

Sadat Antonia Pilloso

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SADAT by Antonia Pilloso

Story-teller

Cairo , 28th September 1970 : at Nasser's funeral there is a great display of emotion and despair. Young Major Anwar Sadat finds himself to govern a country shocked by the death of its charismatic leader , the object of a veritable veneration for having freed the country from colonialism. Nasser , after the defeat of the Six Days War in 1967, had left the Israeli-occupied Sinai , a number of economical problems, a critically divided Arab world. But he also left his myth , and replacing a " Myth-man" is always painful and difficult. It seems impossible that , just when he is hardly known and greatly underrated , a calm and composed Sadat can govern the country. But the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat will be an outstanding figure in Middle East history and his life will bear witness to his cunning and courage. Of peasant origin , Sadat was born on 24th December 1918 in Mit Abu-el-Kom , a village on the Nile delta. In his critical moments Sadat likes to retreat here, to concentrate and think over the decision to be taken. Dressed in his gialabia , the traditional garment of Egyptian peasants , he chats with people " to feel closer to the hearth of rural and ancient Egypt. Sadat often recalls one of his Grandmother's sayings " Nothing is more important than the fact that you were born to this land. And land is eternal because it contains "the mysteries of creation. "Sadat's family isn't rich , but non even poor. And therefore Anwar can attend nursery school and then primary school. At home , his father teaches him English. He moves to Cairo to continue his studies and in 1936 , thanks to a recommendation of an English doctor, he can enter the Abbassia Military Academy. Here he meets Nasser and they share the same ideas.

Morsi Saad El Din , the

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Story-teller

With ten other officers, he'll found a revolutionary secret society whose aim is the liberation of their country ,Egypt , formally independent since 1922 , but in fact an English semi-protectorate. Sadat dates back to that moment the inception of the Free Officers movement. World War Two is the jolt Egyptian nationalist are waiting for. Italo-German successes are welcomed as they can shake the British protectorate which Egyptians resent like a yoke. The English have a Sadat on their files as a trouble-maker and a subversive to be closely watched. He gets in touch with the Muslim Brothers, the sect who , hoping to restore the original Muslim society, fights foreigners and modern civilisation. Rommel's army is pressing against Egyptian borders and the restless Sadat can't lie idle. It's the beginning of a long conspiratorial season. But his feats always fail. In 1942 he is arrested by the English for spying , they say , in favour of both Italians and Germans. He spends two long spells of his

youth in prison where he will broaden his cultural horizons. As his guilt cannot be proven , Sadat is acquitted on appeal.

Madame Jihan Sadat

" It was Summer and I was spending my holidays in Suez at my paternal uncles' , friends of Anwar Sadat , who always told me about him and the risks he was taking , about when he had been arrested at the time of British occupation. After he got out of prison, , what I loved in him was his patriotism, I loved his love for Egypt , even if I was English on my mother's part. Then we started to meet , to talk. I was happy and that's when our love story began."

Story-teller

In 1952 , King Farouk's monarchy having been overthrown , the Free Officers come into power. First with Naguib and then , in 1954 ,Nasser appears. His closest assistant is Sadat. During the sixteen years of Nasser's rule he is entrusted with representative rather than actual power positions.

Morsi Saad El Din ,

Story-teller

When Sadat takes Nasser's place his home enemies spread negative rumors.

Gilles Keppel , historian

" He had a corn on his forehead. This is a sign of prayer. When they bend to touch their forehead to the ground, Muslims get a sort of corn. They joke was : " Every time Sadat got close to Nasser he hit him like this and told him " Come here , my son". It wasn't true of course , but it explain how Sadat was not taken seriously."

Story-teller

However these malicious rumours ignore facts. Actually , Nasser trusts Sadat more than others , so much so that in 1969,one year before dying , he will appoint him Vice-President. In Nasser 's shadow years Sadat , the impulsive revolutionary , learnt patience. Among his first government deeds Sadat orders the release from sequestration the properties of those who have been the object of police actions because of their opposition to the regime. He regularizes revolution " and divests the regime of its punitive nature" Egypt breathes a different atmosphere.

