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Chapter 3: Daily Life at Post

Life around the Compound

Daily life at USINT Sanaa brought its own surprises. Equipment breakdowns, administrative crises with the Yemen government, expected and unexpected visitors, or some personnel problem with our faithful local employees determined each day's priorities. These uncertainties kept us on our toes, creating more challenges and excitement than we ever bargained for.

Many of the crises affected our personal as well as official living regimen. It seemed we were always trying to climb from the bottom rung of Maslow's hierarchy of physical and security issues to the next rung of social well-being. We would make it for a while until the next problem. Then we would slip back down a rung.

David believed the jinn had cast a spell on us, making life much more difficult than it should be. He concluded we were not being sufficiently respectful to these spirits, since we were constantly having mechanical breakdowns. One day he put cookies out under an obviously magical tree with five trunks that our guard Salah said was where the jinn lived. That whole day went so smoothly we decided it would be to our advantage to feed the jinn regularly with some sweet delicacy. We continued to do so, but appeasing the supernatural proved only partially successful.

Although every day was different, the unexpected was the norm. Some of our most memorable times around the compound were those days on which the diplomatic pouch was due to go out.

The twice-weekly classified pouch was hand-carried to Jidda or Asmara by an American official, one of us, or a courier who'd flown in.

One typical pouch day, completely unannounced, a fellow from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) walked into my second-floor secretarial office, adjacent to David's. "I'm here from New York and need to find out about the wheat I'm to help distribute for the U.S. government in the famine areas," he advised as I jumped up to alert David in the adjacent office.

Quickly shedding his surprise, David greeted him as if we had known he was coming. David also wanted to cover up what was often some mix-up in communication between Washington and Rome or Sanaa. Since there were no phones, I ran over to our apartment. "Abdullah," I ordered, "put on an extra plate for lunch and whip up some of your vanilla custard for dessert."

After a politely brief lunch, David excused himself from the table, leaving me to complete the pleasantries. He ran out the door to clean the *shadrawan* (Persian fountain) for the children's weekly swimming party. Since David's jerry-rigged filter system did not work very well, his personal attention was needed each time we invited friends over.

By four thirty, the New York visitor was on his way. Our swimming guests, the German (FRG) ambassador's wife, Ulrike Vestring, with her three children and a Yemeni general and his children, were sitting around the pool. "I wonder where Abdullah is with our tea and cookies," I said to my guests. "He was supposed to be here at five. He's usually prompt."

I excused myself briefly to look for him, but no Abdullah. He showed up with the tea at five thirty, to my great relief, telling us his wife had given birth to their fifth daughter that afternoon! (In his quiet, self-effacing way, he had gone home after lunch without mentioning what was up. If I had known, I would have told him to take the day off.)

While I was at the pool, David petitioned to get our driver Abdul Nu'man out of jail. When driving the Land Rover through Sanaa, Abdul had been hit by a motorcycle. Although the accident was not his fault, it took some effort to get him released. David's official request to the YAR did the trick. We did not want him to languish in jail overnight, and we desperately needed him to drive us to Taiz on a pouch run the next morning. Otherwise, David, who had been running a temperature of 103 degrees all day, would have had to drive the long trip himself.

But the day was still not over. At six thirty FRG Ambassador Alfred Vestring summoned David to his office for an urgent message, which had to be conveyed to Washington that evening due to the eight-hour time difference. We gobbled down a late dinner of leftovers and rushed back to the office to seal official papers in the pouch and write a carbon-copied letter to our parents. Last-minute crunches made personalized letters rare, but we did not want to worry them by noncommunication. Pouch day always seemed to turn into a photo finish, often close to midnight.

That was pouch day. Once during that first August we had an entire week when almost everything that could went wrong. In letters home we labeled it "the week that was." We were between administrative officers, which left David responsible for handling all the crises even though he was still weak from what doctors called a blood infection. Our water pump broke while the carriers who delivered water from donkey carts were on strike. In the midst of the water crisis, our consular officer's servant left the faucet open in our apartment building, allowing all the water we had managed to save in the roof storage tank to drain out. Going several days without baths in the heat of summer was the least of our worries, but it was an uncomfortable annoyance.

That same week, two banking officials from the United States arrived unannounced, and we had to entertain and make appointments for them. Our embassy translator disappeared, and we had to get him out of jail for something he did not do. YAL lost two of our mail pouches, which did not turn up for several days. Rick Rauh, our consular officer, had an accident with the Land

Rover, leading to one man's death and a run-in with some angry tribesmen. John and Diane Cole had their kitchen demolished by fire when their cook failed to hook up the butagas correctly. We were afraid we were going to have to evacuate the whole apartment building until someone found a fire extinguisher in the storeroom.

