

THE



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18 May 1949

MAY 20 1949

To: Foreign Affairs Department

SUBJECT: Recent Information
from Egypt

From: Max Isenbergh

Yesterday, I received a visit from a young man who had been released on May 9 from the concentration camp in Huckstep, near Cairo. He had been among the group of persons suspected of Zionist activities who were rounded up on May 15, 1948. Because he has relatives remaining in Egypt he does not want his name disclosed.

While I learned very little new from Mr. X, he supplied us with authoritative confirmation distinctly worth recording. He has promised to come in and prepare a fuller report. In the meantime, I shall make available what he has told me thus far.

At the present time there are 150 Jews still in Huckstep of whom 50 have foreign nationality. Except for 35 Communists, all of them were confined because of alleged Zionist activities. Mr. X, for example, says that he was in correspondence prior to May 15, 1948 with friends in Palestine. The police, after arresting him at 3:00 A.M. on May 15, 1948, carefully examined this correspondence and although they could find nothing but innocuous personal exchanges, he was kept for almost a year. He asserts that his situation is typical, that the inmates of Huckstep are never actually confronted with a formal charge and are never given an opportunity to establish their innocence.

Huckstep is also peopled by 150 Egyptian Communists and some 250 to 300 members of the Moslem Brotherhood.

With respect to the concentration camp at Aboukir, outside of Alexandria, Mr. X had no first-hand information. He thought that there were about 120 Jewish inmates, about 80 Communists and a larger number of members of the Moslem Brotherhood, but this information was based upon hearsay.

He was able to talk first-hand about the so-called "foreigners' lockup" in Cairo which, among other things is the internment center for women, since en route from Huckstep, he was taken there for a short time. He reports that of the thirty women arrested on May 15, 1948, about 18 remain of which about half are allegedly Zionists and half Communists. Of the 18 some have children less than two years old, and in at least two cases the authorities permit the children to be brought to the lockup every day to be nursed.

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Mr. X was also able to speak authoritatively about the transfer of 50 Jews on January 29, 1949 to El Tor, a prison near the Red Sea which was formerly reserved for felons. Seven of the 50, in most cases because they protested their foreign nationality, were soon returned to Huckstep. From them he learned that prison conditions barely support life. The diet is composed mainly of cereals with an occasional small ration of canned fish. Meat and vegetables are unheard of, and the possibility of supplementation of prison fare through gifts entails so much bribery and delay that as a practical matter it may be regarded as non-existent. Visiting of the inmates is not permitted at all. There are also from twelve to fourteen hundred members of the Moslem Brotherhood presently in El Tor.

Aside from El Tor the confinement centers maintain a tolerable standard of life. The food supplied by the authorities is somewhat sub-standard, but private supplementation has been sufficient to make the diet endurable in general. The health of the inmates is fairly good. They are permitted short visits from members of their families, formerly every two weeks and now only on Jewish holidays. They have organized their own maintenance squads and have even managed to develop organized entertainment.

On the other hand, there is no heat in the winter, and last year they were compelled to make small rooms within the larger ones out of bed-coverings in order to get through the worst weather. Also, when the barracks for members of the Moslem Brotherhood were filled, the overflow was put into one of the Jewish barracks, and at the time of the armistice with Israel there were demonstrations by the Moslem Brotherhood members against the Jews, which came close to the point of violence. The Jews have petitioned the Commandant for a separation but it has not been granted. Also, in June and July of 1948, the trainees of the Egyptian Army - Huckstep is a military installation -- stoned the Jewish inmates, and order was restored only after some of the Jews were injured.

Mr. X confirmed our previous information that the Jewish prisoners were asked by camp officials if they wanted to go to Israel. This was first done at Aboukir in February. Those who said yes were asked to sign a paper to that effect, but thus far there have been no releases growing out of this development. In March, the same question was asked at Huckstep, but instead of answering, the inmates asked further questions such as when they would be permitted to go and what would be done to their property in Egypt. The Commandant refused to transmit their questions to the authorities. Mr. X said that upon this refusal to consider their request, no inmate of Huckstep signed the paper. He said that on May 7 the Egyptian press ran a story that 27 Jews from concentration camps would go to Israel, but as yet nothing has been done.

In his own case Mr. X asked 10 months ago for repatriation to Italy. (Although born in Egypt he has Italian nationality.) This request was suddenly granted only a few days ago on two conditions: first, that he agree not to return to Egypt, and second, that he give up his so-called rights of residence. Since Mr. X is a young man who formerly lived with his parents, he had no question of disposition of his property. He is certain, however, that if he had had any property in Egypt, abandonment of it would have been a further condition.

On his release he was handcuffed and accompanied by a policeman. He was given only 2 hours with his parents and the policeman remained with him even for this farewell conversation. He was not released from irons until he was admitted to the Port of Alexandria immediately prior to sailing for Italy.

He stated that the spirit of the inmates at Huckstep remained good until about April 15 when they learned that the government had officially asked for an extension of martial law. When he left Egypt on May 9 the request had not been acted upon, but he felt that the extension would be made.

Mr. X. also complained about the lack of support of the inmates by the Egyptian Jewish community. He said that the food supplementation, for example, is the result of individual contributions rather than a community effort. He said that the inmates were particularly bitter against Salvator Cicurel Bey, the leader of the Jewish community of Cairo. On the first day of Passover the inmates planned a 24 hour hunger strike as a gesture of protest. Mr. Cicurel came to Huckstep and urged them not to go ahead with the strike, since he thought it would be prejudicial to their interests. They did not follow his advice.

Mr. X said that there were three major periods of arrests of Jews. First, 350 Jews were rounded up on May 15, 1948 and about 50 more were added before the end of the month. In July and August, about 100 of these were released, mainly through bribery of officials. There has been an insignificant trickle of releases since. Second, after the air raid of July 1948 about 40 Jews were arrested on charges of signalling to enemy aircraft. These were released in September and October. Third, after the September bombing of the Jewish quarter of Cairo about 50 more Jews were arrested. These were released about two months later when the program of arresting the Moslem Brotherhood members began.

Mr. X says that there have been no arrests of Jews on the charge of suspected Zionist activities or similar charges in recent months. He said that a small number of sequestrations have been continuing to date however, and that radios and telephones continue to be taken away from Jews from time to time.

Mr. X also confirmed that there have been no acts of mass violence against Jews since September. He confirmed that during the summer violence at least 70 Jews were killed and that hundreds were severely injured.

He says that economic conditions are generally bad in Egypt and, because of the Company Law and similar measures, still worse for Jews.

Mr. X estimated that 10,000 Jews have gotten out of Egypt in the last year.

In Mr. X's opinion there are two major immediate problems: 1) external political support for stateless Jews and Jews of Egyptian nationality; 2) arrangements permitting transfers of property out of Egypt in order to avoid complete loss of their goods by Jews who can succeed in emigrating.

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I have shown the foregoing to Mr. X who confirms that it accurately states what he told me.

M. J.

Copy: Seymour Rubin
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