Moustafa Khalil, Prime Minister

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Story-teller

This as far as domestic politics are concerned , but in foreign politics links lie with the Soviet Union.After Nasser's death , Soviets come to Cairo, gave the impression of being the ones who wanted to form the Egyptian government. Wrong tactics with a people recently out of colonial subjection.

Madame Jihan Sadat

"Those haven been the most difficult days of my life. I could see that all the ministers plotted against him they gave nothing away. Then I told him " Why don't you fight back? " He took things so calmly I thought he would never overcome this situation."

But later I clearly saw that his attitude was the right one. His calm made them believe he knew nothing of what was happening around him."

B.Boutros Ghali ,

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Story-teller

All this foreshadows the real breaking-off which will occur some years later. Many people exult the end of authoritarianism and fear. Sadat drives removes from power reputedly influential figures , he smites police and secret services, challenges Soviet Union , appears on the Egyptian scene as a new leader. In foreign politics , everybody realises that Sadat has deprived of authority his pro-Soviet opponents. Moscow regards the new developments in Egyptian politics with suspicion .The Soviet Union President , Nikolai Podgorni , arrives in Cairo. In his briefcase , the ready-made text of a " fifteen-year amity and cooperation treaty". The main clause : expecting to bind the two countries in mutual cooperation " in case peace is a risk " . In other words , to sow the seeds for a legal Soviet right to intervene in emergency situations. In the seventies the Egyptian situation has worsened. Israeli commandos open a new tactic , the " in-depth actions" ; they fly low , almost at palms height , to avoid radar range ,and carry out surprise and deadly raids over the immediate Cairo outskirt.

Jerusalem's government is sure Egypt will not hold out for long and will be obliged to ask for a hard terms peace traety. Israel wants them to be humiliated. The opening of the Assuan dam is Sadat's first public occasion to present himself as President .Podgorni comes from Moscow. As he goes past people shout "We want to fight ." But to the four thousand villages on the Nile delta, Podgorni only promise electricity. But Sadat is resentful. And it will be Nixon's journey to Moscow in the Spring of 1972 to make events come to a head . Sadat is convinced that Nixon and Breznev signed an agreement to keep up the Near East situation. Sadat then decides to send Russians away and to open to the Americans , the only ones who could clear the situation. To his people the President explains " I sent the Russians away because Moscow denies us the weapons to drive Israel from our land. We shall fight on our own." Sadat makes a " strong man's" gesture , but he does it agianst his allies instead of his enemies. Egypt takes the news well.

6th October 1973, Egypt's Liberation War -it is redemption year In the Summer of 1973 , Henry Kissinger is appointed Secretary of State of the United States. He maintains that diplomacy is successful when there is a fine margin between escape and disaster. That's when one must act. On the eve of the general assembly of the United Nations , Kissinger , as official, chief of American diplomacy , invites to lunch all the Arab representatives in New York , including the one who don't entertain diplomatic relations with the United States. Somebody ventures that America, afraid of an oil crisis, is about to abandon Israel in favour of Arabs. All this is not realistic, but it underlines the more active role that both Kissinger and the United States will have on the Middle East scenery. In the meantime Sadat tries to rouse a political commitent on America's part. His political plan is called " spark operation". With the approval of king Feisal of Saudi Arabia ,Sadat plans for a

simultaneous attack to Israel , both on the Egyptian and Syrian front. President Sadat refers to the Soviets that, after the new settlement policy supported by the Israeli minister Moshe Dayan , the situation is unbearable. When war arrangements are ready , Sadat shows his new bent towards America. Debates on how to reopen the Suez Canal have been going on for a long time. Unexpectedly , the work is assigned to the Americans .Sadat wants to involve them, one way or the other.

6th October 1973 , the beginning of Ramadam for Muslims and the day of the Jewish Kippur . Sadat together with Syrian troops launches a surprise attack against Israel, creating serious difficulties. In Southern Sinai the Egyptian army on rubber boats cross the Suez canal. By means of motor pumps they shoot jets of water to open gaps in the sand walls built by the Israeli defensive line since 1967. The Syrian troops strike in the north , overcoming the Israeli and reaching the Golan.