In the midst of all that chaos, we did enjoy hosting two small dinner parties and even attended three parties that week. Visiting with friends gave us a chance to relieve the tension and to look back and laugh at our misadventures.

Getting the mission to function smoothly took a while. We had two lines of defense against the problems that arose daily, both involving personnel. The first was our American staff—four men and three women—all working for the mission. The first five months were difficult because these American employees dribbled in slowly through the end of August. Administrative problems were our biggest headache, and it did not help that we lost our first administrative officer, a bachelor who found Yemen too isolated. It took two months to locate and bring on his replacement.

Temporary assignee Rick and his replacement, Jack O'Donnell, had their own problems at the consulate, which was always a busy place. As many as a hundred visa applicants crowded around the entrance daily. Once, they were so eager they knocked over the guard at the door, requiring a trip to the hospital, where the poor fellow was given a bottle of vitamins to help him feel better.

One of the more humorous situations occurred at the hands of the Yemeni consular assistant Rick hired. After wasting hours trying to find some files, Jack discovered the fellow had filed all the visa applications backwards. It made perfect sense to him because Arabic is read from right to left, the opposite of English.

When our replacement administrative officer, Walt O'Grady, and his wife Peg arrived at the end of August, the State Department had by then become convinced the consulate needed some efficient help and hired Peg as a temporary employee during her tour. The job was a benefit to Peg, too, since she was a non-Arabic-speaking housewife with no work to occupy her time in those early days. Long hours of inactivity would probably have tried her sanity. Having lost one American, we did not want others jumping ship. With Peg's help, the consulate managed to process the backlog of visa applications left over from the forced closure of our consulate in Aden in October 1969, when the PDRY broke relations with us. Before then, the Aden consulate had taken over issuing visas to Yemenis after the United States had been forced to evacuate Sanaa in June 1967.

People popped into our offices constantly until we found a Yemeni receptionist to run interference. The many interruptions forced us to do major work at night, making ten- to twelve-hour workdays for both of us in our first months of operation. Theoretically, we worked

Saturday through Wednesday, though Thursdays usually found us at the office, too. The mission recognized the Muslim holy day of Friday for its day of rest. We were indirectly compensated for these stressful six-day workweeks because the State Department paid us a differential of a half-day's pay for working on Sundays.

Our second, and often most important, line of defense against daily challenges was the local Yemeni staff, Foreign Service National (FSN) employees of the USG. When anything broke down either in the apartments or at the office, we usually called on two FSNs: Muhammad Abdul Ghani Nagi and Abdul Kadir Farhan, both of whom I've mentioned earlier. Both in their twenties, these young men were our right hands. They knew how to fix things, find obscure items in the local market needed for repairs, and generally how to solve any problem "Yemeni style." Other employees helped out too, but these two reopened the U.S. mission with us and were indispensable.

Muhammad Abdul Ghani, who hailed from Taiz, served as guard, gardener, and janitor, doing repair and maintenance on all of our appliances and machinery. Hired by the USG in 1962, Muhammad continued working for the Italians to oversee our property from 1967 until our return in 1970. Of medium height, thin and wiry, he was very clever mechanically and was designated the chief engineer for watching over the water well repair and helping to build the tennis court. He could do electrical work as well and continually wrestled with the butagas bottles, kerosene stoves, and flash and space heaters in our apartments. Since he was handy and lived close by, we called on him at all hours to fix a heater or find a new butagas tank and repair its valve. And he was fearless. We were always afraid he would hurt himself because he was not as careful as we would have been working with live electrical wires, gas, or kerosene.

Muhammad and his young wife Rashida (probably around age fifteen or sixteen) lived on the compound in a one-story, two-room mud-brick house. When we first met Rashida, she was pregnant. We were told she had a dislocated shoulder (due to a fall) and burn scars on her hands. A year earlier when the shoulder problem had first occurred, the Yemeni cure was to burn her hands—a remedy that merely changed the locus of pain. When she became pregnant, the Russian hospital was unable to x-ray her shoulder to reset it for fear of hurting the baby.

She delivered a stillborn baby, her first, in their little house after two days of labor, with the help first of a midwife and finally a Russian doctor who came to assist. Yemeni women are so tiny and have such narrow pelvic areas that childbirth is often quite difficult for them (see Claudie Fayein, *A French Doctor in the Yemen*). They also observed the superstition of not eating protein during the last two months of pregnancy in order to make the baby smaller, a belief that probably did not help either mother or baby.

