounding him, and with whom he always worked in the best collegial style, was not short on talents. Among these were: Fred Hamilton, a quietly efficient technocrat who did not believe in improvisation and was remarkably methodical in mind and performance; Ralph Eckert (Swiss), a superb worker, always on the go

and bubbling with ideas; the brilliant and indefatigable Martin Sandberg (Norwegian) and, of course, Tony Berouti (Lebanese) who did a first-class job in organizing the Admin. and Finance Section. The writer of these lines was probably the least important figure in that group of pioneers (*).

I hope that the reader will bear with me as I refer here to "pioneering" and I wish to assure him that this is less motivated by any tendency for self-gratification than by the need to use the right terminology. To be perfectly / honest on this issue, I should perhaps add that one had really no particular merit in being "pioneerish" at that time, simply because there was almost no other choice. Everything was so new, and there was so much territory to be explored and developed that only a hopelessly inanimate character would have hesitated to pick up the challenge.

During the period under review, UNICEF's resources were scarce, and we had to inch our way with small allocations (at times not exceeding US\$ 3,000). These were usually aimed at dealing with specific problems and were still far from the cross-sectoral approach. They were primarily geared to areas related to health, nutrition and emergency relief activities. The Executive Board also convened in two yearly sessions at that time, and the duration of allocations was

(*) It is to be noted that Sandberg had come to Beirut after completing an assignment in Baghdad as the first UNICEF Representative to Iraq. At about the same time, two other field offices were also opened in Cairo and Teheran. These offices were headed by Zaven Davidian (Iranian) and Yvan Pierret (Belgian), respectively. Hamilton did not stay long in Beirut after I took over his responsibilities in respect of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Ehrenstrale, on the other hand, was eventually replaced by Stewart Sutton (Canadian), but this change did in no way hinder the dynamism of the "Team" referred to in the above text. The work of that team actually went on in a crescendo style setting, in the process, patterns and procedures which are still being largely applied everywhere in UNICEF. Tony Meager

generally short. These factors, put together, were imposing on the UNICEF field representatives an enormous amount of work and an impossible cascade of deadlines with no one to help with the spadework and related responsibilities.

Of Challenges and Frustrations

In my particular case, this state of "singlehandedness" dragged for about eight years, i.e. until April 1961, when I was finally blessed with the services of Fuad Kronfol (Lebanese) as Programme Assistant (see Chapter III p.). In the meantime, I had to handle alone such obligations as identifying areas of action, structuring the relevant plans of operations with the governments concerned and preparing the draft submissions for Board action (*) as well as the supporting documents which go with these parchments. Afterwards, I had to "defend" the proposals vis-à-vis the higher strata in UNICEF before they were finalized and submitted to the Board. For the then called "Procurement Requests" which were designed to translate the Board allocations into concrete material assistance, Ralph Eckert was - thank God - always there to help with the technical aspects involved. This job was a delicate one because it called for a good deal of alertness, especially in the selection of the right items, the determination of quantities and costs and the synchronization of deliveries with the progress of the various phases of assisted projects (**).

(*) At times, four or more submissions had to be prepared for each of the two yearly Board sessions.

(**) Ralph was ably assisted by Anis Hakim (Lebanese) in matters relating to the receptioning, warehousing and onforwarding of the UNICEF hardware after their arrival at the port(s) of delivery.

Beyond that point, however, the ball again returned to my court as I had to make sure that all went well with the day-to-day implementation of projects, particularly as regards the repartition and utilization of the assistance provided, co-operation with sister Agencies and, last but not least, attainment of objectives. With all this on my arms, I was often unhappy with myself and with my not being able to give all the attention I would have liked to give to such matters as general relations with the governments served and communication with universities, civic, professional and other groups who were or could have been of help in the pursuance of our goals.

At this point, and always in the domain of workloads, I have an episode to recount which, although anecdotic in nature, is fairly revealing on the unwritten laws governing the "inner mechanism" which made UNICEF tick, and tick so well, up till now. Here is the story:

In addition to the great amount of work imposed by the obligations described above, the standing instructions called for the preparation by the UNICEF Representatives of detailed bimonthly reports on what was happening in their respective areas. Later on, this exigency was made slightly softer, and we were requested to submit the reports on a quarterly basis. For my part, I found that the first demand was completely illogical and the second one equally bad and, therefore, gave no heed to either of the two directives. In lieu of that, I kept sending my reports on a half-yearly basis all the way through as this was really the limit of what I could do. There was here a clear-cut case of mutiny but, fairly enough, I was never courtmartialled for that. The Administration, instead, took an understanding - I would even say compassionate - stand on the issue as it realized that I was doing all what was humanly possible and could not do more. Naturally, this kind of fair dealing goes a long way toward building confidence between echelons and strengthening the structure of an organization. I must say that, for my part, I kept a vivid memory of this experience.