B.Boutros Ghali ,

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Story-teller

For Sadat the decision to trigger the fourth Arab-Israeli war ,after Egypt had lost three, was a hard one. But his courage was rewarded. During the first few day the Egyptian troops make the Israeli give in ,but on 16th October general Ariel Sharon leads his troops to hit back and the situation is reversed. On the 17th October in Kuwait the representatives of the ten Arabian governments decide for an embargo towards the United States and Holland , reducing the respective oil production in order to damage America's European allies. All of Africa, with the exception of four minor countries , break off their relations with Israel and for the first time the rich Arab governments are united abd unanimous in resorting to the weapon of oil. In 1973 the Arab countries justify the oil embargo against Europe pleading that American supplies to Israel have left from and passed through European territories. As day go by , the possibility that war operations slip from Sadat's grasp increase. Many journalists reach to Sinai to witness the Egyptian success. The situation comes to a head and the Israelis regain ground arriving at about 100 km , from Cairo. Egypt is on the verge of disaster. The Soviet Union , in order to help Sadat , positions its fleet in front of the Israeli coast, keeping the American planes busy.

To supply the Israelis , the United States organise the most important airlift ever.

Madame Jihan Sadat

" American Jewis , American soldiers landed with tanks and all sorts of weapons and fought. And America never denied this. And the amount of weapons America sent to Israel during this period was something indescribable, so much so that Anwar Sadat said : " We are not fighting against America " and asked for a cease-fire because the situation could have turned into a massacre for his troops. "

Story-teller

Regardless of legends , American contribution was crucial. The great powers' diplomacy starts moving : Nixon receives a delegation of Arab foreign ministers and shows his sympathy. He sends Kissinger to Moscow. And negotiations begin.

Madame Jihan Sadat

" One day Kissinger told Sadat that the Israelis would retreat for twenty kilometres. Anwar answered saying: " If only they retreated even ten kilometres". I got very angry. It was as if he wanted to offer Anwar more and he asked for less. I was sad, I went away, I was in tears. I asked him why he had said so , since Kissinger was willing to give him more. He told me: " Your reason just like the Arab politicians. You look at these details, I'll take the whole Sinai. But if I reassure them on the things we are discussing while negotiating their retreat; when they will be sure of this. I'll be able to mediate calmly. If I let them trust me, if I let them relax , in the end I'll take all my land back. We did infact take back the whole Sinai, without a single Israeli settlement. "

Story-teller

In concert with the Soviet government , America propose a cease-fire resolution to the UN Security Council. On the 24th October 1973 the resolution comes into force and fighting stops. Eighteen days of Arab-Israeli war, the most violent since the Isareli indipendence war in 1948.Kissinger guides the two countries to the " agreement of kilometre 101".This opens the negotiations for the disengagement of the Sinai , where the two armies will be separated by a buffer-zone kept under surveillance by UN forces.

Madame Jihan Sadat

" The 1973 war was one of the best periods of our life. Sadat decided to declare war to recover his land. And when Sadat sat at the negotiating table with the Israeli representative he treated him as an equal. Of this I am proud to this day , and so are the Egyptian troops and the whole Arab world, because it was the first time in our history that we won a war. "

Gilles Keppel, historian

"The oil war, the retreat of the Israelis offer Sadat the opportunity for his great project, that is the breach with the Soviet Union and the strategic alliance with the United States. From that moment onward , both the Arab and European left wings will consider him a man of the Americans. "

Sadat's speech:

" I do not depend on the United States. I am only pratical. They hold all the cards in this game. They supply Israel with everything. They are the only ones putting pressure on Israel. "

Story-teller

Talks about the need of solving the Palestinian question start only after this war. In November 1973 , Arafat , leader of OLP, the Palestine Liberation Organisation , attends for the first time the UN , where a resolution in favour to the Palestinians' right to have a homeland is voted. OLP becomes the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In 1974 Egypt changes his alliance , siding with the West.5th June 1975 ,Ismailia .The Suez Canal is opened for the third time. Port Said ,El Canal day. The deed is signed first by the commander-in-chief of the Navy, then by Sadat and his Ministers. They are all onboard the detroyer " 6th October" , next to the merchant ships waiting to cross the canal. People shout " Thank you Sadat". In his memories ,

Sadat wrote : " I've never been as happy as I was on the banks of the Suez Canal. How will I ever forget that day?"

