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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ashraf Ghorbal

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 11, 1998

Cairo, Egypt

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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ambassador Ashraf Ghorbal

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

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Cairo, Egypt

Jean Krasno: For the record, Ambassador Ghorbal, could you please explain something about your background, where you were born and educated, and something about your diplomatic career?

Ashraf Ghorbal: I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, some 73 years ago, and grew up in Alexandria and then came to Cairo to go to the university. At that time it was called Farouk University after King Farouk and now it is called Cairo University. I graduated in 1945 with a bachelor degree in economics and political science and a scholarship to Harvard. I joined the Egyptian diplomatic service. I got an MA and Ph.D. from Harvard in 1948 and 1949, returned to Egypt to resume my work in the diplomatic field. For 40 years I worked in a diplomatic career and I retired in 1985, having reached 60, which is the mandatory age of retirement. As you have seen, I was lucky to earn a scholarship to Harvard and got to know a lot of Americans; I had great friendships with them that helped me in later years as I worked through the diplomatic service to reach Ambassador in Washington.

JK: Right, right. Now, I would like to talk to you today in general about your role in Egypt's history, recent history. First I wanted talk to you about the Suez crisis in 1956. Were you here in Cairo when the attack began in 1956?

AG: No, I was in London.

JK: You were in London?

AG: I was at the embassy in London. I went to London as second secretary in 1955, and the events of 1956 took place while we were in London. I had come to the conclusion that the British were going to attack, so I was all packed and ready to go when the war broke out. I was one of the first to leave London and go back to Egypt. I remember in 1956 Gamal Abdel Nasser did not participate in the London conference on the Suez Canal.

JK: Right. I wanted to ask you about that. Were you in the conference in London?

AG: No. We were in London and the conference was meeting there, but Nasser had decided not to join the conference.

JK: OK. So, he had decided Egypt would not join.

AG: But at the same time, we were overseeing what was happening from the embassy and, as a matter of fact, I worked principally on covering the conference. The Soviets used to give us several copies of the proceedings of the conference, and I would go through them, suggest what needs to be said through the papers, so that the view of Egypt, even though Egypt was not attending the conference, Egypt's views would be before everyone. And I must admit that the British papers, The Times, Guardian, Observer, were all very properly trained in Egypt's point of

view in answer to what was being said in the conference. I recall that my colleagues used to call me “Mr. Deem-it- Necessary”, because I would start by saying It has been said in the conference, so-and-so, and the Egyptian embassy deem it necessary to state the following... . So, they called me “Mr. Deem-it-Necessary.”

Our assessment at the embassy at that time was that the British, having moved so many troops, etc., are gearing up to an attack, and wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble and then retreat. So as I said, I was one of the few members of the embassy who was ready to go the minute things broke out. I went back to Egypt and waited 17 days in Rome, waiting for a ship to take us all back to Cairo.

JS: So you couldn’t actually get into Egypt, then? You had to wait in Rome?

AG: We had to wait until the ship came in.

JS: Well, let me ask you some more questions about the events leading up to the attack.

Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal.

AG: The Company.

JS: The Company. Why did he do that, and why did he do it then, at that time?

AG: Nasser had been working hard to get the Aswan High Dam built. We were promised by the U.S. and Britain and the World Bank to help us finance the project. When Nasser and the

British and the Americans, John Foster Dulles, disagreed about arms that we were starting to receive from Czechoslovakia, Foster Dulles withdrew the offer to help finance the Aswan Dam, and the British had to do the same and the project crumbled. Egypt had not been receiving anything from the Suez Canal operation. It was built in our country by our labor, where a lot of people had lost their lives, and so on, and we just looked at the canal and it was not ours. So, Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to nationalize the company, and let the money, instead of going abroad, come to Egypt to finance the dam. And that's what he did; that's what triggered the events that followed until what happened in 1956.

JK: So, you said a little while ago in London you had really expected an attack. Had you been aware that the British had been talking to the French or to the Israelis?

