

December 14, 2004

Dear Friends and Family,

Merry Christmas! A very blessed Christmas season to all of you and all the best in the New Year! May the upcoming year be one filled with hope, peace, and the blessings of family and friends.

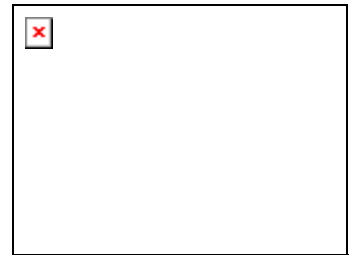
One year ago, I wrote my first letter from Egypt to you. Yes, I have now been in Egypt for just over 1 year. And I will be obvious and redundant by saying that this year has passed very quickly in some ways, but in others ways it has been a long, very challenging year. I seem to become busier all the time. The school here does not have much of a break for Christmas, and the official Christmas here is January 7. Even then, I don't think there will be many days off from school.

My first anniversary in Egypt was spent with my sisters! I was so happy when my sisters - all 3 of them - arrived in Cairo on October 27. There was so much to do and see that we were kept running the whole time and I think by the end of the 12 days (which was far too short a time to catch up on 1 whole year) we may have all been a little worn out. (Or maybe it was just me.) I spent a few days showing them around my haunts, and then we did a tour to Upper (southern) Egypt including Abu Simbal, Aswan, and Luxor. We did this as part of a tour group and had a fabulous tour guide who spoke excellent English and made the history of Egypt come alive. Abu Simbal is almost as far south as you can go in Egypt. It is the site of 2 temples that are 3,200 years old built by "the ever humble" (and I quote) Ramses II. He built one dedicated to himself and one dedicated to his favourite wife Nefretari (not to be confused with the more well-known Nefretiti). In front of the temple for Nefretari, Ramses had several statues of Nefretari built, but to make sure that people remembered him as well, these were interspersed with statues of himself. For his own temple, he placed 4 huge statues of himself in front of the temple, and quite a few more inside. Typically in the inner sanctuary of these temples they would have the gods that were being worshipped. Well in the case of Ramses II, he put a statue of himself in the midst of 3 other statues of the gods, making himself to be one of the gods. Of special note, this temple was designed in such a way that the sun would shine into the inner sanctuary and shine on the face of Ramses 2 days every year. This would happen on the anniversaries of his birthday, and of his coronation day. The other interesting thing about this temple, besides of course all of the inscriptions, is that it has been moved from its original location. In 1970 the Aswan High Dam was built. This caused the creation of a large man-made lake, Lake Nasser, which flooded lands where many ancient temples were located. This was one of the temples that was saved at that time and moved to higher ground. When they moved the temples, they were able to only maintain one of the days when the sun shines on the face of Ramses, the other was changed by 1 day and they are not sure why. Throughout the tour we were given many examples of extraordinary ancient architecture that they are not quite sure exactly how it was accomplished, and replication of some of the building feats takes almost as long now with modern technology and equipment as it did in the ancient days. Quite amazing!

We saw so many tombs and temples from Aswan to Luxor that I could fill

## Chapter 6

# Out of Egypt



several letters with the details. In all of them it was amazing to see the details carved in the walls and in many cases well-preserved. It was also hard to believe that the colours of these paintings have lasted for 1000's of years. In inner sanctuaries they carved their prayers, and in the outer areas, they carved the stories of the King's life. I have decided I want to build a limestone house for myself and carve stories in the wall as well. Perhaps when I get back from Egypt I can begin to work on that☺. Oh yeah, did you know that "the obelisk" was invented by a woman?!

I have experienced my 2<sup>nd</sup> Ramadan. Last year I arrived during Ramadan, so that was all I knew of Egypt. This year, after a year in Egypt, I noted some interesting differences during Ramadan. Someone told me that in the month of Ramadan, people consume in one month what is normally consumed in four. I'm not sure if he actually had statistics to back it up. However, people fast all day, then have a huge feast every evening. The restaurants that sell simple lunch-type meals close down because most people are not eating simple lunches. They are either not eating (during the day) or having a huge feast. During Ramadan, people eat a lot of Konifa, a very sweet dessert which is made with thin "spaghetti-like" pastry. And as a result a number of shops sprang up selling the "spaghetti-like" pastry so that people could make it at home. Right in front of the convent, someone built up a concrete "oven" to make the pastry. Then when Ramadan was over, it was torn down. The biggest thing I noted was that when going out on the street around 5PM it was very quiet. The first time I walked out of the MCC office at that time, the quiet just hit me. I couldn't ever remember Cairo so quiet. Of course to make up for that, the streets are horrifically busy earlier in the day, and to get anywhere around 3PM or 4PM is almost impossible as everyone is rushing home to get there in time for the evening feast. The quiet times were very nice however!