What was achieved in that era?

Against this background of challenges, frustrations and continuous rush, some reasonable accomplishments were recorded as follows:

JORDAN

The first activity initiated by UNICEF in Jordan was a large-scale feeding operation of an emergency nature. This programme was conducted in favour of 45,600 children out of / a population of 200,000 living in villages on the West Bank of the river Jordan and scattered along the borderline with Israel. The said line followed an irrational "tracé" imposed by the fate of arms in 1948 and by virtue of which the said villages were severed from most of the cultivable lands and water resources belonging to them. The inhabitants of these villages were thus in great economic distress as they were deprived of their traditional means of livelihood.

UNRWA, whose terms of reference called for its providing assistance to the Palestinian refugees who had "lost their homes", was unable to help because this description did not apply in the case of the inhabitants of the border villages as they, physically, had remained in their homes. On the other hand, the Jordanian Government, whose resources were extremely limited at that time, could not do much either. Faced with this dramatic situation, UNICEF stepped in, and its Board unanimously approved year after year, beginning in March 1952, the allocations needed for the provision of dry rations consisting of powdered skim milk, rice, sugar, fats and the like to help alleviating the sufferings of children caught

in the vagaries of this sad situation. (*) The rations were issued on a 3-monthly basis, and the programme continued until June 1976 when the fate of arms of another war again changed the configuration of borderlines in the Middle East, including the "tracé" referred to earlier in the present text.

The following are some noteworthy aspects of this activity:

- The programme, which dealt with a difficult problem at a difficult time, has helped building up a great deal of good will with the Jordanian Government.
- UNRWA also was appreciative of UNICEF's "intervention" in a domain where it had a definite moral obligation, regardless of what the written word in its mandate said. Because of this, UNRWA extended to us an extremely valuable logistical support (e.g. overland transportation, warehousing, distribution and field supervision) without which this programme could have not been efficiently conducted.
- Efforts were made at various stages towards injecting a certain degree of diversification into this activity beyond the issuance of dry rations. These included support to "milk centres" for children and mothers, which functioned under the direct supervision of UNRWA, and "hot meals" projects run and supervised by some 30 voluntary agencies. Attempts were also made with the Jordanian Ministry of Social Affairs (which was the government's focal point in this programme) to assist certain initiatives falling in the field of community

(*) Some of the supplies provided were made available to UNICEF as "contributions in kind" by a number of donor countries. Occasionally such donations included tinned food commodities.

development. Progress in these areas was made possible thanks to the co-operation of the International Christian Committee, the British Save the Children Fund and various other NGOs.

With regard to MCH, activities in Jordan did not have to start at point zero as the country already had some experience in this field. There were, in fact, 10 governmental MCH centres on the West Bank and one such centre on the East Bank when WHO and UNICEF began their co-operation in this domain with the Ministry of Health in mid-1954. These 11 centres were originally established under the British Administration, but were in need of upgrading and strengthening in terms of staff, equipment, etc. The programme was developed at a good pace, starting with the setting up of a principal base for the project in Amman which served as a "Demonstration and Training Centre" and where regular and refresher courses were organized for the staff of the existing MCH centres and of the new ones which the Government intended to open in various parts of the country. This principal centre was eventually linked to a renovated governmental maternity hospital in Amman and to the Obstetrics/Gynecology Department of the Augusta-Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem (Arab Sector). Later on, the Ministry of Health also opened a paediatric hospital and a school for the training of "mothercraft/midwives" in Amman.

All these activities were initiated with material support from UNICEF (equipment, supplies, transport and training grants) and advisory services from a WHO team which was remarkably "international" in texture as it comprised a Canadian

paediatrician, a Danish public health nurse and a South African Midwifery Tutor. The working relations between this team and the writer as well as the tripartite Government/WHO/UNICEF co-operation evolved in a very satisfactory manner all the way through until the end of the WHO advisers' mission in 1947 when they left their responsibilities in the hands of a national team ably headed by a young Jordanian lady paediatrician, Dr. Nevine Tutunji-Amer (*).