AG: No. We believed that there was coordination taking place between the Western powers, between Britain and France, but we did not, at least at the Egyptian embassy in London, come to any conclusion that there is a three-power collusion to attack Egypt. We thought that the British would do it, and that the French would do it, but there was not in our assessment an expectation that the Israelis would prepare to attack. It was a complete surprise.

JK: Was there any indication in the conference in London that the conference itself was going badly, or that there was some manipulation so that the conference did go badly? In other words, that the British actually preferred to attack?

AG: I think the British were geared to attack from the very beginning, and the United States had played the role to cool off the situation and try to find a solution. I recall at the time that the London conference directed by Lord Menzies, Foreign Minister of Australia, to head the delegation to talk to Gamal Abdel Nasser to dissuade him from the action that he had taken. But having done what he had done, it wasn't in the cards that Abdel Nasser would go back. So, I think it was the British and the French who were building up their plan to find a way to attack Egypt and seize the canal and from that arrange for the occupation of Egypt. To get Israeli action to attack was another very bad step in their plan.

JK: Why did Nasser decide not to attend the conference that Egypt would not participate in the conference?

AG: He believed that what he did was a rightful action. Within Egypt the canal is built in Egypt by Egyptians; it has been put to the service of the world but we are not receiving any revenue from it. We were going around to seek help, financial help, to build the dam, and here is our own property and we cannot take the money. So, he decided he would do it. And wherever the British, the French, and others tried to coax the pilots to leave their jobs and thus leave the traffic of the canal stopped. Egyptians boarded ships, worked as pilots, and it was working without a hitch. So, it proved that Egypt was doing the right thing for international commerce, but Egypt redeemed so to speak her right to the financing, to the income from the canal.

JK: Had Egypt appealed to the United Nations at any point prior to the attack?

AG: Well, the method was, I think, at that time dealt with by the conference; the western powers called for a meeting in London. There were three subsequent meetings. And definitely, when the British and the French attacked there was a complaint by Egypt to the Security Council, and it is through the intervention of President Eisenhower and the formidable stand the U.S. took at that time to order the three to pull out their forces. It was a real moment of closeness between Egypt and the United States. Unfortunately it didn't last too long.

JK: Then following the invasion, you were involved in the Franco-Egyptian negotiations. Describe those negotiations and your role in them.

AG: Yes. Well, there was as I said, the participation of the French with the British in occupying the land, when it occupied the Canal, the destruction of Port Said and that area, and after the winds settled down a little bit, the French proposed that the three countries would talk about resuming relations and we said we had to have reparations for the damage caused to us in several of the areas. We did negotiate for a whole year, from 1957 to 1958, August to August, and I was in Geneva at the time working in the Egyptian delegation to the United Nations in Geneva, so I was called upon to participate in the negotiations as part of the delegation.

JK: Did those negotiations take place in Geneva, then?

AG: In Geneva, all the time -- although the agreement and final analysis was signed in Zurich, and later on we heard that the Genevois were upset why we negotiated all the time in Geneva and

then we go and sign in Zurich! But it was for no reason other than that the head of the delegation had something to do in Zurich so he asked that the signature be taken there.

JK: Did the negotiations take place in the Palais des Nations in Geneva?

AG: No, it wasn't under the UN's legal auspices or under the mediation of the UN. The Swiss provided us with a meeting place and we used to go and attend the meetings there. But there was no relationship to the UN.

JK: This was the first use of United Nations peacekeeping troops, which was quite a historic event. What was Egypt's perception of that idea, of having United Nations troops then come to Egypt?

