

Out of Egypt chapter 3

28 – April – 2004

Dear Friends & Family,

Happy Easter! I know it is past, but that is the last big celebration that we had here. Also in a sense the Coptic Church continues to celebrate Easter. Let me explain. Many people in the Coptic Church fast for the 55 days prior to Easter (In case you forgot, that means no meat, eggs, or milk products, and no eating before communion.) Here at the convent that meant that Monday – Friday, they did not eat breakfast, they had communion in the afternoon from 1PM – 3 or 4 PM, then they had lunch, Saturdays and Sundays they had all meals at the regular times. Throughout the year, they fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, except in the period immediately following Easter until the day of Ascension. There is no fasting during this time. They also have special ceremonies in their services during this time as well. I think the longer “celebration” time is significant in that Easter truly is a special time of year.

The Holy Week before Easter is a special week with a variety of activities happening in the church. Palm Sunday itself seems to be one of the more important celebrations in the Coptic Orthodox Church. I went to a service in the morning that started at 7AM. I left at around 11:30 even though it was not finished, and the church was packed! It was interesting to watch all the people coming with palm branches and/or weavings that they made from the palm branches. Some of the weavings were quite elaborate. I would like to learn to make some of them!

Easter Monday also happens to coincide with the “spring celebration” in Egypt. This meant we had a long weekend. There was no school from Thursday through Monday. The week before Easter the teachers were talking about all the preparations they needed to make for the feast (Easter). I took the opportunity of a long weekend and went down to Aswan with a fellow MCCer, Carmen, for Easter. Aswan is located in Upper Egypt (south). We went by train which is a very long trip (13 ½ - 14 hours) however it was worth it. We had a wonderful time. Aswan is so much cleaner (at least in the tourist areas), the sky is bluer, and the atmosphere is just more relaxed. People are much more used to foreigners, so we don't stick out at much, and while people try to get us to buy things, we didn't feel quite as conspicuous. Aswan, being further south, did get hot during the day. However, it was quite tolerable if I stayed in the shade and tried to relax a little during the hottest part of the day. Mornings and evenings were very comfortable. It being Easter weekend we did go to several church services, both to German (I discovered I really need to brush up on my German) and Coptic Orthodox services. I like the visual imagery in the Coptic Church. All during Holy Week, pillars were draped in black, and many people at the church on Good Friday were wearing black, then for their Easter service which is Saturday night, they have bright banners, and people are wearing really colourful clothing.

In Aswan, we went to see the Tombs of the Nobles. It was interesting to see the tombs from the pharonic time period and to realize they have been there since around 2000 BC. Some of the paintings, carvings, and hieroglyphs were fairly well preserved. These were located in the side of a hill (mountain) across from the town, and when you climbed to the top of the hill you had an incredible view of the Nile,

Aswan, and some Nubian villages. We also walked around a couple of beautiful islands. One of the islands, Kitchener Island, is basically a large botanical garden and would have been a lovely place to just relax with a book for awhile, but we didn't take the time to do that. And of course, we went on a felucca (which is a sailboat). Everyone has to do that when they go to Aswan. It was very enjoyable. We went in the afternoon towards sunset and enjoyed a beautiful sunset on the water. In general it was cooler on the water. All in all, Aswan was a wonderful time and I would do it again if it weren't so far away.

Just to give you a little more information about where I live. Ezbet El Nakhl (the area where I live) is not quite at the end of the world, but almost. For those who are wondering, (based on what I told you before I left) Ezbet El Nakhl is not a garbage area, it is simply close to a garbage area. Although at first glance it might appear to be so if you hadn't actually seen a garbage area. The sisters from the convent where I live do run a school as well as several other programs in the garbage area. The school for children with disabilities (where I am involved) is within the same compound as the convent. The area has dirt roads which turn into delightful mud "rinks" whenever it rains (which generally is not that often, but this winter they had an unusual amount of rain according to what I was told.) And while I really enjoyed the occasional rain and the occasional thunderstorm (we even had hail once) I did not appreciate the effects on my street. However, unfortunately, my street seems to suffer from some strange kind of cloud bursts, or how else would you explain the large pools of "water" that appear on my street on a regular basis when as far as I know it hasn't rained anywhere? Fortunately, most of the time these "cloudbursts" happen outside the walls of the compound. Last week, however, was a different story, when the whole area in front of the school was covered in "water". The floor of the hospital and clinic were covered. Fortunately, the school is on the 2nd floor and so stayed high and dry.

I find watching the "seasons" on my street fascinating. People who shop in grocery stores or at some of the vegetable stands in richer areas of town have a variety of fruits at one stand, and from looking at the stand, you can't really tell what is in season, because they have small amounts of everything. On my street, however, you can tell exactly what is in season by what is available. When oranges were in season, I couldn't figure out who could possibly be eating all the oranges available on my street. Vendors line the street pretty much all the way to the metro (a 20-minute walk) and many of them sold oranges. Now there are still a few oranges to be found, but not many. Now there are peaches everywhere. Carrots were really good a little while ago, but now unfortunately, there seem to be less of those as well. So far, cucumbers, and tomatoes have been there pretty much the whole time. Donkey carts comprise a majority of the vehicular traffic. (By the way, trucks, cars, donkey carts, all have the same name in Arabic.) But the majority of people are probably on foot. Very different part of Cairo than most tourists will see. However should **you** come for a visit, you could see what most tourists don't see☺.

As the page is once again full, I guess I had better stop.

Love to all,

Gloria Dueck