UNICEF continued to work with the national team which pursued an expansion programme that led to the opening of a total of 37 MCH centres, mainly in the rural parts of Jordan. Dr. Tutunji-Amer initiated in some of these centres a well-structured training scheme for traditional birth attendants. CARE has helped in this particular scheme through the provision of midwifery kits to the birth attendants who completed the course. Later on, the activities of four MCH centres and two mobile health units run by voluntary agencies were co-ordinated with those of the national programme. USAID, which in the meantime had opened a school for the training of public health nurses, also contributed to the strengthening of the programme by putting at its disposal the services of the supervisors and trainees of that school in various aspects of MCH work, including home-visiting which was an essential component of the undertaking.

UNICEF also participated in the 50s in a number of disease control activities in Jordan. Of foremost importance

(*) The daughter of a Pasha (who was also Minister of Health at one time), Dr. Tutunji-Amer was probably one of the most interesting government officials with whom I worked in Jordan. She was extremely efficient, and her exemplary attachment to duty seemed to stem from a deep belief in

among these was the anti-malaria project in which UNICEF co-operated with the Ministry of Health, WHO, UNRWA and USAID.

The principal area of operations was the Jordan Valley where, for centuries, endemicity levels equalled those encountered in the tropical zones of Africa. A particularly ticklish aspect of the problem was that the local vector, A. sergenti behaved differently from all other anopheline vectors. It exercised its biting habits in the open and never settled on the inside walls of houses as the other species do. For this reason, Dr. M. Farid, the Egyptian malariologist who made history in dealing with the problem by resorting to larviciding alone instead of the indoors spraying of dwellings with insecticides - which would have been useless in that case - called this roving transmitter of the disease "the bedouin vector". Dr. Farid was seconded to UNRWA by WHO in 1954 when a bilateral Government-UNRWA malaria control project was initiated. The UNICEF Board authorized our participation in this activity in 1956 within the framework of a joint WHO/UNICEF plan which aimed at supporting the governments of the region in their efforts to re-orient their ongoing anti-malaria projects towards eradication of the disease. The plan subsequently agreed between the Government, WHO, UNRWA, UNICEF and USAID called for the expansion of activities so as to encompass all the malarious parts of the country, including the Jordan Valley. In connection with the latter area, it is worth mentioning that

(*) For this purpose, Dr. Farid had the whole valley topographically surveyed and subsequently mapped out into "operational squares". In each of these squares, well-trained and well-supervised workers conducted on a year-round basis repetitive larvicidal operations which ultimately

the operations conducted there helped opening the Valley, with its very fertile lands, to intensive cultivation of vegetables and other crops. Following that, the Valley's contribution to the country's GNP kept growing until it reached a level equivalent to the income which Jordan was deriving from Tourism. UNICEF's assistance continued until end 1965.

Other large-scale disease control activities in which UNICEF was associated with the Jordanian Government and WHO in the 50s were in the fields of Tuberculosis and Trachoma Control.

Under the former project, operations were conducted at a remarkable pace with the help of a Syrian WHO expert Dr. G. Farah. A monthly average of 25,000 tests and 13,000 vaccinations were, in fact, recorded over the two-year duration of the project (1954 - 1955). The net result of this was the coverage of practically the entire child population of Jordan. These good accomplishments of the mass campaign were sustained after 1955, as BCG vaccination became an integral part of the country's health services. Two permanent TB control centres were opened in that continuation phase in Amman and Jerusalem for the systematic planning and supervision of operations and for the training of personnel.

Activities relating to Trachoma control, on the other hand, began towards the end of the Decade. The disease was particularly prevalent in the Hebron District of the West Bank. A Government project, which was developed with the co-operation of WHO and UNICEF, led to the establishment of

The Top Brass in the Region

Shortly after I joined UNICEF, Maurice Pate, the man who founded the organization and guided its steps in the heroic days - which were also days of great achievements - came to EMAO. Pate actually made several visits to the Region during the 50s, and the more I saw of him, the more I felt that there was a sort of prophetic magnificence surrounding this man, with his dignified towering figure, his poise and, most of all, the quiet yet warm and attaching way in which he communicated with people and advocated the cause of UNICEF. These qualities assumed a very special magnitude in his meetings with government personalities and Heads of States. I had the privilege of being in his company on a number of such occasions, including audiences with King Hussein of Jordan and President Camille Chamoun of Lebanon.