Abdul Kadir, also from Taiz, was shorter and slightly stockier than Muhammad. He was our jack-of-all-trades. While Muhammad took care of breakdowns and malfunctions within the compound, Abdul Kadir served as the mission's administrative/general services

assistant, handling problems with merchants and the authorities in town. Hired by the Italian embassy in 1969 to work with American interests, he drove us from Taiz to Sanaa when we first arrived and continued to function as a driver, messenger, translator—anything we needed.

From day one his goal was to get to America. He knew that if he worked fifteen years for the Americans he could immigrate to the States. Eager to learn how to type, he could not find a typing school in Sanaa. My mother shipped over an instructional typing manual so he could study on his own. Because of this strong desire to emigrate, he worked tirelessly, was scrupulously honest, and always eager to be of assistance at any time, day or night.

Abdul Kadir also spent a brief time in jail. In July of our first year, an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ran a motorcycle into Abdul Kadir, who was driving one of our vehicles. The motorcyclist demanded 3,000 riyals (\$500–\$600) in damages, thinking he could shake down the wealthy Americans for something Abdul Kadir did not do. He kept pressing his claim, even though Abdul Kadir had caused no harm and had lots of witnesses to prove it. However, the police picked up Abdul Kadir and put him in jail in late October, forcing David to drop everything and deliver a huge verbal protest to the chief of protocol. This got Abdul Kadir released but not until after he had spent the weekend in jail.

Thirty years later I was able to track down Abdul Kadir and Muhammad Abdul Ghani, who both had large families and were living in the States, awaiting their turns to become U.S. citizens. I was thrilled to speak with each of them by phone and exchanged several emails with Abdul Kadir. Muhammad and Rashida had two children with them, and two others were married and living in Sanaa. They were living on his \$1,200 per month USG pension while he did maintenance work for an auto parts company in Detroit. One of his daughters was in college studying accounting. Abdul Kadir was spending half his time in the States and half in Yemen. He was trying to get visas for his new, younger wife and family. He wanted to bring them to the United States to join him and the two older children of his first wife, who had died.

Muhammad Qassim was another FSN who had worked for the Americans before the 1967 evacuation and also served a few months in jail because of his association with us. He was our administrative (admin) officer's chief assistant. Once he got into a brouhaha with the other local employees. They accused him of showing favoritism to Zaydis as vendors for things the mission needed to purchase. (Zaydis, of Shi'a lineage, were the ruling Muslim sect of Yemen for hundreds of years and lived in the northern mountainous part of the country. Shafi'is, of Sunni lineage, were the business class who lived in the southern part of Yemen.) Eventually, because of the accusations, Qassim was arrested and thrown into jail. I still have his handwritten notes sent from prison pleading for assistance to get him released. What actually happened and how long he stayed there I cannot remember, but I'm quite sure David and our admin officer won his release with official protests to the YARG.

To handle his reporting efficiently, David needed someone to act as his political consultant, doing background research on key people and current issues. Ali Hamshari, a somewhat aloof

Yemeni from Aden, came well recommended. Always immaculately attired in suit and tie, Hamshari had been educated in the British system in Aden. He and his family had left that country for northern Yemen when FLOSY (Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen) and the NLF (National Liberation Front) forced the British out in 1967. His wife and daughters appeared freer, at least in dress, than the average north Yemeni family. His girls loved to dance to Western rock music, something I never saw among the other Yemenis in Sanaa.

I always got along well with our local staff, finding all of them personally helpful—with one exception. I had sewed lightweight white polyester-and-cotton curtains for several of the offices where our locals worked on the first floor of the chancery. I ironed them carefully and draped them over a table in one of the offices to await David's or Muhammad Abdul Ghani's assistance in hanging them. I returned later to find them wadded up and thrown on the floor because someone needed the table. That was probably the angriest I ever got at our hard-working FSNs, because ironing was not one of my favorite activities! What was a thing of beauty to me that I had made to enhance their offices was not something at least one particular staff member, whom I never identified, understood or appreciated.

During the year that followed those stressful first five months, the unexpected continued to keep us alert. Looking back now, I see we were happy, perhaps closer to equilibrium than we felt day to day at the time. Somehow finding clever ways to deal with the obstacles we faced gave us great satisfaction as well as many amusing stories to share with friends and family. In fact, the unpredictable daily adventures endeared Yemen and the Yemenis to us in ways a "normal," more Western, post would not have. And, dealing successfully with our challenges was a necessary part of the groundwork we laid to facilitate the arrival in 1972 of a much larger U.S. embassy staff, six months after our departure.