

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-6 ZABALIN II

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A VISIT TO THE ZABALIN - II

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

Early one morning I found myself on a rickety bus among a bunch of giggling Egyptian teenagers and middle-aged European housewives, heading for the Tora Zabalin settlement. The teenagers were all children of Coptic families in the Cairo area. Like the Europeans, they are volunteers for Sister Emmanuelle's work among the Zabalin. We had all met at 7 a.m. on Sharia Qubaysi, a middle-class neighborhood in Cairo full of Coptic, Catholic, and Armenian churches.

The object of the teenagers myrth was Sister Emmanuelle herself - or rather her pronunciation of arabic. Despite having lived in Egypt for twenty-two years, it is still heavily accented. As the bus wound its way past affluent Maadi and onto dirt roads, she was lecturing her young cohorts on what needed to be done that day. At the end she added "today is another day to praise the Lord. We must work hard and... we must smile." She then put on a grin that provoked another round of laughter among the teenagers.

The Tora Zabalin settlement is relatively new. Unlike the Manshiet Nasser community (DJV-5) it has no infrastructure yet. There are no paved roads, no electricity, no real housing except for some rusty sheet metal shacks. As usual I tightened up as we approached. A nauseating smell permeates the air hundreds of yards around the settlement. The sight of children with patches of hair missing and constantly scratching their heads, or of young women sorting loads of garbage barehanded while rats scurry around them, is unsettling. Sister Emmanuelle noticed my mood change. As we descended from the bus she says "You'll eventually get over the schock. Don't worry, in a few more years Tora will look like Manshiet Nasser."

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It is indeed hard to believe that even five years ago Manshiet Nasser looked like Tora. But when Sister Emmanuelle arrived at the Moqattam hills about a decade ago she found a community in utter chaos. The Zabalin had just been forced off their previous settlement. Relations with the government were at an all-time low.

As a Catholic nun Sister Emmanuelle was grudgingly accepted by the



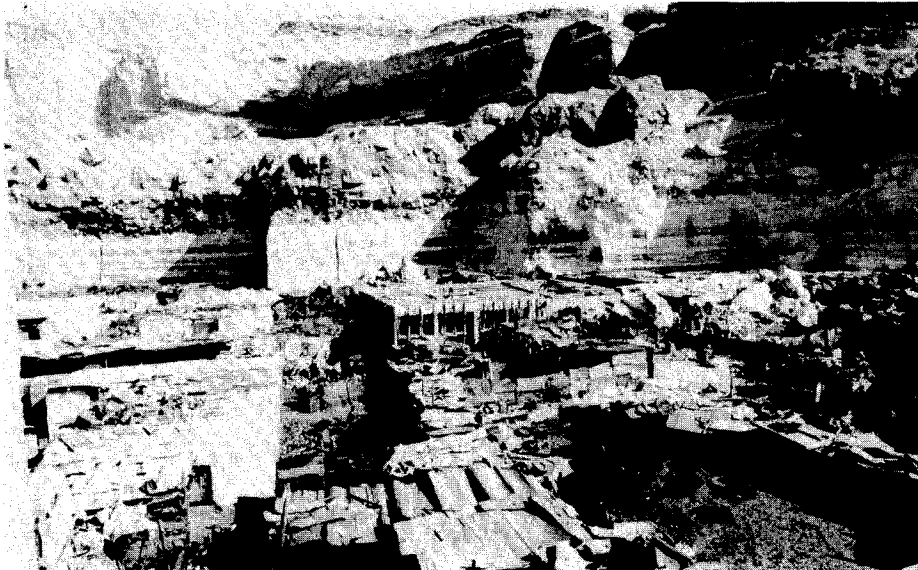
Zabalin collecting garbage in Zamalek

Zabalin, all of whom are Coptic christians. She lived at Muqattam for several months in a one room shack. (Out of respect it has been preserved. Her volunteers jokingly call it "The Queen's Palace.") She realized very early on that only cooperation with the Coptic church seemed likely to improve Manshiet Nasser's condition in the long run. Since 1974 it had organized Zabalin representatives into a voluntary organization (gamaya) that defended their interests within the governorate. But its involvement had been limited to social and welfare services.

One of Sister Emmanuelle's first initiatives was to "exploit" this traditional concern of the Coptic church. She asked sisters from the Orthodox Coptic convent in Beni Suef, a city halfway between Cairo and Upper Egypt, to join her in her work. Ever since that time Sister Sarah has worked closely together with Sister Emmanuelle. They initially attempted to bring some rudimentary form of hygiene and education to the Zabalin children and women. Until now both sisters and the large volunteer organization they have founded is mostly preoccupied with the women and children of the Zabalin.

This is in large part a cultural phenomenon. As women they were both unable to influence the decisions men made within the community. Attempts

to tamper with any of their activities would have been seen as interference and would have destroyed any chances at further cooperation. But any meaningful longterm change among the Zabalin's living conditions depended overwhelmingly on convincing the men that alternatives were available.



