

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Seen by a Diplomat's Spouse

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In the Name of God
Most Gracious, Most Merciful

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Arrival in the Country... Tirst Years

In the Spring of 1994 we arrived in the Arabian Peninsula. My husband Elman Arasli was appointed extraordinary plenipotentiary ambassador representing the Azerbaijan Republic at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We had to establish the first embassy for our newly independent state in this country.

To tell the truth, I was not at all willing to travel to any place, as this meant parting again with the children and leaving home. After living abroad for a long time one would prefer to finally settle down at home.

At this time, my husband had spent about twenty years in the diplomatic service in the Arab countries. However, I realized that we had to travel for many reasons, or at least for two main reasons. On the one hand, my husband could not imagine himself isolated from active work under the uncertain conditions of that period of time. He was always ready to serve the state that was being born before all to see. On the other hand, and I say this without affected modesty, the new State was in need of specialists of this

high-ranking level.

The month of April at Baku was exceedingly beautiful that year. I roamed through the narrow streets of the old city and inhaled the spring odors that had dwindled into oblivion, enjoyed the pleasure of warmth under the rays of the sun which had not yet become too hot, in an attempt to record this impression on the pages of my memory. I visualized the spectacle of the yet invisible phase of our life. I was not keen on foretelling the future and predicting what is in store for us, as I knew that this matter is not warranted nowadays.

Surrounded by a gathering of friends and relatives who came to bid us farewell and who wished us happiness and safe landing, we climbed up the aircraft steps and seated ourselves in the parlor of a Turkish airline plane.

The noise of the engine, together with the fretting associated with the initial phase of travel, have triggered a series of ideas in my mind. I could not but think that this new embassy beyond our borders is radically and amazingly different from all previous ones, not only in respect of the country of destination, but also because my husband's activities this time will have a different significance. It is as it were a pioneering one and would be directly linked with the history of our state. Whether we like it or not, it is going to be a distinctive phase, albeit not a big one, of this history. At this juncture, it dawned on me that I must prepare a diary book which could serve as the basis of a book in the future. Who else could do this if not myself, a living witness of such events.

For us, the Middle East region was not a remote and

obscure place. Moreover, as I have already said, we had lived for a large part of our active life in the Arab countries and were able, particularly my husband, to properly understand its problems. The two years Elman Arasli had spent in Egypt as a beginner orientalist, working there as an interpreter; and subsequently as a senior economist, at the Commercial Representation of the Soviet Union in Cairo; the seven exciting years that were fraught with events in Iraq during what I consider to be the most prosperous days in the life of this country, indeed in our private life as well, in his capacity as the Director General of the Soviet Cultural Center and Advisor to the Soviet Union Embassy; and the five years, in the same capacity, in splendid and unforgettable Jordan; the four years in difficult Yemen, but which in any case remains stored in our memory – all these years have given us in-depth knowledge not only of the characteristics of this part of the world, but also knowledge and concern for the interests of these peoples.

However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is another matter. We have of course consulted a few books which we found in our country on Saudi Arabia, from which we gathered scanty and partly obsolete, and in many cases, biased information. It is only natural that Saudi Arabia should be associated in people's minds with great wealth, and I was no exception in that respect. I had known that it ranked first in the world in respect of oil, its extraction and export, that its citizens have one of the highest standards of living, and that, being the cradle of Islam, and the location of revelation, it plays a prominent role in the spiritual life of all Muslims throughout the world. Finally, its unique



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geographic position, at the cross-roads of Asia, Africa and Europe, has enabled it to control the most important sector of the world communications between East and West. It was obvious that this was not enough or adequate. Theoretical knowledge is never a substitute at all for actual, living impressions, which none of those around us possessed. Until the time of the embarking on change, which came to be known as the reconstruction process, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. No Soviet individual had access to this place, although many years ago a wise person, who is an old friend of the family, the Academician Ghafourov was somehow and mysteriously able to visit the Arabian Peninsula, even met King Faisal bin Abdulaziz and told us a great many interesting and cute things about Saudi Arabia.

After a four-hour flight, during which the monotonous noise of the engine filled our ears, we began to feel drowsy, particularly as it was past midnight. Every now and then I would look through the window and could see nothing but thick darkness. Three or four of the first-class passengers were fast asleep, and one passenger drew near to my husband and they had a refreshing conversation. It transpired that this fellow traveler was a Turkish businessman on a business trip to Saudi Arabia. This young man has later on given us precious assistance that was quite necessary for us during the first stages of the establishment of our embassy.

Then came the announcement of our being close to landing. I looked again through the window, and lo! What

a miracle! All the land below revealed many intersecting and intercrossing lighted lines that reflected streets, alleys and public squares. This was such a pleasant surprise after many hours of the utter bleak and dreary darkness that surrounded the plane and lasted many hours. This made us realize that the city of Riyadh is a modern city that does not bother to conserve electric power.

The large and widely-spaced airport welcomed us with a refreshing and pleasant cool breath of air, and with unexpected luxury. Its ceiling and many cupolas rose high above. The passages and glass-lined corridors were hanging over mosaic, water groupings of waterfalls, while the murmuring water flowed crystal clear over the steps wherein live, ever green, tress had been planted, their fresh leaves indicating that they were in perfect condition within the closed and roofed space. The walls were beautifully decorated and adorned with Islamic symbols. There were also specially designated places for prayer whose floors were covered with carpets and rugs.

Although it was very late at night, the representatives of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs were there to receive us and accompany us to the reception hall that is reserved for guests of honor. After exchanging traditional phrases of greetings, the men became absorbed in a warm and heated conversation. I, personally, occupied myself with observing the place, which was the entry to a hall that was akin to the parlor of a palace, whose floor was covered with an exquisite old carpet. The edges of the building were lined with golden comfortable chairs and sofas on both sides. On marble tables with plaited legs

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there were lamps in the shape of glittering vases on top of which are laid umbrellas veiled with cloth from which soft light emanated. On the wall that immediately faces the door, there were four water-colour pictures, the first representing the founder of the State, King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, the second representing the present monarch, king Fahd bin Abdulaziz; the other two represented his brothers, Crown Prince, Head of the National Guards, Prince Abdullah and the Second Deputy President of the Council of Ministers, Minister of Defense and Aviation and Inspector General of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As we found out later on, these pictures are indispensable decorations of the front of government departments, photography saloons and even barber saloons. Saudis appreciate and love their leaders.

There rose in the air a slightly intoxicating odor of incense and oriental perfumes. There were no windows. However, there rose high in the corners of the hall within metal enameled barrels ever green trees. It seemed to me strange, at the time, that they could grow so well without day light, but later on, I was no longer surprised to see dense plants and decorative trees.

One is dazzled to see the entrances of the major government offices, the commercial centers, the stores and private houses, not to mention the flower shops, which abound in Riyadh.

A swarthy Bedouin wearing a white tunic (dashdasha), a long robe, offered us Arabian coffee, which turned out to be quite different from traditional coffee. It is a hot and almost transparent dark yellow beverage from which

emanates the aroma of cardamom. Sipping Arabian coffee has a special tradition. It is poured into small cups from a special coffee pot (della) made of copper or silver and has a long mouth. Coffee is prepared on coal and hot ashes. The one who pours the coffee holds in his right hand up to eight cups piled into one another. Each is filled up to the middle and is offered to the guests, beginning with the most senior and respected one. Declining to drink coffee is unethical; the protocol of offering this beverage is primarily a sign of welcome. If one does not wish to partake of more than one cup, one has to put one's index finger over the top of the cup and shake it from one side to the other before returning it to the coffee server. It is not proper to put the empty cup on the table.

Finally, the conversation came to an end, the baggage was delivered and for the first time we plunged in the open and mellow night air. To say that it is mellow is true but with a difference. In early April, even late at night, the weather in the suburbs of Riyadh would be sweltering by our standards. As we found later, the temperature was about 32 to 34 Celsius. At the time, however, I felt it was much higher than that, because I was not used to it.

The convoy, which consisted of three automobiles, proceeded to Riyadh, which is splendid in its reflection of the radiant orange light of high lifted road lamps. Two rows of carefully trimmed dense trees could be seen along the road. These were among the first strong impressions that surprised me in Riyadh: such dense green in the heart of the desert! Later on, we got used to seeing all cities, even those in the driest regions of the country, planted

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with ever green trees. The State spends exorbitant sums of money on these green trees, a special device having been placed to irrigate each tree using the dripping method. Not to mention the thickets of dense palm trees and the many recreation grounds and parks that abound with jets and waterfalls.

Forty minutes later, we reached a high rising luxurious and comfortable hotel “Riyadh Palace”, our first residence in this country.

Thus, we found ourselves in Saudi Arabia and it seemed that there was a substantial, hard and unknown, though interesting, task ahead of us in a unique type of country. Where and how do we start? Obviously, twenty years of diplomatic experience abroad is a valuable asset. Once we settled down, Elman Erasli put a blank paper on the table before him. But it was late and we were tired and greatly exhausted on account of the long day of travel. It seemed that a huge mass of impressions was exerting pressure on me and made me fall asleep at once. So, I did not see what my husband had jotted down in his fine handwriting: the first steps needed by our embassy which had not yet been established. When I woke up in the morning, I could not tell at first where I was. My husband was not there. I looked through the window and saw a small part of a white plaza – on account of the bright rays of the sun – which was absolutely bare. Subsequently, we were no longer surprised when we used to drive for 15 to 20 minutes across a certain street without seeing a single person walking in the street. It was not possible to see a gathering of people except in markets, near stores and

commercial centers. I think Riyadh is one of the rare cities in the world where there is almost no pedestrian crossing in its streets. Actually, there was no need for them, because all the people moved in cars, although the city means of transport therein are non-existent with the exception of taxi cabs. A flow of small buses would rarely be seen, but I never saw, not even once, a bus stop.

The great majority of Saudi citizens use their private cars. As to foreigners, their employers provide them with this type of transport (for your information, this is an obligation in any employment contract). I think that this state of affairs is dictated primarily, more than the absence of city transport and the great expanse of the city, by the inclement weather in the Kingdom. In the heat of the summer (55 degrees Celsius in the shade), it is not easy to wait at a bus stop. All cars, including taxi cabs, are air-conditioned. Riyadh is most probably the only city where one does not see a single police officer standing in its streets or at its cross-roads, with the exception of policemen in charge of organizing the traffic. But these would be sitting inside their cars and their presence is manifest and tangible everywhere. In case of a traffic accident, policemen would arrive at the scene within no more than five minutes.

Students go to their schools riding their private cars, which are driven by chauffeurs. Hence the traffic jams between twelve noon and three p.m. near schools. Expert drivers are keen to make detours round these places. As to the children of foreigners, these are transported by the school buses. Sometimes, one could see an eleven or

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twelve--year-old boy sitting behind the steering of a big jeep driving such a large car skillfully. I think this is not encouraged by traffic police, but they do not prevent or preclude it.

The habitual practice of opening embassies is for a group comprising one or two diplomats to arrive in the country of accreditation, together with a specialist in economic administration to look for an appropriate building for the embassy and a convenient place for residence, and to rent and prepare same properly. In our case, for certain reasons, everything was the other way round. It transpired that the vanguard group of the embassy was confined to my husband and myself.

A few days later, we moved to a smaller hotel that comprised family flats and started looking for two proper buildings for lease. Here something unexpected happened to me. Throughout my life, I had always complained of the lack of leisure time and used to dream of practicing things that I liked, such as writing a book, painting a picture, sewing or embroidering, or at least practicing my collection hobby. But now I had plenty of time and there was no trace of managerial problems. But, strangely enough, I found myself disinclined to do anything. Before my eyes, the white pages of the diary book were open; but what can I or should I write about? I had no children, no friends, no relatives close to me. Elman, on the other hand, was soon plunged in work and was always absent, while I was alone without books or newspapers. Because of the tightly shut windows, there were no disturbing noises, no blowing of wind, no barking of dogs, not even the caress

of breezes. Only at night could we hear the screeching of the brakes of cars driven by hasty and adroit drivers.

I felt like a prisoner. After sun-set we tried, my husband and I, to go for a walk, but we gave up this idea. Even in the evening, there was the humid weather that was suffocating. Two or three minutes later, there would flow on our backs under our clothes a string of melting sweat. Thus the best thing remaining for us was to run for the air-condition.

Fortunately, I finally I found something to keep me busy. During the first half of the day, my husband used to pay visits. But in the second half, we used to go looking for two buildings for the embassy and for residence. This, of course, was no mean matter, if we consider the tiring heat and our financial status.

Every day, we used to inspect 3 to 4 buildings with the assistance of a real-estate agent. All in all, we inspected more than sixty buildings, and, in doing so, we had actively studied, within one month, the residential assets of the Saudi capital.

Eventually, we stopped at two buildings: the embassy building, which is a two-storey villa, that consists of 11 rooms, a large courtyard paved with marble slabs, a tiny house that is appropriate for a driver, a shed for the car and a swimming pool of medium dimensions; the second, was the residential home, which was more modest, consisting of a one-floor furnished house. Later on, within a few days, the embassy rooms were repaired, furniture was purchased and oil paintings were hung. Then, which is quite an accomplishment, the Encyclopedia Britannica

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was bought with its many volumes, which became the foundation of the embassy's library.

Thus in one way or another, everything was ready for the official opening. Guests flocked in and the flag was hoisted and the cinematographic camera was loaded. What could be said other than that the moment was tense and fraught with delightful emotions. It was the opening of the first Azerbaijan embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The flag was hoisted high above and started fluttering in the wind. This took place on the 4th of May 1994.

At first, our residence seemed very dreary. In the process of cleaning the windows, I found that they were blocked up to two thirds with wooden boards, which was a necessary measure against the possible air raids of the war that was raging in the Gulf region. When we finally moved from the hotel, I suddenly felt that I was living in a house. The shining wide windows overlooked a small delightful garden that was surrounded by a high stone wall. In the garden, there were small palm trees, lotus trees and one pomegranate tree, which filled me with tenderness and warmth as they reminded me of my far away home. From the gate to the external door, there was a fence on which grew small vine trees from which bunches of grapes were hanging and casting a pleasant shade. There was also a jasmine tree from which there emanated an intoxicating pleasant smell. The glass wall in the reception room provided abundant light. The flowers I had planted grew quickly and created a pleasant impression on those who saw them.

As it is the case with every woman, I busied myself

with the pleasant task of organizing my home. On tree branches, I hanged baskets which I filled with grains for birds. I gradually trained a cat which was abandoned by some people and bought a sea tortoise.

At the time, the mercury gage indicated rising temperature, day after day, which made it almost impossible for me to walk in the garden during day time, indeed even at night, for the heat seemed almost not to abate; the temperature merely fell by no more than 3 to 4 degrees. This was the beginning of a long and tortuous summer.

Ever since my arrival in Saudi Arabia, all communication with my relatives had been interrupted, as communications between cities had not yet been established. It was merely possible to contact the children by telephone at the city's trunk calls department, where there was a long queue of people waiting for their turn to make long distance calls. As I was always busy, I had not thought I would so desperately need to communicate with my relatives. But things were easier for Elman Arasly. Thus on the first day of our residence, he called Ali Tuwaiqan, the ambassador of Turkey and told him that we would like him to visit us so that we may become closely acquainted. The meeting took place on the same day at the hotel and was the beginning of an intimate and lasting friendship.

Let me hasten to say that Ali Tuwaiqan was a gentle person and a skilful diplomat. He never hesitated to give valuable advice and gave Elman Arasly practical assistance that was very necessary, particularly during the first stage

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of the organization of our embassy.

The spouse of the Turkish ambassador was an attractive and intelligent Canadian, who became my first friend in Saudi Arabia. She introduced me to her many friends and we used to spend many hours together. We understood each other splendidly, although my English was poor at the time. One day, I had a telephone call from the spouse of the Russian ambassador, Trasov (only the Ambassador of Russia had been accredited at the time and the second to be accredited from the same region was the ambassador of Azerbaijan). She told me that she and her husband knew Elman Arasly by reputation and were among the students who studied at the Official Moscow Institute for international relations, which was affiliated to the Foreign Ministry in Russia, for preparing diplomats, and that they benefited from his writings. In addition, we discovered that we had many common friends and orientalists. I was also visited by the spouses of the ambassadors of many countries as it is common practice according to diplomatic protocol. Later on, I myself visited more than once the newcomers to provide them with initial support, although I knew that they would soon join intimate groups and things would be easier for them. In any case, they were grateful and thankful, for the care and attention given to them.

In time, through attending many women meetings, charity activities and art exhibitions, I became acquainted with many Saudi women. I say in all honesty that I had not expected to meet such beautiful, wonderful, educated friendly and cultivated women. I contracted a special

relationship with one of them and we became almost like two sisters. She is still young and has a well known and gorgeous family. I will certainly have occasion to talk of her later on.

Thus I gradually cultivated friends and acquaintances. After one year or a little more, the embassies of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine were opened. My husband had previously met during his business activities in one way or another with the ambassadors of these countries. Thus, life became easier and more interesting. On April 18th 1994, two weeks after our arrival, Elman Arasly visited the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, in order to deliver a full copy of his credentials, the originals to be handed over to the head of State, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz, but this was done only after some time. During the recent years, the King was in the habit of receiving the credentials twice a year: the first time was before the Holy Month of Ramadan; the second, at the beginning of the Hajj (pilgrimage) season. It is well known that before handing over his credentials, an ambassador is not effectively considered the official representative of his country and does not always participate in diplomatic functions. His name is not listed in the special information registers. Until the time of our arrival, there had accumulated a long queue of 15 ambassadors who had previously arrived in the country and were awaiting their turn to present their credentials. Luckily, the Hajj season was close at hand.

At last, a day was designated for the presentation of credentials. I propose to describe briefly these ceremonial

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occasions. All the heads of diplomatic missions met at the Guests Palace in Riyadh. Then each of them was driven in a special car, accompanied by a squadron of motorcyclists to Al-Amer Royal Palace. The actual presentation of credentials was shown on local television. Each ambassador got off the car and proceeded in the direction of the palace gates, escorted by two lines of honor guards that comprise 35 to 40 military personnel wearing special apparel. At the end of the line, the chief of the group of guards was waiting for him in order to offer him the military salute with a drawn sword that is lifted high up and accompanied him to the guests waiting room. When all were gathered, they were invited to move on to the close-by hall of ceremonies where the King was present with his entourage. After the announcement of the name of each ambassador and the name of his country, he would proceed solemnly towards the Head of State and present his credentials. After the ceremonies were over, the King sat with them and welcomed them for forty minutes in other more magnificent and gorgeous halls.

Thus Elman Arasly obtained official diplomatic status as extraordinary plenipotentiary ambassador representing the Azerbaijan Republic at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Awaiting him were years of hard but very important and interesting work.

During the many years of our life abroad, I always used to help my husband in his work. But here, in the Kingdom, I realized that my tasks must be different and more important. An ambassador's wife also represents her country and a great deal depends on her activity.

As I have already said, my English at the time was very poor indeed. I understood that I had to do something about it. One day, I received a call from the spouse of the British ambassador. She was an attractive, intelligent person. Her name was Mary Horbedit and I contracted with her an intimate and enduring friendship and asked her to help me find a woman teacher. Less than a week later, she told me she had found the teacher I desired and that I could form a group of ladies whose English was poor. The spouses of some ambassadors responded with pleasure to my proposal. Our first teacher was the spouse of an English major general. Our friendship is still alive and we still correspond.

I am writing about that in such detail because our group that was later called “the Azerbaijani Group” has become, since then, a remarkable phenomenon in the diplomatic life of the Country and I think it has played a small, though positive, role in the relations of Azerbaijan with other states.

Months had passed and the group increased and multiplied; new members joined in and others had left the country. We used to enjoy study at our meetings each Tuesday, which tradition has continued up to the present, although I am the only one left of the first students. I am also the coordinator of the group, although I was really tired of carrying out daily routine work. But this Group is my lovely baby and I will not abandon it until my final departure. When this happens, the group will probably cease to exist. At present, the Group comprises about fifteen members, both foreigners and local women. Obviously, the activity



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of the Group has ceased to be confined to the learning of English, as most members became quite fluent in English. However, we always exchanged views and talked carefreely about various matters. Sometimes, we would invite specialists in various fields, celebrate different sorts of occasions, stage plays, give parties, organize exhibitions of national dresses and costumes, make many trips and stand by one another in cases of difficulties and, of course, talk about our countries.

Here in particular, after becoming members of the society of ambassadors' spouses, I wanted to make acquaintance with many Saudi ladies in the diplomatic corps in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I suddenly discovered that many of them knew nothing or very little about our countries. I had to take it upon myself to give lectures and talks, explanations and illustrations.

During our stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, my husband made several appearances on Saudi television, gave radio talks, wrote many articles in the local newspapers and was interviewed several times by newspaper reporters. All such activities were illustrated by color pictures. I, myself, was involved in a few such activities. A whole picture appeared in newspapers about Azerbaijan with exquisite photographs of our children and grandchildren. I appeared several times on television and talked of our country, our traditional cuisine, the way we celebrate the month of Ramadan and Id Al-Fitr . I also talked about the books I had written, the paintings I made, my famous collection of women fans and many other things. But time flies and our fifth year in Saudi Arabia

seemed like yesterday. The world is changing rapidly, but not to the better, unfortunately. Regional disputes dispel confidence and cause perpetual anxiety. Each time the annual vacation comes to an end I used to feel two conflicting desires within myself: to stay at home and protect my family against the invisible danger, or travel quickly back to Saudi Arabia where we can reach the safest place on earth, provided I could take with me the dearest persons who are nearest to my heart.

Here in Saudi Arabia, we did have our own home, many friends, a lovely job (I have now started painting) and life here was interesting and active. My husband and I have been nearly all around the country and met many wise persons. We have heard first hand accounts and stories that are almost figments of imagination. I was aware that I was now able to talk of so many things that had accumulated in my memory. Thus I cannot help conveying to my compatriots what I have felt and seen of this unique country. Thus I started writing, prompted by the occasion of the Centenary Celebration.

The State Foundation Centenary

In January 1999, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia celebrated the first centenary of its foundation according to the Hegira Calendar. Is this a short or a small period? On the scale of the evolution of the human community, it is a very minute phase of time. But when we consider the colossal changes that have taken place during such a short period, it seems very long indeed. Obviously, the oil wealth that was discovered, which is the greatest in the world, has played a crucial role in this accelerating process. But there is no doubt, also, that the wise administration of its first King, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud and his sons, has determined, in many respects, the happy destiny of this state, given the many examples of rich countries that were not able to properly manage their available potentials.

The first known ancestor of Al Saud family, after whose name the country was called, was Imam Muhammad bin Saud, who ruled during the twenties of the Eighteenth Century and was able to hold both the secular and religious authority, which is still preserved. Subsequently, as a result of the many inter-clan wars ignited by the

competing powers – the Ottoman and British Empires – these lands were taken over by representatives of either one or the other of such ruling families. The currently ruling branch of the Saudi genealogical tree stems from King Abdulaziz, who was able, in 1902, through his rule which was based on Islamic law, to unify the dispersed lands that were inhabited by various tribes that had practically led a medieval type of life for many decades. He weaved an exquisite tapestry of a unified state and kept, until his last days, spreading it under the feet of his people as a carpet of magic colors and craftsmanship.

On a bright morning in the year 1902, a small group, comprising forty persons, marched from Kuwait through the central Arab desert sands towards their objective, facing the ruthless desert in its endlessness and monotony, which seemed to have no ending, amidst sand, stones and salty marshes, swamps and the balls of plants on which camels feed and ruminant. These balls resemble living plants that have been plagued by dryness. The lips of the group were festered with dryness that was occasioned by the northern sandy wind that hit semi-closed eyes that had turgid eyelids, looking exhaustedly to the far off horizon that had no end. Occasionally, the monotony of the sand dunes and swamps would be broken by a frightened rabbit running for its life, or by an intruding fox, or an eagle gliding in the vast firmament, swimming in the air, spreading its wings, looking sharply with its piercing eyes on its prey, and flying low in order to dive on its prey at an amazing speed, particularly during night hours. For their part, the group would seek to protect themselves from the terrible



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cold of the night that pierced their bones to the marrow by sitting close to one another and to the camels, seeking the warmth of their hair and blood, opening their eyes widely and turning them towards the vast sky that was punctuated by stars that glittered like pearls in the wide expanse of the night. The silence of the night would be disturbed by the anxious and alerted howling hyenas. In this manner, the caravan proceeded day after day, avoiding the usual Bedouin tracks, rare oases and the wells of potable water, through tortuous enemy terrain wherein saline swamps abounded amidst unknown locations. The camels, that had become lean, were carrying on their backs heavy gear and the necessary reserves of water, food and weapons.

From the very outset, the group moved about with great energy and enthusiasm, confident of their legal cause, full of certainty of achieving swift victory, heading towards their remote target. However, after being exhausted by difficulties, persistent tension and expectation of enemy assaults, they at first began to lose their enthusiasm and alertness, although the majority of them were of local origin. But things were different for their youthful and energetic leader, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, the grandchild of Imam Faisal, who had spent the early years of his youth in the palaces of Kuwait under the persistent lovable care of his father's companion, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah. Here, amidst games, banquets and conversation with wise elderly companions, he had obtained his training, acquired experience and cultivated the pre-requisites of leadership. This is the future monarch of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For Abdulaziz, the desert was not a place

that was close to his liking. It evoked in him caution and anxiety. At the same time, it awakened in him hopes and promises of what he had aspired for. The young prince also suffered from the difficult march. But his iron will, strong mettle and his awareness of the difficult task he was undertaking were motives that provided him with an unprecedented and extraordinary strength. Abdulaziz well knew the dispositions of his companions. He had absolute confidence and trust in his loyal friends. At the same time, he could see how tired they were and their desperate need for rest and recuperation. He realized that it was necessary - at such time - to boost their morale, and to make them realize that they alone can complete the task of liberating the homeland.

The sun began to descend in the direction of the western horizon. Abdulaziz gave his order to stop for rest at a convenient resting place, as he saw from the far horizon the advent of sand storms. In front, he could see the still sea of sand dunes.

These sands have a notorious history. Here the traces of men and animals disappeared instantly, being wiped out by the winds and the sand storms, and the route that had recently been traversed appeared as though it had been untrodden. The ancient bedouins know the locations where the sliding sands can swallow not only an uncautious person but the whole caravan as well.

Suddenly, a sand storm swept over the nearest dune. For the inhabitants of the desert, it was a common sight for the wind to uproot the upper face of the upper layer of sand and to lift it high up in the air, winding it in the shape

of an ascending cyclone, such that the place was seen from a distance as though it were a raging volcanic crater shooting lava up in the air. But this time, everything was more serious, more dangerous, more terrifying, because the gloomy and dark sky soon poured forth quantities of clouds of dust and fine dust over their heads, the small particles of which penetrated through their eyes, noses and throats, preventing them from breathing, as they obstructed the passage of the air – no breathing in, no breathing out. Visibility was almost nil as nothing could be seen beyond a couple of yards ahead, thus rendering people half blind. These were the (khamaseen) winds, which are stirred by the northern winds, and could last up to fifty days in full.

Then loud cries were heard from the guide of the caravan. He was an expert camel guide. He had known he was in a desperate situation from the very start of the storm when he was unable to gather men and camels, for they would soon be dispersed in the desert, which was like a sea of sand in which all would be drowned in the raging sand of the cyclone, just as a ship sinks in a stormy sea. Under such conditions, one cannot see or hear even at a distance of two yards. But thanks to God no one was lost and the guide managed to gather the frightened camels, which under such circumstances tried to assemble together when facing this fierce and stubborn opponent. The men protected themselves under large woolen blankets against the grains of sand that penetrated all that came their way, and in order to dispel feelings of despair in the absence of roofs that sheltered the afflicted, and in the absence of fire round which people in forests would gather at night.

Shortly before dawn and sunrise, the wind quieted down, after it had blown so fiercely, producing all sorts of noises that deafened the ears like the banging on brass. However, the blanket that was heavy with a thick layer of sand, and the faces of the revived faces that had been dried up, were all that remained of the storm that passed in peace, as though nothing had happened. Thus the caravan proceeded onwards and had to face, unless something unexpected should occur, many monotonous days that were similar to that day along the long desert route. Abdulaziz, however, was prepared, for the sake of attaining his objective, to go through much more than that. A year before, his father Abdul Rahman, together with Sheikh Mubarak, had gathered a large force to fight their bitter enemy, the Al-Rashid family, whose members had occupied their land. The battle that raged was a fierce one. But despite the courage and bravery of Abdul Rahman's men, they had to withdraw, at which time the young Abdulaziz swore by God Almighty to recapture, without the least doubt, the land of his ancestors and make his people happy.

Through the eye of imagination, there passed the great difficulties encountered on the way and the great dangers and risks they had been exposed to, together with the deprivation from which they suffered. The caravan crossed the dry courses of rain streams with their hard edges and sharp slopes through a sea of sands where sharp and protruding rocks stood as sentinels in places where one could not see a single living soul. Finally, tired and exhausted, but grateful and thankful to God, the men,

feeling proud of their accomplishment and fully confident of their capabilities, arrived in a small oasis near the city of Riyadh. At this point, Abdulaziz divided his detachment into three groups and kept ten persons to guard the caravan and the baggage, so that in case of failure of the next day's assault, they were to return in haste to Kuwait, using the same route and inform their families of the defeat. The remaining persons would follow suit.

