Preface to

Foreigner Complex

In pursuit of the foreigner complex, Gëzim I. Alpion treads in the footsteps of a venerable line of Albanians who, since the time of Alexander the Great, have contributed to Egypt's sense of self-worth. If Alexander was the first European conqueror, he was, unlike other European masters, also the first to encourage his successors to make Egypt their home and seek its prosperity. 2,100 years later his mission was repeated by his fellow countryman, the mercenary Mohammed Ali, who arrived at the head of an Albanian troop contingent to rescue Egypt from its moribund decline and restore its independence, if not its Pharaonic Empire.

The Albanian connection with Egypt is well-rooted. The Egyptian word for 'foreigner' – *khawaga* – is derived from the Turkish/Albanian word, *hoxha*, meaning 'master'. Mohammed Ali never regarded himself as an Egyptian or an Arab and he never spoke Arabic. And yet the irony is that it took a foreigner to restore Egypt's sense of nationhood. Gëzim Alpion seeks to do on paper what Mohammed Ali did in politics: release Egypt from the psychosis of its national inferiority complex, restore its nationhood, and revive Egypt for the Egyptians. And in *Foreigner Complex* he comes closer to depicting the essence of five thousand years of Egyptian identity than a thousand newspaper despatches from Cairo.

The very title – *Foreigner Complex* – sounds politically incorrect, a relic perhaps of the era when Mohammed Ali encouraged European settlers to patronise Egypt's shores. And yet no foreigner – be they the package tourist or ambassador – can escape noticing its peculiar attitude to foreigners. Egyptians will treat their white strangers like gods one minute – deferentially venerating them as sources of lucre and opportunity – and in the next as devils, convinced that when westerners are not worshipping a naked idol, they go on pilgrimages to the pagan high places of the Pharaonic cult, spread aids, and indulge in other such Mephistophelean acts which might merit a place on the hitlist of radical Islamists. Even the authorities are not immune, and come summer they carefully spray their Nile island quarters with a perfumed DTT to keep out mosquitoes, while their own people are left to scratch all summer.

Gëzim first introduced me to his quest for deciphering the sphinx-like mystery of Egypt's relationship with the outsider at Cairo's independent English-language weekly, the *Middle East Times* (MET). I was immediately struck by his proposal for a series on the productive and destructive influences of foreigners on Egypt. Gëzim had the Albanian knack of straddling Egypt's foreign-local divide. And in many ways the MET was a fitting place for the articles, at once part of the problem and part of the way forward. It was a paper largely staffed and run by foreigners, and yet one which risked the censor's wrath and black pen to report objectively on a country managed as much to serve the interests of its western backers as those of its own people. The MET was based in a colonial villa in Zamalek, the Nile island in the heart of

Cairo once the British officers' mess. And yet its journalists were *persona non grata* at the British Embassy, after they reported the cry of the bemused Egyptian caretaker of the British cemetery at El Alamein introduced to John Major, the British Prime Minister, on a visit to pay his respects to the soldiers of the Second World War who died in defence of Blighty's rule of North Africa. 'Egypt for the Egyptians,' the caretaker told Mr Major.

These were poignant times. Gëzim and I met in Egypt following the Gulf War when the West was fighting the Arab world's wars for the first time since independence and the *okda al khawaga*, foreigner complex, was again breeding fast. Egypt seemed to have surrendered the independent voice it had established under Presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, and Mubarak sounded a mere Arab echo of western decision-makers. It was perhaps not surprising that foreigners should bare the brunt of the blowback. The Islamist attack on tourists recalled the expulsion of foreigners under Nasser. The British club retreated from its halcyon days on the porch of the Shepherds Hotel in Central Cairo behind the hedges of the distant suburb of Maadi. It even removed the copper nameplate.

Escaping from the collapse of Enver Hoxha's communist Albania, Gëzim was already fascinated by the rise and fall of powers and civilisations. But he also undoubtedly drew inspiration from Cairo University, where he studied from 1985 to 1993. For the colonial campus at once was the centrepiece of the British Empire's contribution to Egyptian modernisation, and the breeding ground of the lawyers who forced Whitehall to withdraw from the East, and who in 1952 helped regain Egyptian independence for the first time since the Romans overthrew Cleopatra.