19th November 1977, Jerusalem : Sadat alone against one and all. 19th November 1977 , Lod Airport in Isarel. President Sadat gets off the plane, there's an intense atmosphere of astonishment...Golda Meir cuts short her visit to the United States to welcome Sadat; here, seen from behind , is Moshe Dayan ,against whom Sadat fought the 1973 war; Mordechair Gur , the Israeli chief of staff , warns everybody against this visit , calling it a ploy to conceal a forthcoming attack. But Sadat counters" I don't use subterfuge. I may resort to different strategies and tactics, but never to a subterfuge implying moral responsibilities"

20th November 1977,President Sadat visits the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The third among the holy sites of Islam, outweighed in Arabs' worship only by Mecca and Medina, the two cities where the Prophet was born and died. Inside ,prayer , the sermon and the Imam's admonishments. There is a powerful tenseness taxing Sadat's legendary imperturbability , his gambler's disposition. But how did President Sadat reach the sensational decision to go and discuss peace with the Israelis? May 1977,the right wing coalition ,led by the Likud party , whose leader is Menachem Beghin, promoter of an inflexible policy against the Arab world , comes into power. September 1977 , the political situation is as follows : on one hand there are Syrians and Palestinians , supported by the Soviect Union; on the other there is Jimmy Carter , who is trying to get the Geneva Conference off the ground. On the international level, the Russians are inciting Arabs against him. Jimmy Carter sends a handwritten letter to President Sadat. Something has to be done to overcome the deadlock , a sensational gesture. They need a direct contact with Israel , but what is the tourny question of the problem? The lack of mutual trust , worsened by the hatred and bitterness resulted from four wars. It is essential to understand if Beghin really wants peace. Is it possible to scrap thirty years' hatred? The Jerusalem question is the most sensitive negotiation within the Palestinian issue. But for Sadat the main target is to have Sinai back.

B.Boutros Ghali,

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Moustafa Khalil, Prime Minister

Story-teller

In the afternoon of 20th November 1977 , President Sadat goes to the Knesset , the Israeli Parliament.

Sadat's speech

" Peace to you on the Arabian land ,or in Israel , and those on the territories of every place on this immense planet, this world damaged by our bloody conflicts, nonplussed by severe contradictions and threatened many a time by terrible wars. Man makes war to eliminate his brother, himself a man. There is no winner nor looser amid the rubble made by man and amid the corpses sacrificed by man ."

Story-teller

In Israel the speech with which Begin answers Sadat is considered very harshly, although rich in reference on biblical history, it is poor in references to the future, to the prophetic passion and to Sadat's courage. Images showing him sitting at the Knesset, laughing with Golda Meir, travel all over the world. Where Israel obtained recognition of its existence, Sadat won the world's public opinion. President Sadat, on his return to Cairo, is prey to an unprecedented strain: the mission to Israel is unquestionable. In spite of the great trust he has in his people and its support, he is ready to resign. But facts prove him right and a crowd of five million. Cairenes greet him in an unprecedented demonstration. What did Sadat obtain? An agreement with the Israelis on two basic issues: that the 1973 war be the last one between the two countries, and that the problem of Israeli and Egyptian security be discussed at the negotiation table. He explains these results at the People's Assembly and asks for the opinion of its members. He obtains an almost unanimous approval. He is preparing the way to the Geneva Conference. Sadat acted with great skill, negotiating with Israel, leaving no alternatives to the radical area of the Arabic world. The Soviet press devotes a lot of attention to Sadat's vision, but does not publish his speech at the Knesset. Many Arab newspapers believe that the visit has been prepared with the United States' direct involvement, pursuing an attempt to undermine the united front of the Arab countries in their fight to wipe out Israel. True or not, on 6th September 1978 negotiations took off in Camp David, the country residence of the American president Jimmy Carter. President Sadat and First Minister Menachem Begin sign an agreement. The first part dictates the foundations of the peace treaty between Israel and all its neighbours; the rest only between Egypt and Israel.