The night was very dark and quiet. It was as though the moon had deliberately hidden behind the invisible clouds. Nobody noticed those fighters who crept silently towards the wall of the city and climbed it near one of its gates, which was called Al-Shumaisi. Then, sticking to the cold wall, they advanced towards the mud buildings and after short runs they reached the cactus plants behind Al-Masmak stronghold, wherein the governor of the Rahidis, Ajlan, used to sleep under the protection of a group of guards – as their under-the-cover- of-darkness reconnaissance had reported. Here Abdulaziz kept his brother Muhammad with another group of warriors. He himself, together with the remaining most loyal and most courageous aids, headed through the narrow alleys, listening tensely in the quiet night, till they reached the house of his old ally, who had been waiting for this for many days. They all sneaked unseen till they reached the governor's palace, which was not far away, and occupied it. According to the chambermaids, the governor used to visit the chamber of his new young wife nearly every morning. Hence, Abdulaziz sent for his brother and his companions to join him and they decided to wait till

morning. The youthful prince was brave of heart but was at the same time extremely cautious. He had realized that attacking the citadel would not bring him victory in view of the inequality of the forces.

Morning broke out and the burning sun began to rise slowly, its rays jostling through the upper curves of the citadel and penetrated through the teeth of the citadel wall. The muezzin's melodious voice was heard from over the high minaret. Gradually, here and there, after the slumber of night, the usual the barking of dogs, -noises of the awakened city were heard the cries of water - sellers the laughter of children, the noises of camels. Suddenly, the narrow gates of the large citadel were opened and two huge slaves emerged from the narrow fissure and gazed through the near courtyard, which seemed to them quiet and empty. They were followed by the governor, who looked cautiously and made a few steps. At this moment Abdulaziz and his men rushed swiftly into the courtyard and within a few minutes Ajlan was arrested together with some guards who came to his rescue, in response to the cries of help which he had uttered, and all of them were killed. The majority of the population received the young prince with greetings and welcome. He was twenty five years old at the time.

That was a daring operation by a small group in the depth of enemy-rear-end that aimed at capturing a citadel that is hardly believed to be susceptible to occupation and seizure. But this did happen. Only a person who believes in his just cause and who is confident of victory could have done that. He saw what could not be seen and did what

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could not be done. This took place on January 12, 1902, at the dawn of the Twentieth Century. With this brilliant victory, Abdulaziz came to occupy the position of head of the Saudi House, master of the land, the people and the homeland, and that of monarch that ruled the kingdom. But for strengthening and protecting the country and adding more and more new acquisitions, the future harbored other fierce battles, assaults, compromises, retreats, diplomatic discussions and political negotiations, ambitions and aspirations. In the following decades Abdulaziz had to win the confidence of the many independent sheikhs, to put out the rebellions that took place within his own family, to annex the Hijaz territory with its Holy Kaabah, to maneuver wisely between the two great empires: the Ottoman and the British, and, finally, to steer the ship of his kingdom through the storms of two world wars, without nearly sustaining any losses.

The centenary celebrations went on for a whole year. During this period, arrangements and receptions were organized to commemorate this historical occasion in actual practice. Thus, the sky was lit with fireworks, exhibitions were staged and books, brochures and albums were exhibited to mark this occasion, together with the few photographs taken and reproduced in great numbers between 1920 and 1953. There were also pictures showing various aspects of the achievements witnessed by the Kingdom throughout that important period of history. Such rare pictures in black and white showed faces that had left this world a long time ago, some of which are totally unknown; others are historically and internationally

famous. All these are records of important landmarks that reflect the stages of evolution of the country during the past years, which are estimated to represent at least five hundred years of the history of this country.

The reader can see in this book the first snapshots of the future king, his entourage and retinue (all of whom are, obviously, men, and none are women). Their faces look grim and cautious, semi-covered with the traditional head-cover (kufiyya) and (iqaal). These were the faces of men who had encountered something new and incomprehensible in 1911. At that time, the country included just the central part of the Arabian Peninsula and the Governorate of Jeddah. Tribal life and the pastoral type of economy prevailed; the roaming nomads controlled the largest part of the territory and the water resources; they owned great numbers of camels and sheep; the standard of living of the majority of the population was very low. Diseases were rampant, specially malaria, syphilis, tuberculosis and leprosy. The average life expectancy was 33 years; slavery had not been totally abolished yet and contact with the outside world took place once a year during the season of Pilgrimage to the Holy Kaabah. There were isolated towns and no asphalted routes; the conventional means of transport were the camels, which were also the source of food and clothing and a guarantee of survival in a rigorous climate.

There is also a historical photograph representing the meeting of King Abdulaziz with King Faisal of Iraq on board the British cruiser Lubin. This was no casual occasion; it followed the disintegration and fall of the

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Ottoman Empire. At the end of the First World War, Britain played a crucial role in this region, and installed two reliable rulers on the thrones of Transjordan and Iraq.

In 1930, nearly thirty years after the occupation of Riyadh, during which, and as a result of hard struggle, Abdulaziz was able to subdue the sheikhs of the neighboring emirates, and as a result of his struggle against the Turks, he cooperated with the British, who, obviously, were seeking their own ends, for converting to urban life a number of bedouin clans and established special settlements for them. There the group of the Ikhwan were trained to perform agricultural work, which was new to them. After they had lost contact with their previous way of life, they became not only urban farmers but also first class and unimaginably loyal warriors at the disposal of the Saudi State. With their help, and as a result of the successful moves made by Abdulaziz, extensive and wide expanses of the territory of the Arabian Peninsula were unified, including the Hijaz, which includes the holiest of Islamic places: Holy Mecca and the Medina Munawwarah. In 1933, Abdulaziz issued a decree providing for the unification of the various parts of the country, under which decree the country came to be known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since then, Abdulaziz became king of a vast state which occupied twelfth position in terms of areas among the states of the world. This secured for him a high and prestigious position. The King's foreign policy had a peaceful character in view of the fact that he realized that only under peaceful conditions could the most difficult and complex political, internal and religious problems be

solved. Thus in 1936 he signed the Friendship Treaty with Egypt and Iraq and, in the following year, with the Yemen. The old photographs in this book show the meetings with the leaders of those countries and others.

The major factor for the inevitable evolution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia between the two World Wars was the recurrent acute shortage of material means. According to eye witnesses, the entire state treasury was stuffed in the belt of the King. The years of drought and the conditions of dry weather had an impact on the gloomy future. As to the revenues from the Pilgrimage fees, these were not stable, but were highly volatile depending on several circumstances. Industry was in its primitive embryonic stage and was confined to handicrafts. The basic export items included camels, wool, sheep skins, dates, and some fruits, while practically everything else had to be imported, like rice, wheat, sugar, gas, petrol, soap, matches and other necessary commodities. Britain had also sharply reduced its aid and debts owed by the state increased and multiplied. In the midst of this extremely complicated situation, King Abdulaziz granted concessions to American and other companies, seeing in this the only way to develop and strengthen his country.

Foreign companies appeared in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the twenties and were involved for more than ten years in exploration work, seeking the black gold, almost to no avail. Following the signing of the 1933 Agreement with the American Company for a term of 126 years, the first positive results were in sight and heralded the beginning of the oil boom in the country.

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In 1937, huge reserves of oil were discovered in the northeast of the country. A series of photographs showed the Saudi monarch, with a smile of satisfaction on his face, checking the increasingly active projects for the extraction and refining of the black gold. This is not surprising, for the country was progressing rapidly towards prosperity. The King was seen in such photographs during the celebrations of the discovery of the rich industrial oil reserves in Dhahran being greeted on board of the first oil tanker. He is shown in another photograph giving a banquet in his summer tent in honor of the delegation of ARAMCO, one of the largest companies that had grown at the expense of Saudi oil, being surrounded by Americans disguised in Arab popular guise.

Towards the end of the Second World War, the Kingdom was constantly on the move and expanding all the time. On his way back from the Yalta Conference, President Roosevelt had to travel a long distance in order to visit his strategic partner. Cameras kept busy photographing the meeting between the two leaders on board a ship in the Suez Canal on February 15, 1945, during which King Abdulazizi sought to obtain commitments from the United States that any changes in the position regarding the Palestinian Question will not be effected till after detailed consultations were made with the Arabs and the Jews.

This diplomatic victory no doubt had enhanced the personal position of the King as well as the status of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the whole world. Only two years later, on February 17, following insistence by the British, a meeting was held between the King and the

British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. It looked as though the Great Powers were competing in showing their interest towards the rich oil giant. They were not alone. We can see in the old photographs a series of kings and leaders from various countries hurrying to visit this highly respected and recognized leader by all in the great country which he has established with his own hands, or photographs showing his reception by them in their own countries.

While writing these words, I look before me and see a photograph of the Young King, which photograph can be seen not only in books and magazines but also on the walls of the offices of official personalities, financiers and businessmen, as well in the windows of photographic shops. The Saudis love and respect their first King. This man creates real interest in one's soul. His is a tall posture (taller than that of his many relatives, his entourage and retinue, with the exception of his eldest son). He has handsome features, intelligent looks, and a rosary that is continuously held between his long fingers. I kept looking at this photograph. It seemed to me I had seen his face in actual fact some time ago. I would be interested in knowing what he was dreaming about and what he knew about the complicated world? What was it that he wanted, contemplated, desired and aimed at? He was born in a country that led a tribal life. He had spent thirty years in exile with his family, his father hiding at first in the desert, and then in Kuwait. What was it that he knew about the outside world except his own world But he was armed with his faith and had an invincible will power and a strong

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physical build up. He knew exactly what he wanted and desired. He had sworn to recapture the land of his family and to liberate his countrymen. This he did realize splendidly.

In November 1953, when he was 77 years of age, of which he had given thirty years for the cause of unifying the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and of guaranteeing security, peace and stability therein, and having established a firm foundation for the prosperity of the state, he passed away. With his death, the country concluded a long and important phase of its history.

According to various sources, he has left male children whose numbers ranged between 34 and 36 from 14 mothers. The number of his wives, throughout his life, as is well known, has exceeded three hundred. However, he has adhered strictly to the provisions of the Holy Quran, having only four wives at one and the same time; some he divorced and others had died. Such a large number is not to be understood as reflecting his fondness of women, but rather his desire to contract many family links with a view to stopping tribal disputes and assembling clans round him, and, consequently, to build a unified state that has a vast expanse of territory of the Arabian Peninsula.

Shortly before his death, King Abdulaziz had indicated in his will that his sons should take over the running of the state. Some witnesses report that, to preclude competition between them, he asked his two eldest sons, Saud and Faisal, to solemnly swear on the Holy Quran to obediently fulfill his final will, namely, to live in peace and harmony, the first to become king, the second, crown prince, his other sons to continue to run the country, and as long as

their king was alive the authority was not to be transferred to another generation.

During this period, the country was ruled successively by Kings Saud (1953-1964), Faisal (1964-1975), Khalid (1975-1982). It is well known that King Faisal was the most prominent among them and was described as the reformist King, who succeeded, at first together with his great father, and then, on his own, in ridding his country of backwardness and pushing it towards the modern age.

Faisal is the first son of Abdulaziz to be born in the country's capital. He remained loyal to his smaller country, which he loved, till the end of his life. Before his own eyes, and through his own efforts, instead of the narrow winding alleys with corroded and dispersed palm trees, the mud (one or two-storey) houses that looked as if dyed with the dark, monotonous and depressing color of the desert, there sprang up a city of sky-blue buildings, wide, modern streets and green parks that pleased onlookers. Prince, and, subsequently King Faisal did not have any brothers born to his mother (she died at an early age). His closest companion was a slave named Marzook, who had been given to him as a present by his father and later became close to him as his shadow and who many years later, during a visit to the United States, surprised "democratic" customs officials when he reserved with his master a full table and luxurious offices. The young prince had grown up in the house of his grandfather (on his mother's side), who implanted in the soul of the young boy a deep religious spirit. He received good home education, was widely read and was fluent in several foreign languages. He inherited

from his father a very important trait: the perpetual ability to learn. Abdulaziz was could see in his second son, very early on, a sharp mind, self-control and a feeling of personal dignity. It is not surprising that King Abdulaziz, while thinking of the future of the country, said to those close to him: "I wish I had several sons like Faisal.." It is well known that, in the east, men mature and come of age earlier than in other countries. Hence, King Abdulaziz had entrusted to his fourteen-year old son the task of heading a delegation to the British Isles.

Civilized London, with its contradictions, mysteries, greenery and colorful plants in its parks, had left a deep impression on the young Saudi, who was impressed with what he saw. For the first time in his life, he saw the luxurious buildings, the glittering shop windows and the flowing river with its perforated bridges. This was his first encounter with telephones, typewriters and airplanes. At Greenwich, he saw through the colossal telescope the stars and the planets in the vast sky, in plain daylight. All this was for him like a miracle. However, remembering his father's instructions, Faisal made a point of not showing his emotions.

After a tour in Europe, Faisal was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ever since then, his father considered him mature enough for such an appointment, as the young prince had contributed to the drawing up of the state's foreign policy in terms of practices and theory, that is tactically and strategically. Time passed quickly and the world changed rapidly. In strengthening the status of the state, the political conception of Faisal himself was formed and he laid down his approach to the promotion of alliance

relations with the other Arab countries and keeping away from confronting great powers. On the other hand, the young prince was aware that the developing state should survive without support from others.

During the post-war period, the home and foreign policy of the Kingdom was completed under the impact of the new oil factor. In the early fifties, relations with Great Britain were far from being smooth, for different reasons. But with the United States, they were strengthened and were reflected in various fields. In fact, the United States had intensive interests in establishing good relations with the “Oil reservoir” state. Thus in the late forties, it granted it loans amounting to millions of dollars and constructed a network of railways. In the north-eastern part of the country, it began constructing the American military base in return for which the Americans undertook to supply the Kingdom with modern weapons and to prepare and train Saudi pilots. The United States showed its readiness to help in the search for, and exploration of, natural resources, to develop means of transport and communications, enhance agriculture, and build routes for motorcars, and, obviously, extract oil and prepare storage facilities. As a result of the activities of American oil companies, there was a construction boom that attracted the poor from the desert and established new cities and modern industrial institutions. Whether in this manner or otherwise, this alliance was based on mutual interests although, in light of the logic of the present, such alliance may prove to have some negative aspects. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has succeeded in making the first and mightiest

country in the world work for the Kingdom's interest, this being undoubtedly thanks to prince Faisal.

When prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became Prime Minister in 1962, he announced in his program at the session of the Council of Ministers, on November 6, a specific plan for radical transformations under the title of "The Ten Items", the purport of which was the need to modernize all aspects of the state activities and of the community. The state assumed the task of drafting the country's basic law, which is based on the Holy Quran, the Sacred Sunnah and the tolerant Shari'ah, and of the development of the social sphere, culture and education. It was felt that there was a need for the establishment of a ministry of justice, a legal council that comprises prominent intellectuals and scholars, for improving the conditions of the society that was in charge of preserving Islamic tenets and morality. The document put at the head of the agenda the improvement of the standard of living of the ordinary people; it guaranteed for all citizens free medical care, free teaching and state aid for lowering the prices of food stuffs. The regulation governing social security for the aged and the disabled was implemented. A legislation was enacted providing for the protection of workers against unemployment. The government's objective was to secure financial stability, economic development, the studying of water resources, the building of infrastructures and the establishment of a general agency for oil and mineral resources. Two banks were to be established: an agricultural bank and an industrial one. In addition to budget allocations, sums received from the oil companies

were also spent on various promising projects. Finally, slavery, the import and sale of slaves were to be abolished and compensation to their owners would be paid.

In his plan, King Faisal promised the following: We shall attain a standard of living that will remain a mere dream in the countries of the world and shall achieve social justice without depriving people of their freedom, rights and property.

It should be pointed out that the young King was able, in any case, to realize a large part of his magnificent plan. Had he not suffered a dramatic death, he would have also achieved many other beneficial things for his people.

The present King, the fifth of the Saudi family, King Fahd, who has been ruling the country since 1982, is a skilful politician and wise man. He is also prime minister as well as Commander-in-Chief of all the armed forces.

King Fahd had received secular and religious education. Before ascending to the throne he had filled, over a few decades, critical official posts in the various fields of human activity, in which he exhibited an excellent mind, lofty spiritual qualities, an iron will and strong nerves, whether in the economic field, or internal and foreign politics. But despite the close relations with the United States over many decades, the King was strong enough to make a stand on firm principles as regard the question of the settlement of the Middle East dispute. For many years, and even before he ascended to the throne and up to the present, King Fahd has been contributing most actively to the question of the just settlement of this chronic problem, not to mention the moral support and perpetual generosity in providing

financial aid to the Palestinian people. A crucial stage of this process may be called the “Fahd Plan”, which he proposed for the settlement of the Palestinian Problem, the core of the Arab – Israeli conflict.

The King has also exerted no small amount of his peaceful efforts towards establishing close relations with all the Islamic countries and the consolidation of ties with his Arab brethren, in implementation of God’s injunction in the Holy Quran “And hold fast all together by the Rope which God (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves...” He played an important role in bringing back Egypt to the fold of the Arab world following the unilateral, dissentionist Camp David Accord. He also sought to bring about conciliation among the conflicting parties in the Lebanese civil war, and took the initiative in the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is very likely that had it not been for his efforts, the Madrid Peace Conference would not have been held. It was King Fahd also who has initiated the campaign for aiding the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and appealed to the international community to exert all possible efforts to prevent the aggravation of that dispute. At the same time, he allocated enormous financial help in assistance to the brethren in faith. I remember the ceremonies held in the mosques of Riyadh when people prayed God Almighty for Bosnia. Boxes for the collection of donations were placed at the entrance of mosques in which Saudis contributed their donations in support of the Muslims who were exposed to harm and injustice there.

I cannot help thinking also of the sudden danger

that befell the Kingdom and its sovereignty during the treacherous invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqi forces, i.e. during the Second Gulf War. This small state was traditionally the closest partner of the Kingdom. The annexation of Kuwait could in fact have entailed a real danger to the independence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and of the Gulf countries as a whole.

Hence, the question of coming to the rescue of the afflicted neighbor was not even subject to discussion. It was rather a necessary and inevitable thing, come what may. But although most Arab countries had unconditionally condemned Baghdad's occupation of Kuwait, yet the balance of forces was not in their favor. Therefore, King Fahd took the historical decision, which may be considered one of his loftiest achievements, namely to turn to all the Arabs for help in repulsing the aggression. Prominent personalities in the advanced countries describe King Fahd as "the architect of the modern Kingdom", which is a true description, because the unique successes realized in the country within the recent decades are all attributed in one way or another to the effective activity of the present monarch.

Before becoming king, Prince Fahd was Minister of Education for a whole decade in the fifties, during which the number of schools increased ten fold and the first university was established, not only in this country, but in the whole region. Then he occupied the post of Interior Minister for a number of years. He also headed the Higher Council of Oil and Minerals and the Higher Hajj Committee and others. In all these posts the King has initiated astounding transformations.



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Another achievement of great importance which may be considered one of the main peaks in the life of King Fahd was the radical reconstruction, expansion and reorganization of the two Holy Cities, Holy Mecca and Medina Munawwarah, their main Mosques and the other holy places therein. Millions of Muslims throughout the world should be grateful to the monarch of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the improvement he introduced, which improvement is unprecedented and unparalleled throughout the world.

King Fahd took over the running of the country during a prosperous period of development of his country, when the prices of energy materials were still high. Consequently, the hard currency revenues were quite abundant in the state treasury. At this point, it was thought that all was well and secure. But the monarch had realized that oil and other natural resources would sooner or later be depleted and that for the country to keep developing, basic branches of the economy must be established. It is well known that the social – economic development of the Kingdom is based on long-term five-year plans which were implemented particularly during the reign of King Fahd. In consequence, there were established in the country successful chemical, mining, light and food industries. Rapid development also took place in the field of agriculture and basic and residential construction. The production of electric power and potable water was also expanded (29 desalination plants, the largest number in the world). Moreover, the oil refining and petrochemical facilities occupy at present first position in the Middle East.

When ascending to the throne, King Fahd swore that he would spare no effort, energy or time in serving the prosperity, security and stability of his country. He has kept his promise in fulfillment of his father's will. He led the country and brought it to a higher standard of living. Members of the ruling family enjoy great privileges and high respect in Saudi society. Most key posts are held by members of the family, which makes it possible to effectively lead the country. The family give the impression of solidarity, strongly and confidently holding in their hands the administration of the state and being immune to fluctuations and crises, internal or external. But despite the expected and probable differences in points of view among the members of the ruling family, King Fahd wisely tries to find compromises and mutual concessions in order to preserve the stability of the current regime, and maintain the leading role of the family itself.

Physical Characteristics

The Arabian Peninsula is a definite geographical unit that is clearly demarcated on the map. It covers three million square kilometers. Being part of Asia, it looks as though it was confined between this continent and the continent of Africa. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia covers a large part of the area of the Arabian Peninsula (2.24 million square kilometers). It overlooks the Persian Gulf (referred to as the Arabian Gulf, in Arab sources) in the east, the Red Sea, in the west, both Yemen and Oman and the United Arab Emirates in the south. The State of Qatar, which is a peninsula, and the Kingdom of Bahrain, which is an island, can be considered two appendages in this area. At the upper end, on the north-eastern border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there lie Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait.

Until fairly recently, the borders with some of these states had not been clearly and accurately delineated. For this reason, there occurred disputes over the lands more than once, which is not surprising, for the majority of the population of the Kingdom represent nomad clans that

are constantly on the move, and by their very nature their members would not recognize any borders or confine themselves to them, formally or in practice.

So far, most disputes pertaining to territory have been settled. I can say that the relations between the oil emirates in the Gulf are almost ideal. This was helped to a great extent by the fact that the roots of the ruling families in these countries go back to one tribal union.

As I have already said, my husband and I have spent many years in the countries of the region, but I have not visited some of them. As to Elman Arasly – in addition to his post as ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, being simultaneously accredited as a permanent representative of Azerbaijan before the Organization of the Islamic Conference – he often represented our Republic during the many functions held by this Organization in the various Islamic countries. Moreover, delegated by his country's government, he often had meetings with the leaders of the neighboring states, top political and economic personalities, financiers and businessmen or headed delegations at international conferences. In some cases, when trips were made to the nearest neighbors by car, I did not miss the opportunity to acquaint myself with these places of the Kingdom that had previously been unknown to me. In this manner, I was able to visit the major parts of the Kingdom, and I can say today with a great deal of confidence and certainty that I know this large part of the globe, which is called the Arabian Peninsula, that is equal in area to Germany, France and Spain, gathered together. Many people think that the



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Arabian Peninsula is a gigantic stony desert with no water no plants, no life, extending over an endless expanse of territory. But it must be said that this is far from the truth. In fact, the Peninsula is characterized by having a variety of geographic regions. Geologically, the Arabian Peninsula is a plateau, with an average elevation above Red Sea level of 200 meters, slightly slanting from west to east. Hence, the coast of the Persian (Arab) Gulf is lower than that of the Red Sea, where the high mountains of the Kingdom are situated – Al-Sarawat Mountains, the Hijaz mountain chain, which extend along the western part of the Peninsula from north to south, while the sharp fractured slopes draw near to the sea and move away into the distant continent, thus forming a sand valley near the sea coast. In some of them, the mountains are interrupted by deep mountain passes and wide spaces of lava fields called “harra”. This expanse of territory is not suitable for agriculture, not even for human life. It is covered with black burned stones of various sizes that shine on the rocks under the rays of the burning sun. This natural view, which is similar to the surface of the moon, extends to many kilometers, creating an unexplainable and gloomy feeling of anxiety in the souls of travelers. There has been no record of active volcanoes in the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. But the presence of extinguished craters and lava areas along the coast of the Red sea is an indication of strong volcanic activity long ago. The lava falling from the slopes have crept down carrying all that came their way in their movement from west to east, following the slanting terrain of the Arabian Peninsula, which is full of

lowlands and mountain passes. Arab Medieval sources indicate that the last volcanic eruption had taken place in the middle of the Thirteenth Century beyond Yathrib (the City of the Noble Prophet, peace be upon him) when the melting and shining lava had almost swallowed the whole city as a crocodile swallows its prey.

In the direction of Jeddah, the main sea gate on the western coast, the mountains turn to versants, while the lava fields are interrupted and form a valley through which caravans used to travel in old times to the central part of the Peninsula towards the opposite coast of the Gulf. Today, exquisite two-way routes with several lanes leading to the capital Riyadh have been constructed.

To the south, chains of mountains rise higher and higher, connecting with the Hijaz chain of mountains. Their average height is 2.5 thousand meters above sea level. Here is found the most beautiful oasis. It has a pleasant weather and is the most famous place for rest and recreation for the population of the country which surrounds the city of Taif . This corner of paradise, that is 1500 meters above sea level, fascinates the traveler, who must be exhausted after driving through a monotonous and boring road, with its paths that are covered with emerald verdure and are protected by the slopes of mountains and thick plants, trees, fruit and olive trees, and with the pure intoxicating air.

Taif region is one of the coldest places in the Kingdom. In winter, the mountains would be covered with a thin layer of snow, while the water in shallow holes becomes frozen at the bottom. Once my husband and I were hosted by

the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who spoke proudly of the achievements of his splendid city. He showed us around the city and took us to the new park that had just been opened. We spent three days at a luxurious and comfortable hotel whose rooms overlooked an unforgettable view of the chain of mountains that extend endlessly towards the horizon of green mountains that are linked by the wide multi-circular and very short highways. We visited a number of hospitable houses and were surprised to know that the people there keep, in their orchards that lie outside the city, poisonous snakes in cages, as pieces of ornaments, just as we do with rabbits and parrots. They showed us a peaceful cobra in a safe cage of which the small children of the family were not afraid.

Moving eastward, the chain of Hijaz mountains is transformed into mountain slopes. Thence, to the plateau of the central region of the Arabian Peninsula, wherein appear mountains that are not very high and drift smoothly to a flat plain and sometimes to the swampy coast of the Arab (Persian) Gulf. Here, the moving sand dunes cover vast expanses. In the valleys between them are hidden small thickets of short palm trees and wild shrubs of desert plants. During the rain season, hardly noticeable flowers of sweet fragrance grow. Here and there, there rise, like silent sentinels, huge bare rocks that have been eroded by the wind. The closer one approached to the Gulf, the more the landscape changed and the desert became covered with low rising trees and islands of thick greenery. In the eastern part of the Kingdom, in particular, are found the

largest of oases, where the cultivation of date trees and the picking of dates constitute the main occupation of the local population. In the hinter land of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Najd mountainous plateau occupies the central region of the Kingdom, which represents a flat plain to the north of which lie Shummar Mountain and Touwaiq Mountain in the south-east. In the south there lies the largest desert in the Arabian Peninsula called the "Empty Quarter" (Al-Rab' Al-Khali) which extends over a million square kilometers, most of which is covered with moving sands. It extends up to the borders of the state itself including, in the eastern part of the territory, the Sultunate of Oman and, in the south, part of Yemen territory. This obscure part of the Arabian Peninsula has had a notorious reputation since time immemorial: endless expanses of moving dunes from which emanate the noises produced by the blowing winds as they move from one place to another and merge together, and the landslides of which swallow and bury everything else, including branch, animal or human beings that have lost their way. In this region, there is no trace of any source of water and hardly ever a bird may be seen over flying this region.

The climate in the vast majority of the Kingdom's territory is characterized by rare rain and incomparable dryness, with the exception of the mountainous regions of Hijaz and the regions that are close to the sea, where the extreme humidity combines with high temperature to make the climate unbearable. In the city of Riyadh, as in all the central part of the Arabian Peninsula, the summer is long (about five months), temperature sometimes reaching

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55 degrees Celsius in the shade. In the summer, hardly a single cloud can be seen in the sky. The difference in temperature between day and night does not exceed a few degrees. Thus, when you leave an air-conditioned house and go into the street you get the impression that you have entered a closely sealed sauna bath. The winter season does not extend for more than four months. During the period from December to March, the temperature ranges between 15 and 25 in the day and between 5 and 18 at night. I, personally, like this period of the year in Riyadh. There is usually no rain and the air is fresh. It is pleasant to bask in the sun while in the garden where different types of flowers whose caps reflect a variety of colors: grey, rosy, white, and comprise daisies, violets, narcissus, tulips, carnations, Jessamine and sunflowers. The plants sometimes rise as high as a human being. You get the impression that the flowers are in a hurry to benefit from the short winter months. Nature exhibits all its beauty during this short period that is stolen from the course of time.

The other months are transitory and hot during the day and could become fresh in the evening and at night. Rain falls only in winter and spring, and is hardly predictable in absolute terms, not only from year to year, but even within the period in which they are most predictable. It happens sometimes that heavy and promising clouds fill and cover the sky and people await, confidently, the water of life they had looked forward to and hoped for, but when it does come, it falls in drizzles in certain places and stops, and the wind takes care of clearing the sky,

pushing the clouds far away, leaving it to the sun to take over. However, sometimes powerful storms are brought by the northern wind and heavy rains fall and are carried by strong winds that uproot date trees and other slim trees, easily breaking the branches of high-rising trees and filling the city's pools to overflowing points. Not rarely, residential buildings are also exposed to damage. Once a huge brick was lifted high in the air from the roof of our house. On another occasion, a hailstone, the size of a fist, broke the street lamp. The continental, semi-tropical winds are usually accompanied by strong storms. The hot desert winds lift clouds of dust and sand and penetrate through closed windows and everything in the air would be covered with sandy foams, while car-lights are hardly seen even at a close distance. In an atmosphere like this, the best one can do is stay indoors and not even look through the windows. Thunder and lightning storms are not unusual here. The thunder looks as if it was tearing the sky asunder, drawing in the horizons lines like those of the branches of trees; what a strange and rare sight! I remember, when our grandchildren were visiting us, during the winter holiday, that they asked us to wake them up at night, in case of lightning, as they were eager not to miss such a beautiful sight.