AG: Well, we agreed to the action taken by the Security Council and we felt it was a good step in the right direction for both sides to feel a certain degree of security but at the same time we wanted it to be on the proper ground, that it should have been on both sides of the fence. Otherwise it would leave the impression that there is an infraction of the sovereignty of Egypt. This is why it was essential to put a phrase in the agreement at the time that it is there with the consent of the receiving power, and it would leave at the request of that power. In hindsight, it was a mistake by Nasser to call for the removal of the forces in Sinai. It gave an impression of the intent to attack at that point, but that was not the case. It was more to impress on the Israelis to relieve pressure on Syria because there were reports in 1967, this was before the war, before the Israeli attack, that they had heavy military concentrations on the front with Syria. The

Soviets had passed that information to us; we acted in a manner that I will explain and we asked the Secretary-General to pull out the forces, that he direct the forces to pull out, and he did. Some people fault the Secretary-General for allowing that to take place and say he should have taken the matter to the Security Council. It's always easier afterwards to criticize events that happened, to analyze this point or that point, but this is how it happened in 1967.

JK: Well, I wanted to ask you some more things about that. I understand that the request to remove the peacekeeping troops actually first came from one of Egypt's generals, and was a message given to General Indarjit Rikhye, the UN Commander in the field, and the first request wasn't really to UN headquarters, that General Rikhye sent that to UN headquarters, a copy of that request. What was the reason for doing it that way?

AG: We in the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were somewhat puzzled: why didn't the Foreign Minister of Egypt do that? As a matter of fact, we heard of that happening after it happened. So, had we heard before, I am sure we would have had his input in the situation, and he would have warned against pitfalls, against perceptions that could be, I think, construed. But if you recall Gamal Abdel Nasser had requested the withdrawal through General Fawzi as you said, to pull the forces from the lines. I didn't talk about the Strait of Tiran, the passage through the Gulf of Aqaba, and we all had hope, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that Nasser would not do anything with the passage of Israeli ships through the Gulf of Aqaba. Israel had declared before that that would be a *causis belli* and it would automatically trigger military action. But I think Gamal Abdel Nasser found in this situation that if he would ask the force to leave, and yet ask the force to stay in the Gulf of Aqaba, there would be a dichotomy. So, he

decided to pull out, to ask the United Nations force to leave. Many of us believed that that was all wrong.

When several of us think back on these events, I for one believe very frankly that Israel had decided in its own mind that she must destroy as much of the Egyptian army as possible, and that certain actions will be taken which will trigger an action and reaction cycle, and as we learned later that there was a disagreement between General Amori and General Abdel Nasser. General Amori was in charge of the army and Nasser in charge of the politics. But apparently Nasser was not fully aware of the conditions of the army, as it was then. All this we heard later. And thus happened the situation that happened. As I said, my own feeling was that there was a determination by Israel, either Egypt would reach a peace agreement with Israel and recognition and so on, or Israel would take action that would evoke a reaction from Egypt and destroy the air force of Egypt, which did happen. And unfortunately, Egypt faced the situation that we faced in 1967.

JK: Because from all that I have understood it was really perceived by the rest of the world that Nasser was planning an attack, and that he had asked the forces to be removed because that was the plan. I was just interviewing Ramses Nassif in Geneva, who was the spokesman for U Thant, and he said that when he had received the message about the removal of troops, he had called a meeting in New York of all the countries that were contributing troops to the UNEF and that they felt that they would be in danger if they stayed, and that was one of the reasons that he decided to go ahead and remove the troops.

AG: I am not a military man who is able to make the military judgment, but no person in his sane mind would spread out an army at that time into a desert without aerial protection, proper aerial protection, and contemplate that he would be attacking across all that line, the enemy, so to speak. I do not think any military person in his right mind would do that. I think probably what Gamel Abdel Nasser was undertaking, brinkmanship, was miscalculated. He probably was hoping and relying on a diplomatic solution. The biggest proof was that he announced that Zacharim al-Hadeen, then I think Prime Minister and number two man in the military regime, would be going to the United States to meet with President Johnson to find a way out. Maybe the plan was that as a result of that trip there would be a calming of the situation. This adds up to my conviction that Israel pre-empted and struck before Zacharim would go to Washington, because the plan, to take the opportune moment to attack and destroy the Egyptian armed forces.