B. Boutros Ghali,

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Story-teller

The outset was not promising and it took a thirteen days debate. For two weeks the press and the whole world were kept out of this event. Carter, the man with the everlasting smile, put the issues on the table: Sinai, Gaza, Golan, Jerusalem and the right bank of the Jordan.

Moustafa Khalil,

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B. Boutros Ghali,

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Story-teller

Oslo, 27th October 1978 If on a political level Sadat's initiative was regarded with suspicion, on the ethical one the international community rewards him by awarding him, together with First Minister Begin, the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo on 27th October 1978. And politics, too, undergo an acceleration: President Carter calls the two opponents back in Washington, and on 26th April 1979 they sign the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel. In every speech Sadat speaks with emphasis of the eternal soul of Egypt, of Egypt's unique features, of its ancient, glorious history

,seven thousand years old ." A final break between Egypt and the rest of the Arab world is unthinkable": But President Sadat is obliged to retreat into a splendid isolation. The pressure increases : Sadat's bold move on the international scenery opens a series of splits. OLP has no esitations " An agreement on the Egyptian front is useless. And it is symptomatic -they say-that neither Jordan nor Saudi Arabia wanted to associate with Sadat. United States cannot expect to manage negotiations for a peace treaty on their own. Soviet Union and Western Europe too must be directly involved in the Meditettanean area peace. No Camp David can expect to decide for the future of the Palestinian people. "OLP reacts with a number of terrorist attacks in Paris , Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq , and Isarel. Sadat's political choice opens wounds also on the internal scenery. Arab radio stations keep spreading provocations which result in the awakening of an Egyptian neo-nationalism. On the eve of the referendum to reconfirm popular support to his policy, President Sadat does not worry about economical and oil boycott. Egypt does not and will not depend on anybody.

6th October 1981, Cairo. During the military parade of 6th October President Sadat falls victim to a veritable execution.

Moustafa Khalil,

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B. Boutros Ghali,

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Story-teller

Who was behind the military and civilians who took part in the attempt to his life? It is hard to believe they were alone. But Sadat did not expect it.

Gilles Keppel , historian

"The Egyptian lieutenant belonged to the Jihad , a secret group. He had a brother who had been arrested by the Egyptian police and tortured because he was an Islamic activist; today he is very close to Bin Laden. The lieutenant let in three accomplices , who were not soldiers but Islamic activists. While passing in front of Sadat's platform, they threew three grenades. There is , therefore , no doubt that he was assassinated by Muslims. But did they act on their own or were they manipulated by someone?"

Story-teller

Who was financing the Islamic awakening against the Rais? On one hand maybe Saudi Arabia for religious reasons? And on the other hand Gheddafi and Libya for political reasons? Or was there ,perhaps, a Soviet diplomatic conspiracy? These questions , which couldn't be answered , still stand. In 1981 President Sadat , by means of a decree , closed down seven newspapers , ousted 67 editors ,replaced the Minister of Cultural Heritage and kept 40.000 Mosques under the control of the State. He tried to eradicate all possible hotbeds of opposition to his policy. A step which , a few weeks before his assassination ,led to a mass arrest. And then, an even more sensational move, the expulsion of the Soviet ambassador and other Moscow diplomats. In these images we can see the announcement of this very serious step. Because , Sadat claimed, they had schemed, together with his home opponents, to

depose the president himself and murder him. The most disquieting hypothesis on the assassination is the religious motive , connected with the awakening of the Muslim extremism. President Sadat had always been the promoter of a liberal , lay state , where religious components should not be predominant over institutions. This is why he was always criticized by the Islamic component. The result of the official announcement was that five terrorist groups engineered the plot which was perpetrated by six people. Wide ramifications of the plot were obtained from the arrestees' statements: they intended not only to murder Sadat, but also to overthrow his regime and stir up a Khomeinist revolution in Egypt.