Unfortunately, rain in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula is rare and niggardly. In the absence of rain, there would be no rivers. However, there are unique features in the topography of the Arabian Peninsula that are called "wadis", which are the dry courses of rivers and streams, which can sometimes be very deep. There



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are also sharp stony shores. In ancient times, the climate in the Arabian Peninsula was more clement and wet. Such courses used to perform their functions as rivulets; but sometimes they look like huge grooves and wrinkles on the desert surfaces. They most often intercross throughout the territory of the Arabian Peninsula, which makes one puzzled and uneasy. During certain years, in particular, and during times of heavy rain, some are filled with muddy streams and sometimes with thick muddy currents; and sometimes they can sweep everything that comes their way.

Although these "wadis" remain dry for a long period of time, ground water used by the local population for watering agricultural fields, orchards and date farms, is sometimes discovered not very deep in the bottom of such "wadis". This is especially the case in the Gulf coastal areas where great quantities of water accumulate from west to east along the slopes of the water-conserving layers of the plateau of the Arabian Peninsula. The rural population here dig wells into the rock layers and obtain therefrom pure potable water. Pure potable water jets are discovered even in shallow places of the Gulf, from which fishermen and seamen used to fill their skins, with pure potable water.

For the population of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, water is traditionally considered a valuable asset, and is rarely comparable to anything else in this respect. Even now, there is almost in every villa in the city of Riyadh one, two or even three private pools. The historical memory of Saudis does not allow them to squander this valuable asset.

Rumors have it that, even in the recent past, people used to dread the perpetual shortage of water from its depleted sources as well as the absence of rain that they always yearn for but rarely comes. During the long journeys of Bedouins, people were compelled to drink the urine of camels, which was also used for medical treatment purposes, such as the washing of newly-born babies.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies first position in the world in terms of the desalination plants, which number, as we have already said, 29 plants. Taking this fact into consideration, and bearing in mind the existence of several sources of water in various areas, it must be said that water is now available in adequate quantities. However, the price of a one-liter bottle of water equals double the price of one liter of petrol. However, it is available for every individual, and the price of a liter of petrol is a little more than a quarter of a dollar. The rural population are careful not to waste water even in a favorite but very expensive game of theirs. They have in their gardens pools and ponds and all types of small artificial waterfalls. In the pools there swim all sorts of colored fish brought from the Red Sea. There are also public parks that need daily irrigation under dry circumstances such as these. And yet, when a quantity of water that is more than necessary and usual is noticed at the gate of one's garden or one's door and is the result of washing one's car, someone will call and ask whether there was an accident or whether one may have, perhaps, forgotten to close the faucet in the pool, and whether one needs any help. For information of the reader, if one regularly washes the street one may be

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subject to a penalty, irrespective of the fact that one does pay the price of the water recorded by the water meter. Citizens are certain that using water excessively for other than what is necessary is an immoral act and consider cautioning against it a correct moral duty. There is another interesting detail connected with the use of water. Many who own private property have pipes extended outside the walls of their property that end in a tap so that any passer-by may drink therefrom or may perform ablution for the daily prayers.

For people who live in the rural areas of the kingdom, water has always been a dire necessity. Hence, during the winter-spring period, when the winds coming from the Indian Ocean do not bring the hoped for rain, people in the mosques pray the «Istisqaa» prayer, which is characterized by special rites. Plants in the kingdom are very rare, which is attributed primarily to the absence of the necessary quantity of water, to the rare or irregularity of rain, to the types of sandy and stony soil that is not suitable for agriculture, and to the high temperature that is unbearable, at least during five months every year. Exceptionally, there are a few oases and green plots on the slopes of mountains and high land.

Most of the trees in the Peninsula that go back to a very old period in history are palm trees. That is why they are spread throughout Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other countries, and have become greatly respected in the Middle East region. A poet once said: «We have visited the noblest of trees - the palm trees.» This is not strange, for, before the discovery, extraction and export of oil, the

palm tree was, just like the camel, almost the main food for the local inhabitants. The fruit of the palm trees is rich in nutritional materials, vitamins, and other elements that are used on a large scale in food industries. The stones of the date fruit are used in the pharmaceutical industry and in the preparation of the various types of food and even in coffee beverages. Old people know many recipes that contain date ingredients for the treatment of eye, kidney, stomach and other ailments. It has been said that thanks to this fruit, Saudis have an unusually strong memory.

Since time immemorial, local people have been in the habit of covering the roofs of their homes and summer and rural cottages with the branches of date trees. Such branches are also used in the manufacture of the traditional rugs, baskets and bags that are used to carry things along the sides and backs of riding animals. From the trunks of palm trees, craftsmen make various kitchen tools and pieces of furniture. Being an integral part of the basic symbols of the country, following the promulgation of the decree establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 18, 1932, the palm tree became an integral part of the country's flag. Moreover, during recent celebrations, the dearly cherished tree was not neglected and was given all attention and care. The date trees that stood proudly in the streets were decorated with the wires of colored electric lamps and were lighted by flash lights from the walls of neighboring houses. The symbol of this occasion was the famous Mismak Citadel that had been captured by King Abdulaziz, under the artistically painted palm tree. This tree is extremely beautiful and graceful. It rises as high as

a three-storey house. It has a geometrical and symmetrical crown. It is not much exacting. It does not need regular irrigation and undue care. Saplings close to its roots must be removed for the tree to give an abundant produce. Its low branches must always be cut off, with the result that its trunk becomes like the skin of a large pineapple tree. Once, in the city of Taif, in the park opposite the hotel where we stayed, we found a palm tree with a swollen trunk like an egg. In fact it looked like a high pineapple tree. I have kept a picture of this beauty in my album.

The palm tree blooms in the spring, towards the end of March. In our garden, a beautiful palm tree grows in like manner. Thus each season we witness a miracle, when there grow, below the crown, the yellow granules that are suspended on the branches, marking the beginning of the ripening of the dates. Each granule would be hard at first hard like iron pebbles ascending from the trunk. The branches seem to distance themselves from one another to make way for individual fruits so that they would not crowd one another. After a short while, the pollination period begins. This is a time-consuming process that involves great efforts. Now given that the area of some private date thickets in the Kingdom extend over tens of square kilometers, one wonders how this number of palm trees is treated manually within a short period of time (about ten days), which is what happens and what it takes. It has been found that about 90% of the date trees are feminine while only 10% are masculine. At first, specialists turn their attention to the male trees.

Thus they climb to the top (they are known by the name

of “nakhawla”) (date trees climbers) and take the necessary pollen, after slitting open the boxes thereof, which they dry up. Subsequently, they grind the contents into powder, and this powder constitutes the pollen. Then they climb to the top of the female trees, and, with the help of a special tool, they split open the skin of the future dates. Later on, the aroma of the noble fruit fills the air and the golden fruits make their appearance. The produce per tree is between 10 and 15 kilograms, sometimes more! Often the owners leave part of the produce on the trees, pending the arrival of Id Al-Fitr (the end of Ramadan festival). I can assure you that the dates preserve their delicious taste and sweet smell for months. It is traditionally known that dates have valuable characteristics. Legend has it that the troops of Alexander the Great used to eat a few dates every day, which was enough for them to regain their strength and maintain their combat spirit.

Today, as well, dates constitute an important and necessary part of the necessities of the life of Saudi citizens. Thus in the morning, it is customary for them to drink a glass of water and eat three dates, which is a daily doze of energy. This traditional practice is repeated before lunch and at seven p.m. In winter, many partake of this wholesome fruit during the day to “warm their bodies”. Visitors are first greeted with dates, which are arranged on a beautiful tray or plate. In the month of Ramadan, dates are a must. Immediately after sunset, and before eating anything else, people break their fast by eating three or more dates, after which they perform the sunset prayer.

Different types of molasses and juices are made of dates.



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Biscuits and cookies are stuffed with dates. It is said that dates regulate digestion and metabolism. In short, the rare characteristics of dates have innumerable benefits of which people are aware and make full use. Dry and canned dates preserve their taste characteristics throughout the year. The soft and fresh dates are usually kept in refrigerators or freezers. Before the advent of such apparatus, the local population used to hang the bunches and clusters of dates in well ventilated places. In this manner, they would last for long periods of time. Dates are also symbolic presents that reflect the nobility and generosity of the country.

Once, the spouses of foreign ambassadors who are accredited in the Kingdom were invited to pay a visit to the Medina Munawwarah by the spouse of the Emir of Medina. We boarded the private plane of the princess and spent two enchanting days in that holy City, which is greatly venerated by all Muslims. At the end of the visit we were given beautifully inlaid boxes full of sumptuous fresh dates.

The Bedouins

Over the centuries, there existed in the Arabian Peninsula two social groups: the urban population, who are centered round the oases and water sources, and the bedouin tribes that are constantly on the move in search of pastures for their cattle. The latter are known as “bedouins”; the singular “bedouin” refers to the dweller of “badiyah” (desert).

The bedouins, who are isolated from the outside world by mountains, sterile lava fields and marshy lands due to their salty nature, have lived, generation after generation, observing unchanging moral traditions and immune to external effects. On the other hand, they have had an impact on the neighboring population, as all contacts between the latter were effected through the wandering bedouins. Moreover, they have always imposed tributes on trade caravans that traveled through routes that were under bedouin influence. In case of need, they would roam in the vast and endless desert, which were like seas that had no shores, where they felt secure and masters of an environment which they considered theirs over whose



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ownership there is no one to rival them or compete with them. For them, defense against external aggression has always been their impregnable fortress. Thus they were immune against the assaults of the Roman legions and the Persian, Egyptian and Ottoman armies, and against any other invading foreigners who had overtaken the region and left military garrisons in the coastal cities but never penetrated deep through the Arabian Peninsula. All this served to maintain the solidarity of bedouins and their social links safe and sound and had an impact on the unique formation of bedouin individuals. These are imbued with a deep religious instinct which was represented by Islam, with the feeling of brotherhood, dignity, an independent spirit, pride of their lineage, courage, boldness, asceticism, sense of humor, composure, serenity and poise. They were also fond of poetry and freedom, the latter occupying pride of place in their system of values. This explains their preference for an ascetic life, that is fraught with dangers, to easy and lethargic living .

Birth lineage and pure blood were among the foremost of values and a source of pride and self-confidence among the desert people, most of whom are considered the immediate progeny of Prophet Abraham, peace be upon him. Mention should also be made of honorable and impeccable reputation, which has always been the basic source of prestige. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was raised, during the first two years of his life, among the people of the desert. His widowed mother, like mothers who live in royal environments, believed that an ascetic life in the desert is a must for the health and

strength of her son.

Centuries have elapsed and empires have vanished but nothing has changed deep inside the desert of the Arabian Peninsula, except that the tribes have adopted the new forms of movement and wandering according to the cycles of nature. Europeans have rarely penetrated in those regions. For them, the life of the desert dwellers was mysterious and incomprehensible. Such life, however, has continued, being governed as it was, by the laws of the forefathers and the traditions of the ancestors, where everything was simple and clear.

The nomadic tribes, who consider themselves the aristocrats of the desert, consist of moieties and subdivisions, while the latter consist of families. A moiety is a self-contained unit of relatives that are linked by blood relations. But this is not an exclusive unit. Members from other tribes may be included through fraternization and alliances. Individuals would call one another by the term “brother”, as though they belonged to the same father and mother. Disputes, enmities and hatred were prohibited among them, as such could lead to the spilling of blood and the killing of souls, which in turn would give rise to reprisals and the killing of the killer in an endless cycle of vengeance and counter-vengeance. A moiety would have several tents, in each of which there live a family. Each tent would be divided into two parts, the one belonging to females being larger and is used for storing mattresses, rugs, foodstuffs and other domestic accessories. In the tents, the young children gather together during the cold weather and food is cooked for the whole family. The

other, smaller, part is designated for the relaxation of men and the reception of guests. Females were not allowed in this part, with the exception of veiled female servants.

Children occupied a special position in the family. The bedouin method of education of the young generation is worth talking about. In my opinion, it can be taken as a positive example to be emulated by the other part of the world, provided there is a similar desert milieu that is isolated and specially kept for children.

The mother was usually the one in charge of education, as the father would have to spend a long part of his time away from his children. Children would learn how to behave from their mothers or, otherwise, mostly through example and emulation of elders, not through violence and compulsion. Somehow, and ever since the first year, when starting to walk, children are left alone for a long while. They would eat from the large, common, plate. In case they fall down and start crying they would receive no sympathy from their mother, who would insinuate to them that it is a shame for men to cry. Hence, by the time children are four years old, they stop shedding tears for cause or for no cause. Children did not receive physical punishment; but in case they commit something wrong they would be gently reprimanded. Thus since early childhood (when children are two or three years old), when they are able to go to the men's part of the tent, their behavior would be under the scrutiny of the strangers and their reputation in the future would be established on the basis of their behavior and conduct. Thus, adults would observe their behavior and store it in their strong memory.

When children are seven years old, they are entrusted with the task of cooking and serving coffee to guests (which is an important task that involves responsibility).

As to the youths, these were entrusted, when necessary, with the task of protecting the honor of the family and defending its dignity. Even at such age, a youth would decide what his occupation would be. But with the advent of schools, it was up to him to decide whether he would go to school or not. A father's interference was considered improper and wrong. This community of adults used to give love and care to the new generation, as well as to the other members, not only on the basis of age but for consideration of lineage. It was the environment wherein children lived that formed such children and their character.

It is not a mere coincidence that the desert population consider that raising five children is easier than raising just one. Although this may seem strange, the bickering, wrangles and jesting in the education process of a young boy is considered the most efficient way of raising a child, though this is inconsistent with the European approach in that respect. A bedouin attributes great importance to one's sense of humor and gaiety in general. During their spare time, bedouins involve themselves in speech battles in which the weapons of jokes and jesting are skillfully used together with rhetorical devices, proverbs and wise sayings. Theirs is a wide vocabulary and a vast knowledge of legends, myths and fables, which are often considered part of their history. Fortunately, much of such verbal legacy has been collected and published. Till now,

there live in the obsolescent milieu of bedouins naturally talented poets.

For the desert population, a woman cannot live without a man; neither can a man live without a woman. Hence, in the event of the death of a brother, his bedouin brother is under obligation to marry his brother's widow, even if he is already married. This has frequently occurred in the past on account of the many tribal wars, in which many (husbands) died, leaving widows behind. This was logical, for a woman under the severe conditions of life at the time, would be doomed without a husband, as she would not be able to support herself and her children. On the other hand, a man was also in need of a wife because she was the one in charge of the household. This tradition of polygamy has remained up to the present in the social milieu of cities.

The life of a bedouin woman was very tough and hard. Housework required a great deal of strenuous physical efforts. Thus, she would repair the household things that could not be lifted. She would grind the grains in primitive hand mills, wash clothes, cook and wash the dishes and utensils under circumstances of water shortage, knit bedcovers and pillow sheets, as well as rugs, baskets and other household accessories. She was ever ready to receive unexpected guests. For a bedouin woman, reputation was of great importance. Although she used to appear with a veiled face, in the presence of men, it was common place amidst the bedouin community that respect of a family depends on its women. This necessitated that she be able to bring up her children and instill in them bedouin

traditions, that she obey her husband, be good-natured, economically and moderately organized, not only in terms of spending, but in terms of seeking to achieve potential benefits, prepare meals and be able to perform the delicate task of the proper reception of unexpected guests.

Bedouins have always been generous, spending lavishly and providing generous hospitality to their guests. This concept involves a complete system of tribal values of complex adaptation and balancing of symbolic behavior and applicable traditions. Food and shelter were, literally, symbols of life and security. Anyone in the desert is entitled to good reception, entertainment and food. Moreover, the fire of the hearth should be kept burning at the entrance of the tent of the most venerable of the tribal men, in anticipation of a passer-by who may have lost his way, or who shows up and seeks shelter. As a sign of welcome, rugs are spread on the floor and the traditional rites of coffee-serving takes place, followed by offering delicious and abundant food. Subsequently, the guest is offered a sleeping place in the best location and is never asked about his plans and business, or where he comes from and where he is heading. A hospitable man earns the respect of his clan; and a bedouin unable to provide food and protection to guests would be deprived of the respect of his clan. On the other hand, if the guest eclines the hospitality of his bedouin host, the latter would be entitled to consider him an enemy.

Bedouins attribute a great deal of importance to the reception of unexpected guests. When newcomers are detected from a distance, all members of the family would

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hurry to make preparations for the proper reception of the guests, for welcoming them and slaughtering a goat or a lamb for them. Water would be boiled; the women would be veiled. It may happen sometimes that the sands would be blowing hard, making it impossible to see anything even at a short distance of a few steps. In such events, horsemen would suddenly emerge from the sand storm and appear at the very entrance of the tent, or close by. In such case, the host would rise to receive them and shower them with expressions of warm welcome and invites them cordially, sincerely and insistently to come in, amidst all signs of hospitality and welcome. The guests would sit on the rug after taking off their shoes, leaning on pillows that are lined on the edges. The host would light a fire and begin to roast the coffee grains in the special copper utensil. He would not bother the guests with questions or by pressing conversation, for they would probably have been through a tiring journey. So the host would wait for them to make the first move in starting a conversation. The host keeps roasting the coffee beans carefully and without hurry lest they get burned until their color becomes brownish and golden. They must be kept for an hour over the fire and then they are removed and put in a special receptacle for them to cool off. All other works are entrusted to the women or to the eldest daughter, although the host himself is able to perform such work, this being a gesture of respect and honor for the guests. After the shells are removed from coffee beans, they are poured into a stony or metal receptacle and grinded. Usually, the host performs this himself. Then after coffee is ready,

the powder is poured in a special coffee pot which has a long handle and water is poured over it. Then it is put on burning coal. After boiling for a few minutes it is put aside; then the liquid is poured into another receptacle and saffron powder and dry carnation is added together with peeled cardamom in order to give a pleasant flavor to the coffee.

Every phase of this traditional process would be performed with great decorum, which is aimed at making the guests feel comfortable and at ease in the tent. All this takes place to the accompaniment of expressions of pleasure by the host because the guests have honored him with their visit. As to the partaking of coffee, this constitutes an important part of the traditional ceremony, which involves a series of acts beginning with the preparation of this golden drink. I have already touched on that and will not repeat it. All I can add is that the coffee pot is raised to head level or slightly higher and that the doze of the cooked coffee beans should not exceed the right amount. To be able to achieve this correctly, the host should have special expertise and previous experience.

Thus coffee is poured in a small quantity, enough to hide the bottom of the beautifully decorated cup, and enough for one sip. To ensure this, the ancient bedouins used to stuff the mouth of the coffee pot with a bunch of date tree fiber. One can have many such mini sips, but it is not proper to fill the cup to the brim, as this would be considered a deliberate insult. The ceremony of the offering and sipping of coffee, like other aspects of bedouin life and pattern of behavior, have been documented in their poems



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that are characterized by original and exquisite meters and rhymes. I have often observed desert poets sitting absorbed in contemplation round their fire in their tents that have white and black stripes, as their cattle grazed, and as they gazed through the flat, seemingly endless horizon, or looked up to the wide, blue sky.

I saw in this their desires and aspirations, their skills and their ability to beautify their lives and make it sweet and precious with the few ways and means for satisfaction and ease that are available to them. On some occasions, I was able to detect on their faces grim and sullen smiles, and on other occasions I could see looks that reflect utter happiness and bliss, as well as docile and gentle looks that emanated from eyes from whose bright whiteness there radiated the wisdom of centuries and the satisfaction of contentment. They well deserve all this, as they are the prominent heirs of the Arab and Islamic culture, which they were able to carry, transfer, convey and preserve in almost its original form and prime condition for many past centuries and up to the present time.

Obviously, Saudi society could not be considered as having one unified way of life. Thus, in the wide expanse of the vast country, there live beside the nomads, a population that lead an urban and semi-urban way of life. However, the roots of the majority of such population go back to the tribal way of life. It should be pointed out that the time element that penetrates through the socio-political structure of society and its structural entity has been the unifying factor, at least for more than two hundred years, during which it spread out until it included all categories

of the population.

A great catalytic factor in the process of the reconstruction of all the structures of Saudi society was the entry of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the oil period. Although the process of demolition of the tribal system and the disruption of the system of clans had begun long before, the change has in fact been associated with this event in particular as well as with the following periods, which change marked the transition to the urban pattern. Thus, it proceeded in fast and irreversible steps that moved in an ascending and rapid fashion and generated rapid social and economic achievements that went ahead to break the chains of the traditional patterns. More than twenty years ago, the nomads constituted a quarter of the country's population. Today, however, I do not think they constitute even one percent.

Even those who are enamored with desert life from among the Saudi population, who prefer the life of bedouins to urban life, have a successful business in cities and with the city population; they own villas or whole districts therein. When they need to reach the major markets that are organized in supermarket style, they do not mount camels, but sit behind the steering of vehicles that carry their sheep which they wish to sell in the market, or drive their children to school or the young ones to the nearest of fun towns where the children can try computers or enjoy playing with mechanical and automatic racing machines. Obviously, after the introduction of the comprehensive urbanization process as an alternative to desert life, there arose many problems connected with the adapting of the



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desert population to new circumstances and conditions that were not familiar to them.

However, prompted by its desire to secure social peace, the government took it upon itself to look after this part of the population by providing jobs for them, giving them aid and long-term loans, performing charity works, and, last but not least, preserving the system of the former ideology and moral and behavioral rules, as well as the applicable and safeguarded traditions. There are still present and actively operating islands of the cells of the bedouin pattern and tribal way of life in the southern and eastern parts of the Kingdom. The state, however, has sought to provide them with all living facilities and to improve their life and that of their families, wherever they may be.

Riyadh, the Capital of the Kingdom

Since time immemorial, the rise of any settlements has been inextricably linked with economic - geographic factors. In view of the inclement climate of the territory of the Kingdom, as well as the basic stock of its citizens, we find that such settlements were not many. The number of cities and large settlements can today be counted on one's fingers. The basic residential locations were, naturally enough, concentrated along the shores of the Red Sea, and the Arabian Gulf (which is internationally known as the "Persian Gulf). The two Holy cities that are visited by pilgrims from all over the world are a special case. As regards the new industrial establishments, these have sprung during the oil period, in the locations of concentration of the black gold reserves.

The current capital of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, the only big city in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, has risen and grown at the site of an old small settlement, whose natural wealth was the type of fertile soil that is suitable for agriculture, which was enriched by the muddy and silt stream water as well as the shallow

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underground water that gave life to plants at that location. Hence, the name “Riyadh” (the plural of “rawdha” in Arabic, which signifies a beautiful garden). Moreover, the City has constituted a strategic location along the route between the two sea coasts of the Peninsula. Thus, whoever controls Riyadh can dominate the whole of Najd. Hence, the recurrent conflict over this city in the past centuries.

During two different eras of its history, Riyadh twice became the capital of the Saudis, and for the third time in 1932, when King Abdulaziz annexed Najd and the Hijaz Kingdom to form a unified Kingdom, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the time, the area of the city was only four square kilometers, and its population numbered three thousand. During more than two decades, it developed at tortoise speed. But since the extraction of oil, this basic settlement - which was surrounded by a mud wall, with four guarding towers and gates that were opened in the morning and closed in the evening – was transformed into one of the ultra-modern cities in the world, with an area of 1,600 square kilometers and a population of 4 million. Today, it is a planned city with a network of modern highways. It is also surrounded by a multi-lane circle of wide routes which look on the map like intersecting knitting. The city is developing at amazing rates.

Our chauffeur, who had arrived in the Kingdom seeking a job in the early eighties of the last century, remembers that the residential districts in Riyadh were confined to its borders. As to the remaining constructions in the modern capital, it is difficult to imagine that they were a barren desert deprived of any green color, where packs of

homeless dogs used to bark. There were no asphalted roads, no sewage and no water system. Hence, it was possible to own land at unbelievably low prices (today, I believe the price has risen fivefold). Our driver had lived in the only high building at the time, which comprised four storeys and belonged to one of the first American oil companies. It was surrounded by a few mud constructions not far from a large place which was later paved with concrete slabs. It is now confined between ultra-modern buildings at a major street in the city by the name of "Olaya", which shines under the rays of the sun and reflects bright marble and the colored glass of the high buildings of the trade centers and companies. At night, it reflects the colors of the mobile shining advertisements.

As to the mud buildings, these have disappeared almost everywhere from the present city, which seems to swallow such buildings one after the other. In their place, there rise luxurious buildings made of stone and glass. Unfortunately, some of the old ones represented real treasures of the native architecture of the Arabian Peninsula. It is fortunate, however, that the old part of the city has preserved the narrow alleys, and the amazing maze of the old market and the one-storey traditional mud buildings. Parts of the old citadel were rebuilt together with the gates and the Justice Palace. The mosque of Imam Turkee bin Abdullah was rebuilt and its large front was inlaid with natural local stones. The Masmak Citadel, which had been built in 1865, was obviously repaired, if you remember the history of the events of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Part of it has now been converted into

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a museum wherein the personal belongings of King Abdulaziz Al Saud are preserved and exhibited, together with the gifts presented to him throughout his long life, as well as public documents, photographs, geographical maps and other exhibits connected with that citadel. The other buildings and the palace are used as juridical premises. At this place, on Fridays, the public execution of criminals takes place. This is now very rare and only men are allowed to attend. It is rare because the crime rate is not high in the Saudi community, the reason seemingly being the fact that the population adhere to religious morality and are deterred by the justice of punishment.

Credit should be given to the authorities for providing all that would preserve the special character of this part of the city. Builders— who use modern and stronger materials — are careful to make them look like mud bricks, as though such new buildings represented those that have survived, and imitate the style thereof. Such traditional buildings with walls that incline inwards with very small windows and roof curtains that are indented are built in other locations of the city, adding to the city an original touch. Usually, totally modern and comfortable exhibition halls are organized in them, together with rows of shops, as well as centers for weddings, which are given the name of palaces.

In addition to Mecca and Medina, Riyadh may well be described as an important city of the state. It encompasses the premises of the Ministry of Pilgrimage, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments and more than 800 mosques, whose numbers are constantly increasing,

keeping abreast with the expansion of the city. They are built in such a manner that each Muslim should have the opportunity of hearing the “Adhan” (the call for prayer), and, of reaching the nearest mosque on foot within three minutes thereafter, wherever he might be.

The Riyadh mosques are not simply places for performing the five daily prayers; they are also decorations that embellish the city. Some exhibit beautiful domes and architectural innovations together with internal decorations. One such mosque is the mosque of Prince Faisal bin Turki, that can accommodate 17 thousand persons, or the mosque of the University of Imam Muhammad bin Saud within the University campus. Another is the mosque in the square of the International Airport, each accommodating five thousand persons. There are other more modest mosques in terms of size, luxury, and expanse. They are imitations of the traditional style. Such small buildings can be seen all along the car routes, near petrol stations. Five times a day, the beautiful voices of the muezzins are heard melodiously spanning the sky of the city, upon which the rhythm of daily life comes to a still, as people head towards the mosques in order to pray in all humility. Work at government institutions and departments stop and the entrances of commercial stores, hairdresser saloons, sumptuous and popular restaurants are closed, and people head towards the houses of worship, whose gates are constantly open to receive the uninterrupted arrival of people who come to pray.

Throughout the recent decades, Riyadh had become famous as a scientific and cultural center. Operating therein



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at present are two universities (there are eight universities in the Kingdom) where the new Saudi generation receive higher instruction. Riyadh's two universities are King Saud University and the Islamic University bearing the name of Imam Muhammad bin Saud, both of which are independent institutions of high education that occupy an area which comprises ten square kilometers, with their own infrastructure, including electricity, water, museums, public libraries, sports facilities and comfortable residential buildings for professors and instructors, as well as shaded areas for tennis, dense palm trees thickets, mowed grass fields, jets and golf grounds, the places of relaxation and rest. All this contributes to the creation of a suitable climate for study and scientific research.

On top of that, Riyadh encompasses the successful King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, which is equipped with modern laboratories and a number of the most up-to-date public libraries. King Saud Public Library comprises more than two million books and journals. Other libraries include King Fadh National Library, King Abdulaziz Public Library, the library of King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and others. I was lucky to be able to visit King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, where we acquainted ourselves with the activity of the public library, the like of which I have never seen before: spacious and wide halls, immaculate cleanliness, an almost imperceptible movement of the ladders hanging all along the shelves wherein small green lamps keep shining. Within no more than five minutes, the books you

have reserved for your study are brought to you. This is a miracle, beyond one's wildest dreams!

The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is exceedingly keen on preserving the history of the country. Therefore, it allocates huge sums in the budget to be spent on the redesigning of historical monuments, the establishment of museums and the organizing of research expeditions that acquaint the new Saudi generations with their history and make them proud of this secure country. In Riyadh today, in addition to Al-Masmak Citadel, there is the architectural museum, the National Museum and the "Deirah", the old city, and the "murabba", which is an integrated establishment of official buildings that include King Abdulaziz Palace.