Across nine carefully argued and witty essays and short stories, Gëzim charts the impact of two millennia of foreign rule on the Egyptian psyche. He reveals how the Romans disembowelled the world's most enduring civilisation, and reduced its most sophisticated cult to heaps of stone. He blames the Romans for emasculating the Nile Valley's 3,500-year-old military tradition, disarming its soldiers and sent them packing to the fields. Rome's ultimate humiliation was to downgrade Egypt's identity – Egyptians hitherto celebrated as victorious warriors and charioteers depicted on ancient reliefs – to that of a breadbasket for the Empire.

Gëzim argues that a conquering monotheistic faith further exacerbated Egypt' s self-hate. It severed the country's links with its glorious past by deriding the Pharaonic cult as pagan. Hisham, the MET's advertising salesman, had previously worked as a tour guide in the Valley of the Kings and married one of his European charges. Yet he could talk for hours of the sins of frequenting infidel sanctuaries. He was, of course, unaware that the Prophet Mohammed had more than once extolled the greatness of Egypt's heritage. For two millennia Egyptians had collaborated in the plunder of their past, but now they seemed ready to bequeath the richest elements in their heritage *en masse* to foreigners.

Gëzim controversially argues that Islamic laws were similarly used to neuter North Africa's people. Egypt's foreign rulers from its first Islamic invader, Amr Ibn Al Azz to the Mamluk slaves of the Caucasus, continued to apply the Roman ban on military services for the Coptic and Jewish population who for centuries comprised the majority. They introduced the

protection racket known as the *dhimmi* contract, whereby non-Muslims who were banned from the army paid a tax in lieu of military service. And as Gëzim amusingly portrays in his graveside interview with a skeletal Mohammed Ali, it was this outsider who first ordered the return of Egyptians to military service in modern times, and financed the rediscovery and study of Egypt's Pharaonic past.

While Gëzim attributes Egypt's salvation to Albania, he does also allow for other positive foreign influences. In the essay 'Egyptian Coffee Shops', he highlights perhaps one of Egypt's most significant imports, the coffee bean, charting how its introduction as the favoured beverage of foreigners, its slow percolation to the local *élite* and finally its popularisation in newly-opened *qahawas*, or cafés, both was a tribute to British Imperial capitalism, and its death-warrant, for the *qahawas* quickly became the crucible where dissidents preaching democracy and independence thrived.

Not all Gëzim's articles, it must be confessed, were well received. As MET editor, I was used to complaints, most of them from the censor's office and touchy western diplomats. But I was struck when one arrived from the doormen's association, objecting to the publication of Gëzim's essay celebrating the Sudanese import of the *bowab*, or porter. At first I feared this was another ploy by Egypt's Information Ministry to attack the MET and defend a key institution in its intelligence arm: tucked into their cubby-holes under the stairwell of every apartment block in Cairo, the *bowabs* were widely regarded as official informers on the tiniest of domestic ripples. But after Gëzim and I traipsed the five flights of chipped stairs to the grubby home of the Nubian Association in Cairo, it became apparent that the *bowabs* were defending their honour. They objected to Gëzim's slur that they had been dragooned *en masse* from Sudan by that ubiquitous Albanian, Mohammed Ali. Worse, they accused Gëzim of propagating the smear that *bowabs* would punish ungenerous residents by trapping them in lifts between floors, or withholding their mail. Gëzim, it seemed, was as guilty of damaging Nubia's cultural pride as Nasser was in drowning Nubian civilisation with his construction of the Aswan dam. *Bowabing* is an Egyptian taboo not to be mocked.

Flashes of brilliance pepper the text. The dialogue with the ghost of Mohammed Ali betrays the seeds of the emerging playwright which was to flower with Gëzim's first play, *Vouchers*. The bickering of Napoleon and the Sphinx is both hilarious and inspired, contrasting the longevity of Egypt as represented by the Sphinx, with the petty airs and grandiose ambitions of cocky foreigners caricatured in the form of Napoleon. Ultimately, as the Sphinx versus Napoleon row successfully portrays, Egypt at once bewitches and taunts its visitors. Maybe Tennyson had the Nile in mind when he penned his poem, the River: 'Men may come, and men may go, but I go on forever'.

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