Maurice Pate knew individually every staff member in every UNICEF Offices. He also remembered their names and made it a point to call everyone by his or her first name. This has gone a long way toward building up the "esprit de corps" by which UNICEF has been known. In return, the UNICEF staff were extremely fond of their Executive Director and knew that they could always count on getting a humane response from him every time they needed his help or understanding. Nevertheless, this generosity was never applied by Pate in a way detrimental to UNICEF's image or interests, and experience has shown that he knew how to be firm and prompt in dealing with potential "sinecurists" and similar categories. I have in mind here

specific cases of terminations in the Region which, at that time, made a lot of echoes within the house. Even then, however, the separations were made in a quiet and graceful manner of which UNICEF kept the secret ever since.

The passing away of Maurice Pate was a very sad event to many people, especially those whom he called by their first names, and that meant everybody in UNICEF.

Another leading figure from Headquarters to come to Beirut a few months after I joined the organization was Dr. Borcic, Deputy Executive Director, who was an authority in public health and to whom UNICEF owes most of the policies it had developed in that domain. Characterwise, Borcic was known to be a no-nonsense man and a hard liner in programming, which was his sphere of authority. In other words, he had the reputation of a sort of "Yvan the Terrible", with the difference that he also commanded a great deal of esteem everywhere.

During that period, I was battling in my parish with a number of complex projects, particularly in the malaria field. The Syrian project was probably the most difficult among these as a number of the problems encountered there were not technical in nature and, therefore, called for a great deal of patience and diplomacy on the part of whoever had to deal with them. Now, of all UNICEF projects in the Region, Borcic had decided to pick up this particular one for a thorough review, starting with an extensive tour of the areas covered. The message received at EMAO in this regard also indicated that Borcic would be accompanied by

his wife (who possessed a good knowledge of UNICEF field work, having herself served for a certain length of time as UNICEF representative to a Latin American country). The news of that "inspection tour" left me with mixed feelings, to say the least, especially that I had been with UNICEF for only a few months at that time. The rest of the story could be narrated as follows:

In the company of Dr. Deniaud, the WHO Malariologist assigned to the project, the tour eventually started in the rural areas surrounding Damascus, and was continued in the Orontes basin where malaria incidence was high. The party, consisting of Dr. and Mrs. Borcic, Dr. Deniaud and myself, then pushed westward in the direction of the sea where, according to the plan set out for the tour, we had to spend the night at an old hotel called "The Casino".

There, after dinner, the "business discussion" started, and I found myself facing a barrage of remarks and observations by Borcic assorted with a series of difficult questions which could have been embarrassing had I not been aware of the ins and outs of the situation. I took the points raised one by one and gave Borcic all the explanations required, adding facts and figures as necessary in support of my arguments. At a certain point, however, Deniaud, who was an excellent technician but not very good at handling the often subtle problems that fall outside the realm of technicalities, came up with a number of complaints, most of which did not concern me directly as UNICEF Representative, but which I had to review all the same for the benefit of not only Dr. Borcic but of Mrs. Borcic also, as she took a keen interest in the discussion. The exchanges suddenly heated up, and I felt that the thing was taking an irrational tournure on the side of my interlocutors. I, therefore, decided to take a firm position commensurate with what I was convinced of. Accordingly, the discussion was concluded by my briefly repeating the explanations I had given earlier and adding that I was not prepared to capitulate on any of them.

As I was climbing the stairs to my room after that memorable session, I could not help thinking that I had just signed my letter of resignation, although I was not disappointed with myself. What was not my surprise, therefore, when, on the following morning and as I was going down to the ground floor for my breakfast, I found Dr. and Mrs. Borcic waiting for me with open arms. They had in the meantime pondered over what I said and found that I was not wrong, and they decided to tell me so in no uncertain terms. I then realized that I had just made acquaintance with the real Borcic.