Following the discovery of the first reserves of oil, in the thirties of the last century, the King of the Great State, who has a lofty stature and large family, issued a directive providing for the need to establish a special compound of buildings to accommodate the official establishments and members of his family. During the year 1936, a plot of land was chosen to the then north of the city, outside the border of the citadel wall, and within two years the building thereof was completed. The buildings were constructed in accordance with the traditional style of local stone and the walls were cemented with mud, while the roofs were made of bamboo and palm tree branches. As to the Al-Masmak Citadel, where the governing family had lived since 1902, and from which it administered the state, it was emptied and transformed later on into a museum.

The King lived in the "Murabba" till his last days.

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Here was the royal court and the headquarters of the Official Guards. Official business was conducted there, and there also the King received heads of state, leaders and prominent personalities. It was here that the King cultivated his diplomatic talent and took the important decisions that have later on led to the constant development and prosperity of the Kingdom. Now, the “Murabba” which, together with the heart of the huge city, are surrounded by modern buildings, has been transformed into a museum wherein are carefully kept all that existed in the life of the Monarch. Saudis cherish the memory of their founder king and appreciate his successful efforts and great accomplishments that benefited the country.

The plots of land in the city are municipal lands and private lands. Hence, one can find between the built districts empty spaces of land designated for construction that are owned by some persons who are waiting for the opportunity to erect buildings thereon. However, the city is being built under the strict supervision of the competent authorities. If one consults the Riyadh plan, one finds it akin to a paper from a mathematics notebook.

The roads are mostly wide and straight, intercrossing and linking residential areas that are alike. Spacious cross-roads reflect clear and comfortable plans and an ideal system of traffic. The authorities in Riyadh were kind enough to give the name of Azerbaijan to one of the streets of the capital in honor of our country. I should point out, in passing, that Azerbaijan has been so far the only member of the Commonwealth of the newly independent states to be so honored. The Azerbaijan two-way street is half a

kilometer long and 20 meters in width and is situated in a new luxurious area. The newly built modern style villas, which have ever green trees that are planted along the street, have made our street a beautiful part of the city.

In Riyadh, as in the other cities of the Kingdom, there prevails the system of division into sectors, which is, in my view, very convenient and appropriate for the accommodation of foreigners who arrive in the country, seeking employment, pursuant to contracts concluded with countries of different habits and culture. These sectors represent independent blocks surrounded by walls in the shape of fences. They are divided into areas ranging between one and several hundred hectares where everything needed for a natural and comfortable life is provided. This, in essence, is a city within a city.

Here live the newcomers, depending on their financial ability to rent a flat or a fully furnished and equipped villa. Other buildings are designated for celebrations, commercial stores, centers and facilities for public services.

In the large compounds, there are deep and shallow swimming pools with diving planks a few meters high, and other accessories, particularly for children. There are also sauna facilities, tennis playgrounds, golf grounds, shaded paths, restaurants, cafés, meeting halls, public libraries, massage rooms, super markets, kindergartens and even schools. Here various seminars and training courses are organized, together with artistic hobbies in which adults and children can engage in drawing, sculpting and embroidery activities under the supervision of specialized trainers. Other activities include language studies, all

types of wrestling and other interesting activities.

Once an American friend of mine invited me to the compound where she lived. I was fascinated by what I saw there. It seemed to me I was at a place other than the Kingdom, like somewhere in Spain. Along the banks of the emerald and blue artificial lake and small island in its midst, which is surrounded by velvet grass, and amidst densely growing plants, there rose villas built according to the Spanish style. The vast expanses of lands and settlements reflected European and quasi-European undulations (in the middle of the desert !) I also discovered there well-equipped golf grounds, a theater, a round area for skating and sliding and an acrobatic sports facility, basket ball grounds, a volley-ball ground and a football playground, as well as a balling path, a racing course and a stable for Arab stallions, and a small zoo. I did not have time to see all the playgrounds (one can move around in small convertible cars). May be I missed many other interesting things which I did not have enough time to see.

The city of Riyadh today resembles a giant building ground. The construction activity proceeds without interruption at regularly increasing rates of intensity. Construction includes every thing: private villas, banks, employment offices, hotels, commercial centers and stores, although the existing selling outlets are empty and await buyers. This has always made me wonder in amazement. For his part, my husband proposes a convincing argument, namely, that since they continue to build them, this means there is demand and need for them. What I would like to point out to is that the building process is carried out

systematically. Thus the land designated for construction is surrounded by a beautiful fence on which original drawings are exhibited reflecting the future building. It is amazing that they plant 8 to 10 meter-tall palm trees so that when the fence is lifted after completion of the building activities the astounded eyes of the spectator see a well arranged and blooming garden, while the window glass of the lower windows is carefully cleaned and the building is ready to receive the first dwellers, even as finishing activities and internal décor continue inside.

When villas or palaces are to be constructed (just as it is the case with the buildings of government departments), architects, engineers and foreign workers are invited and are allocated by the employers not only residential accommodation but also small mosques in an integrated construction unit. Building activities are carried out on a large scale, using traditional shining alabaster with an undulated sky blue color, marble and other paving rocks. The styles of building are varied. No villa is like another. Individual buildings are surrounded with high-rising fences (between four and six meters high). They also are paved with exquisite and valuable stones; the gates are beautifully designed and made of laced iron and colored glass that is decorated with engravings. All along the wall fence of the external gate, trees are planted and are later pruned with utmost care.

In the parks and gardens, there abound jets, pools and waterfalls, as well as European interlacing. The shaded paths that are planted with trees are lit with special route lights. One can see original equipment specially invented

for servicing the parks and gardens, which shoot up powerful jets of water. The climate is made pleasant as a result of the cold breeze. This in itself constitutes a well delineated area that has its own climate within a privately owned protectorate. Some owners of the property erect, in isolate corners of the parks, and gardens attached to them, bedouin striped tents in order to satisfy their eager desire to reproduce the kind of life in the desert which they had got used to and the hidden inclination to recollect the pleasant memories of the past.

It sometimes happens that relatives that belong to the old generation live in these tents because they could not get used to sleep indoors within rooms in which the air is cooled by modern air conditioners that are highly expensive and are considered symbols of high life. Thus they feel moral and physical cold when exposed to the coolness of the air produced by the electric and electronic machines. Sometimes one can see such a tent on the roof of a high rising building with multiple flats, wherein live grandfathers and grandmothers.

As the plots of land in Riyadh are expensive enough, all that has been described above largely applies to high income and wealthy citizens who own two, three or more houses. A plot of land that belongs to a middle class owner is not usually larger than the built house itself. In the front of such a house, there is usually a small space paved with marble slabs. On the edges, there is often a small pool. In the rear or on the roof, there are usually rooms for servants and at the gate there is a one-storey building for the janitor or the chauffeur. In some squares, a plot of land

is seen in which palm trees, orange trees, lemon trees and other trees are planted, together with fruit trees, as well as blooming bushes on which grow seasonal flowers that have a pleasant and sweet fragrance.

Traditionally, Saudis have built their houses in a special manner. Thus, they designate one hall or parlor for women guests and one for men. They have sauna baths, swimming pools with mosaic floor which they fill with hot water. They have many bedrooms, depending on the number of their children and relatives and on their financial potentials. The internal parts are characterized by luxurious decorations of the ceilings and by exquisite chandeliers. In the palaces of princes and princesses, the walls are full of colorful silk curtains that are manually embroidered.

Once a Saudi businessman invited us to see his newly built and furnished house. The invited guests gathered round a jet in the midst of a small pool in the middle of the guest parlor. But the hosts and their children were keen on showing their new residence and invited the guests to circulate throughout the house and see for themselves its various parts. Thus they led the way and we followed them with pleasure. The house was organized in good taste. The doors of rooms on both sides of the sitting two-storey parlor were connected with stairs that end in a corridor. The corridor was lined with glass behind which there was a big flower pot in which rare plants have been planted (one wonders how they had time to grow that much in the new house) over which was spread a glass dome inside the hall. In the middle, we saw an oval-shaped pool ending on one side with a waterfall that has two steps. The bottom

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revealed a mosaic tableau in the form of a traditional eastern carpet. Answering our inquisitive looks, the host, who was extremely pleased with our reaction, said that all this was nothing but pieces of mosaic. It was certainly an artistic masterpiece. I kept looking very closely and found it difficult to believe that this carpet was not a real one that is weaved with woolen threads.

Riyadh has many unusual government buildings, in terms of their architecture. One gets the impression that the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is capable of showing the world that the Kingdom is unique and different in many respects from other countries in the world. The building of the Ministry of the Interior is a case in point. It is designed in the form of a metal sheet of many steps. In shape, it looks like the wings of a science fiction flying saucer. From the outside, it is reminiscent of a specimen of post-modernism. The internal parts, as my husband Elman Arasly has told me, look like the ancient palaces described in the traditional eastern stories. There is another building with a gigantic size. It looks like a glass handgrip that ends in a glass ball tens of meters in volume! The high-rising chimneys have apertures and necks made of harmoniously mixed materials comprising glass, modern metal compounds and valuable stone.

A short while ago, at the beginning of the new millennium, there arose at amazing speed, as though it sprang from inside the earth by a magic power, the Royal Center, which is a large compound in the midst of which is a three-hundred-meter-high building. It can be truly described as one of the new wonders of the world. This

building will most probably become a symbol of the city of Riyadh, as its miniatures are exhibited in the windows of stores and shops that sell memorial gifts. Its pictures are seen on sports tee shirts. Another architectural masterpiece can be seen in the sports stadium, which is considered the largest sports track in the Middle east region.

In the north-west and upper part of Riyadh, there extends over an area of eight square kilometers the district known as the Diplomatic District. Commencement of its building goes back to the seventies of the past century, when a government decision was taken providing for moving the Ministry of Foreign affairs and all diplomatic missions from Jeddah to Riyadh. The high-rising buildings overlook the rear part of the area (it is a geometrically shaped hillock with a circular summit. Its form resembles the circular road of the city of Riyadh, while its base tilts westward). This is the largest “wadi” of the Peninsula, with it sharp sliding edges. These very characteristics were the basis for the elevation of a rare artificial repeatedly winding park which extends over a few kilometers, for the formation of which huge blocks of sand and shells were used, with which a strangely looking building was built at the edges. There, families can spend pleasant holidays with their friends. An open stadium was erected and the summits of hills were raised high and were transformed into an entrance to the city (one wonders what modern technology was used here). Aqueducts were formed with stone benches on the banks and edges that invite the spectator to sit and listen to the orchestra of the sounds emanating from insects and frogs. Such a place

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is conducive to thinking and meditation and brings back memories. Calmness here is unique and so is the fresh and transparent air. The temperature here is two to three degrees below that of the city. This is attributed to the height of the building of the Ministry of foreign Affairs, the plants and the waterways. Moreover, all the buildings of the embassies and diplomatic missions are engulfed in verdure; while the many pools, ponds and waterfalls impart humidity and cool the air (the weather in Riyadh is extremely dry).

On the pavements (sidewalks) and in the middle line of the roads in the Diplomatic District, rows of palm trees provide shade that provides protection against the burning heat of the sun. The cross roads have been designed in the form of green circles in the middle of which trees and flowers are planted. The Diplomatic District is surrounded by a protecting fence, except in the part where the hills form a natural protection. Access is only possible through the main boulevard which runs from north to south. At the main entrance is found the location of the guards and the main roundabout which is intercepted by the masts over which fly, during festivals, the flags of the accredited embassies and diplomatic missions in the Kingdom.

In addition to embassies and the premises of diplomatic missions, one can find in the Diplomatic District branches of major banks, schools, clubs, as well as the women's luxurious center termed "Manahel". Here both grown ups and children can practice various activities, ranging from study of the Holy Quran, learning foreign languages, operating computers, drawing, pottery, silk engraving,

playing tennis, swimming, wrestling and many other activities. There is also a compound where are situated hairdresser saloons, restaurants, cafés and large halls for exhibitions and charity bazaars. The spouses of diplomats are regular guests at this hospitable place. Local women, on the other hand, prefer to spend here a great part of their spare time. Most of them bring along their children, who are provided with various academic studies. Women have the opportunity of seeing to their appearance and beauty. They do shopping and exchange relaxed conversation with their friends while sipping their coffee. Obviously, membership and study involve payment of fees, which is not, I believe, a heavy burden on people like the citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Every year, the Manahel Center gives banquets and parties for the spouses of ambassadors, during which games are played in the form of questions and answers (guess). Once I was lucky enough to win first prize, which was a dinner invitation for two persons (to be honest, the questions were very simple). Along the main boulevard, a large compound was built which is three hundred meters long. Its design resembles the old buildings; it has a parking lot for cars in an underground tunnel. In it have been established administrative offices, an exquisite hall for official receptions, a supermarket, souvenirs stores and a hotel. At the level of the third storey, the latter was divided into two parts. There is also a clean path where a genuine garden was grown like a “hanging garden”. I personally like to take walks here where are found high rising palm trees, acacia trees that have dense crowns in

the form of a lamp, and decorative trees, and cool shade. The high visible sky is seen through the covered squares which are mostly empty. All these form a mysterious atmosphere of the ancient orient, which we have come to love from the bottom of our hearts ever since our reading of the magic stories in our distant childhood.

Not far from the reception hall, between the small shops and cafés, a vast area is designated for the relaxation of citizens who like to spend their holidays as well as their evenings during ordinary business days. Riyadh families flock to this place with their children and their prams, as well as skating boots, bicycles and food baskets. Here they occupy the tables that are lined along the vast expanse and spread their carpets and rugs. They usually stay there till late at night.

My husband and I, together with some friends, often come to this place for rest and relaxation after a few kilometers walk.

Our visits to this palace were repeated quite often when our grandchildren came to visit. Here we can sip coffee and tea, partake of ice-cream and a piece of Italian bread and meat. One can play with the electronic games or just sit and relax while watching scenes of the life of Saudi families. Although children fill the air with their noise and cries while playing with their balls or skating and may be hit one's table inadvertently, yet, strangely enough, one is not bothered at all. One can also see the smooth polished stones that shine like a mirror, the playground and large hillocks that are safe for skaters and the corners designated for flowers, as well as the sweepers, cleaners and security

men who are always ready to provide assistance.

I keep wondering how the authorities are keen on looking after the citizens of their country without bothering about formalities, always thinking about their comfort, rest, leisure and forms of life. Huge sums are spent on such objectives, not only because they have plenty of money but because this is how things should be. Thus beside any commercial store and park in the country, there are plazas and compounds for the entertainment of children under the supervision of the employees so that mothers can feel quite at ease and turn their attention to their shopping. The fathers have access to close-by mosques for performing their prayer. In general, children occupy a prime position in the policy of the Kingdom, which has prepared for them special fun towns, that are properly equipped, outside the city. Primary, secondary and higher education is provided free, together with substantial and adequate study allocations and medical care, which is provided free for adults as well.

At the highest point of the Diplomatic District, there rises the Palace designated for official receptions, symposia, seminars and exhibitions. It is called "Touwaiq Palace". Its shape, lack of windows and winding circles look in fact like a "tawq" (ring). It was so called after the well known Touwaiq Mountain. Its exterior shape is quite original; I have never seen the like of it. One could perhaps say that it looks like an upside down goose, while its middle part rises up to the level of a three or four storey building. Its circular ends start from the floor of the internal part with its winding steps and rise gradually. From here

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one can ascend easily to the roof and reach its highest point, climbing over the back of the goose, thus closing the circle and descending the steps and the slope from its opposite end. Here a beautiful sight can be seen wherever one may move. In the inner plazas of the palace there are artificial undulations and rare and exotic plants, together with deep ponds that are covered with glass roofs.

In the evening, one can see princes' palaces outside the city and the cerulean sky that is lit with a bundle of lights over the city of Riyadh. One third of the Diplomatic District is occupied by parks and palm tree thickets (they total three hundred in Riyadh). This is a genuine collection of verdure which looks like a green bunch. Obviously, all this requires tremendous human efforts, great expenses, the moving of sands from all over the Kingdom and even from beyond the borders. I have already spoken about the water provision problem. At present, the natural sources of water and the desalination plants meet the demand, but the government has entrusted to scientists the task of finding a solution for meeting the increasing demand of water in the future. Up till now, trees are still irrigated and pools are filled; moreover, jets and waterfalls continue to operate round the clock, and the government spends generously on the illumination of parks.

In the south-western part of the Diplomatic District, there is, at its lower part, a beautiful palm tree thicket, which any citizen can visit. In it, private tents are erected and shelves that contain braziers and other facilities for picnickers who like to prepare food and partake thereof in the open air in parks during holidays. One can also see

the sumptuous lotus trees, the date tree crowns that are heavy in the spring with their load of bunches of several kilograms of golden dates, the fragrant flowers and the citron trees that are heavy with fruit, the small waterfalls, the frogs and the flocks of wild ducks that alight to rest and drink. All this attracts the nature lovers in any season, even in the summer. Here, under the cool shade, along the bank of a stream, we often celebrate feasts and Christmas, together with the staff of our embassy. Each time, I never miss to look at the clear reflection of the palm trees in the still and calm water and listen to the singing of birds, pests and invisible insects. I often wondered at the limitless potentials of living nature when it is taken care of, as in such case, it reciprocates with gratitude and thanks even in the midst of the desert.

Saudis prefer to relax lying on the green thresholds over which are spread beautiful carpets, that are surrounded with baskets that contain their food and things. Or they prefer to sit near the playgrounds of children which may be said to be arranged like necklaces. These spaces are arranged in refined taste. One can also enjoy seeing the bowers of laced wood that is manually engraved, the huts that are designed to look like tents and old houses, the shallow pools, the swings, the hillocks and the sport tools that are made ready for use by the little ones, who are alike all over the world in that they sometimes break their toys. All this is observed and watched by an army of employees, who are not visibly perceptible.

The decorative beams are polished; the pools are clean and the paths are strewn with soft sand; and the high-rising



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plants in the arbored lanes that are designated for picnics under the burning rays of the sun are clean and inviting. The invited are, strangely enough few. It could happen that in a two-hour picnic one does not meet a single soul, particularly during ordinary week days. Most ordinary Saudis prefer to spend their leisure time in the city parks and commercial centers. Thus they drive to the suburbs and sit beside their cars at the edges of the road, looking pensively at the horizon or, at night, watching the starry sky, probably satisfying their yearning to their mother, the desert.

My husband and I would drive a few kilometers outside the city and stop at an elevated place and watch the orange disc of the sun as it sets behind the distant horizon. I have already referred to the amazing lights emanating from the city of Riyadh at night, when I first saw the city from beneath the plane that brought us to this fascinating city, whose streets are always lit particularly during feasts and celebrations. Private establishments have the lion's share in the illumination they contribute. All the first storeys of residential buildings are usually occupied by shops, restaurants, pharmacies, hairdresser saloons and the workshops of craftsmen and other service facilities. All these exhibit all types of bright-shining electric signboards, thanks to which the streets, at night, look like the screen of a bright show room with open doors for buyers.

I cannot give even an approximate figure of the number of stores in Riyadh. There are probably more accurate statistics, but in view of their multiplicity, I can only use the old expression "uncountable". They vary between

modest one room shops and gigantic two or three - storey department stores spanning a few hundred square meters, not to mention the commercial centers that comprise whole buildings. The front of these commercial centers is in the form of a gigantic glass wall, that makes it possible for buyers to see, while still in their cars, the things they need and want to buy. This applies in particular to furniture department stores in which all the most up to date household furniture is exhibited and rotated every six months. This gives one the impression that furniture is an everyday commodity. Of particular interest are the stores that sell lighting apparatus in various shapes and sizes, which twinkle like stars. Interesting also are the confectionary and chocolate stores which exhibit their products in glass or inlaid boxes or in flower pots. Cheaper products are found in plastic containers of various attractive decorations and colors. As to the stores that exhibit household utensils, their exhibits are so numerous and beautiful that no housewife could possibly resist the temptation provoked by the skilful adverts and must inevitably succumb and buy some such exhibits.

Obviously, a special book can be written on the stores in Riyadh and other cities in the Kingdom, particularly in the major ones. But what they all have in common is that they rely on flooding their show rooms with huge quantities of luxurious products, relying also on their knowledge of the psychology of buyers, and the know-how of specialists whose expertise is not confined to the decoration of the shop windows but to the whole of the vast expanse before stores, reaching out to the area close

to the street pavement. The smaller shops also use light effects, colored appendages and small machinery or exhibit memorial showpieces to attract customers. Examples of such things are a four-meter coffee pot. If it happens that palm trees are grown near those shops, then these trees would be decorated. Recently, it became customary to use strong revolving spotlights that send their piercing rays from the ground to the sky, thus transforming night into day.

As to the pavements, every shopkeeper decorates the pavement opposite his shop to his taste, sometimes spreading cozy and snug carpets on the floor of the pavement, which is sometimes covered with decorative alabaster or marble, sometimes beginning from the pavement of the pedestrians, who sometimes find it difficult to move through such "obstacles". However, all the decorations are meant to attract motorists more than pedestrians.

Mention should also be made of the small street plantations that belong to florists, which plantations stretch over an area of 2.5 X 4 meters and are made to look like genuine gardens with the associated water jets, waterfalls and watermills that are powered by flowing water. A customer who walks on the soft carpet amidst fragrant plants and flowers is inclined to buy some of these beautiful and tempting flowers.

Many Saudis prefer to buy manufactured commodities from the markets. Unlike our markets, theirs represent long rows of small easily accessible stores and shops that are assembled within one area. For example, Al-Deira market

in the old part of the city comprises 400 selling outlets. There are, however other larger and more comprehensive stores where one can buy all sorts of commodities: from needles to large pieces of furniture of various kinds. They are also known for perfumes, natural oils and henna (camphire). In these places one can bargain. Thus if you can show your ability to speak Arabic and earn the appreciation of the seller, you may get a good discount.

I should not omit saying a few words about restaurants and cafeterias. The latter are situated near shops that sell the daily necessary commodities such as bread, meat, vegetables. These cafeterias are designated for men only, but some of them have special places for families. As to restaurants, these are numerous and variegated: Turkish, Indian, Moroccan, Japanese, Korean, Italian and many others. They are usually very large and divided into beautifully engraved and decorated girders and beams, secluding partitions and curtains so that the clients are isolated in groups of friends. Their entrances are usually divided into two doors: one for men and one for families, so that when they enter they do not see one another. Chinese restaurants are particularly famous for their exquisite, colorful decorations and the lamps that are suspended from the ceiling, as well as the small ringing bells. There are also artificial ponds with water jets and large glass basins that rise higher than men's stature, in which exotic fish and other marine life swim, all this being for the entertainment of customers. One may also choose to sit with one's friends and acquaintances in a closed hall.

The staff of these restaurants receive guests and bid

them farewell with friendly smiles and faces. At the end of the meal, they provide you with boxes that contain whatever was left of the food you were unable to finish, thank you for your visit and invite you to come again, thus bidding you welcome in advance. The walls of the fronts of all Chinese restaurants are decorated with an original picture which you can easily recognize wherever you happen to be in the city.

There are Korean restaurants, Kentucky, Macdonald and other restaurants that have traditional and bright decorations as well. There are also restaurants that are annexed to major luxurious hotels. Here also there are small halls and large ones.

In such places, all sorts of receptions, including diplomatic receptions, celebrations, parties and weddings take place. We celebrate the national day of our Republic in the celebration hall of Riyadh Palace Hotel, which is the same hotel we stayed at on the first day of our arrival in this country. But this is not a mere coincidence, for my husband has, since then, made friends with the manager of the hotel and we have discovered that he and his wife are kind and courteous and are of Jordanian origin. Our friendship has probably been cemented by our common love for this magnificent country. Since then, he has always shown all signs of respect and appreciation to our embassy – to our country as well - and given us good discounts for all our receptions that take place there. In April 2002, there was a great exquisite exhibition of Azerbaijan carpets at this hotel under the auspices of the Emir of Riyadh, Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz. Generally

speaking, and throughout our long years of diplomatic work, my husband and I have become convinced of the importance of personal contacts and relations with people in this kind of business.

To conclude my talk on restaurants, I will simply add that these are surprisingly different from ordinary restaurants in that there is total absence of alcoholic drinks and music. But the food is excellent, both that served at luxurious restaurants and that provided by more modest ones, which makes it possible for foreigners who come to work unaccompanied by their families to have their meals at such restaurants. I may mention in passing that many very small cafeterias that offer Turkish “shawerma” and fast food, attract passers by with the scent of their grilled and fried meat, which is sold in the form of sandwiches that are stuffed with delicious food and sold at three Riyals per unit, i.e. less than a Dollar, which anybody can afford.

For the entertainment of citizens, in addition to camel racing, which I will take up below, horse racing and football matches are frequent and create a lot of noise among the youths, which noise reaches the streets (particularly after the winning of a local team). Thus the youths would drive their private cars at top speed waving their head dress (kufiyya) as a sign of pleasure and exultation. As to horse racing, this is organized pursuant to all international rules and attract great interest, but, obviously, there are no brokers and betting.

Among three hundred parks and recreation grounds in the capital, there is a place which has a special appeal, not only for children, but also for adults. This is the zoo,

which occupies a vast area that is full of cages and barns wherein are kept all sorts of animals. In the zoo, there are many beautiful islands, artificial ponds, water jets and grass expanses that are elegantly pruned and surrounded by plants and flowers. One is struck by the exceptional care and organization of the zoo and the cleanliness of the cages and the absence of any foul odors. The various animals enjoy a life close enough to their original habitat. Hence, they procreate and multiply naturally and fill the spectators with pleasure when they see their healthy appearance. Some of them are found in great abundance, such as apes and little monkeys, that can sit on the palm of one's hand, gorillas and orangutans. Local animals are also exhibited. Attracting my attention were the snakes with horns on their heads that swing when they bury themselves in the sand. These are quite abundant in the Kingdom and are further characterized by the fact that they adapt their color to that of the environment and are therefore unnoticed even at a close distance. Hence, they are extremely dangerous because their sting is fatal. However, I was told that the bedouins have effective antidotes against the poison of such snakes and scorpions, which are also very dangerous at certain times of the year.

As with other public places, the visits to the zoo are organized in such a manner that there are days for men and others for families. There is a cafeteria in the zoo, but visitors usually prefer to sit on the grass for rest, which is permitted by the zoo management. Thus people would spread their rugs or carpets and partake of their food and fruits, preferring spending the day in the open. Recently,

the manager of the scientific section of the zoo, Siberi, a wonderful and good-natured specialist, has introduced many innovations and improvements. I, personally, have organized several visits to the zoo for my friends, for the embassy staff and for the staff of other embassies. Why did I do that? Because the manager has permitted us, upon my request, to come during the morning hours of holidays, when no visitors to the zoo bother to come. At such time, the zoo would be plunged in a sea of calmness, when there is no noise or crowds. All that could be heard was the singing and twittering of birds, the occasional cries of ferocious animals and the laughter of our children who loved rolling over the green grass. Once I brought along some men who had become disabled as a result of the hostilities in the mountainous Karabagh region. They were recuperating after receiving free treatment at the Riyadh hospitals. They were driven in special vehicles and their crutches were carried in special carts. A tour was organized for them throughout the zoo, involving stops before each cage. These young men were filled with pleasure and admiration, just like children, and forgot for a while their tragedy and difficult condition.

Among the great variety of species, there were of course our beloved animals: an orangutan family comprising five members. We would stand watching their movements for a long while, not less than half an hour, and they reciprocated the act of watching by watching us in their turn. After getting permission from the person in charge we were allowed to feed them with bananas and other fruits. As we gave them the delicious food thrown

to them, they exhibited not only skill and agility, but also the individual characteristics of natural dispositions, as some of them did not bother to take what we had offered them. Others may have considered it undignified to show too much eagerness to grasp our donations. Others still, have, on the contrary, shown great typical eagerness to keep filling their stomachs more and more. Some others showed signs of begging for the sweets and candy and behaved in a manner that is quite different from that of human beings, which, naturally, triggered a storm of pleasure and happiness among the children and even the adults.

It is also a good thing that the accommodation of animals at the zoo (I do not wish to call them “barns” by way of respect to the inmates!) are built in such a manner that the barriers and impediments separating them from the visitors are low, so that the spectators (both children and adults) may easily see them. However, for safety reasons, there is all along the cages a ditch filled with water, which the animals cannot traverse.

I remember in this connection an unexpected occurrence that took place in the zoo a few years ago. Usually all work connected with the animals takes place in the absence of visitors. But as we happened to be there, and those who perform the work were unaware of our presence, no special measures were taken as a precaution in view of our presence. Thus, while moving a small but vigorous crocodile from a small pond to another larger one (not very far from where our group were standing), and as I had asked the workers to let me photograph the process which

involved getting hold of the crocodile in a special way and pulling it up three to four meters and lowering it into an opening that led to the next pond. Thus two workers went up to the edge of the pond, started throwing their net on the animal, and succeeded in their effort. But when the huge crocodile felt the rope that was pulling it hard to the point of strangulation, it started to resist in an attempt to rid itself of the net. Somehow it succeeded in liberating one of its front limbs, but the rope was still tightly encircling its neck. The workers thought that this was enough to bring it under control and started pulling the crocodile from its tail and head. After holding it properly, they started pulling it upward. But while the crocodile was lifted up in the air, it somehow and suddenly (I don't know how) got loose, clamped down its strong jaws and bit with its canine tooth one of the workers. Blood gushed forth and the crocodile fell into the pond. Someone rushed to the phone asking for help and first aid. It must be admitted that the first aid group was on the scene in only five minutes and the injured person was transported to hospital in a state of shock. It took us quite some time to regain our composure and calm down. Later on when I enquired after the worker I was told that he was alive, that the sharp tooth of the crocodile had not reached the man's veins and had not cut the veins and arteries, which had remained sound and safe. It must be said that the man was extremely lucky and must have been born under lucky stars. I still keep a vivid memory of that event, as well as the documentary film that has recorded this terrible event.