I continue to be busy at the school for children with disabilities. I continue to do a workshop for the teachers every Thursday afternoon. It is a difficult time for a workshop as the teachers are tired from their day and their week of school and just want to get home in time for their children to get home from school. I provide them with tea and coffee and sometimes a little snack to try to keep their attention and motivation but sometimes it gets difficult. And of course I always have to be thinking of the cultural differences. I have of course made some mistakes, but mostly the teachers seem very forgiving. Starting last Sunday, I added a second workshop schedule and so now, for 5 Sundays I will be doing workshops for the parents of the children with disabilities. (I am taking at least one Sunday, the 26<sup>th</sup> off) The preparation for the workshops takes a lot of time. In between that I still try to work in the classrooms with the children and with the teachers. I still have not found many resources for things like good chairs or wheelchairs for the children with physical disabilities. It's hard sometimes to focus on how I can help the children, instead of on all the ways I would like to help them, or see them helped, if only there were more and better resources. And of course I continue with learning Arabic. Unfortunately my wish of being fluent in one year, just did not happen. Just recently I caused my tutor much pain when I read a letter the wrong way. I read it as if the dot had been under the letter not on top of it.

This year for Christmas I also decided to get involved in a local church choir. The church is part of the Coptic Evangelical Church (Presbyterian). We are doing a Christmas Cantata in both English and

Arabic. We are singing it twice in English next weekend, before "western" Christmas, and then in Arabic just before and just after "eastern" Christmas. Unfortunately, because of my workshops for the parents I will only be able to sing in one of the English programs and probably only in one of the Arabic ones. Singing in Arabic has proved to be quite challenging and so far I am still not able to sing along all the time, especially when the music is fast. Hopefully by the time of the Arabic cantata I will be able to sing most parts of it.

As many of you know, the school I am working in is run by Sisters within the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church prepares for Christmas by fasting from November 25 - January 6 midnight. So this year, I have decided to fast as well. I however have shortened my fast. As I was invited to celebrate American Thanksgiving with some of my American Colleagues on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, I decided to begin my fast the first Sunday of Advent, the 28<sup>th</sup> of November and continue until our Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>. The long tradition of celebrating Christmas on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> does not die easily and so I could not imagine fasting through Christmas. Fasting here does not mean complete abstention from foods, but it means abstaining from certain foods, namely: meat, eggs, milk and all dairy products. (There is also some complete fasting in the morning, but I haven't quite figured that out.) In case you haven't figured out what the fast means - it means no Christmas cookies (If anyone has a delicious vegan Christmas cookie recipe, feel free to send it to me☺), and no chocolate. Fish is allowed during the Christmas fast (but not during the Easter fast). I chose to fast this advent because typically we "celebrate" Christmas with huge feasts, and tons of sweets. And it doesn't necessarily seem to help many people prepare for Christmas. So I thought maybe I should try something different, and certainly abstaining from these foods in preparation for Christmas is quite a change from the normal routine for me. So far it has been an interesting experience. It certainly makes me look forward to Christmas and the chance to eat all the cookies I've been baking, and the chocolate I've been saving☺. But more than that, it has made me consider the anticipation with which some people were looking for a Messiah. It has made me think about the despair and darkness of a world without Christ. And when surrounded by piles of cookies on "cookie baking day" and not able to indulge my cravings, I think of people without or with little food watching with hunger and envy those who simply throw away excess. I don't know if I will try this fasting again, but it certainly has pushed me out of my typical "Christmas rut" and given me fresh thoughts and understandings of the Christmas season.

Wishing all of you a special and meaningful advent and Christmas.

Love,

Gloria Dueck

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