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JK: One other question in this track of thought was that U Thant had gone to Paris before coming to Cairo. He had wanted to talk to Nasser. He had already gone along with the removal of the troops, but he wanted to talk to Nasser to see if he could help find a solution before there might be war, but while he was in Paris he then got the news that Nasser had closed the Strait of Aqaba.

AG: When they asked Nasser that question, he said, "I had foreseen an embarrassment to the Secretary-General, U Thant, because had I waited until he had come and then announced it, it would have been an affront to him." And I think he told him so. But in my insight, definitely, it wasn't a right step. Events had taken place so quickly, one thing leading from another, and the ante was really increased on both sides, that things went out of what-do-you-call, proper control.

Then we faced what we did face. This is why it was very essential for redeeming to take place in 1973, to change the image of Egypt, that it was not what it was in 1967.

JK: Now, before we move to 1973, what were the communications in 1967 with Syria and with Jordan prior to the conflict?

AG: Very close cooperation and consultations with Syria and Jordan. As a matter of fact, King Hussein came in because of the events that happened later to Cairo particularly to ensure that there is this solidarity, and there was. There was also very close coordination with the Syrians when we learned what the Russians had told us, that there were Israeli troops massing on the border with Syria, we dispatched General Fawzi to Damascus to assess this operation on the ground and he came back with the assurance that there was none.

[Interrupted]

JK: Alright, we were just talking about the communications with Syria and that General Fawzi had gone to Damascus.

AG: Yes, he had come to Damascus to assess the situation, and brought the reports of the intelligence about Israel and he said that there was no concentration of troops by Israel towards Syria. That should have cooled the situation, but unfortunately as I said, things happened, first this, then that. And this is where it comes as another reason why, I regret to say, Israel wanted to get rid of the military equipment of Egypt by any means, and instead of letting the situation cool,

things escalated. Nasser also has his share of mistakes throughout and allowed this situation to smolder until it reached what it reached.

JK: Now, moving ahead then to 1973, were you the press advisor to President Anwar Sadat during that period?

AG: Yes. From January 1968 to July 1972, for four years, I was...

[Interrupted]

AG: From January 1968 to July 1972, I was in charge of the Egyptian interest in Washington. After the break of diplomatic relations which followed the 1967 war, when Nasser cut off relations with the United States, the two countries decided to create what they called “intersection”, to be there but not to be there, to be there in actual person, both in Cairo and Washington, to conduct relations and yet there would be no diplomatic recognition. So, I was in Washington for four and a half years, and I tried my best to get the image of Egypt changed, to get the United States to take a leading role in finding a solution to the problem, and end the occupation. And I read through the Rogers plan and what-not, and the double policy and the White House telling the Israelis something and telling the Arabs through the State Department something else. In the end of 1971, I went to see Anwar Sadat, and I said, “I think it is time for me to come back to Cairo, because I had done what I could and I have no more tricks up in my pocket. Maybe you should send someone fresh; let him try his hand. But in all sincerity, I do not believe Israel will withdraw because the picture Israel has, and America has, of the Egyptian and of Egypt is that it is incapable of doing anything military, and we have to come to the negotiating

table.” That was my assessment, I didn’t influence Sadat in saying that this made him think of a plan, it was all in the plan that, as he said, “What was taken by force will have to return by force.”

So, I came to Cairo in July 1972, and worked as deputy to the National Security Council Advisor, Abdul Zeman. And then I became President Sadat’s press assistant and press advisor. Then he trusted me with the media, with information during the October War. The specific agreement that we had together, that the truth will be said whether it is for or against us. We are not going to lead our people into another hoax, which we did in 1967 by saying “We brought down 20 planes” when we didn’t bring down anything but, the Israelis had brought our air force into complete destruction. Israel took great satisfaction, if I remember those days, because Walter Cronkite, who had been portraying the situation on the front from the Israeli communiqués, for three days, on the fourth day he said, “Just a minute, I was leading you into the wrong area; the voice of truth is coming out from Cairo and not from Tel Aviv.”