The Fauna

If one takes a look from a plane at the territory of the Kingdom, one will see that a large part thereof is an arid desert. Yet, in addition to the palm tree thickets that are planted by men, which I have previously talked about, and the green lines of the slopes of the Red Sea coast, as well as the great oases in the eastern part of the Peninsula, one can see here dense plants and “asmal” trees which can well survive in the types of hot coastal sands. They are deliberately planted for the purpose of fixing the moving dunes. One can also see acacia trees that blossom aggressively in the spring in all grades of red. Other trees are the “limoza” trees with their fruits which look like inflated yellow pellets the size of large prunes, which look like a flat umbrella of thorny trees.

After rain-fall, the desert blooms with bouquets of small narcissus flowers and the wild “aris” flower of dark blue color. Spreading like a carpet are one-year-old herbs that constitute additional vitamin nutrition to the rare food of camels and sheep. In the mountainous regions, one can see types of cactus fruit and some types of high-rising

trees. Cactus fruits are very delicious but need careful peeling in view of the thorns that cover them. The local population are very good at peeling such fruits and then enjoy partaking of them.

At present, the cities of the Kingdom are, literally, real oases. Thus all their streets are planted with trees; in the cities one finds many public parks and recreation grounds, which costs the government exorbitant sums of money in view of the harsh weather of the country. Pipes are used for irrigating each tree individually (dripping); plants are regularly pruned and are well looked after. Private owners compete in the organization of their gardens, the golf fields and the green expanses. Because of the abundance of water and the bright sun, plants grow rapidly. An example is the jasmine tree that blossoms copiously at leisure throughout the year and become interlocked with neighboring trees. Because of its vital energy, it undulates as though it resented the abundant blooming and dense overlapping. This prompts it to climb walls and descend to the other side of the walls, thus transforming the alleys and streets into passages of thick verdure.

Among this abundance of flowers, particularly in the spring, multitudes of birds build their nests and their melodious singing merges harmoniously with the chirping and twittering of pigeons and multi-colored parrots, hoopoes, starlings and sparrows. The transparent sky is full of flocks of gracefully and swiftly flying swallows. If you are lucky, you can hear the melodious singing of the nightingales. In the morning and in the evening, the atmosphere is full of the orchestrated singing of

blackbirds.

In general, the world of birds in the Kingdom is characterized by its abundance and great variety, particularly in the two coastal regions. One can see the flocks of migrant birds airborne twice a year, coming from Europe and heading to Africa, overflying the Kingdom. Sometimes they stop here to build nests. The first migration takes place through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea; the second, through Mesopotamia (the Euphrates and Tigris in Iraq), the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, and then Ethiopia and Eritrea. They fly over the Kingdom towards the end of October and leave in April. Here the wild birds fish and white pikes, storks and pelicans loiter over the shallow waters. For their part, wild geese and handsome peacocks strut and exhibit their beautiful feathers.

There are gatherings of European flamingo birds that dig into the silt with their strong feet and extract therefrom small fish and worms that find their way into their crooked beaks. Such swarms of flamingo birds I have not seen except in the Gulf of Aden in Yemen. At the time, I had a strange experience with them when their swarms rose high up in the air above the sea area between the white and rosy coral fissures and were transformed into a light grey cloud that was dispersed slowly in the blue sky. There are also peregrines, eagles and falcons. The latter are hunted and trained to hunt rabbits, lizards and small birds. There are also the birds of steppes, which have long necks and strong legs. Bird hunting is a favorite hobby of the Saudis. It goes back to ancient times, hundreds of years ago. Thus before the appearance of guns, towards

the end of the nineteenth century, this hobby was the only opportunity and possibility for the Peninsula population to obtain meat.

The falcon is an integral part of Saudi folklore, about which poems were written and legends were spun. Its use in hunting is a physical exercise. It is intelligent and beautiful and lends itself to training. The ideal length of a falcon in Saudi Arabia from head to tail is a man arm's length from his finger nails to his elbow. The other characteristics of good birds of prey have to do with wide chests, soft feathers, piercing sight, and long, strong wings that enable them to fly at amazing speed, particularly against the wind. The price of a bird of this type ranges between ten and twenty thousand Dollars.

Falcons are hard to come by. But they can be speedily domesticated, habituated to various changes. They can be trained, within between ten days and several weeks, depending on their type. Their hunting and training need a lot of time and patience, expertise and innovations, as well as knowledge of the propensities of this type of birds. Falcon hunters do not collect them from nests, which is a lot easier, but prefer to hunt the young ones whose individual character has been formed and which have been separated from the swarm. Although this may seem strange, but the required bird must necessarily be a female bird, as it has been observed that female falcons have the necessary qualities for hunting, and they alone are considered full-fledged falcons. The size of the male falcon is usually one third that of the female. In the past, bedouins were not concerned with the sex of these birds.

They used to select them on the basis of their abilities and skills in hunting. This has always been the case, but until now when bedouins are certain that the bird they have is a female, they would call it by a male name. Thus the female falcons have earned the names of the male falcons in view of their masculine characteristics.

There are several traditional methods for hunting falcons. Thus in the past, a cage would be made of very thin sticks. Today, it is made of very thin metal wires round which are tied a number of knots. A pigeon is put inside the cage as a bait, upon which the winged hunter swoops on its prey and digs its curved claws therein. At this moment no big effort is needed to capture it. Pigeons are sometimes used by tying them to invisible nets that are tens of meters long which are fixed to the ground. The poor victim would flutter its wings in an attempt to escape. This, obviously, draws the attention of the hunter bird, which, in turn, falls into the trap and is then captured by the hunters.

After the falcon has been trapped and is considered by the expert hunter suitable for training, a leather veil that covers its eyes is put over its head. In some cases its eyelids are carefully sewn with a thin string and it is kept indoors for three to four days. This does not in any way affect its piercing sight, but quiets it down. During the training period, the falcon is not allowed to sleep at night, and every now and then it is offered a piece of meat. In the process of training, domestication and preparation of the falcon for hunting, the “falconer” needs several things that are necessary, including a leather glove that is worn

to protect the “falconer” from the sharp claws of the bird. Some prefer to use for this purpose a long fiber satchel and a special scuttle that looks like a bonnet in the form of an open book that is used as a resting place for the falcon between hunting flights. He also needs a short belt with which the legs of the falcon are tied to the scuttle and a large leather bag in which are placed the hunted birds which are prepared as meals for the falconer. One other thing which is necessary for the training of this hunting bird is a band for stretching the wings of the birds that are used as a bait.

Finally, the long awaited period comes. The falcon is now fully trained to serve its owner. It is now aware that, after each hunting flight, whether successful or otherwise, it will get a piece of meat. Thus, its alliance with the falconer secures for it the necessary food and this gives it a feeling of satisfaction and security.

In the field, early in the morning, the falconer is mounted on his horse. On his left hand, which is wrapped with the leather satchel, the falcon is poised, its head and eyes covered with the leather bag. Before them an endless half a circle of stony desert unfolds. High above is the dome of the blue sky that is lit by the oblique rays of the sun. A soft breeze caresses the crest of the Arabian horse and flutter the feathers of the hunter bird. The bedouin spans the horizon through the transparent air with his piercing eyes. Somewhere in the serene sky the warbling of an invisible skylark is heard. The falconer becomes restless and impatient, as time passes slowly here. Suddenly, he observes a movement that is hardly noticeable between

the stones and his whole being is alerted, which alertness is instantly transmitted to the falcon. The falconer unties the legs of the falcon, pulls out the leather veil from its head and issues a roaring cry. This is a significant cry, in response to which the falcon moves its neck and shakes its head, turning its piercing looks in all directions. Suddenly, it prepares to take to the air and in a moment would be airborne at increasing speed, leaving the falconer far behind. Then it climbs into the air in a straight line before turning to dive on its awaited prey. Then it tumbles down like a falling stone on the prey, piercing its sharp claws in the back of the desert rabbit and strikes it with its crooked beak. But the prey keeps resisting and, pop-eyed, in a mad fear, it tries to escape in vigorous jumps in an attempt to evade the grip of the merciless killer. But the falcon keeps following it like a horseman on its intractable horse. Thus it rises and falters and loses its balance, but keeps holding the prey with an iron grip.

Finally, the climax is at hand. The falcon deals its deadly blow to the neck of the miserable prey and the battle is suddenly over, with a noise like the crash against an invisible wall, and the cloud of dust subsides. But the body of the victim keeps trembling for a while before it finally comes to a stand still and passes away. Meanwhile, the falcon would be sitting in a posture of fierce greed on its prey. Soon, the hunting horseman arrives on the tragic scene in time to put back the veil on the falcon's head and snatches the body of the rabbit, which would still be warm after its recent death, from the claws of the falcon. The falconer slices a piece of meat from the rabbit with its

sharp knife and slips it into the beak of the hunter falcon as a reward for its efforts. He then quickly puts the prey in the scuttle lest the falcon should tear the prey to pieces. Then he rubs the feathers of the falcon tenderly to calm it down and cool its enthusiasm, addressing it with the name he had given it. He then pulls the leather veil that covers the falcon's head to his ear and listens, awaiting a response or reaction from it. The falconer lifts his hand from the falcon more than once and probably many times to enable it to spread its wings in the air, this brief intermission being all the resting period the hunter bird gets.

There is nothing strange about the bedouins considering these birds, which are the most skilful of all hunters, as though they were members of the family. Thus they treat them with great tenderness and treasure them as the most valuable of possessions. Moreover, at the end of the hunting season, they release them into freedom so that they may have time to have a family of their own, to lay their eggs and wait to enable them to hatch. Unfortunately, these practices are becoming rare because the owners of falcons are not willing to let go of these very expensive birds for them to maintain their species, though they try their best to arrange for such endeavor, but without liberating the birds.

In general, hunting with falcons has changed during the recent decades from a difficult task for the bedouins to what is a virtual entertainment for the princes and the rich. The hunting men rarely train on the saddle of horses. They rather opt for a convertible jeep that is specially equipped for that purpose. Acquisition of falcons in the Kingdom is

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Seen by a Diplomat's Spouse

not confined to hunting same; they are also imported from overseas, which is a costly business. Therefore, when the falcons are finally in the possession of the aristocrats, their price rises to more than 250 to 300 thousand Dollars per falcon. Of great value are the hunting birds that are brought from the vast steppes of Siberia and Kazakhstan, which are known to have white falcons.

A few scores of years ago, big birds that do not fly, like the incomparable ostriches, could be seen in the Peninsula. They were found in the northern part of the Peninsula. They grazed in great numbers like camels. However, the great demand on their delicious meat, their soft feathers, their eggs that are full of vitamins, their grease that Saudis use for rubbing and massaging the skins against the heat of the sun or the waves of cold weather, has caused this species of wonderful animals to disappear. At present, they can be seen only in the zoo of Riyadh. This I will take up soon.

As the main part of the territory of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is desert territory, it is no wonder that it is not rich with fauna. Thus in the endless arid land, all sorts of gazelles are found, but a great number thereof are unfortunately tragically slaughtered. The delicious and tender meat of this docile and gentle animal is in great demand. Financially well off Arabs hunt them as well as the antelopes that have straight horns. In the mountainous regions, are found wild cats, hyenas, foxes and mountain ibexes. Smaller animals like lizards, rats, snakes, dabs and hedgehogs are found everywhere. Foxes and rabbits often cross the road without fearing your car, but obviously

they dare not cross motorways. They rather move across desert trails that are remote from populous areas. In the mountains of the southwestern part of the country, one can find packs of monkeys that look like dogs.

Once, my husband Elman Arasli and I were on our way to Mecca to perform "Umra". We saw multitudes of these monkeys near a mountainous path. At first, we thought they were human beings, which was very strange, as you cannot expect people to stand along a multi-lane motorway. My husband started to clamp the breaks and simultaneously blew the horn. But this did not have any effect on the monkeys that were sitting before us. When we drew close to them, they approached our car and surrounded us. Fortunately, the car windows were closed. But soon some of them went up to the roof of the car, making all sorts of intelligible gestures, striking on their bellies and putting their fingers in their mouths, while extending their hands forward as an indication that they were hungry and needed something to eat. It was also clear that they were used to receiving food from motorists who happened to pass by. Unfortunately, all our food reserves were packed in the trunk of the car and we could not, at the time, for obvious reasons, get out of the car. We may have had to stay locked up in the car for quite some time had not a car come behind us that attracted the attention of the monkeys, as the people in that car were apparently prepared for this and started throwing fruits, thus encouraging the monkeys to leave us in peace and turn to them in order to get a share of the fruits being thrown to them, and thus making it possible for us to resume our journey in peace. It is

reported that in cases of anger and resentment, they could throw stones at people, but we were lucky to have been spared such ordeal. On our way, we kept remembering the different postures of the monkeys, especially a tiny little one that stood on our car and started making all sorts of funny gestures that made us burst with laughter.

On the rare drawings on the rocks in the mountainous part of the western coast of the country known as Assir, which lies along the historical route of the caravans traveling from Yemen to Mecca, we saw many drawings showing horsemen mounted on their horses and others sitting on the necks of camels, as well as hunters carrying bows, arrows and long and short spears, in addition to tame and ferocious animals, like lions and tigers, which can be seen today only in the zoo. The lion's share of these drawings is reserved for camels, which is not a mere coincidence in the pre-oil era, as such animals played an important part in the life of people, together with the sheep and goats, which are the essential resource for the life of the population of the Arabian Peninsula. Needless to say, fishermen and pearl divers in the coastal regions had other resources than camels, but this category represented a small part of the natives. Thus, the camel was in the first place a symbol of material and financial wealth and a bedouin had to have tens of camels and 50 heads of sheep and goats as well as a hunting dog and a horse. After the advent of fire arms, the rifle was an indispensable weapon. A bride's dowry consisted, in addition to clothes and other household accessories, of money with which camels and sheep were normally bought and which, in time, would

multiply and become a dependable material support for married women in case of divorce or should they wife become a widow.

The list of foodstuff of the population of the Arabian Peninsula is very modest, being confined to the dairy products, dates and, rarely, mutton, which is different from the meat of camels. The latter is not so lean and is more fatty. Thus they used to slaughter sheep in great abundance because the pregnancy period of ewes is much shorter than that of camels (13 to 14 months in the case of the latter). It should be mentioned in passing that the milk of ewes is much fatter than that of goats, while that of she-camels is the fattest of the two. Butter, cheese and yoghurt were made out of the milk of ewes. In order to satisfy the need of the bedouin's family with the basic nutritious substance and providing milk for the babies, the udders of ewes were put in sacs made of leather or cloth. Today, it is not uncommon to see in villages the golden colored sacs that are sewn with golden threads swinging between the legs of the female cattle that have just given birth. There was a time when the life of bedouins depended wholly on domestic animals, which provided the nutritious elements for the bedouins. Throughout the year, the cattle and their owners would move from place to another in search for pasture. During the winter – spring rain it was much easier to find food in valleys that receive plenty of rain near the temporary shallow streams between the dunes. However, during the dry months of summer, from May till mid October, the clan would keep moving towards the borders of oases, the shady palm tree thickets and towards

the well known sources of water and wells, near the rural settlements, where the members of the tribe could sell their wool, rugs, leather products and locally made objects, or exchange their commodities with food stuffs.

Camels and cattle represent real necessities for the life of bedouins, providing them with wool for weaving carpets, rugs, clothes, tents, saddlebags, bags and hides from which they make buckets, receptacles, cradles for babies, and shoes. Horses, on the other hand, represent a source of pride and a symbol of success for their owners.

Many tales are narrated about the origin of the famous Arabian horse, which appeared in the Arabian Peninsula 4 to 5 thousand years ago and was subsequently domesticated. Some believe that they have come from the Mesopotamia region, which is known for its abundant wealth. Others are of the opinion that they have come from Egypt, or that they were probably acquired during the many invasions to which the Peninsula was exposed. But all these legends are not substantiated and are merely transmitted verbally by the desert population.

As mentioned earlier, there are high-rising mountains and barren desert in the Najd Plateau. Under such circumstances, only those animals that can bear great hardship would survive in such an environment. The dry climate has contributed to the health and strength of the swift horses of the region, while the rigorous and niggardly life has helped in the formation of the physical and delicate moral characteristics and aristocratic behavior of this graceful and patient creature (I should not say animal, out of respect and admiration for this graceful being).

Arabian horses are associated with a romantic aura of glory and veneration. This is reflected in Arabic and Islamic literature, where one finds a description of their intelligence, friendliness, loyalty beauty and sensitivity. It is no accident that His Royal Highness Crown Prince Abdullah, who is a loving expert of horses, should give great attention to the development of equestrian sports and its propagation in the country.

Many legends circulate about the courage, wonderful toughness, solidity and speed of the Arabian horse, whose legs are exceptionally suited for running through sandy and stony trails in lava expanses. However, horses need great attention and exceptional care. The desert people say that it is easier to raise five children than to take care of one pony. Children need special care for two years, while a horse needs constant care for life.

Although the usual and necessary fodder, as we know it, is almost totally absent, the owner of a horse is keen on providing what is necessary for his horse, sometimes at the expense of his own family. And even in difficult times, he adds to the food of his horse dry dates, cured meat and dry locusts (the favorite food for desert people). In the absence of the necessary foodstuffs, he would give the horse the milk of camel to drink. Some scientists believe that this miserly food has helped to form swift horses with delicate bones. However, these types of horses that can stand the difficulties and rigor of life are an indispensable source for natural selection in the whole world.

Since time immemorial, the bedouins were, like modern specialists in the breeding of noble horses, very careful

and scrutinizing in preserving the pedigree and original blood of the Arabian horse, whose blood is not adulterated with a single drop of alien blood. It is customary among the local population to call witnesses to testify as to the pure origin and pedigree of horses.

Thus, we see that a horse requires great and constant care from its owner, which is not the case with camels, which are an indispensable necessity for the life of bedouins.

Camels are almost the most important and most common among animals that are capable of adapting to the difficult conditions of life and of operating under exceptionally strenuous conditions. Their meat is used as food, and so are their fat and milk. From their hair clothes as well as covers, tents and ropes are made. From their hide are made skins, shoes, bags, belts and other products. Their bones are burnt and used as fertilizers and their dung is used as fuel. Moreover, before the advent of motor cars, camels were practically the only means of transport and hauling in the Peninsula.

The camels of the Peninsula have but one hump, unlike those in Central Asia (which have two humps). They are two or more meters high and each one sometimes weighs 500 kilograms. Their intelligent and piercing eyes are half closed on account of the bright rays of the sun, the piercing globules of sand, while their eye-lids are thick and two-layered for protection purposes. They have relatively long noses which can be tightly closed in case of strong sandy winds. Their jaws are very strong and are capable of breaking the bones of an adult human being if they clamp on them. Their bodies are somehow frightening, while

their limbs are slender and graceful and their feet are flat and soft. Their ribs are big and their chests are wide.

Their humps are situated up opposite the abdomen below. Their necks are long and curved . Their ears are relatively small, have sharp and tapered ends and are stuck on a high and proud head. All this gives the spectator a feeling of awe and an impression that camels look with disdain on all that is around them.

Thus, it can be said that the camel ranks first in respect of all its vital characteristics. If animals had a special register for their record figures, on a par with the well known Guinness record, then the camel would most probably occupy pride of place among all other animals in respect of its adaptability to all conditions of nature as it has unique vital and organic characteristics.

One unique characteristic of the camel is its hump, which is a virtual store wherein it stores a great quantity (up to 150 kilograms) of food and water. Thus when it eats more than it needs, the extra food is transformed into a special grease that contains water and is kept in this store. When its body needs water and energy, it takes it from this reserve. Hence, a camel can dispense with water for two weeks, and when it partakes of plants that contain water, it can dispense with water for several weeks. This, however, does not mean that it can dispense with water when it is available, for, on the contrary, it does not miss any opportunity to drink when water is available. Usually, when agreeable water is available, a camel can drink between 10 and 20 liters per minute, up to a total of 100 to 150 liters. In cases of rainfall, bedouins prefer to drive

their camels at night and leave them near streams so that they may drink at leisure in the cool. In general, these animals have a special sharp sense in respect of water. They sense its presence even when it is underneath layers of sand and at a far distance.. Many a time camels have led their stranded owners to the buried wells and oases. Many stories are narrated on how in the past men have found the water that rescued them from inevitable death thanks to the camel's storage of water in their stomachs.

In such circumstances, men would slaughter the camel and drink the unpalatable, green water just in order to survive the fatal thirst.

The hump of a camel is an index of its physical condition and health. If a camel has been sick and hungry for a long while, the hump would become hardened and wrinkled, would spill over the back and would almost disappear. But in the case of a sated and healthy camel, this part of its body would be hard. I should mention in passing that a camel's saddlebag takes the form of a square piece of wood that is placed on the hump. I have often taken a ride on the back of camels, but to tell the truth, it was a frightening experience, although we were given very calm, docile and properly trained camels to ride. In camel-racing, the riders sit behind the hump, on an ordinary pillow, although one gets the impression that they cannot possibly control the camel by pulling and releasing the bridle while sitting back in that posture.

In the winter of 1999, the heads of diplomatic missions accredited to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia were invited to attend the celebrations of the first centenary of the

establishment of the Kingdom under the auspices of Crown Prince Abdullah. We arrived at a sports facility in the suburbs, about forty kilometers from the center of Riyadh, which is called “Al-Janadriah” and which was decorated with flags, signboards and signs of welcome as well as slogans connected with the occasion. The visitors’ platform was full of spectators who were surrounded by many guards. At this stage, the north, inclement, wind blew hard, but the mood was pleasant and people were elated. After a few minutes, there was a commotion in the spectators’ platforms and Prince Abdullah and his attendants appeared in the midst of the sound of trumpets. A small old-fashioned airplane landed in the courtyard and then it circled round the platforms in an acrobatic-like show. It was the latest model of the time – A Dakota, given by President Roosevelt as a present to King Abdulaziz in 1950. It shone brightly under the rays of the sun and looked brand new, having been completely renovated, at a cost of five million Dollars, as indicated in the beautifully printed centenary albums commemorating this centenary. It looked like the Saudis have spared no funds for keeping this historical gift. This was followed by a military parade and camel-racing. Before the platforms, the desert extended endlessly, unblocked by any signs. Pending the promised competitions listed in the program, the spectators exchanged conversation. The cold wind blew harder and harder. Suddenly, there appeared, from a distance of a few kilometers in a column of dust, a dark moving patch, attracting the attention of all viewers. After a while, it transpired that a large group of camels were

advancing in a gigantic circular ring. When they drew near, it seemed to me that there were dummies attached to the camels and were jolting and rocking in a strange manner. Drawn swords were waved to the tune of the rocking and jolting movement. But when the rushing patch drew to a distance of one kilometer and appeared immediately before the platforms, I was surprised to discover almost bare children riding the camels and knew not how they managed to stay put despite the jolting and rocking movement at such a great speed, as they were wearing thin shirts and barefooted, and resisting the cold winds that were blowing in their faces. But when they arrived, having run about twenty kilometers to the final line, their faces were shining with smiles of pride. The voice of the commentators began to resound in the radio, full of pleasure and ecstasy that was undulating over the platforms. Then stood the adults who lifted the winner from the back of the whitened camel, on account of the salt that was discharged with the sweat that covered the camel's body and hair. Strangely enough, a young boy whose height barely reached the knee of the camel and who was less than fourteen years old, was the winner.

The ceremony of distributing the trophies took place in a majestic and grandiose atmosphere. The winner approached the compartment of Prince Abdullah. On his face one could see solemn signs of self-confidence. He reciprocated the shake hand of Prince Abdullah, who handed him over the winner's certificate and a check for a million Saudi Riyals (about three hundred thousand Dollars), with a polite smile. The prince embraced the

winner tenderly after handing the check over to him. The second winner was an eighteen-year old boy who was given, in addition to the winning certificate, a check for half a million Saudi Riyals. (2500 camels participated in the race, 250 at a time).

But let us go back again to our camels and talk about their great adaptability and ways of life and their ability to bear the extreme desert conditions. Camels breathe more slowly than other mammals; their body temperature is higher and they transpire more slowly . But when this does happen, their hair operates as a insulator, which makes it possible for their body temperature not to exceed a certain limit. But in the cold weather, it, on the contrary, preserves body temperature. Thus, in the winter, their hair grows more actively specially on the hump, the neck, the shoulders and head, its length sometimes reaching that of the camel's tail. But as summer draws near, the hair begins to fall and may be compared to wool for its softness.

The camel's body exudes very small quantities of water and its kidneys excrete highly concentrated urine whose smell is not rancid because of the plants it eats. In the old times, and perhaps even today, bedouins washed their hair therewith. It is probably for this reason, and thanks to the use of black camphire, that beautiful bedouin women pride themselves on their curly and shining hair as compared to the hair of other local women.

Feeding camels is not costly in terms of the type of food that they eat. Thus they eat tree leaves, regularly and in small dozes, without moving from one tree to another, before exhausting the leaves of individual trees. Nor do

they disdain eating desert shrubs and bushes that have a salty taste. But no matter how inviting a plant may look, a camel would not eat it if it contains any chemical solutions. In difficult times, when the necessary fodder is hard to come by, camels are satisfied with eating some dates, barley, dry fish and the previously prepared barks, as a reserve in case of deprivation.

The milk of a she-camel is rich in vitamins despite its unusual taste. It is very similar to the milk that tribes living far from wells would use to quench their thirst therewith. In any case, the taste of this milk is affected by the food which the camels eat. Hence, it is sometimes nearer to being sweet or salty. It curdles with difficulty despite the hot weather, and does not yield butter because of the low fat it contains. However, some special types of hard cheese are made therefrom in the shape of small balls that can be well preserved for long periods without being refrigerated and that can be eaten after soaking them with water.

A she-camel produces between 6 to 7 liters of milk daily. It is interesting to note that a she-camel does not accept being milked except in the presence of its owner. When the owner is not available, resort is had to a dummy that looks like him. Milking takes place twice a day, obviously with clean hands, failing which, as bedouins assert, a she-camel would lose its ability to produce milk. Camel meat is in demand in the Kingdom, although it is hard compared to the lean meat of sheep. In the past, they would slaughter camels only by way of honoring their guests. Today, however, things have changed. One can buy camel meat in any supermarket in both cities and in

the country side. But the meat of she-camels is not found anywhere, which is not surprising, because she-camels are kept for continuous progeny purposes. A she-camel is a tender mother that takes good care of its young ones. During the first months of birth, it would not allow any animal or human being to come near its young ones, even if it has to exhibit violence in an aggressive spirit. If a young camel should accidentally die, its mother would stand motionless over its body, weeping with real tears and would not leave the place except with the dead one. Its other young ones imitate their mother's behavior in this respect. When the young one is weaned, a small piece of a tree is put round its nose, which hurts the she-camel in case it tries to suckle it. In such case it stops suckling it and the young one gradually turns to the herbs of the grazing areas. When this takes place in the winter, when the desert thrives, the weaned camel would soon grow up rapidly, would become strong and stand on its slender legs.

We have got used to consider camels quite calm and docile. They only exhibit their pugnacity, rather rarely, by spitting on those who are determined to draw too near them in the zoo. However, it transpired that this is not the case. It is true they bear pain patiently; they can bear hunger and thirst patiently as well as long travel for days through the hot desert, carrying loads that can exceed two hundred kilograms. Nomads always prefer to use she-camels for such tasks because male camels can sometimes be irascible and extremely aggressive. One must be very cautious when they attack one another, and

sometimes they can attack human beings. Their bites and kicks can be extremely dangerous. Hence, those deemed dangerous are muzzled. When excited or angry, a camel would blow its mouth like a ball in view of the slackness of its epiglottis, and can eject the obviously no -disgusting green liquid from its first stomach ordinary spitting at all, which can reach one liter in volume. The she-camel, on the other hand, is much more calm and forbearing. Heavy loads weigh down on she-camels, which suffer under such heavy loads and express their suffering in the form of moaning and crying with real tears. There is another unpleasant they are extremely vengeful. -characteristic of male camels. This trait is the subject of many tales which my Saudi friends have narrated to me.

Once a herdsman of a small herd of camels decided to water his camels from a shallow stream that was formed after heavy rain. He approached one of the camels that had a special position of leadership among the other camels and urged it to rise but the camel was recalcitrant and would not move. The man resorted to issuing loud cries and even struck it with his stick to force it to rise, but to no effect. It is well known that if the leader does not proceed forward the other camels would not move either. The bedouin kept trying to make the stubborn camel to move and finally he gave up and let him be when he noticed in its eyes looks that made him feel uneasy.

In the evening, the camels moved voluntarily towards the stream and returned after having filled their stomachs with water, their sides inflated and their humps strong. But this man, who was well aware of the nature of camels was

very cautious. Thus in the dark night, he spread a rug on a slope near the tent and put in his usual place of sleep a long sack full of straw and covered it with a blanket. Having done that, he stayed away, waiting patiently. In the sky there was a full moon and the man could see distinctly the sleeping camels.