The Manshiet Nasser Zabalin Community

Nineteen eighty was a tantalizing year for Sister Emmanuelle and the Zabalin community of Manshiet Nasser. Her work had already attracted worldwide attention. International aid agencies were willing to underwrite major programs for the community. Manshiet Nasser was offered a unique chance to to develop. But money alone couldn't turn the community around, or persuade the men the grab the opportunity offered. A pervasive feeling of distrust and fear remained. The men particularly were particularly opposed to any changes in their lifestyles.

This is perhaps hard to understand for many westerners who tend to think that people always make pragmatic decisions, particularly if they are living in desperate conditions. In reality change can be held off for a long time in a traditional society like the Zabalin. Even incentives for improved living conditions are often considered secondary to other values. One of the international donors' internal reports described the situation in Manshiet Nasser as follows:

- Nearly total illiteracy among the men in the community
- Very limited management and technical skills, knowledge and

experience to implement any program.

- Domination of target population by much more powerful interests who are profiting greatly from the community's ignorance.
- The target population's own awareness of these limitations and their consequent unwillingness to participate in any programs so far.



Sister Emmanuelle among some Zabalin Children

By 1982 the community was receiving substantial amounts of money, due mostly to Sister Emmanuelle's hard work and high visibility. A tireless organizer, she had managed to commit several agencies to build a school at Manshiet Nasser, pave some of the roads, bring electricity and water to the community. "Money alone wasn't enough," Sister Emmanuelle recalled that day in Tora. "What we were interested in was turning the community around, so that it could take care of itself, and not be dependent on hand-outs from anyone else."

In an attempt to involve the Zabalin more systematically in garbage collection, the Cairo governorate in cooperation with Sister Emmanuelle and the gamaya attempted a couple of pilot projects at the end of 1980. The first consisted of a financial reward to collect in low-income areas. The second was a plan to provide them with motorized carts. Both backfired, mostly for reasons identified in the report quoted above: lack of leadership to organize the community and distrust among the Zabbalin. In the case of the motorized carts the problem was primarily one of economics - both the purchase price and the operating costs were much higher than those of donkey carts. When I asked one of the Zabbalin at Manshiet Nasser about the plan, he burst out laughing and said rhetorically, "gas is very

expensive and we can't feed the tractors garbage like the donkeys, can we?"

At the end of 1983 no alternative existed to the governorate's plan. Manshiet Nasser now had paved roads, electricity, and water. It even had its own full-time doctor, Dr. Adel Abd al-Malek Ghali, a volunteer from the Coptic community. But the Zabalin were even more reluctant to extend their



A Rag-pulling machine in operation in Manshiet Nasser

collection routes after the failure of the first plan, and bristled at the governorate's attempt to introduce tractors.

"We were scared at that point," Sister Emmanuelle recalls, "we thought we would never manage to get the community involved. It seemed as if the Zabalin were doomed to live forever on hand-outs." Drastic problems demanded drastic means: Sister Emmanuelle's organization ("The Friends of Sister Emmanuelle") hired a consultant to study the possibilities of increasing income to the Zabalin, upgrading the community, and of involving them in extended garbage collection.

The consultant's report - a fancy 200 page tome that neither Sister Emmanuelle nor any of the Zabalin could comprehend - pinpointed some of the major problems and opportunities. It stated that the role of the gamaya needed to be upgraded, so that it could deal more effectively with governorate officials and other outsiders. At the surface this looked like an innocuous suggestion. But the Coptic church administered the gamaya. Any criticism of the gamaya was bound to have repercussions within the community.

In a move that remains very controversial even today, the gamaya was nevertheless reorganized and secularized. Proponents of the plan argued

that the community needed a board of supervisors that could effectively defend the interests of the Zabalin within the governorate. Many of the Zabalin saw the move as nothing more than an attempt to destroy the involvement of the Coptic church. Their charge was not without merit. At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s a campaign against the Copts had led



Munir Busscha pointing at the location of the
new composting plant at Manshiet Nasser.

to several bloody incidents in Egypt. Pope Shenuda, the spiritual leader of the Copts in Egypt and Africa, had been subjected first to house arrest in Cairo and then to banishment at the Wadi Nitrun monastery.

In the end the power of the Coptic church within the Zabalin settlement suffered little from the gamaya's secularization. Not surprisingly, most of the top leadership of the gamaya also has high positions within the Coptic church. On a daily basis, the most influential figure within the Manshiet Nasser community remains the Coptic priest. But the involvement of the gamaya grew substantially after the reorganization. It was the gamaya - with a staff trained by Oxfam and Ford Foundation money - that systematically started to interact with the government on the Zabalin's behalf.

The second recommendation of the consultant hired by Sister Emmanuelle singled out recycling as the major opportunity for the Zabalin. Ever since systematic garbage collection started, Cairo has had a complex market system to deal with it. Recycling in fact is so intensive in Cairo that scavengers on garbage dumps - a sight common to many other Third World

countries - do not even exist.