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JK: OK. OK. Very interesting, very interesting. Well, from everybody’s point of view, no one seemed to have expected the attack in 1973, and I was speaking Jean-Claude Aimée in Geneva, who had been in Cairo the day before, had stayed overnight with American friends at the Pyramids and they were all saying “Well, we hope nothing goes wrong because we are all out here!” And he caught the plane the day of the attack, back to New York, just before it had started, and nobody expected that it was going to happen.

AG: It was a well-kept secret, but at the same time Anwar Sadat had said it so many times that he would make war and nobody would believe him, and we would have an excuse that it was

cloudy or that circumstances did not allow. I think it was part of the camouflage because the intelligence that the US and Israel had before the war broke out said that there were concentrations, etc. but, the assessment was that that was a show; that nothing, was going to happen to X, that it was just another act, Anwar Sadat, who is not going to go to war and that, he is going to come to the peace table, as he is. But they got a surprise.

JK: So, what was the reasoning...

AG: I visited Israel three years ago and I had lunch with my wife and my family with Ezer Weizman, the President, who became a friend, and I have respect for him. And he said "You gave us a bloody nose in 1973." Which was the case. The Israelis had to know that Egypt, whatever move it plans to take, will not accept to be occupied, and we are determined, we are all determined, to have our land back.

JK: Why was the timing of the attack planned for precisely that day, or that time?

AG: I don't know -- probably someone else can tell you more about it than myself. It was part of the assessment of Ramadan, and Ramadan is the fasting month, and people are fasting and the soldiers are not equipped militarily for that and because of Yom Kippur is at the same time.

[end of side 1]

[side 2]

AG: ... and I think the calculation was that this would be the best time to do it, because it would be against all the logic that people who would have.

[Interrupted]

JK: Had it made a difference that Egypt now had air cover, in other words, it had missiles?

AG: We had missiles that provided air cover and this was why we were moving gradually, bit by bit, into Sinai, making sure that the air cover would be adequate enough to handle the situation. Unfortunately, the United States had decided on the 15th of October, or the 14th of October, to give Israel all it needs, or more than it needs, by an “air bridge” into Israel, to the point that we caught some tanks with the mileage showing that it was just coming, from the airport to the front.

JK: That was all the mileage that was on the tank?

AG: That was all the mileage that was on the tank. The Galaxies were arriving, one after the other, ... And because at that particular moment that Anwar Sadat said, “I can fight the Israelis, but I can’t fight the United States.”

JK: Now, the US believed that the Soviets were sending troops into Egypt. Was that the case?

AG: No. There were no Soviet troops in Egypt. There was a time when the Soviets had been asked by Egypt to help in the air defense of Egypt, because the Israelis during the war of attrition, as you heard took place, Israel was on the east side of the canal and Egyptians on the west side of the canal. Israel wanted to establish there a capability of dealing with whatever we had as defenses in Egypt, and they started to attack, and we had some problems. They wanted to prove that they are masters of the sky, so at that particular moment Gamal Abdel Nasser, it was at that time, Gamal Abdel Nasser asked the Soviets to help and they provided experts, finance, and arms, some of which were missiles, which brought about a balanced situation. But there were no Soviet troops, no.



JK: Because Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had ordered that the United States go on nuclear alert in 1973.

AG: Go on...?

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JK: On nuclear alert.

AG: Yes, there were the rumors that the Soviets were going to send troops, so he issued that as a counter-measure, so it should not take place. I remember it was Henry Tunner, the *New York Times* correspondent in Cairo, called me up and said "Are there any Soviet troops here?" I said "Not to my knowledge." He said, "I want to report the truth." I said. "Let me check with the President." And I called up the President and he, Anwar Sadat said, "There are no Soviet armed personnel except those who were here for training purposes."

JK: For training Egyptians?

AG: For training Egyptians. And you remember Sadat had asked them in 1972 to withdraw all their experts, so they weren't here.