After some time, everything was quiet and the man almost decided that his caution was not warranted. But suddenly, he heard the sound of broken branches as the same stubborn camel rose to its feet. The man held his breath and the camel moved slowly towards the tent. Arriving there, it stopped as though deliberating. Then it rushed into the tent and threw its weight on the sleeping place of the herdsman and started trampling on it with its feet and chest. It must be pointed out that there are formed throughout the life of a camel strong and hard corns on the knees and the belly. The bedouin saw all this and was full of fears realizing that had it not been for his clever anticipation of what the vengeful camel might do, he would not be alive. So he got up, snatched his stick and jumped to the tent. When the camel heard the noise, it got up and faced its adversary and in a few moments it collapsed and died. Apparently, it could not bear this terrible fiasco.

Following is another story that happened in a mountainous region in Taif. One morning, a man got up early in the morning and by mere coincidence saw a camel and a she-camel copulating. When they realized that he had seen them, they stopped their activity. It should be pointed out that these animals, unlike most other animals,

are extremely shy and bashful. The man, who was aware of this fact, immediately disappeared from the scene and for the following days made a point of not coming close to the camel. Later on he sold it as a precaution against something harmful that might happen to him, for having witnessed the camel in an embarrassing situation.

Ten years passed and one day, while the man was in a market, he suddenly saw the camel he had sold. He recognized it from the branding on the camel that marks ownership. What is most surprising was that the camel had also recognized its previous owner, who had immediately realized this from the angry looks on the camel's face. So he immediately ran away, jumping over the sacks and baskets that contained various commodities, treading on sleeping sheep and their heaped lambs. The camel pursued him and soon caught up with him. It easily threw him down and treaded on him. When the police arrived on the scene the man had already died.

Obviously, such incidents are rare. Hence, it is no wonder that they are kept in the memory of people for a long time and are transmitted from mouth to mouth just like famous stories and wise proverbs. However, they involve lessons to be learned in connection with the desert ship, the camel, which, though having been domesticated and docile a long time ago, yet one must be cautious in dealing with it and must show respect and consideration to such unusual animal. Now since the camel has always been for centuries the only source of affluence for the nomads, and, since it possibly represents the basic part of all their life, it is no wonder that so many names are given

to the camel (Arabic philologists mention 5744 different names), the various names being associated with the stages, circumstances and characteristics of this animal. There are also different names given to the camel for each year of its life and to each one of its species; to the first phases of its life; to camels that are barren; to those used for riding and transport; to the healthy ones and the sick ones; to those that have physical defects; to those that have special habits, and according to the color of their hide and hair and so forth. The term “desert ship” is also significant. Most camels in the Kingdom have a light yellow color and some are dark brown and white. In Najd are found the best camels that are more patient and more capable of bearing difficulties. They are traditionally dark to the point of blackness. However, white camels are part of folklore and popular stories in the Kingdom. Bedouin women always prefer clothes weaved from the hair of white camels. The young women, on the other hand, dream of traveling in a houdaj that is placed on the hump of a white camel.

It happened very often in the past that camels fell victims to an invading enemy in view of their great value among the tribes. As tribal wars took place very often, those animals often exchanged hands. In other words, they often came back, sooner or later, to their original owner. A man who has lost in battle his friend that is invaluable, namely, his camel, which had been throughout the years not merely a source of income but also a full member of the family, could not under any circumstances give up and resign himself to such loss. Thus in such circumstances he would hire a spy, whose task, after receiving detailed

and minute descriptions of the lost camel from its owner, was to look for the camel in enemy country and report to its first owner its whereabouts and its new owner and thus obtain the promised recompense. Subsequently, a process gets under way for retrieval of the camel and its release from imprisonment.

For men, the objective of invasions and conquests was not merely the kidnapping of persons and animals, but also self-assertion and a demonstration of ability and courage. It was not unusual in battles to adopt a special tactic. The more capable camels in battle, the black camels, when proceeding for battle, would be arranged in close rows like a well knit structure, behind which horsemen carrying spears would line up. Bedouins narrate that this black wall that constitutes an insurmountable obstacle, like a sea building, used to create a frightening impression in the souls of the enemy, so much so that they would turn back and take to flight. Generally speaking, the courage, skill and devotion of these animals were the subject of so many narratives and interesting legends.

At the end of the battle, the fighters would bring water in skins so that both men and camels would drink. Wounds are attended to and treated on the spot. Bedouins knew lots of efficient ways and means of treating wounds. The simplest old method is to put a hot substance on the wound or the painful place. This, most often, would be a stone. Then there is the process of cauterization, which is the ultimate treatment, comparable to surgery in modern medicine. Despite the paradoxes involved in such types of treatment, they, nevertheless, were beneficial, although

they left their traces on the body of the injured.

A few decades ago, long caravans used to travel through the undulating sands of the desert which is like a coastless sea. They used to follow trails left by previous caravans beginning with the ancient ancestors 3,500 to 4,000 years ago. At that time, the famous silk road from China together with the perfume road was frequented from Queen Sheba's Kingdom – the Yemen of today, to Syria, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. After crossing great distances through which there was no animal or plant, merchants would bring commodities of food and plain water for sale or trade exchange, which commodities were very expensive in this part of the world. Bedouin families also were always on the move searching for pasture. Pilgrims' caravans from all over the world used to intercross as they passed through the valley of the Arabian Peninsula on their way to the two holy cities: Mecca and Medina. Hundreds and thousands of camels used to travel at 5 kilometers per hour in a unified mobile chain in a monotonous way amidst the moving sands or the black lava fields, punctuated by short stops and long travel in the hottest times of the day, and sometimes at night, for weeks and months. The cameleer's songs would either serve to reassure the camels of the soon arrival to the water and the grazing fields or to encourage them to maintain their strength and not to lose their way. The rhythm of the cameleer's song determines the speed or slowness of the movement of the caravan.

Women and children, jewelry, as well as very expensive belongings would be carried inside howdahs that are

carried by camels. The people inside the howdah would be protected from the heat of the sun, the sand storms and the curious eyes of strangers by dark curtains that hang down the howdahs, which have various names depending on the functions they perform. Some constituted artistic products and are made of special cloth; others are made of gazelle hides and decorated with drawings, slogans, symbols, laces and ribbons. Such an unstable miniature house, like a bedouin tent, was their home, as they spend quite a lot of time therein.

Often, the camel is described as the “desert ship”. This well known name fits the nature of this animal that is enamored with work. Anyone mounting its back will realize that sitting on or near its hump makes one feel as though one was on a light ship. Such worrying and fluctuating movements makes a novice suffer as though he was sea sick. However, soon one gradually gets used to these movements and become like an expert sailor that does not feel any discomfort or pain. This is not to mention those who are used to riding camels, who feel more at ease on camels’ back than when sitting on the ground or walking on the same ground. On the other hand, the camel’s pad is famously adapted to the sandy, pebbly, stony and even rocky ground. The undulations of the skin that are as hard as pins on the knees, chest and belly of the camel, where the body touches the ground all these protect the camel from painful wounds and bruises. We can visualize the caravan that proceeds along the edge of the desert land that extends like an endless chain under the inclement and hot rays of the sun, to the accompaniment of the monotonous

ringing of the bells that hang round the long necks of these long suffering animals that labor under loads that are too heavy for them. They have covered several days of travel and have more weeks to go, while those mounted on the camels do not look like living beings, their faces having been covered with a layer of sand, have merged with their animals and look as though they were part of the loads, not living human beings that have feelings. Some camels moan and shake and even shed tears in consequence of their exhaustion. Suddenly, the wind raises in the far off horizon a hardly perceptible cloud of dust. In a minute, a sand storm surrounds everything and removes the light layer of sand from the top of the dunes and pushes them strongly in the direction of the moving caravans. At this point, the leading camel in the front turns his back sharply towards the strong, piercing current, folds its legs under its belly and down it lands on the ground. It closes its two rows of eyelashes, closes its narrow eyelids like shells closing on pearls, and the other camels follow suit. This is the long awaited period of rest! People jump to the ground in great ecstasy and gather together wrapped in their men's cloaks and line up in close contact with the camels, where they find total security, while thirst is not that painful and can wait for hours to come.

The bedouin is happy when he finds a protected refuge like that. He appreciates that this defense is the greatest gift sent to him by God Almighty. Therefore, it must be adequately appreciated and taken good care of.

The Gold Market and a Tour in the Desert

It is universally acknowledged that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a legendary rich country and occupies first position in the world in respect of oil extraction. In other words, it may be described as possessing the greatest quantity of black gold in the world. But this alone is not the whole story, for in the Kingdom there are great reserves of copper, zinc, lead, nickel, iron ores, uranium, salt, natural gas and other valuable deposits, which I leave it to specialists to talk about. But I would like to talk in some detail about gold and silver of which there are great reserves, or rather about the things that are made of them by skilful craftsmen that are well known in the east, which is proud of them. I do not wish to talk about matters that are obvious and taken for granted, but I will touch on a well known fact, namely, that jewelry have always been important things for the majority of women, particularly eastern women. Hence, the Arab countries have always been famous for their markets and stores that sell golden jewelry.

The golden market has always fascinated spectators.

It is a long row of shops and stores that are flooded with bright lights, whose shop windows are full of various types and shapes of jewelry. These markets are usually situated in the old part of the city and occupy an area of several square kilometers. During the years I have spent in the Kingdom, I saw many such places, and many a time I visited one of the oldest markets in the Middle East, Souk Al-Hamidiyyah in Damascus, which is sixty centimeters lower than the level of the city streets that have preserved the spirit of past centuries. Not far from it, is a small silver market built in the form of a one-storey alabaster palace in the middle of the courtyard of which are beautiful water jets. At that place one can buy not only jewelry but also the most exquisite traditional works of art. I can also remember the famous gold market in Baghdad, as well as the Yemen market that is hidden behind the old walls in the capital, Sanaa, where textiles are priced according to their weight and the price of pearls is determined on the basis of the types of musk. At such places, one can buy and sell heavy silver coins, including the riyals of the Austrian Empress Teresa. In the city squares, on Fridays, criminals condemned to execution are beheaded. And if you dare to enter the alleys that abound in the various types of goods and commodities, you will see long rows of gold selling shops, where one can buy exquisite necklaces made of gold, silver, platinum, etc, not to mention false jewelry.

In any case, a visit to the gold market is a must in any eastern city that has centuries of history behind it. In Riyadh, one can find several such markets, the most basic being two that are situated near that same citadel named

Al – Masmak, which was captured by King Abdulaziz in 1902. At that place, the remaining old buildings constitute sure evidence that in very old times there was active trading in golden and silver jewelry, precious stones, swords and daggers, carpets and other handicraft products. In the depth of this labyrinth we discovered a small shop where old Azerbaijan carpets were sold. But we could not obtain a satisfactory and convincing explanation of how such carpets ended up there. Close to the old market, there is a compound which is a resting place for the population. It comprises several buildings separated from one another by large squares whose floor is paved with marble slabs and whose edges are planted with royal palm trees. Here children can play, run, skate and ride their bicycles, while the parents, most often the fathers, would be resting, sitting on the empty mastabas that are fixed on the ground.

Entering one of the buildings of the Trade Center, one finds many shops that sell different varieties of goods. The shopkeepers welcome visitors warmly, not only because of the traditional eastern hospitality spirit, but because such visitors, as seemed to me, were fewer than the shops themselves. Then you can take the lift to the second floor. Here you find yourself in a legendary surrounding. At first sight, you cannot perceive where you are and your eyes would be dazzled by the golden brightness of the great abundance of jewelry that cover the walls up and down. Each selling store looks like a theatre stage wherein exquisite decorations are exhibited. Instead of the front walls there hang from the ceiling itself, one or one and a half meter high golden curtains made of many golden

chains to which are attached balls and coins so that for the client who wishes to enter must either bend his head or move the curtains with his hands, something the like of which I have probably not seen anywhere else. The first impression sometimes outweighs one's thinking. But gradually, some questions arise: how do shopkeepers close their shops at night to preserve the wealth contained therein? I soon discovered the answer when I saw in the side walls two hidden mobile iron nets. As to the reply to another question, namely, where can one find such number of women in this country for wearing all this quantity of jewelry, this I leave unanswered.

One can find here the jewelry and adornments that suit all tastes. Most of them are made of high carat Saudi gold (22 carats) of dark yellow color. There is a great demand on jewelry that is known as "kafiyat" and resemble incomplete filigreed gloves (a bracelet tied to various chains ending with rings in the form of three or five circles that are worn on one's fingers). Of special attraction that defy imagination are the golden belts that adorn the waist of local young women who are unlike slim women (Saudi women, like the representatives of the other sex, are usually characterized by heavy weight). As to other types of jewelry, these are so many that the eyes are dazzled thereby and keep looking around in a state of utter amazement. In the depth of the ancient market, one can find the old jewelry that are well preserved and which are made of silver, turquoise, onyx and pearls. In the shop windows that shine with night lights, there glitter- with a sparkle stronger than the resplendence of diamond-

precious stones called “Saudi Berlanti stones”, which are types of quartz stones, small pieces of which are found by those interested, provided they know where to look for them and have plenty of time and patience for the arduous search.

Thus, after hearing a great deal about these rare precious stones throughout the years I spent in the Kingdom, I came to the conclusion that one must make a trip to the desert in search for such stones, particularly in view of the fact that rumors have it that the Saudi government would, as of next year, begin to assume the control and supervision of such search. I had to ask my secretary to enquire regarding those involved in guiding tourists for the search of precious stones and received expressions of appreciation from my group.

On an early morning of May, a group of twenty women wearing large edged hats accompanied by two men, who are driven by curiosity, namely the Austrian ambassador and the British military attaché, who were driving private cars, arrived at Sahara Hotel, from where the trip must begin.

Here there was a bus waiting for us and we were given instructions by the guide, a swarthy youth, and then we were on the move. The road was a one-way route that cuts through the verdant areas like an arrow. Apparently it had rained the day before from a passing cloud. The earth has apparently responded gratefully and was forthwith transformed into a green carpet adorned with flowers. On both sides of the route, we could see small numbers of black camels together with a small number of

she-camels and white camels. In the midst of these, there were playing around the newly born camels that are as high as the bellies of their parents from the surface of the earth. The camels were lazily feeding on the dry herbs.

In a flashback, I should mention that two years before, two sons of the ambassador of a European country had come to visit their parents. They all traveled to the western coast of the Kingdom in order to practice their favorite hobby – fishing. On their way back, they had a terrible accident. The driver behind the steering saw a group of camels on the road. There was no sign warning of the imminent danger; hence, he did not slow down. Suddenly one of the camels jumped into the road. The driver tried to maneuver but could not control the car with the result that one of the two youths died, while the second was taken to hospital in a critical condition.

The traffic authorities, whose job it is to supervise and guard the routes, know very well the disposition of the “desert ship”. Hence, on both sides of the road between cities and external lanes there stood special beams and after each interval along the route tunnels were dug underground for camels and long horned cattle. Smaller routes are full of warning signs on which camels are drawn. Unfortunately, it just so happened that there were none of those where the tragic accident had taken place.

We are then traveling along a local route. The desert here is not uniform, as usual and as many think. In some places, it rises to form low - rising hills containing a kind of cohesive, precipitated sand; in others, it is transformed into fields of black lava that extend beyond the horizon,

or a sand plain covered with short thorny bushes. On rare occasions, one can see a collection of trees near valleys (which are the dry course of streams that are formed after rainfall), close to a black or striped tent of bedouins with their Nissan or Toyota truck which they use for transporting their sheep, goats or their children.

A pleasant mood prevails in our bus. Some passengers try singing but there is no common song that is shared between them except an English one which begins as follows: "I wish you health and prosperity", as the group comprises women of various nationalities. We split into groups according to interests and inclinations. Behind the glass of the windows, the desert begins to change. It becomes a sea of surging and rough waves of sand, whose dunes look as though skillfully made of thin layers like a plate of mashed potatoes served at a fancy restaurant, that are of orange to red color. But why this color in particular? I try hard to remember the geographic information I learned when I was young, but in vain. Even the guide, who is supposed to know everything, did not know that. But the view is magnificent. The disk of the sun has not risen much towards its zenith. The contrast of colors between the parts of the dunes that are exposed to the rays of the sun and the shade of the low ground is sharp and is close to dark grey. According to the guide, by mid-day, twenty jeeps will arrive here, driven by youths who compete in a match of ferocious wheels, transforming this beauty into noise and dust. The roaring engines of their cars will awaken the desert and disturb its peaceful beauty sleep. Finally, we reached our destination. Here there is a road

restaurant whose staff are waiting for us as we had called them before our arrival to prepare our breakfast. Thus carpets are spread and breakfast is ready, but none of us has the necessary appetite for eating; we are rather alert and full of the eagerness of hunters.

Gradually, all the comrades are spread over the wide expanse of the desert, which looks like a gigantic tray on which are strewn pebbles of various sizes. Between these pebbles are hidden the stones called the Saudi Berlanti, some samples of which our guide has shown us when we were still in the bus. At first, we started collecting what looked like them; but we gradually began to distinguish the genuine ones. Soon cries of joy and satisfaction were heard. The small stones that were found were slightly different from the others. They are like them, transparent and covered with dust. But when looked at through the slanting rays of the morning sun, the difference soon became apparent. The more transparent and radiant the sample, the more valuable and expensive it would be. The size of these stones is not big, ranging between half a centimeter and a centimeter in diameter, though larger ones are sometimes discovered. One of our companions was lucky enough to find some stones the size of half a finger. From such stones, if free of internal fissures, it is possible to make a magnificent trickle, the size of a drop, that is worn like a necklace.

Where did such accumulations of quartz pebbles come from? It is difficult to find an answer to that question. It is obvious, however, that huge quartz veins have at some time, at some place, been dug and scattered all over these



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Seen by a Diplomat's Spouse

areas. As far as I know, no such phenomenon has been observed anywhere else in the vast expanse of the desert. Foreign businessmen had been, for more than twenty years, bringing to this small area, twice a week, tourists who are full of curiosity, and so far it does not look like they are likely to stop doing that. Such a trip with breakfast and light lunch costs quite a lot of money, with which one can buy 5 to 7 ready made exquisite polished stones of that type. But to my knowledge, no one feels sorry for the costs sustained, because no amount of money can buy the unique sensation and impression created by the endless morning desert with its light mirage locations and the overwhelming eagerness of hunters, the spirit of competition, the excitement of the pleasant discovery of the expected stone.

A Wedding Ceremony

Although the Saudi community have found themselves, out of the bleu, in the age of modernity, I believe they will not soon escape from the chains of their traditions that go back to the good old days. This is because the disposition of the people of this country is not as flexible as economy and production, for example. Thus traditions are predominant, imperative and so firmly established that they cannot change, let alone disappear within such a short period of time.

This explains also the ceremonies associated with marriage, the wedding ceremony and all that precedes or follows that in the new phase of life for newly married couples anywhere in world. Although this event is extremely important, yet exceptional importance is attributed to it in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and relatives on both sides have special roles to play in this process.

Saudis as a whole are remarkable people. They have a tall and graceful stature, sharp features and dense hair. Their teeth, which, it seems to me, is a result of the good care they take of their teeth through the use of the “siwak”,

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which is a kind of tooth brush that consists of a stick taken from the branches of “Arak” trees that grow in the region of the city of Taif, a bunch of which can be bought from rural sellers near the major stores and trade centers. The end of the stick (siwak) must be bitten for softening it. Then the gum is massaged and the teeth are cleaned therewith. This plant has a pleasant and quite refreshing taste. For many men, this becomes a habit and white usual smile generally reveals an orderly row of snow an amusing activity, particularly in view of the fact that Saudis rarely smoke. This may be explained by the fact that Islam prohibits smoking, as it is a kind of narcotic that stupefies the mind. Moreover, the annual fasting during the whole month of Ramadan is not conducive to the spread and consolidation of this harmful and hateful habit.

There is another striking feature of the outward appearance of Saudis, namely their eyes, which are big and large, shaded by thick and long eyelashes, and which have black pupils against a wide white shining area, the white color being pervaded with a bluish color. These eyes have been the subject of many poems in Arabic literature and are called “hoor” when applied to the eyes of beautiful lasses. Such eyes are usually confined to the desert population, who are known for their independent spirit and unfettered conduct, who have got used, throughout the ages, to lift their gaze towards an endless clear, blue sky.

Saudi lasses are usually exceptionally beautiful, although I must admit that those I was destined to meet were essentially representatives of the well to do section of the community, where natural selection takes place.

Women's faces are veiled in the streets; hence Saudi men do not see women in the Kingdom. Thus the selection of a bride as a wife is left to the taste of relatives. It is the mothers, aunts and sisters who undertake the task of searching in the various gatherings, parties and weddings for the youthful candidates. As to the youthful candidates, these make a point of showing their beauty and dresses at their best. If the lass belongs to a rich family, then she would be sought by an endless series of suitors; and if she is highly beautiful then many young men would hasten to propose to her, through their relatives of course.

After selecting the would-be fiancé, there follows a process of scrutinization of the physical and moral features, characteristics, habits and potentials of the candidate's family and an exchange of photographs of the couple takes place. Thus if all information and data are convenient and acceptable to both parties, the senior member of the family of the would-be groom pays a visit to the bride's family and asks for her hand in marriage to the suitor. Thereafter, the future bride and bridegroom are allowed to meet, being chaperoned by members of both families. Then the marriage contract is negotiated and its conditions are laid down, which conditions include all that is considered necessary in terms of the amount of dowry, jewelry, private residence of the couple, car and many other details. For his part, the bridegroom spells out his own conditions. Once all these matters are concluded, preparations for the wedding take place.

I should mention in this connection that the suitor is financially responsible for securing everything for the

future family. Thus he has to pay the wedding expenses, give presents to the bride and her relatives, pay the sum stipulated in the marriage contract as a dowry, prepare the villa or flat, the furniture, the utensils and all household accessories that are necessary for a full-fledged family life. Many contemporary fathers usually give their dear loved daughters money, as well, although the bride is not obliged, according to customs and traditions, to make any financial or material contributions. In case of divorce, she gets a substantial amount of money by way of compensation!

I must admit that having lived many years in the Kingdom and observed the life of Saudi women, I have come to the conclusion that I had formed many wrong impressions and arrived at unwarranted conclusions concerning Saudi women and their status in the community. I have found out that the conditions of Saudi women have many advantages and merits. After the luxurious wedding ceremony, the new wife gets a new house or flat. In other words, she gets everything that a bride ever aspires to. Thus her mother-in-law comes to her house only as a visitor. When she gives birth, she does not have to suffer getting up at night to attend to her baby, as her maid is there to help. When the child reaches school age she feels quite secure and at ease when she sends her child to a fully equipped, most-up-to-date school that offers free tuition that reflects the latest teaching and education methods. The child is driven by a trustworthy and loyal chauffeur and thus the mother has nothing to worry about regarding the safety of her child. She has no fear of the child being stolen, kidnapped or exposed to an explosion. There is no

question of his school mate teaching him/her to smoke or to indulge in drugs. She does not have to carry heavy bags that contain provisions for her child, as their private car, or a taxi would do this. Most often, this is entrusted to her governess, economic assistant or her personal maid.

Under such conditions, she can afford to go to work, if she so desires. Otherwise, she would have plenty of time to attend to social life, to receive visitors, to visit her friends, to join women's clubs, visit art, commercial and industrial exhibitions and involve herself in charity and social work. In the hot summer, she can seek rest and relaxation at the best summer resorts in Europe, Asia and America.

Thus she has nothing to complain about concerning the different condition of women in Saudi society, particularly in view of the fact that significant social and political changes have recently taken place in the Kingdom. During the last forty years, i.e. since 1960, school teaching for girls has been consistently on the increase, so much so that their number sometimes exceeds that of boys. All this is undoubtedly to the credit of Princess Effat, spouse of King Faisal, who is referred to by the Saudi people as the "Queen Mother". As to higher education, the same is true, if the number of students that studied abroad is not taken into account. Thus even in higher education, female students outnumber their male counterparts. It is expected that this difference will gradually even out.

The statements recently made by Crown Prince Abdullah regarding future prospects indicate that positive changes in the position of women in the country are expected to take place. Thus he said something to the

effect that: “We should open all doors before females as long as this does not run counter to Islamic teachings and national morality”.

During the years of my stay with my husband in the Kingdom, I had occasions to attend many Saudi weddings. Thus I have witnessed the luxurious weddings of princesses of the Royal Family and weddings of notable and rich families and even rural weddings. For celebrations of such such pleasant occasions, the State spends huge sums and invites first-class foreign architects to build exquisite palaces. There are also many special wedding halls that can accommodate several thousand persons at one and the same time.

There are wedding parties for women and others for men, both occurring simultaneously but at different places. As far as I know, on such occasions, men meet behind tables that abound in all kinds of delicious food, singing collectively and listening to national hymns. As to women, I can be more specific and give first-hand details. Thus irrespective of financial conditions, the wedding parties are quite similar. Thus within one and a half to two hours before the actual ceremony starts, the guests assemble and are seated round tables or on rows of seats that are carefully arranged. This is a good occasion for them to indulge in conversation covering all sorts of topics, while observing each other's clothes, partaking of cookies, sweets and chocolate, drinking refreshments, smelling incense and perfumes, observing the lasses participating in the ceremony. All this lasts for two more hours. Then the sound of tambourine is heard, and the

wide doors are opened slowly and the bride appears together with the bridegroom, flooded with spot lights, in conformity with the customs of the family (in some parts of Saudi Arabia, trilling cries of joy would fill the air at such moments). The couple advance slowly with regular steps, treading on the carpet that crosses the hall from the middle. On the opposite side, on a platform glittering with lights, two chairs decorated with flowers await the arrival of the couple (in case the bride appears alone without the bridegroom there would be one chair only). Before the couple, children in beautiful clothes lead the way, carrying censers from which the vapors of incense rise upwards and fill the air with the smell of very expensive perfume. In the rear of the procession, children hold the bride's wedding dress, all walking in measured steps, stopping for a few seconds every now and then, so that crossing the distance between the door to the chair takes almost half an hour, thus giving the guests an ample opportunity to look and minutely examine the exquisite sight of the couple.

It is not difficult to imagine what the couple feel during that time, as they are exposed to the piercing eyes of the greatly interested spectators and to the dazzling lights that reflect the many jewels worn by the bride, her beautiful and original hairdo, the bride's dress, heavy with decoration and colored beads, the lot weighing several kilograms.

Eventually, the procession ascend the platform and occupy the places appointed for the participants, a few lasses standing at the feet of the couple on the steps leading to the platform. The couple also are exposed to the dazzling spot lights and feel a bit embarrassed amidst the

looks of the spectators. This would be a good opportunity for mothers and aunts searching for fiancés for their sons and nephews to take a close look at prospective brides. At this moment, a long queue of the couple's relatives and close friends approach the platform to offer their congratulations to the couple . It also happens that a group of men, who are the male relatives of the couple, would be standing at the entrance of the hall waiting to be invited to offer their congratulations. At such moment,, most women who are close to the platform quickly put on their cloaks and draw their veils over their faces. After the withdrawal of the men, the women would put aside their cloaks and veils and the wedding celebration proceeds at leisure. At about midnight or one hour later, the guests are invited to a sumptuous meal. Thereafter, the celebrations are resumed.

It is worth noting that many guests are neither relatives nor acquaintances of the couple. Saudis are fond of luxurious weddings that gather many people together. Hence, it is customary to send invitations not only to relatives and friends but also to the latter's acquaintances and relatives. Some guests present flowers but, customarily, no presents. But on the following day, both relatives and close friends and acquaintances gather together and present their presents, and what presents! Usually the presents bear names and signatures and then the wrappings are opened and examined with great joy. Then records are made of the presents and their donors because there will be occasions in the future when such presents will be reciprocated with comparable or perhaps

more expensive ones.

Once I was lucky enough to attend the wedding of a princess, who was a granddaughter of King Abdulaziz. I was a member of a group of the spouses of the foreign ambassadors accredited to the Kingdom. From the moment we went through the entrance of the most luxurious hotels in the city, “the Intercontinental”, where the wedding was to take place, I realized that I would be a witness to something extraordinary. A few kilometers before the hotel, it was difficult to find a parking place for even the smallest of cars. Thus one after another, deluxe cars arrived at the main entrance from which the guests disembarked amidst a wave of the most expensive perfumes, wearing black cloaks with gold-embroidered edges. The invitation cards were examined by special agents equipped with special audio-visual apparatus.

The wide halls were full of guests who were wearing the most exquisite of clothes. The women paraded in the halls showing their most up-to-date dresses, the eye-dazzling bright shining jewelry and most original hair-do, their faces glittering like stars in the sky and planets in their orbits. They themselves were stars and planets!

In the halls, there were television screens that showed the details of the wedding ceremony for those who could not find a place in the central hall, where all the action takes place. It is customary for Saudi women to bring along with them their children, even those who are still nurslings. This is a kind of tradition that demonstrates the solidarity of relatives and close friends on all occasions. But for the mothers to enjoy themselves freely, the task

of caring for children is relegated to the maids. On such occasions, children find it a good opportunity to run about in their apparels that are worn on special occasions, such as weddings. Soon they feel exhausted and settle down quietly and go fast asleep on chairs and sofas, in the arms of their governesses or in their laps if they are too young.

The main hall looked like a historical Roman amphitheater but with a square shape. The long rows of velvet chairs were arranged in a descending fashion ending at the main carpeted path. We were given privileged seats not far from the platform.