The Muslims Brothers did not claim responsibility for the attack, but some organisations of the exiled opposition did by means of anonymous phone calls. Among them , the most credible came from the Free Officers of the opposition front for the liberation of Egypt.

B.Boutros Ghali,

"It was a real disaster , not only because I lost my chief , whom I greatly admired , but it was a serious disaster for Egypt because we had to start all over again. We had to convince Israel that we intended to go with the peace process. Israelis were very suspicious : " What ? But the whole operation was Sadat's operation" , perhaps the new leader , who was President Mubarak , wouldn't want to go on with the peace process. Perhaps the Egyptian public opinion was against this process, the proof being that Sadat had been killed. We did not know how things had gone exactly, who had killed him, but it was a proof. It was therefore a very difficult time in which we tried , first of all, to convince Israelis that nothing had changed , that the same ministers, me for instance, were the same members, that I would continue with my work, that the party's president Mustafa Khalil was the same president with whom Mubarak was involved in the peace process and that he, too, would go on. We had then to convince the American administration , we had to convince Europeans that nothing had changed. It was therefore an extremely difficult period , until everybody was convinced that after Sadat's death , Sadat's policy would go on and there wouldn't be any change in Egypt's foreign policy."

Story-teller

President Sadat's funeral takes place in the very spot where he fell victim to his attackers. The Authorities decide the funeral service is to be strictly official and solemn. President Sadat's body is draped in the flag and borne on an horse-drawn gun-carriage. The cortège is opened by the armed forces followed by the procession of relatives, authorities and foreign delegations. The United States, in the intent of reassuring their allies, send the three former Presidents Nixon , Ford and Carter , and the former Secretary Kissinger. Sadat is dead but the White House does not abandon Egypt. Then come all the western Heads of State. Africa sends only the President of Sudan ,Somalia and Liberia. Asia hasn't sent anybody. And Anybody represent the Soviet Union. Beghin, The Israeli first minister , is the first to arrive. There is nobody from Saudi Arabia , nobody from the Gulf Emirates. For security reasons, Cairenes' participation is kept at the margin of the cortège , as one can see from these images clashing with the severe official character : men shouting " Rais , with our soul we

love you, with our blood we'll avenge you" , " Victorious Sadat, nobody can defeat you". The young Ciro Reza Pahlavi , son of the late Shah of Iran , follows the funeral procession next to Sadat's son , almost as if he wanted to recall the promise Sadat had made to his father " Your family will be my family , your son will be also mine". The inscription on the tomstone opens with a Koranic quotation. It is verse 169 of the third Sura, called of the Family of Imran ,which says " Do not suppose that those killed in the way of God are dead. They are alive and well provided for " followed by the epitaph " Anwar Sadat , war and peace hero. He lived for peace and died a martyr to his principless."

PAOLO MIELI " *Sadat has been one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest figure of Middle East history of the twentieth century. His life proves that origin does not count. Let's keep it in mind, Sadat's origin does not count : as a young man he collaborated with the Nazis , was an anti-Zionist , although tinged with anti-Semitism. He was friendly with the Muslim Brothers. At the onset of Nasser's revolution, Sadat was at his side, one of the toughest. At a certain point in his life , when he came into power after Nasser's death , he knew how to become the man of the great realism. He was able to do what up to then, in the seventies , nobody could have imagined, that is to hold out his hand to Israel and make peace with Israel. This a very important thing and the same criterion must be applied to Israel , too. Origin, the fact that somebody as a young man was a radical, an extremist , thought about fighting, had very strong ideas about fighting , doesn't mean that later , as an adult , he will keep up with those ideas.*

On the contrary , the fact of being known and loved by his people as an honest person, one representing not a man stooping to compromise but one of sterling character , enables him, at a certain point of his life , to negotiate. Sometimes hard men can negotiate better than gentle men, than smooth-talking men. Sadat ,just because he was hard, succeeded in doing what nobody else after him was able to do."

Thanks to Annarosa Saccheri for the translation.