JK: So, the rumors that planes were taking off from the Soviet Union to come to Egypt, were wrong?

AG: Were wrong, yes. They were a hoax.



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JK: Do you have any idea where that started, the rumor started?

AG: Well, in these cases it is to be expected for the enemy to start that rumor, in order to create a feeling of support for himself, maybe Israel. I won't be astonished if that was the case. They wanted so much for the US to be on their side. The good part about Sadat was that during the October war, he was in contact with Henry Kissinger and Nixon through different channels, and ? whom I mentioned, the National Security Advisor, was sending correspondence to Kissinger and getting answers back, and Kissinger answered all of these saying, "I appreciate that you are keeping us in contact during this period." And finally it led to Kissinger's arrival in Egypt, and the cease-fire, etc., and the beginning of disengagement.

JK: Right. Describe how the cease-fire was resolved, eventually resolved, how the cease-fire was reached.

AG: Well, I think one of Henry Kissinger's plans was always to make sure that both sides, when they start negotiating, would have enough in the hands to press on the other that it is to the benefit of both to disengage. This is why there was this tremendous airlift to Israel, and by consequence a redressing of the military situation, because the Israelis were really on the rout when the U.S. airlift began, so it was at that particular moment that it was decided between Henry Kissinger, Nixon, a couple of contacts with the Soviet Union, that this is the time to tell people "cease fire," and then disengage. There was no disengagement from the military later in the day; the Israelis, if you recall, had crossed the canal and created a presence on the west side of the canal. When Kissinger arrived, he was told by Sadat that he has the Egyptian army encircling the Israeli presence and we could liquidate that group of army. Kissinger's answer was, "Why have that additional bloodshed? Let us just disengage the parties from each other." He tried first to get the parties back to the original lines, with the Israelis on the east side and us on the west side, but we refused. So, then came the idea of disengagement, and finally led to the steps that at last led to the peace agreement.

JK: Now, did I hear you correctly, did you say that Nixon had come to Cairo? Or was it...

AG: No, Kissinger.

JK: Kissinger had come to Cairo and met with Sadat. Yes. OK.

AG: No, Nixon came to Cairo later on.

JK: Later. Now, I understand that also that the Egyptian third army had been cut off.

AG: Cut off. But that's what I was saying, that the Israelis claimed that they cut off the third army. I was sitting with General Il Gannley the other day and he said, "No, the third army had all the ammunition necessary, and the food and water. What was really in a bad situation was the people there who were hurt by the war and didn't have enough medicine and hospitals equipped enough. The Israelis had used very heavy bombing to attack on that day. But this was one of the many reasons for the disengagement, was to allow plasma and other things to go to through these areas and at the same time deal with Israeli encirclement, and let the two parties disengage very carefully from each other until the further steps were taken."

JK: Do you feel that President Sadat achieved what he had intended?

AG: Sadat? Yes. I think he had hoped to gain more from the war than he had achieved. Henry Kissinger short-cashed him. He had hoped that there would be a real movement, one step after another, to give Egypt more of a victory from the confrontation. "The Americans" who, as you recall Kissinger at one time said there should be no Soviet presence in the Middle East, so Sadat asked them to leave before the war, and nothing happened at this point. I asked Henry Kissinger, once, after all these events, I said, "Why didn't you take us seriously? You are responsible for the October War." He said "Me?" I said, "Yes." I said, "You did not take us

seriously. Anwar Sadat told you several times that he was going to attack, etc.” And he said, “How could I take him seriously? He was every day coming out with a different statement, and then he kicked out the Soviets without asking us for anything in return.” I said, “Let’s take this point and analyze it. If he would have asked you for anything, what would you have given him?” And he said, “I don’t know.” I said, “You would have tried either 1.) to leak it out in order to nip it in the bud, or 2.) you would have given him practically nothing.” And Henry laughed and said, “You know, I would have at least tried.” But Anwar Sadat was gearing more toward a message to the United States, that strategically we are not anti-American, but like hell would we accept that we will become occupied country by anyone.