Dick Heyward, Deputy Executive Director (Administration) came to the Region in November 1955. His travel plans encompassed the three countries served by my office, and, there, he did not miss any of the projects in which UNICEF was or could become a co-operating party. This meant for him and for all of us who accompanied him more than 14 hours of work-and-travel-and-work-again every day for quite a few days. Although very tiring, this expedition, conducted in the best UNICEF style, was also a very memorable one, and not the least in terms of productivity and the amount of on-the-spot decisions taken on a myriad of small and big issues. The solving of these issues by letters and cables would have taken me ages.

After the party was over, the boost which this "epical" visit gave to the projects and to the morale of all of us was very great indeed. It also gave considerable support to the modest endeavours which I was trying to make - mainly through hard work - toward developing an "image de marque" for my organization in the three countries which I was serving. It is with this particular point in mind that I am describing as "epical" the visit in question. Actually, as I look to the future, I sincerely feel that a lot of credibility is still to be won in the field for UNICEF through visits of this kind by our top echelons responsible for programming and administration with the clear-cut design

to help our representatives and their assistants in solving problems which could best be hammered out where and while they are operationally hot. In this connection, one could recall a pertinent Arabic proverb which says, in substance, that it takes two hands to achieve applause, and there is no doubt that the hand of our decision-makers, when available in the field, could help bringing about a good deal of applause.

The image which my colleagues at EMAO and myself gathered on Dick Heward's personality during his visit described above, was one of a very firm character fortunately moderated by a cartesian logic which waived the risk of unbearable stubbornness. This meant that one could always win him over to a given cause as long as such cause was based on reasonable premises. We also noticed that he was quite conversant with - and greatly interested in - the Arab and Islamic cultures. As I speak of this visit, I cannot help remembering, with some nostalgia, the tour which I made in Heyward's company of the Great Omayyad Mosque in Damascus. That tour lasted for almost two solid hours during which he walked slowly and I walked beside him in that vast shrine of Seventh Century Islam which witnessed all the glories of the famed Omayyad dynasty^(*). During these

(*) The first of the two great Arab dynasties, the second being that of the Abassids which emerged in A.D. 750 and moved the capital of the then vast Arabo-Islamic empire from Damascus to Baghdad. For centuries, these two capitals shone with culture, sciences and art, and their brilliance was reflected in other cities of the empire, such as Samarkand and Tashkent in central Asia, Al-Fustat (today's Cairo) on the African continent, with its famed Al-Azhar University which celebrated its 1000th anniversary 14 years ago, and Córdoba, Seville and Granada in Spain.

two hours, I exchanged very few words with him because I could see that he was meditating all the time and intensely living every second of that encounter with the history of the Orient which manifestly seemed to fascinate him.

After Heyward's departure, I had another opportunity to learn - at my expense - about how familiar he was with the Arab culture. The occasion for that concerned an exchange of several cables which I had with him on whether the milk plants to be provided to Damascus and Aleppo (see p.) should adopt the sterilization or the pasteurization process. Heyward, who had seen the conditions prevailing in Syria, had (rightly) decided on the sterilization process which was then/ relatively new, but our MCP engineers conservatively opted instead for the other alternative and persuaded me to side up with them. Noticing what looked to him as an excessive enthusiasm on my part, and not being aware of the fact that I had fallen victim to the logic of my colleagues from MCP Division, Heyward thought that I had unduly committed myself to the government on the issue of pasteurization. He, therefore, sent me a final cable in which he made it clear that sterilization was the last word, adding humoristically that "he who made the donkey climb to the top of the minaret will now have to bring it down"(*). That, of course, ended the debate, with the writer left completely flattened. I willingly accepted defeat on that day, but never told Heyward that his hypothesis about my assumed commitment to the government was wrong. The wit in his cable was just too good to be diluted with the banality of an explanation which, after all, was not of much importance.

(*) Alluding here to a well-known story about "Goha", a witty personage in the Arab "popular culture" whose deeds and sayings, although ostensibly funny, often carried a deep meaning or a thought-provoking message. The chronicles on Goha place him in a misty area halfway between legend and history. The real personage probably was a likeable jest~~er~~-philosopher in the court of the Abassid Caliph Harun-el-Rasheed whose reign (A.D.766-809) was one of unequalled splendour. In fact, most of the tales related in the "One Thousand and One Nights" drew their inspiration from that era which also witnessed the establishment of active diplomatic relations between the Caliph of Baghdad and the King of the Franks, Charlemagne.

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