

FAILED EXPECTATIONS IN A PROMISED LAND

Randy Hayes—Department of Religion

THE ARTIST

After considerable effort we discovered his name to be Alex. At first I thought he was an elderly man. As the evening progressed I decided that he was probably closer to my age. I am young!

Alex was a Russian Jew from the Ural Mountains. In the Soviet Union Alex had been a teacher. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, he determined to leave the Urals and “go home.” Even though he had never seen Israel, all his life he had been told it was home. Even during the good times when he could feed his family, he never felt he was at home in the Soviet Union. Now that the times had turned bad, more than ever he longed to be in the land called Israel.

As a young boy, Alex could remember his parents and grandparents talking of the land of Israel. The Promised Land. The land that held the fulfillment of all their dreams. A place that not only flowed with “milk and honey,” but “kosher milk and honey.” There were always reports of opportunity, advancement, and security. The internal problems with the Palestinians were always played down as something that would soon be solved.

As I recall, it was a dark rainy night in Jerusalem that Alex knocked on our door. Or maybe it was just the feeling I got when Alex stood there in the doorway. He was selling something. His English sounded worse than our Hebrew. Alex was selling paintings. He held two pieces of old ply-wood connected with tape for hinges. Inside this portfolio were a dozen canvases painted in oils. In the bottom right-hand corner of each painting was printed “Alex.” I’m not sure to this day whether an artist would appreciate Alex’s work or not. It really doesn’t matter. They were scenes from the Urals.

We now have on our wall at home a beautiful bright scene of Alex’s Ural home. Like so many other emigrants in Israel, he couldn’t find work in Israel sufficient to house and feed his family. Professionals with impressive degrees were doing dishes at the hotel. Concert musicians spent their days looking for jobs. Evenings they played their violins on Ben-Yehuda Street for shekels in a hat. Alex was asking \$25 for the painting.

THE BUS DRIVER

Of all the experiences in a foreign land, making a new friend is the sweetest. Once a week early in the morning, four buses arrived at the entrance to the BYU-Jerusalem Center. My 45 students and I were always

Alex was a Russian Jew from the Ural Mountains. In the Soviet Union, Alex had been a teacher. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, he determined to leave the Urals and “go home.” Even though he had never seen Israel, all his life he had been told it was home.

on Jerusalem Orient No.2. All the drivers I knew were Arab. These drivers were very proud that they carried Mormon American students. I also found out that the more trust and appreciation the students and I showed them, the dearer the friendship became.

As time went on, Kahlil, our bus driver, went to great lengths to make sure we were first arriving at our destinations; so we wouldn't have to wait in line. He would take us to his favorite felafel stand where the students were safe and treated as royalty. He introduced us to his friends. He was important in his friend's eyes because the Americans trusted him and brought them business, and we held him in esteem because of his concern for us. The students began to treat him royally.

At the conclusion of each day as the bus rolled down the driveway of the BYU-Center, the students would applaud the efforts of our driver. To maneuver a bus through the narrow streets of Jerusalem's traffic was no small task, and Kahlil beamed when our students applauded his skill.

We left very early one morning for Egypt, driving from Jerusalem to the Rafah border. Rafah is a city a few miles south of the Gaza Strip. Mark Antony married Cleopatra there. It is the border crossing from Israel into Egypt. We arrived at the Israeli side of the border around 9:00 AM

Once again Kahlil was our driver and was very excited for us to see Egypt. Some of his family lived in Cairo, and he had told many of us about them. Border security is very serious in Israel, and the students learn that at borders less talk is more effective. There are horror stories of BYU buses being held at Israeli/Egyptian borders for hours. Unfortunately, I had first hand experience in some of those legends.

As always, when we arrived at the border, an Israeli security official boarded the bus, asked me who we were and where we were from. He walked up and down the aisle looking at each person, saying nothing, just looking around the bus. The security officials were always young, confident Israelis, the age of the students.