JK: Now, eventually President Sadat went to Jerusalem. Why did he go to Jerusalem? What was the thinking behind that trip?

AG: In my estimation, Anwar Sadat, having gone through the war, was not going to stop at simply disengaging and not reaching the goal he had in his mind, to liberate all of Sinai. And to have the Arabs see that Egypt through what she did, gained back her territories. In other words, “follow us, we are the leader; we are powerful, and we did what we did, follow our steps.” And I think he came to the conclusion that he had to go to the lion in his own den and talk to the people eye to eye. We have witnessed war, but we are not the enemy of Israel. You have your peace, but we have to have our peace in our land. And I think that he found that President James [Jimmy] Carter had tried his hand and didn’t get anywhere. Carter had sent him a letter through me again, seeking a conference because the issue had been closed. I sent one member of our embassy to the President and he told President Sadat, as we learned later, that he promised to do

something saying, "I am at the end of my capabilities to do something at this stage." And then Sadat thought of holding a meeting of the Security Council for the Permanent Members in Israel, and he would attend. The Americans felt that it might not be a workable idea because the Soviets might veto it. So, finally he decided to take the journey.

JK: So, the original idea was to actually have the Security Council meet in Israel?

AG: No, they never had the Security Council meeting.

JK: No, but that was the idea, he had that idea?

AG: He had that idea in mind. Instead the Security Council planned to meet in Geneva.

JK: But the United States was afraid that the Soviets would veto it, so they didn't want to even bring up the idea?

AG: Probably that was the fear but, he [Carter] should answer that. The United States did not want the Soviet Union to get involved in that. It wanted it to be *Pax Americana*. I think that that is calling a spade a spade.

JK: What was the reaction by the other Arab states, when Sadat went to Jerusalem?

AG: That was an interesting time. I was in Washington, and just two weeks before the foreign minister was in Washington for a meeting with President Carter and there was the call for a meeting of the Geneva conference, and then Dayan came down from New York to see the President...

JK: This is Moshe Dayan?

AG: Moshe Dayan. And dissuaded the President from the meeting in Geneva. So, America back-tracked, and there was no meeting. Ifuneid Fahmun was the foreign minister at the time...



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JK: ... of Egypt.

AG: Of Egypt. He was scheduled to have an interview with the press, the American press, in Washington before he left. He didn't have anything to say after what had happened, so he said "Cancel the meeting, and you talk to them at your first chance." So I put it off for about two weeks -- if the foreign minister didn't have anything to tell them, what am I going to tell them myself? And then I fixed a date for a meeting at breakfast. At 7:00 in the morning, my press attaché called me up and told me "Cairo has just announced that the President Sadat is going to go to Jerusalem." I didn't have any information; I didn't have any instructions. But we learned that Sadat was going to go to Damascus before, after announcing that he was going to go to Jerusalem. The questions that morning from the press were, "What would the Arabs think?" I said "The fact that he is going to Syria before he goes to Jerusalem, and after announcing his decision to go, shows that Hafez al-Assad is involved." It was a logical explanation, but the

Arabs did not feel upset with Sadat going to Jerusalem, because he had a very forceful speech in which he told the Knesset things as they ought to be called, decently, properly, friendly-wise, but at the same time direct and clear. The Arab states got upset later with Camp David, which they interpreted in the wrong way. But at that time I remember Arab leaders were coming to visit Anwar Sadat in Cairo and we did work with them. It was later, as I said, with the Camp David Agreement which they considered it a separate treaty between Israel and Egypt, which it was not. Had the Palestinians accepted, they would have been better off than they are currently now.

JK: Well then, as long as you have brought up Camp David, you participated in the Camp David negotiations. Could you describe the process at Camp David? How did those discussions actually come about? Who initiated that process?