There I found myself amidst the relatives of the royal family, who were of various ages, all of them beautifully dressed and perfumed, with engaging smiles on their faces. The jewelry they were wearing were of rare beauty, reminding one of the exhibits in major museums. Such jewelry decorated their bosoms and necks and made me feel that the jewels I was wearing were trivial. I noticed that one of the elderly ladies was wearing a beautiful, bluish ring of 17 carats. It was unbelievably big, giving the impression, if seen in any other place, of being an artificial one.

There was plenty of time ahead and I had the opportunity to make acquaintance with my neighbors. I must admit and give such neighbors the credit they deserve. They were gentle, smiling and cheerful, as is required by the traditions of hospitality towards guests, and as is only natural in a quiet life that is free of any problems. But regardless of the reason, the organization and arrangements you find yourself, being well received and conveniently seated and

making acquaintances with people who ask you about yourself, where you come from, how long you have been in the country, how many children you have, etc., leaves nothing more to be desired. In the majority of cases one gets other invitations, from new acquaintances, to a tea party or to a light meal.

Since the majority of Saudi women do not go to work and are not much occupied with house work, they have plenty of time to visit exhibitions and to spend some time in the markets. I remember that, during the initial years of my sojourn in the Kingdom, I met many women and visited their houses but I could not remember their names. Instead, I have gathered quite a collection of personal cards on which I wrote in fine letters important details of my meeting with those who had given me the cards so that I might remember them in person.

Meanwhile, the activities and events of the wedding were in full swing. Tens of maids circulated among the guests carrying censers, stopping for a little while before each guest so that the vapor of the incense would penetrate through their hair and clothes. The maids had a very dark complexion and wore the same uniform. Over their necks, there were suspended large golden plaids reaching their waists. It is interesting to note that they all had the same hair-do, their hair being pulled back and looked as though it was tied to the ends of their brows and temples. Their heads were covered with black transparent ribbons that were strongly pulled under their jaws, thus exerting pressure on the cheeks. Moreover, they all looked alike, as though they were twins. My neighbor, whose bosom

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was decorated with a large piece of diamond, explained that after the abolition of slavery in 1962, the liberated slaves were given the choice of either to return to their original countries or to remain in the Kingdom. Since many of them had no relatives and no homes to go back to (it was customary for pilgrims from Ethiopia, the Sudan and other countries to sell their sons and daughters in order to pay the travel expenses) they chose not to leave their masters and stayed with them. They had different destinies, some of them having remained as servants in the palaces of their masters and fared well. Today, their children and grandchildren are well paid, in view of their loyalty throughout the years; they have families of their own and have a decent living in their second home.

As to the unusual hair-do, it used to be fashionable forty years ago among rich Saudi women, and their erstwhile “slaves” were keen on imitating their mistresses. Hence, it is now considered a prestigious hair-do among the maids. The ribbon strung under the jaw was not without reason, as it is the case with all things related to female beauty, whether among the high-class European women or among those who live in a tent over which desert sands accumulate. There are indications that show that when this type of fashion appeared, the bedouin lasses had not been used to the different kinds of food, that are rich in fat. In fact, they hardly had enough of the simple food, as they grazed their sheep under the burning rays of the sun, and were involved in hard house work. Such a way of life made them lean and slender. But the fashion – which is ever changing and opts for whatever is unusual – required

that the criterion of beauty is for women to have round plump cheeks. Hence the fashion of the ribbon under the jaw. However, none of my Saudi young friends knew all this and were surprised to hear my explanation.

It was very late at night, but the end of the wedding was still far away and there were no signs that it was drawing near. Some, including myself, had to leave this elaborated celebration. All the streets leading to the place of the wedding were crowded with cars. The police officer pronounced the name of my country over a loud speaker, and I stood waiting for our car to arrive. The cars approached slowly one after another to pick up their owners. In my case, I had to wait half an hour after the summoning of our car before it arrived and drove me through the empty streets of Riyadh at that time of the night. The driver praised the food served to all drivers (it is customary on occasions, involving thousands of guests, for drivers to be invited to a specially prepared tent for them to rest and partake of the delicious food of the party that is served to them).

Five years have elapsed since this wedding, but I can still remember it with all its details.

The First Saudi State

To the north-west of Riyadh, along the winding wadi Halifah, which borders on the Diplomatic District in the west, there is a vast area called Dar'iah. Within only a few decades it became the capital of the first Saudi State, the large and flourishing state which, though having attained unprecedented prosperous conditions, was yet soon to collapse under the pressure of enemies. It consisted of a collection of settlements that had been formed more than five hundred years ago, although separate oases had existed in this part of the Plateau of the Arabian Peninsula three thousand years B.C. This is attributed to the existence of water and fertile land. Dar'iyah became a capital when, in the middle of the Eighteenth Century, there arose an alliance between Muhammad Saud, the then ruler, and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, who advocated the fundamental type of Islam and whose movement "Wahhabism" was associated with his name in the West.

The present Saudis do not use this term because they do not see in the type of Islam advocated by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab an independent current of Islam, since

it called for the purification of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, from the perverted accumulations and errant interpretations of Islam that had been previously formed and called for a return to Islam in its original form that was based on the Holy Quran and the noble Sunnah (traditions of the Noble Prophet). This call, in the middle of the Eighteenth Century, was the only doctrine that could be focused on and that made the Arabs appreciate their national originality which had been perverted by enmities and continuous tribal wars as well as by the various religious currents and cults, including pseudo-pagan ones. Western analysts accuse Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab and his disciples of non-acceptance and fierce rejection of the followers of other currents of Islam, but this is a somewhat one-sided view, as the analysts have neglected the calls of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab for total Islamic brotherhood, for adherence to moral principles such as justice, sincerity, goodness, honor and mutual assistance, which have attracted and won the hearts of many people.

Two centuries after the appearance of the theory of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, King Abdulaziz replied to the above mentioned accusation, which is directed to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, of having chosen a new type of Islam, saying: "They say we are Wahhabists. In fact we are in fact merely Muslims. We follow the teachings of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Noble Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as understood and interpreted by our noble and great ancestors".

Whether this is the case or otherwise, the religious –

political alliance between the ruler of a small emirate of Dar'iyah, Muhammad bin Saud, and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, has played a major role in shaping the first Saudi state, when it became a turning point in the history of the Arabian Peninsula and led eventually to the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

After this interim unification that took place in 1745, there followed a rapid development of the Dar'iyah Emirate. The population inflow (13 thousand at the peak of development) has triggered a building activity (28 mosques and 30 religious schools). There appeared various sectors of craftsmen in the field of textiles, dyers, tailors, saddle makers and weapon makers (swords and daggers at first and then fire-arms). The Dar'iyah people excelled in the making of gunpowder, just like the Iranians.

Keeping abreast with the growth of the Emirate, its capital has also expanded and trade flourished in clothes, silk, copper, arms, coffee, camels, horses, dates and the products of craftsmen. Trade caravans headed for Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Iran and Turkey. The population became more and more prosperous, and schools were opened, wherein the clerics taught reading and writing and the recitation of the Holy Quran. These clerics were behind the establishment of large public libraries wherein many historical studies were preserved. Judges passed their judgments guided by the Holy Quran; houses were provided with furniture and used to be covered with woolen covers as cotton textiles were rather rare. The floors were covered with carpets, even in poor houses. Copper plates and wooden cups were used. People used

to eat sitting on the floor on which were spread round leather covers, women being segregated from men, when partaking of meals. All male adults were always occupied with the various economic fields. Some of them were occupied with the service of the palaces of the royal family as scholars, guards and servants. However, the major part of the population worked in agriculture.

In times immemorial, there used to flow from the regions of the Hijaz mountains, that have a much better climate, fully fledged rivers that flowed eastwards, meeting in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula and reaching the coast of the Arabian (Persian) Gulf. These streams have carried sandy soil and light calcareous and nacreous soil which helped in the formation of irrigated and fertile soil and in the creation of oases in this part of the isolated middle of the Arabian Peninsula that is not quite suitable for human living. Here underground water was available at reasonable depth, which enabled the population to dig wells and produce enough water for themselves, their animals and for agricultural purpose. At this stage there emerged irrigated agriculture that can still be seen today. Water was extracted by means of canals and waterwheels made of hard wood and skins from which are suspended big stones for purposes of weight-giving. This system made use of donkeys and mules. Now, however, farmers use electric pumps, but even today, it is still possible to see the old system of farming and irrigation. I have seen with my own eyes mules being harnessed to work in an agricultural land in the area of Al-Janadriah. Such animals used to move back and forth along trodden tracks driven

by the stick or whip of their master.

From the wells that are dug throughout the agricultural area, brooklets were dug and stone basins were built and are still in good shape. Some are still in use. In the foundations of the city walls, sewage pipes were laid down for discharge of surplus water directly to the valleys that were transformed during the season of heavy rain into effluent streams. The presence of water, fertile lands and cooperative societies of relatives, who cooperated in daily hard agricultural work, have contributed to the rapid transformation of Dar'iyah into a large oasis, a convenient living place and a real paradise for animals, birds and insects. Here were grown wheat, vegetables, barley and maize. The area of the cultivated land was in proportion to the quantity of water available. Grains were grown in the autumn, and were irrigated immediately after plowing (usually with wooden ploughs), such activity being accompanied by prayer to God to send enough rain for irrigating the crops. Such activities continue until the end of April, just before the season of the oppressive heat. In the summer, water was used to irrigate palm trees, orchards and fields. The screeching of the waterwheels was the permanent background noise in the country side, day and night. Fruits and vegetables were grown in the shade of palm trees; such practice is maintained up till now.

The state of the Saud family kept expanding. Until the year 1808 it dominated a large part of the Arabian Peninsula, including Hijaz. However, the Ottoman state that was not happy with the strengthening of the

Dar'iyah ruler sent its forces that were stationed in Egypt and expelled the Saudis from Hijaz, and in 1818 such forces under the Egyptian general Ibrahim Pacha reached the walls of the capital. Here gathered all those who managed to escape from amongst those who were loyal to the Saudi family from the population of the oases and the cities of Najd that had been occupied. The siege of the settlements lasted six months, during which they were exposed to continuous shelling. Thus the walls which they thought were impregnable were destroyed and the houses and palaces were pulled down. An eye witness said that "the shells used to land like heavy rain". The Dar'iyah horsemen, who were armed with spears and protected with shields, could in no way show their strength and remained secluded in the besieged city. As to the thirty canons that had been installed on the walls of the castle, it turned out that they were useless and ineffective. Thus the rows of defenders began to dwindle gradually and the effect of the shortage of equipment, food and water began to be strongly felt. Eventually, the besieged could resist no more and surrendered. The prince and his closest entourage were beheaded, and the trunks of palm trees were cut off lest they should ever give fruit, while the large cultivated area was burned and the settlements were destroyed and plundered.

Thus this prosperous state was raised to the ground, its administrative apparatus was in chaos, and the military force wiped out the resources, which had been scanty in the first place. On the other hand, the people were either killed or dis placed throughout the vast desert. However,

five years later, Imam Turki bin Abdullah restored this region to the Saudi family, but took Riyadh as his capital.

Al-Dar'iyyah remained a heap of rubble throughout the century until the Legacy Revival Department undertook the task of rebuilding it in 1986, which activity is still going on today. We, together with all the embassy staff, visited the place several times (it is a half hour drive from the center of Riyadh), and each time we went there I discovered something new that I had not been aware of before.

Previously, particularly during its prosperity, Al-Dar'iyyah was, for understandable reasons, an easy prey for the neighboring clans. Hence, its rulers were always keen on preserving its security, by building high and thick walls (half a square meter thick) with great towers for protection purposes on rocky foundations at the edges of Wadi Hanifah. Surrounding the walls were also some settlements and even some palaces. The more preserved and restored settlements attract tourists. They constitute an interesting and cute city comprising a few hundred mud houses of one or two floors, twenty palaces at least, mosques, baths, squares, narrow alleys, through some of which two persons can hardly pass. Grand Saud (as his country men called him) resided in this city.

As we cross the archway erected over Wadi Hanifah, bypassing an old gate, we find ourselves in a small square, both edges of which are shaded with a thicket of palm trees. At this point, we had to stop the car and proceed on foot in the direction of the city. On the left, we were struck by the sight of the rubble where semi-ruined walls rose

high up and extended for 15 meters.

The palace compound called “Salwa” which belongs to Grand Saud comprises six buildings, a mosque, a house for guests and sheikhs and a well. All these had been greatly affected by intensive shelling two hundred years ago, by the passage of time, and are waiting for reconstruction. The stairs joining the floors and the roof are no more. It was clear that there was here a three-floor building reflecting the architectural pattern typical of the region of the Central Arabian Peninsula in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.

Obviously, these old palaces have nothing in common with similar constructions. They do not differ from the houses of ordinary citizens except in terms of size and internal arrangement. Both the palaces and the houses were built of dried slabs made of a mixture of local mud and straw, or were mixed with small pieces of stone. The simple houses, just like the houses of the rich, were independent structures having internal courtyards, stores, barns and open kitchens. The external walls were without windows but were decorated with triangular openings, the heads of which rise upwards. They are pierced in a certain arrangement that reflect geometrical shapes that are found high up the walls of the buildings. These were not merely architectural decorations; they were functional as well in that they served as ventilators of great importance in the terribly hot weather of Najd. The roofs of the houses to which the stairs lead up were used for evening relaxation and sleep at night during the summer season.

The rooms of the buildings are arranged along the

buildings and their small windows overlook the internal central courtyard. The size of the windows was determined by the hot sun of the summer as well as by the waves of cold weather in the winter. This tradition is still kept today, as windows are very small in the majority of multi-floor residential buildings in Saudi cities. An exception is found only in the windows of hotels and company offices. Recently, however, the general appearance of buildings has changed to the better with the advent of modern thick-glass windows.

In the internal women quarters of Al-Dar'iyyah houses, surplus food, mattresses and pillows are kept. Their counterparts in palaces were located in the upper floors. From such locations, women could observe what was going on in the guest halls below, through special latticed windows. Finally, the palace walls ended in saw-teethed heads at the corners. These were painted decoratively with white gypsum.

Thus we crossed the courtyard amidst ruins and whatever was left of the columns that used to rise high, the narrow alleys between the buildings and rooms, ascended on the remaining stairs and finally arrived in the internal courtyard of Al-Salma Palace, which had not been cleaned after the old shelling. I managed to sneak away from my team and visualized in my imagination the living tableau of life that had been vividly described by eye witnesses.

From the east, dawn began to approach slowly, before the disc of the sun made an appearance and ascended in the horizon. The weather was rather cold and it may be said that the air was cold. Hence the women wrapped themselves in

their cloaks and in the courtyard a monotonous echo was heard.

The great number of people present could not be estimated, although the middle of the square was empty. Gradually, people arrived and sat on the stony floor. After a while there appeared the sons of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, together with their paternal and maternal uncles with their own sons and brothers. Each of them was accompanied by an entourage and a few servants. Thus they approached the middle of the square and took their seats before the sons of Saud emerged one after another together with the distinguished personalities and notables as well as the slaves, all of whom occupied their places in the square. When the leaders appeared all those present rose as a sign of respect. After a while, Grand Saud made his appearance, surrounded by a circle of black slaves armed with expensive swords that are decorated in gold and silver and shining like the moon at night. At this point, the sharp sound that resembles that of a burning dry tree began to rise gradually. It was the sound of the clashing of swords, which was a gesture of greeting and honor to the wise and just ruler. Prince Saud then proceeded through the living passage that was comprised of the rows of those present and greeted the people who loved him and returned their greetings. Then the noise subsided and all present sat quietly and listened solemnly to the recital of the words of God Almighty.

At the end of the religious lessons, Prince Saud exchanged conversation with the notables and the clerics for a while. Then he rose and entered a nearby hall where

he received people who had grievances and complaints and those who needed assistance, and listened to them. This usually goes on till the sun rises to its zenith, when it would be time for a noon siesta.

Let me point out that this tradition which goes back to many centuries, whereby an opportunity is given to each individual to express his grievances, is still practiced today in the Kingdom. Thus any Saudi citizen can appear before his monarch, present his complaint and request assistance, and he is sure that his request would be looked into and met. I have often watched this on television. Once an acquaintance of mine, who was a Russian and a wife of a Syrian specialist, gave birth to a baby that had a serious heart defect. Her husband wrote a letter to King Fahd requesting financial assistance. The baby underwent a very complicated surgery at the best private hospital in Riyadh and the bill was paid by the Saudi monarch.

Coming out of the ruins of Salwa Palace, we soon found ourselves near a one-floor building, whose front wall was in ruins. Behind the wall could be seen a number of rooms that looked like warehouses. This was the building housing the state treasury. Here were kept valuable property seized during successful raids, as well as the "zakat", which represents a certain percentage of citizens' assets which is collected for the benefit of the state. The Najdi historian bin Bishr reports that armed detachments used to be sent from Al-Dar'iyah to collect Zakat from all over the country.

Not far, on the right side of the road, we saw a restored mosque. In front, we saw a spacious square most of which

was covered with a roof made of palm tree trunks and branches and supported by ten columns. In the middle of the wall, in the direction of the qibla there was a mihrab (niche). But there was no minaret as usual. All that indicates its presence was a small building on the roof that looks like a narrow square-shaped tower. It was an antiquated building that had not been changed up to the present time. The fact is that God's houses have greatly expanded, in the building of which very expensive construction materials are used, their minarets rising high up and embellished with round laced terraces.

We usually visit Dar'iyah in winter. Even in this season, the sun is so hot that it scorches the skins and faces in clear cloudless weather (this, according to my calculations, continues for no less than 345 days every year). Thus covering our heads with hats, we penetrated through the narrow alleys of residential areas. The children of our embassy staff jumped up and down making happy noises before they plunged into the darkness of the corridors that met them immediately beyond the doors.

Their mothers followed them together with the remaining personnel. Here there was the possibility of some parts collapsing over one's head or falling before one's feet, as not everything had been restored and repaired. But the whole surrounding was cute and made one forget the possible danger. The rooms were without windows and their function was not readily understood. The ceilings were dangling down with some dry palm-tree branches and worn wooden columns. Following the children, we climbed up the narrow eroded stairs with some difficulty

and caution and proceeded to the roof. Afraid to fall, we walked cautiously towards the fence and.... we froze with astonishment. Before us, on the rocky plateau that was surrounded by green grass and a thicket of palm trees, there appeared a whole town of mud houses comprising small one-floor buildings. Here and there could be seen high-rising palaces. One could imagine that a giant had built these small mud houses in close rows as though they were empty boxes lined next to one another. It seemed as though he did not wish to provide them with roofs because he wanted, later at his leisure, to look from his high position to see how their inhabitants lived and what they did.

We came out greatly puzzled by the deserted house to enter another deserted house, and a third and a fourth, and we discovered, to our great surprise, that until a fairly recent period, there had been people living here. The walls were painted in white and the windows were ridged and glassed . Here and there, we saw clipped pieces of electric wires. Eventually, we arrived in the city's central square. Here some palaces and public buildings that had been repaired rose high. I can recall the testimony of an eye witness who said, "At Dar'iyya, I have seen an abundance of wealth, many people, weapons embellished with unprecedented decorations of gold and silver, pedigree horses, Omani camels, expensive clothes and other signs of prosperity that defied description and enumeration."

Once I noticed a market where gold, silver, arms, camels, sheep and goats were bought and sold. Here one could see those who give and those who take. All that was

heard were two phrases “I have sold” “I have bought”.

In this public square, we saw a huge, high-rising building that goes back to the time of Grand Saud or his son Abdulaziz. This was the guest house. Amidst the buildings that were strung in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula desert in early Nineteenth Century, there rose a hotel! It was on a par with modern hotels. The hotel was divided into several spacious rooms. There was also a conference hall whose walls were beautifully decorated. There was also a bath directly connected with the guest house.

I remember coming here two years ago on a tour. At that time, the building was in ruins, round which were gathered building laborers. In the square facing the building, there were rows of mud tiles lined up in the sun to dry up. It was not easy, at the time, to imagine what the building would look like at the end of the repair work. But now everything is in place. The bath was operational and reflected the latest techniques of the period. It consisted of several parts: a spacious place for undressing, benches, a room for cooling off with a small pool and another with hot water whose ceiling is in the form of a dome. There was a fireplace with three walls (something similar can be seen today in some villages in Azerbaijan). Water used to be transported up on the backs of mules from a well that was thirty meters deep in the valley. After use, water was drained in special pipes underground that were hidden in the wall foundations.

Our tour brought us to several palaces, some of which had their own name and others had no names. The house

and mosque of the daughter of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab had been repaired and the palace still looked fine to the stone cutters (this is not a slip of the tongue for this is how the catalogue refers to them. At that time, stone cutters were greatly respected and appreciated and were entitled to have such luxury houses). The house was well built, while the four walls were reinforced with stone slabs and gypsum. Inside, the decorations were of the usual traditional pattern. This house probably belonged to the master of stone cutters, not to an ordinary laborer.

Next, there was the western part of the road, which was wider than others. This would probably not be rebuilt and repaired. It would rather be kept as it was as a living historical witness to man's occasional propensity to wars, their destruction and evils.

Finally, we walked by the stable and along the side of the city wall and ascended to one of the guard towers. From this high place, we could see a breath-taking panorama of the suburbs of the city that is enfolded with thin clouds. From this high place can be seen the mosque of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab that has been recently renovated, as well as the site of the mosque that had been destroyed. It was here that the Sheikh sought with his students and followers to realize the ideal and true Muslim brotherhood.

Here we came to the end of our tour. Persons and things cast long shadows, as the sun drew close to its setting in the west. By then, we had been tired and exhausted, but we were quite satisfied as a tired body makes one's soul quite at ease after all the unforgettable sights that we were

privileged to witness. Now it was time to go home. So we got into the bus and turned our gaze for a last look at the city with mud houses. The setting sun colored the interstices and gaps that decorated the upper parts of the walls of the mud houses, which looked, from far away, like miniature houses. They somehow reminded me of the biscuit cans, may be because of the decorations that characterize both.

Farewell Dar'iyah. We hope to come back some day. These old settlements will remain quite vivid in my memory and in the tens of the photos we took, which recorded the impressions of close friends on the background of the ruins of Dar'iyah and in the painting which I once painted for this city on the basis of the fresh impressions that were converted on the drawing paper into bright colors and impassioned emotions.

Customs and Traditions

The way of life of bedouins or rather in the Arabian Peninsula has undoubtedly changed under the impact of the pressure resulting from the wealth that literally poured on the country and all the resulting consequences. This new way of life does not conform to European norms. This is because of the effect of religion and because the accumulated traditions and customs did not have enough time to vanish from popular memory within such a short period of time. Thus the Saudis who found themselves under quite different socio-economic conditions are living pursuant to their historical experience and in accordance with the laws of Islam.

Although all city dwellers live in stone houses, yet many of them have not forgotten the laws of the tent. Thus, they must have two segregated guest rooms, one for men and the other for women. Guests who are not very close to the owners of the house are usually received by both husband and wife, it being understood that the wife would be wearing a veil on her face. She would escort the women guests to the place allocated specially for

women, while the men are taken by the husband to the official guest room, where he receives colleagues, friends and relatives to discuss problems that have emerged in their vast country. In both guest halls, servants of the same sex as that of the guests serve such guests. Contemporary Saudis are quite hospitable, just like their ancestors. All guests, of whatever category, receive a warm welcome and are spared anything that may cause them any worry or discomfort. Hence, on reception days, the children are sent to visit their relatives or are moved to a remote room where they are looked after by an adult and are not permitted to make any disturbance or noise, not even to speak aloud. During the first years of my stay in Riyadh, I used to be surprised at the absence of what is usual for us in connection with children's play and amusement and with the barking of dogs, of which there are none in the city, in the first place. In general, Saudi children grow to maturity early on and are well brought up, are quiet and show great respect and even obedience in the presence of their elders.

Guests are served with bedouin coffee and tea. Coffee is served in small cups of which a small part only is filled. On the other hand, the cup of tea is filled to the brim; otherwise this is construed by the guest as unwillingness of the host to receive him at his house. In general, Saudis are keen on avoiding any disputes that could lead to a scandal, noise or screams, or, God forbid, to a quarrel or fighting. They are usually quiet, good-natured, forbearing and solemn. But this does not mean that they are not emotional or sensitive. Thus their self-confidence does

not allow them to behave in a manner that is contrary to decorum, although Saudis, specially women, are skilful in the use of metaphors, metonymy and symbolic language, in the use of which their ancestors excelled. Thus if a woman who is known to indulge in gossip and backbiting happens to be among the guests, the hostess would put next to her a roasted lamb whose tongue has been cut off, which is not a pleasant sight. The other guests would of course understand this gesture or transparent insinuation, which is almost explicit. This tradition is common, in small cities and even in Riyadh, among women, who are careful not to create unpleasant situations.

In some families in Saudi Arabia, it is still common for people to sit round a tray on the floor. Thus a long “tablecloth” is spread, on which are placed a large tray. Round this floor “table”, there sit, knees crossed, or on a half knee, guests and hosts. In such posture it is considered bad manners to reveal bare feet. (All women take off their shoes at the entrance of the room).

Once, my husband and I were invited to a palace in the capital by a certain prince. The palace was furnished with the most up-to-date expensive modern furniture. We were surrounded by the rarest of decoration items. The walls of the halls were embellished by museum-class artistic paintings with very expensive frames. Food was served by elegantly-dressed servants, who carried the most delicious of dishes in thin, transparent plates whose edges were decorated with thin strings showing exotic oriental decorations. In the middle of the “table” was a “tablecloth” that is embroidered with exquisite drawings of all sorts of

flowers. The chandeliers sent forth bright lights that were reflected on the crystal glasses and the elegant spoons, forks and table accessories. The atmosphere was saturated with soft, intoxicating perfumes. Wood and sandalwood burned in the enameled fireplace, as the spring of that year was rainy and chilly. The food was excellent, each course being followed by another just as tasty if not more delicious than the previous one.

The topics of discussion were cute and interesting. In short, that evening was a lovely tune which impinged strongly on our memory that treasured the breath-taking view and the exquisite theatrical scene. After a while, the generous and hospitable host invited us to visit his country-house outside the city. I must say in all frankness that I felt at a loss regarding the choice of my dress and ornaments. For, on the one hand, the trip was a tour in the desert, and on the other, we would be going to a palace, anyway. Eventually, I reached a compromise decision and wore a medium high-heeled shoes. It transpired that the prince's house was a real oasis in the middle of a vast sandy desert that extended as far as one can see. The palace was hardly visible, as it was plunged amidst a thicket of trees. The whole atmosphere was filled with a heavy and strong smell of the blooming lemon trees and other citron trees. Butterflies kept hopping from one tree to another, stopping at intervals on the white, snow-white flowers.

The host invited my husband to accompany him to a glass bell-shaped building that looked like a garden with glass walls. In my case, I was invited into the house with the women. At the vast place sat more than ten women,

all of whom wore long dresses that were embroidered with silk strings of golden colors and looked quite alike, so that it was difficult to identify the wife of the prince among them until she herself stepped forward to welcome me. It seems to me that if I were to meet her somewhere else I would not recognize her at all. She was an ordinary, simple woman, wearing casual clothes, her head tied with a headband. She was quite unlike the proud beauty that wore jewelry worth millions who received us at her palace in Riyadh. I learned later on that women always wore headbands in the presence of elderly women such as sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law, as a sign of respect. This applies to princesses as well, even the crowned ones, i.e. their highness the spouses of Saudi kings.

The hostess of the “rural cottage” seated me amidst her relatives, but did not introduce them to me one by one. But they of course, knew who the guests were. Their customs dictate, most probably, that it is not incumbent upon me to know the name of each one of them. At first, we sipped coffee; then we split and sat on the floor round a cotton “tablecloth”. The maids brought the vegetables, fruits, dairy, sweet drinks and refreshments and loaves of bread, together with three large plates in which rose heaps of rice that was mixed with saffron on top of which were placed grilled lambs. This is the traditional Arab food, which is wholly cooked in large ovens. Each of the women helped herself with her right-hand fingers to a piece of lamb and made a ball of meat and rice with her skilful fingers and shoved it in her mouth. They all talked freely and were not disturbed by the presence of a foreigner in their midst.

I learned later that silence at the table is considered bad manners and that hosts and hostesses are supposed to try to entertain their guests, who, in their turn, are advised to narrate interesting and amusing news.

Saudis visit one another daily without exchanging presents. This is probably why the women were astonished to see the large box of chocolate and the bouquet we had carried with us and presented to them. In the bedouin milieu, the best of gifts are the raw (unroasted) coffee beans and the grains of Condimum and dates.

Saudi men's clothes have not probably changed during the last centuries, perhaps with the exception of the type of cloth. However, when they are abroad, they wear European clothes. The daily clothes of Saudis are the dishdasha, which is a long dress of white thin cotton. During the cold months, it is substituted by a thicker dark colored cloth. During the day, the temperature is rarely below 16 Celsius in winter. But when a cold wind is blowing and is accompanied by rain, a Saudi would put over his shoulders a piece of cloth called mishlaq, a sleeveless wide coat which is made of the soft wool of camels or sheep of various colors, ranging from light yellow to almost black. All its front edges are embroidered with gold strings. These days, the mishlaq is made of high-quality imported woolen cloth. In ceremonies, a semi transparent mishlaq is flung over the shoulders. My husband could not resist the temptation of owning one in a dark yellow color, which he wore when I painted a portrait of him.