As the guard walked to the back of the bus and then returned to the front, he had not responded to any of the student's salutations. One of the students said, loud enough for all to hear, "Someone didn't have their coffee yet." It was apparent that the young man wanted to let these American students know he was in charge. I suspect most all of us smiled at the comment. A few even snickered. The young man turned to Kahlil and in Hebrew said something to him. In that moment all the hope and brightness in Kahlil's eyes was smothered. He got up from his seat and left the bus. With the bus door open I could tell the conversation was not pleasant. The young man did all the talking with an occasional *La* (no) or *Naam* (yes) from Kahlil. Kahlil kept his head down and would not look into the eyes of the young Israeli.

**It was apparent
that the young man
wanted to let
these American
students know he
was in charge.**

For the next two hours, Kahlil sat on the grass outside our bus in full view of the students, in prisoner posture, while bus after bus came and went. He had been humiliated by a young Israeli in front of people that he wanted so much to think highly of him. He was never the same after that.

THE PRESIDENT

Egypt is a marvelous place, a land of promise in its own right. If I never returned to Egypt, I would feel less than whole. Most visitors spend their time in Cairo and Giza; but for three marvelous days up river, Luxor is the ideal.

On this visit we stayed in the same hotel as always, the Étap, sitting right on the bank of the Nile. When students arrive, they want to go outside immediately and begin their adventure. This particular group had determined on the plane that everyone would check in quickly and then meet in the lobby. Our Egyptian guide was Mohammed, another old friend. He had promised the students marvelous things in Luxor, and they were ready to take him at his word.

Everyone gathered, and out the front doors we went. We turned south and followed the river along the walk-way. The city hall of Luxor sits a few doors to the south of the Etap, so we were accustomed to seeing official vehicles and people. However, this time it was different. Armed soldiers were posted around the city hall. Mohammed asked one of the soldiers what was happening. He told Mohammed, who then told us, that the President of Egypt was in town at the opening of a tomb recently discovered and would arrive at the city offices in a moment or two.

We determined to stay and watch. It was interesting to see that the American students were allowed to be in the parking lot, but the local Egyptians were kept out in the street. I began to tell the student about Hosni Mubarak and his rise to power when down the street came a number of black Chevrolet Suburbans, led by a number of military jeeps and personnel carriers. There we were in the parking lot, standing between the Suburbans and the military with the local population still in the street being held at a distance from the President.

As President Mubarak left the second Suburban and started up the stairs, Mohammed turned to an aide and said something to him. The aide yelled to President Mubarak something about America. He had said, "These are American students." President Mubarak immediately stopped, turned on the stairs, came back down and started shaking hands with my students. All this time the local Luxorites were being held at a distance.

All of this was being broadcast live on national television. The locals later told my son that they saw him with the President on the news that night. American students, made celebrities, were allowed not only to

He had said,
"These are
American students."
President Mubarak
immediately stopped,
turned on the
stairs, came back
down and started
shaking hands with
my students.

**The locals didn't
mind. These
students were
from America, and if
the President
and the Americans
get along, then life
may get better.**

shake his hand but also have individual pictures with him. He stayed on the steps for maybe 15 or 20 minutes, talking, laughing with students from another land of promise. The locals didn't mind. These students were from America; and if the President and the Americans get along, then life may get better.

Kahlil and Alex are much like you and me. If they are humiliated often enough and deeply enough, if their hopes are crushed and their joys turned to sorrow, they become resentful, even angry. If they are appreciated, if they have a sense of opportunity, their lives seem full and satisfying. To them we are foreigners from very, very far away. Though we are much alike, the bonds we may be able to form are tenuous, subject to sudden interruption, and difficult to restore. They are willing to stand behind the cordon and watch us receive their President's greeting, Mohammed among them. Their demands are modest, but their hopes are real. In the parking lot at Luxor, we all felt a greater sense of possibility—and the deeper immediacy of the barriers. ∞