AG: I think it was the right thing for the United States to do. Anwar El Sadat had gone to war. Anwar Sadat went to Jerusalem, and he received Menachim Begin and in Ismailia. What else could Anwar Sadat do? And the United States decided to call the two sides to Camp David, away from public light and put their heads together and reach an agreement. I think that that was a wise approach on the part of the United States. Menachim Begin was involved, there was no opposition stronger than him, so if he should come to an agreement the rest would follow. He brought with him his top brass. The negotiations started with a meeting between Carter, Sadat, and Menachim Begin.

JK: All face to face?

AG: The three together. Carter brought the three together, but it was a heated meeting and he decided, “don’t do it that way.” So, he asked both Presidents to appoint someone whom they had brought with them in the delegation, who would sit with Carter, and they would draft what would be a possible agreement. So, Sadat appointed the press advisor to Mohammed Hozni Mubarak, a political advisor to Mubarak, and Menachim Begin appointed who later on became President of the Supreme Court in Israel. Both are Jews, and Carter would listen to one side with the other, take notes, and he and Cyrus Vance and the American team would work out the language that would finally be submitted to both Presidents for their approval or changes, etc. That was the process that was taking place. And in final analysis, it did work. An agreement was reached and it was celebrated worldwide.



JK: How long were you there at Camp David -- several weeks? How many days were you in Camp David?

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AG: We were there a week -- more than a week.

JK: More than a week, OK. And in the meantime, then, were there social events with Sadat and Begin in the same room? Were there receptions or lunches?

AG: President Carter took the two sides, with members of the delegations, to Gettysburg for a sort-of an outing, to go to Gettysburg, to create an atmosphere of relaxation.

JK: So, he tried to create some kind of social situation, where they could relax.

AG: Yes. But for all practical purposes, there weren't meetings that were meetings between the two sides. They stayed very reserved from each other.

JK: So, would Cy Vance and his team meet with the Egyptians, and then meet with the Israelis?

AG: Yes, but at the same time, there was the meeting of Carter and the two men who were the Egyptian and the Israeli representatives.

JK: And he would meet with them together?

AG: Yes.

JK: OK, OK. That's interesting.

AG: Carter really put his Presidency on the line, and this is why I say it is very important unless the President of the United States is personally involved, forget it.

JK: We were starting to get into this earlier, but how did the agreement at Camp David affect Egypt's role in the Middle East after that?



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AG: Well, immediately after Camp David, we were castigated by the Arabs. And we were excluded from their meetings. We were considered an outcast, so to speak. But I think gradually, over a period of time, they came around to understand that that was safe to do. It was left to Mubarak, after Sadat's assassination, to bring back the Arabs to Egypt. Now that relationship has become very strong. Time was needed to learn from the lessons of the mistakes of his predecessor and from Sadat's mistakes. The Arabs' reaction upset Sadat, and I used to tell him "Mr. President, give them time, explain to them." And he would say, "The only person who sees things very quickly is King Faisal. The others do not rise up to that level." And I always told him, "Mr. President, you were a politician before you became an army officer. You have to read what goes through our life, not what goes through our rulers. These are the present rulers of the Arab countries. You have to move them." In the final analysis, it was Hosni Mubarak who managed to get back the Arabs, and then events proved that we would not sell anybody short, on the contrary, we created the principles upon which peace could build. And we avoided the issue of settlements. Just imagine a settlement in the desert, in the Sinai. That would have created as a miserable problem between the two countries. Things wouldn't have worked out. In the final analysis, no one can take it out of my mind that the Palestinian state is there, already there. The Israelis are trying to hold it back as long as possible, and limit it to as small a fraction as possible, but that's the wrong way to go about it. You live and let live. You do not live and let others die.

JK: This has been extremely interesting, and I appreciate your participating.

AG: It has brought back many memories.

JK: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

AG: No, I am at your service. If at any time you feel that there is a need for me to add anything you can drop me a note, I would be glad to.

JK: Thank you very much.



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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Ashraf Ghorbal

Jean Krasno, Interviewer

March 11, 1998

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