Recycling typically took place in three distinct stages: collecting and sorting, preparing the materials for recycling, and actual reuse of the recycled materials for new products. In this process the Zabalin had always operated at the first stage: the providers of the raw materials, usually at very low prices. As the table below shows, the value of recycled materials increases drastically between stage of recycling:

Price per ton (Egyptian Pounds)

	<u>Stage 1</u>	<u>Stage 2</u>	<u>Stage 3</u>
Mixed Paper	3	16	17
Clear Glass	27	60	70
Plastic Bottles	90	160	450
Textiles - White	25	70	210
Dry Bone	25	35	70

The consultant's report encouraged the Zabalin to get involved in processing some of the materials locally, i.e. to bring them from Stage 1 to Stage 2 before selling them. They could then be disposed of at substantially higher prices, directly to specialized users. At the same time the Zabalin would no longer be subjected to middlemen who took advantage of their ignorance of the market for recycled materials.

This "secondary recycling" however involved purchasing specialized machinery, such as rag-pullers and plastic shredders. Few of the Zabalin had the money to purchase these machines, and were suspicious of investing. What would happen if the government relocated them once again? Distrust was still extremely high. Even if an intermediary could be found to negotiate a loan for those Zabalin willing to participate, there were a number of enormous practical problems. Many of the Zabalin had no experience in dealing with banks, almost none had any credit rating, they had no collateral, and few had legal papers to even prove their identity beyond their baptismal records from the Coptic church.

At this point (1983) Munir Busscha, a young engineer working for the consultant stepped forward, determined that the problems could be solved. Funded by Oxfam, the Ford Foundation, and The Friends of Sister Emmanuelle, and in cooperation with the gamaya he attempted to entice several individuals in procuring loans and to invest the money in either a plastic granulator or a rag-pulling machine. As he recalls those days he remembers only the initial distrust and the difficult conditions he worked under. Like Sister Emmanuelle he spent several days at a time living among the Zabalin.

The "Zabalin Small Industries Project", as the consultant's report called it, had gotten off to a difficult start. But Munir was crucial in eventually making it successful. After two years of work five men had signed up for the program - three to purchase a plastic granulation machine, two for a rag-pulling machine. The loans were relatively small, a few thousand pounds at most, to be repaid over a period up to three years.

The impact of the first phase of the program, however, was dramatic. When Munir launched the second phase later that year he was overwhelmed by requests for loans - even though conditions were now more stringent and no donor aid money was used. Within a few months several more small industry projects were launched, ranging from the initial rag-pulling and plastic granulation to carpentry shops, car repair shops, plastic manufacturing facilities, tile makers, an insulator workshop, and even a photo studio. Manshiet Nasser now boasts thirty six small businesses. The gamaya initially functioned as intermediary between the banks and the Zabalin. Most of the projects now under consideration, however, are funded by money generated within the Zabalin community itself.

The total committed in all of the initial project was LE63,000 (\$46,000). The amount was miniscule compared to most development projects. But the success of Munir's project was due to several factors that had little to do with money. He carefully outlined them in his final report: Open discussions within the community to avoid suspicion and distrust, cooperation between the different participants involved in the Zabalin community, and the commitment of several key people to the project.

But in this particular project Munir's role was crucial. He summarized the experience and the process in his report:

"Thus the initial loan recipients came to rely on the Engineer's [Munir Busschal] confidence in them in the absence of confidence in themselves. As the loan recipients became comfortable with the projects, this early psychological support was more and more replaced by technical support. Training was provided by the Engineer in project operations, maintenance and repair. Project recipients themselves later made major technical modifications on their own initiative to the equipment as they became more familiar with it."

The Zabalin Small Industries Project has been particularly successful. Now that they can recycle materials more effectively, it is economically feasible for the Zabalin to collect in lower-income areas. The gamaya is staffed with people from the Manshiet Nasser community itself. Several families enjoy larger incomes. As Sister Emmanuelle pointed out, there is a greater degree of confidence in the community and new projects are constantly started.

It doesn't mean all is well with the Zabalin community. Despite the improvements living conditions are still abominable. The Zabalin are still living at the edge of Egyptian society. But compared to Tora it is infinitely better.

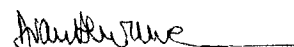
Munir has since moved on to a new project at Manshiet Nasser. He is currently supervising the construction of a composting plant which will cost the community \$600,000. Sister Emmanuelle's organization is acting as

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the contractor for the operation. When fully operational it will yield 120 tons of fertilizer per day, mostly from pig manure purchased from the Zabalin within the community. The compost will be sold to the government for land reclamation or to individual fruit and vegetable growers. Not only will the plant be profitable in a few years' time (the money will be returned to the gamaya), but it will clean up the community as well.

Sister Emmanuelle, Sister Sarah and Dr. Abd al-Malek Ghali have left Manshiet Nasser altogether. "Manshiet Nasser doesn't need our help anymore," Sister Emmanuelle told Dr. Ghali the morning I visited her at her new settlement, "I'd like you to come work at Tora full-time. We have work to do here."

All the best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Emmanuelle", followed by a horizontal line.

I would like to thank Munir Busscha and Ronda Fahmy of Environmental Quality International, Sister Emmanuelle and Sister Sarah at the Tora Zabalin community, Magdy Bebawy of the Zabalin gamaya at Manshiet Nasser, Dr. Adel Abd al-Malek Ghali of As-Salam hospital, and Mr. Mustapha Murad of the Ford Foundation.

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