A Saudi prefers leather footwear with a knot for the big toe. But at their offices, most Saudis wear ordinary shoes.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Seen by a Diplomat's Spouse

On his head a Saudi dons a ghutra (also called “shimagh”) under which is a Kufiyyah and ‘iqal. The kufiyya may be white or speckled with red pieces like a chess board. Most Arabs prefer the white color but the elderly ones wear the speckled kufiyyahs. The men who belong to the group that enjoin good and prohibit evil wear similar head covers but without iqals.

As to the history of the appearance of this sort of apparel, it goes back, as we know, to the time when many caravans roamed through the sands of the Arabian Peninsula hundreds of years ago. They would keep going for hours and then stop to give the tired camels time to rest. They often spent the night in the middle of the desert. Now in order to make sure that the camels did not go too far looking for water and nutrition and lose their way, the caravan men used to tie the knees of camels with the iqal, which is the folded rope. On their long way, they used to bend the rope and tie it round their heads over the gutrah so that it would be handy when needed and they would not waste time looking for it. Or may be it was used to protect them against the hot sun or the cold winds.

The ghutrah is folded in the middle and is put on the head and tied with the iqal, which looks on the forehead like a protective cover. Saudis are very careful and serious about their head cover and make a point of wearing the ghutrah in the middle of the forehead. They are very fussy about their head dresses, which should be carefully worn and adjusted.

When not holding the steering wheel, the car phone or their pens, the fingers of Saudis are kept busy with the

rosary balls. The rosaries are innovations that are sold practically everywhere and are made of various materials, ranging from cheap plastics of good quality, to precious stones, pearls, corals and rare types of perfumed wood. In the gold market, one can buy rosaries made of silver or even gold. Rosaries comprise 33 pieces divided into three groups, each group comprising 11 pieces. They are not used merely as pass time; their main purpose is to make sure people say the right number of glorifications after the five daily prayers without being distracted by counting the number of phrases of praise and glorification of God Almighty. I admired these cute rosaries ever since my first visit to Egypt. Since then I have kept collecting all types of rosaries and today my collections include three hundred rosaries.

When Saudi women go out of their homes, they wear black cloaks with or without sleeves. The important thing is that they should cover the whole body from top to bottom. Cloaks may also be made of another dark color but those that are sold are only black. Underneath the cloaks, however, women would be wearing beautiful and colorful clothes. The majority of city women wear underneath the cloaks the latest in European fashions. This is made easy by the presence in cities of branches of the world's most famous houses of fashion.

During our stay in the country, many changes and developments have occurred in the design of cloaks, which have changed from being simple sack-like apparel to beautifully designed pieces of clothes that are embroidered and ornamented with silk strings and other

items of embellishment. Our daughter, who is keen on following the latest fashion, has bought one such cloak and took it with her to Germany.

The hair of Saudi women is hidden under a sort of handkerchief and the face under a black veil under which a burqo' is sometimes worn. It is a piece of cloth with two holes through which the eyes can look. In certain places in the Eastern Province, thick leather masks are in vogue and are decorated with golden colors. These hide the forehead, the nose and the lower part of the face and look as though they were made of copper. In my view, they are far from being comfortable in practice. Such masks are worn by rural women in the two neighboring countries: Bahrain and Qatar.

The veil (hijab) is ordained by God Almighty through the Noble Prophet, Muhammad, peace be upon him. Thus women were ordered to hide their hair and body from the top of their heads to their feet, by wearing a comfortable dress that gives them freedom of movement when walking. Unusually beautiful women or those who use items of embellishment are supposed to hide their faces as well. Women should not display their charms to any but their husbands, should abide quietly in their homes and should not flaunt their charms as women used to do in the old days of pagan ignorance. The cloak is adapted in such a manner as to give freedom of movement to a woman's hand, so that it can lift her dress when mounting or dismounting. In time, however, many advantages of this apparel were discovered. Thus when intending to go out to buy things from stores or to other places, women

do not have to bother about what to wear underneath the cloak. All they have to do is to wear the cloak and go out. In the winter, they have no need of an overcoat, for the cloak would do the job. As to the hidden face, this makes sure women are not recognized and identified. Thus they can see everybody without being seen or identified. In fact, Saudi women consider the cloak and the niqab as a protection against slander and persistent harassment by men.

Girls begin wearing the cloak when they are 10 to 12 years old, the age of puberty. At first, I was under the impression that they would like to postpone this as much as possible, because the young ones are extremely mobile and they hate everything that prevents them from free movement. But I discovered that I was wrong. They, on the contrary, dream of the time when they would wear a cloak, just as our own girls are anxious to wear certain underwear although such underwear would not be comfortable, simply because they feel that they have come of age. In public parks, one can see this typical tableau: young girls skating and their cloaks fluttering in the air, although they are still in the stage of childhood!

Most Saudi women use make up: black or red henna (camphire) which even men use to embellish their moustaches or beards. This henna is effective for headaches. It is the product of an equatorial tree and its leaves are found in abundance in the southern parts of the Kingdom. Old women use it to dye their hair, feet and the palms of their hands, while the young ones use it to dye their nails and the palms of their hands as well. There are

skilful women who make what looks like beautiful gloves of henna, and in rich families it is the maids who do this. Recently, read-made moulds have become fashionable and they do the trick just the same, easily, without much effort. The pre-wedding night is spent by the bride and her friends and relatives dyeing their hair and certain parts of their bodies with henna, spending long hours in this ritual, all the while leaning on cushions.

Light color henna is used for embellishment of hands with dappling and drawings. However, recently ready-made moulds have come to be used. It is dissolved in hot water and the dark type is dissolved in coffee drinks. After drying, the dappling on the hands is wiped with olive oil in order to fix the drawings. These unusual gloves remain fixed on the palms of hands for about two weeks and are gradually wiped out as a result of washing and with the passage of time. Some amateurs repeat the drawings perpetually with new doses of henna so that they remain constantly.

Kohl (eyeliner) is used on a large scale. It is a kind of powder which is obtained by burning mandal and laden and some other elements which I know nothing about. It is conserved in small metal or glass vials and is drawn by a wooden or copper rod in a small quantity with which the eyelids are dyed from the inside. It is reported that this substance has an antiseptic effect and is very useful in conditions of bright sun, imparting a special radiance to the eyes. It is used even for children. Recently, kohl has been mixed with beeswax and other bee materials which are said to enhance its benign effects and from which light adornment pens are used.

Even before school age, I had come to know that certain perfumed oils were used in the Arabian Peninsula, tens of centuries ago, since the era of Queen Bersheba. The tradition of incense and perfuming has come to the country from ancient India and Indonesia, as well as Yemen, from where the famous “perfume road” began, crossing the Arabian Peninsula and reaching Europe. The first time I got interested in perfumes was during my sojourn in Yemen. But I came to really appreciate them in Saudi Arabia, where I became exceedingly fond of them.

Perfumes are essential elements in the daily life of Saudis and form part of social life. Thus in addition to the beneficial properties, they perform some symbolic functions. Thus burning incense at the end of a banquet or visit is a sign to the guests that the reception time is drawing to an end. Any significant event must necessarily be associated with such burning of incense and perfuming, whether at a wedding or on the occasion of the birth of a baby, of circumcision or merely on the advent of a holiday. I should point out that for each of such occasions there are special materials prepared therefor. These include tree twigs or perfumed juicy wood, balls made of fragrant wheat, the juice of special trees, together with their skins and roots. After the incense burning, the fragrant perfume remains in the air, the hair and clothes, for two to three days.

The glass windows of most stores exhibit incense receptacles, hundreds of beautiful boxes, glass vases, big and small jars, glass receptacles that are filled with fragrant roots, rods, balls and perfume materials and oils. Almost

all these materials are imported; hence they are bound to be somewhat expensive. But those that are traditionally given as presents to the married couples are very expensive. The stores entice clients with their fragrance even if they do not intend to buy anything that is exhibited. Hence, they are full of people, even males, who are not rare customers in these stores. In our own house, perfumes have become an essential part of our life. They have curative properties and create an atmosphere of geniality and a joyful mood.

I have devoted several pages of this book to jewelry. However, being a woman, and hoping that there will be a number of women who will read this book, it should not be out of order to add another page to this subject.

Saudi jewelry are characterized by variety and innovation. They include the finely laced and braided pieces of jewelry to which are attached golden sovereigns and tiny little bells. Silver, amber and turquoise jewelry are very popular, together with pearls and coral. This part of the world is well known for goldsmithery and the manufacture of swords. In the old days, each tribe had its own blacksmith and goldsmith, who used various materials such as copper, silver and gold in the objects which they made, which materials they had in great abundance. Thus, it transpired that King Solomon's historical mines are not a mere legend. They were discovered in 1939 in Saudi Arabia. Thereafter, they were mined, but in 1954 they were closed because of diminishing of returns.

Bedouin brides used to receive necklaces made of coral and a bracelet or belt of precious stones as well as a hat in the form of net of a special kind made of silver or golden

chains that used to be worn round the neck. (Such golden hats could still be seen worn in weddings on the heads of young princesses).

Such jewels are later on either sold or smelted. However, there are currently sold in the gold markets of Saudi Arabia many exquisite old silver jewelry that may be more than two thousand years old. Particularly famous are bedouin jewelry in the Eastern Province.

Bedouins are often seen, in the mountainous villages and small towns in the northern and southern parts of the country, wearing a curved dagger tied to a wide belt decorated with silver badges. Such middle size daggers are called “janabiyyah”, the blades whereof have a slight curve. The sheath is definitely an artistic work of smithery. Some of these daggers have a strongly curved end and a pointed head, sometimes ending in a precious stone or jewel. This shape of the dagger has a functional justification, for a bedouin would spend a lot of time on the saddle and a sharp and straight blade that is constantly worn on the waist could hurt the rider. Until the fifties of the Twentieth Century the great majority of males in the Peninsula used to carry such a weapon, which was a symbol of prestige. If this weapon were of the normal size, it would give the impression that the holder was ready to attack or to defend himself. But if a guinea is suspended from the belt, then this would be an indication that the wearer is a peaceful man wearing same as merely a kind of adornment, as arms are the adornment of men, as the proverb has it. However, this kind of weapon with its studded sheath can only be seen in special celebrations, traditional rituals or during

traditional men's collective celebrations.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia uses the Hegira Calendar, which began with the migration of the Noble Prophet (peace be upon him) from Mecca to Medina. Each month represents a full moon cycle whose duration is 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes and 2.78 seconds, or 30 days. In short, the month begins with the "birth" of the crescent and ends when it wanes at the end of the month. Every three years, one day is added, in which case there would be a leap year. I remember how, at the beginning of our stay in the Kingdom, the local women would find it difficult to remember the year, month and day of their birth when asked about same. I realized later on that this was because they would be trying to convert the Hegira (moon) Calendar to the Gregorian (sun) Calendar.

The Kingdom celebrates two religious occasions, Id al-Fitr, at the end of the month of fasting, whose celebration continues for three days, and during which children wear new clothes and buy toys and sweets; and Id al-Adha, which lasts four days, during which sheep are sacrificed at the conclusion of the pilgrimage and their meat is distributed among the poor and relatives. On such occasion, members of the family meet together and exchange presents.

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic Calendar. It was in the month of Ramadan that Allah Almighty has revealed, through the angel Gabriel, the first verse of the Holy Quran, to the Noble Prophet, peace be upon him. During this month, Muslims abstain from food and drink from dawn to sunset. Fasting is one of the pillars of Islam. However, fasting is not just abstaining from food and drink;

it is also an occasion of meditation and remembrance of Almighty God and His Noble Prophet, peace be upon him, and of performing fruitful deeds, more than at any other time in the year, particularly the performance of acts of charity. It is a test of strong will and firm spirit; it is a test of personal attributes of each individual; it is a realization of the wish to share surplus money and to give generously to those that need help. It is the month which is described by the Holy Koran as “the month of Ramadan in which the Quran was (first) bestowed from on high as a guidance unto man and a self-evident proof of that guidance.”

All believers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia readily obey God's words and follow the Sunnah of His Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Thus they make a point of fasting during this month, which fasting has beneficial effects for the body and is also an occasion of moral training of the believers to overcome difficulties. Thus, man purifies himself and devotes his endeavors to the worship and obedience of God. Exempted from fasting are children below fifteen, travelers, breast feeding mothers, pregnant mothers and the sick. Non-Muslims, who live in the Kingdom, observe the fasting of Ramadan and other tenets of Islam, by refraining from breaking the command in public. Moreover, Muslims who are unable to fast for a few days during Ramadan have to fast a corresponding number of days in another month or months.

In the past, canons used to be fired in major cities, immediately before the time of cessation of eating and drinking, by way of informing people of the beginning of the day of fasting. This is still done in Mecca and

Medina. But in the villages and in the tents of bedouins, such a moment is determined by people being capable of distinguishing between a white string from a black string at a time when this would be very difficult to do.

Before dawn, the believers would eat three dates and drink some water and then they partake of a pre-dawn meal called “suhoor”. Sleeping during the day would compensate for the sleepless hours at night. Working days are officially shortened during the month of fasting; they begin late and end early at schools. Most women would have a siesta and then they get up in order to prepare the “beak-fast” meal. During this period, the appetizing smells fill the streets and alleys, which would be totally empty. This would be a real test of patience for the rare passer-by who smell the inviting odors or for those who do the cooking.

As the evening draws near and upon sunset, the voice of the muezzin is heard. Soon he is joined by another and another and another until all of them form a solemn chorus that fills the atmosphere, which gradually becomes darker and darker. Soon people emerge and cars start racing towards the mosques and people hurry to perform the sunset prayer and invoke God’s blessings and glorify His name. This is followed by the distribution of charity and the partaking of a few dates to be followed by the evening meal which consists of various dishes that are exchanged by people so that they all can partake of one another’s cooking and offer same to passers-by, who may be total strangers and yet are close in spirit and religious belief.

Thus another day of fasting comes to an end. In the

next day, before the sun rises, the voice of the muezzin is heard again announcing the advent of dawn and cautioning people that the fasting has begun and calling them to perform the dawn prayer. In this manner the days pass one after another in fasting, prayer, charity work and payment of Zakat and other donations. This is because in this month in particular, as the Holy Quran says, the soul is utterly purified.

It is well known that Zakat is one of Islam's five pillars. The population of the Kingdom voluntarily pay 2.5% of surplus income that has been lying unspent for a whole year to those who are needy. If a worker in a company knows no needy persons to whom to pay Zakat, he can entrust such money to the management of his company, who would be obligated to see to it that the money reaches those who need it and to inform the donor of the identity of the receivers.

The family members of my friend, Saeeda, meet together behind a table and put in an envelope money, the amount of which would have been previously determined by the head of the family. This takes place joyfully and creates an atmosphere of holy festivity. Subsequently, the envelopes are distributed among the families of the driver, the janitor and the school cleaner. I am certain that, thanks to the teachings of Islam, this contributes to the creation of good human relations, which are implanted in the souls of Muslims and create feelings of love and fraternity. The children will treasure these memories of domestic harmony.

During the day time, in Ramadan, the stores and shops

would be closed, except those that deal with food items. But as of ten p.m. to two or three a.m., they would be open and full of life and movement, and lights would be shining brightly, transforming night into day time. Throughout the month, and particularly during the Id, the cities are adorned and business flourishes, as this would be the season of sales, when people buy a great many presents for their families and friends. During the Id, many families travel to Mecca, where the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, together with the heads of many Islamic states, perform Umra (the minor pilgrimage). This represents the end of the Holy month and the whole country looks forward to the next Ramadan, which is the holiest of months, at the end of which Id is celebrated, preparations are made, prayers are offered in mosques, articles are published in newspapers and magazines, and television stations prepare special programs in honor of this month. I was lucky enough to participate in such occasions.

Saudis show a great interest in the Islamic countries of the former Soviet Union, of which they had no knowledge previously. They are also interested in the people, the natural characteristics and, of course, in the customs and all that has to do with Ramadan in our country. During our stay in the Kingdom, a number of films were shown on our country, during which I talked on the manner in which such occasion is celebrated and on some typical Azerbaijan dishes that are usually offered to relatives and friends during the Id. The Saudi people refer to their country as an island, and just like the island which is surrounded with water, the Kingdom protects itself

against foreign influences by adhering strictly to its own traditions for fear that the defects and negative aspects of foreigners might impinge on their society. The major traditions relate to the strict observance of all the teachings and moral, religious, civil, political and legal rules that are derived from the Holy Quran, which has dominated the life, thinking, hearts and minds of whole peoples, the beginning of whose revelation took place in this blessed month of Ramadan.

Hajj (Pilgrimage)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies 85 per cent of the Arabian Peninsula. However, the Saudi people often refer to their country as the Jazira (island) which sincerely and completely follows all the teachings of the Holy Quran and sticks to its traditions, as though they were creating a barrier between themselves and the rest of the world and in doing so affirm their special status. In fact, the Kingdom is unlike any country, not even Arab countries, in many respects. This is no accident; for towards this country, towards Mecca, in particular, the faces of more than a billion people turn in prayer five times a day, and as such, it acts like a magnet that attracts the hearts and souls of so many people.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is described as the stronghold of Islam, not only because it embraces the two Holy Mosques (God's sacred House and the Holy Kaaba) and the Mosque of the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, and his sepulcher in Medina) and other holy places that are venerated by all Muslims, but because Islam here, unlike in other Islamic countries, forms an integral

part of social consciousness, is the pillar of the faith and the only source of legislation. As such it performs the functions of social and cultural organization. Hence the country's leadership consider that their primary duty is to preserve the Islamic faith and law, which is the basis of all constitutional and moral rules. This, in itself, involves primarily the realization of the desire of the many millions of people who are anxious to perform the duty of pilgrimage, which is another pillar of Islam and the dream of each Muslim, which is sometimes unrealizable, not even once in a lifetime. Thus people look forward to this occasion and prepare themselves for it. During the pilgrimage season, a great many people leave the cities and villages in the Kingdom, and many other near and far off Islamic cities and head towards one and the same point on the surface of the earth, all being assembled prompted by one common objective. For performing pilgrimage some major conditions must be satisfied, namely:

Only Muslims can perform pilgrimage. No other person can perform pilgrimage unless he has adopted Islam.

A pilgrim must be an adult and fully conscious of his duties towards God and people.

A pilgrim must be mentally and psychologically sane.

Good health is an indispensable condition for overcoming the expected difficulties during the pilgrimage trip. Old people or those who are physically weak can delegate a relative to perform pilgrimage on their behalf.

A pilgrim must be free of all handicaps that prevent him or her from performing the pilgrimage.

During the trip to Mecca, nothing should threaten the

safety and security of a pilgrim, particularly his or her life and spirit. If the security conditions are not satisfied it would be better for a pilgrim to postpone the pilgrimage to another more appropriate occasion.

Finally, a pilgrim must be financially able to make the trip and not leave needy dependents behind.

What are the basic rites ordained by the noble Prophet, during his Farewell Pilgrimage, which he performed in the year 632 A.D.?

First and foremost, a pilgrim should be exceedingly eager to perform the pilgrimage, appreciate the great importance of this event and seek to devote himself/herself wholly to this duty.

What contributes to this state are the special clean clothes which must be worn after cleaning one's body. These are known as the "ihram" clothes which consist of two white pieces of unsewn cloth, one of which is wrapped round one's waist, and the other is flung on the shoulder (for men). Such clothes remind one of the shroud of the dead. This is no accident; for a pilgrim leaves his/her home and ordinary life leaving everything behind and heads towards God Almighty. Women can wear ordinary clothes that cover all parts of their bodies with a cover on their head, as a must, while their faces may be revealed.

Thus the pilgrim enters the holiest of places, the sacred House of God, wearing clean clothes with a clean heart utterly devoted to God Almighty, having abandoned all mundane matters and thoughts and focusing all thoughts and emotions on the glorification and remembrance of the Supreme and Most Powerful, in the hope of winning His

blessings, grace and guidance to the straight path.

The pilgrims walk quietly on endless carpets that cover the marble floor of the Holy Mosque, thanking God for making it possible for them to realize their dream of performing the pilgrimage, as though swimming amidst the hundreds of thousands of fellow pilgrims in an atmosphere of love for all mankind.

Then the pilgrim faces, in the middle of the square courtyard, a huge cube covered with an exquisite cover that is decorated with golden strings – the honorable Kaaba, in the eastern corner of which is installed, within a silver frame, the Holy Black Stone.

The flood of pilgrims rush towards the Kaaba without any noise. The flood that comprises thousands and thousands go round the Kaaba anti-clock wise so that they may feel it close to their hearts, all repeating special invocations that are appropriate to this occasion, until they complete seven sacred rounds.

“No deity but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God” is a brief testimony known and enunciated by every Muslim in any country.

While circumambulating the Kaaba, pilgrims stop at the eastern corner and kiss the Black Stone, in obedience to God and not out personal whim.

In the Holy Mosque, there are other venerated places. Thus opposite the door of the Kaaba, under a glass bell and in a marble frame, is placed the stone wherein the traces of Prophet Abraham, peace be upon him, are impinged, when in obedience to God’s orders, he and his son built and cleaned the Kaaba. Almost opposite the Black Stone,

at a distance of 18 meters is the holy well of Zamzam.

Upon God's orders, Prophet Abraham left his wife Hagar, and his son, Ishmael, in the middle of the desert in an arid valley where no crops grow. Being thirsty and her child, she ran seven times between Al-Safa and Al-Marwa hills in search for water. Each time she saw a mirage until, under the feet of the little one, there gushed a spring of water, called zamzam. To commemorate this event, pilgrims walk in quick steps seven times between the two hills, between which there is now a roofed passage.

This passage is now easy to walk through. Pilgrims are well protected from the heat of the sun, and their feet tread on smooth marble slabs. Even the handicapped can make the seven courses sitting on special carts driven by special men through a specially designed path. Close by is an abundance of zamzam water that pilgrims drink and take with them to their relatives and friends when the pilgrimage is over.

In any case, this is no easy excursion between the two hills. The pilgrims pray God, thank Him and express their devotion and love of the Noble prophet. At the same time, they ask for God's help as Ishmael's mother Hagar had done. They realize that Almighty God knows all that they have in mind, all that they exhibit and all that they hide. They, therefore pray for forgiveness, determined to abide by God's order and obey Him in all respects.

On the following day, after carrying enough Zamzam water, the pilgrims proceed from Mecca to "Mina", which they should reach by mid-day. After performing the five daily prayers, they leave "Mina" after sunrise and proceed

towards Mount “Arafat”. At noon of the ninth day of the month of Dhil Hijjah, having spent the night outdoors, the pilgrims begin the essential rite, namely, standing on the ground of “Arafat”, invoking, glorifying and remembering God until sunset. On the tenth of Dhil Hijjah, after the dawn prayer, the pilgrims proceed again towards “Mina” after stopping at “Muzdalifa”, where they collect pebbles and spend the night. On the following day, they return to “Mina” and throw the pebbles. Then begins the sacrificing of sheep, again in commemoration of a historical event: When Prophet Abraham, whom God had ordered to slay his son, prepared, in utter obedience, to sacrifice him, God rewarded him for his obedience by sparing the life of his son and sent him a ram to sacrifice instead of his son. Ever since then, when Muslims, all over the world sacrifice sheep, they turn their head towards Mecca. Thereafter, the pilgrims return to Mecca, where they circumambulate the Kaaba seven times. The tenth of Dhil Hijja marks the beginning of the Adha Id (the Feast of Sacrifice), which is celebrated by all the Islamic World.

As one of the pillars of Islam, pilgrimage is the most important manifestation of the unity of all Muslims.

Every year, the Kingdom receives millions of pilgrims and provides them with all necessary services to enable them to perform the rites of pilgrimage and to facilitate their movement and accommodation. It is not by accident that this country has been blessed with all means and potentials for carrying out such noble and difficult tasks, for which there are no equivalent counterparts throughout the world, as they involve so many people, which need a great deal of punctual

and detailed organization in terms of accommodation in Mecca and provision of tents at Arafat. All the while, health services and security are provided to all pilgrims, some of whom are old and need a great deal of care and assistance. Such people manage, even once in their life, to make it to Mecca to realize a long awaited dream, and on top of that they are on the increase year after year.

Many years ago, the Saud family undertook the responsibility of looking after the holy places and caring for the pilgrims of today and of the future. It looks as though they considered this their primary mission in life. It is no accident that the present Monarch, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz, has relinquished the title of "His Majesty" and took another title "the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" instead. These two mosques and other holy places are constantly being expanded. The expenditures connected with the expansion of the two Holy Mosques amounted to 11 billion dollars, exclusive of the expenses connected with the completion of the colossal projects related to the construction and improvement of other holy places. The area of the Holy Mosque has been lately extended to accommodate, at one and the same time, one million persons, while in the past it accommodated only 340 thousand. On the other hand, the Mosque of the Prophet, peace be upon him, in Medina, now covers all the area of the old city of the Prophet, peace be upon him.

It is difficult to imagine how it is possible to provide water for the millions of people who are concentrated in such a narrow expanse in a country where there are no natural sources of water, which is badly needed on

account of the extremely hot weather. And yet, here water is available in great abundance during the peak season, while the well of Zamzam, from which water miraculously gushed under the feet of Ishmael, Prophet Abraham's son, peace be upon both of them, had throughout the years become gradually depleted until it was no more. But when the Grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, had a dream about this well, it was rediscovered, cleaned and constructed anew. This took place before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Centuries have passed and the pilgrims kept increasing. When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia assumed the responsibility of taking care of this spring, and pursuant to the orders of King Fahd, the Zamzam water plant was erected at the expense of the King and started operating in 1984. Ever since then, it has been supplying pilgrims from all over the world with the sacred and pure water. The plant has a great capacity, producing 14 tons of plastic water bottles per hour. During the Hajj season, 12 million bottles of cold Zamzam water are distributed among the pilgrims. Inside the Holy Mosques, more than one thousand big jars of cold Zamzam water are in place, while in the open space round the Kaaba the air is cooled in an inconceivable manner. In general, anyone who visits Mecca for the first time confronts, at every step, what amounts to a miracle. The Holy Mosque is in itself a miracle. When one stands before the main gate of the Holy Mosque, one experiences something unprecedented. On the one hand, one feels like being a small ant when confronting this non-human greatness and divine beauty.

On the other hand, one is filled with overwhelming joy and the long forgotten childish feeling of peace and security of being in the bosom of one's parents.

Thus pilgrims walk in a widely open heart amidst hundreds of light columns. In the internal space, another miracle unfolds before their eyes – the Holy Kaaba, which is covered with a black cloak embroidered with gold strings and sewn in woolen yarn and silk strings. All corners of the Kaaba are wrapped with a fourteen-meter-long cloth. On the cover, there are embroideries of Quranic verses as well as beautiful ornamentation. Above the door of the Kaaba, is engraved in laced letters the following sentence: “ This cover has been woven in Mecca and presented as a gift from King Fahd, may God amply reward him”. The total value of the cover amounts to five million dollars. In 1975 a special factory for making such covers was inaugurated by King Fahd himself.

The Kaaba itself had not been renovated for six hundred years before 1957, when the beginning of its renovation was celebrated by specialists from many Islamic countries. The renovation was completed within two months. That was the thirteenth renovation of the Kaaba ever since it was built. In 1977, a new door for the Kaaba was erected, in which 20 kilograms of gold were used, the value of which exceeded three and a half million dollars. Every year, before the advent of Ramadan and before the Hajj season, the rite of washing the Kaaba takes place. This solemn rite did not occur by accident. Thus when Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, returned to Mecca with his followers, the first thing he did was to purify the Kaaba and to destroy

the idols that had been erected inside the Kaaba.

Ever since then, the most notable and honorable of persons in the country and from other countries of the world are allowed to enter the holiest of places inside the Kaaba to sweep it, clean it and perform prayer therein. The ambassadors of all Islamic countries, who are accredited to the Kingdom, are invited to attend this ceremony. In the month of July 1994, during a visit to the Kingdom, the then President of Azerbaijan, Haidar Aliev, performed the duty of pilgrimage. At that time, the Kaaba repair work was underway and it was closed. However, as a gesture to our country and its President, the Azerbaijan delegation was allowed into the holiest place on earth for Muslims, and to perform prayer therein.

During our stay in the Kingdom, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz granted our country a special favor, by permitting five hundred citizens, who were refugees and members of the families of martyrs (who had been killed during the war in Karabach) to perform the pilgrimage duty at his expense. This royal favor can hardly be evaluated no matter what one say in that respect, for it was given to people who were in a dire need for support.

Mecca is visited by millions of pilgrims, from all over the world. They come to perform the pilgrimage duty. Among them there are several hundred citizens from our country. This number is very little. We hope that life in Azerbaijan will improve year after year and that it will be possible for any of our citizens to realize his strong desire and long cherished dream of performing the Hajj duty.

The Story of Two Families

I have said many times that the Saudi community has changed from a feudal community to a capitalist one. This is due to the effect of the social and economic changes that affected the conditions of the population during decades, thanks to the wise and balanced policy of the state leaders and the potent oil factor. Thus the way of life and standard of living have changed and an industrialization and urbanization process has taken place. The latest technology was introduced, the infrastructure was developed, new state institutions were established, and a strong network of health and education facilities was established, almost from scratch. As a result, illiteracy was sharply reduced, and the average life expectancy increased, this being the best objective indication of the positive development of the country. According to World Health Organization statistics, the age expectancy of both sexes did not exceed 50 in the sixties of the last century, while it rose to 68 at the end of the nineties, for men, and 71 for women, leaving behind the life expectancy rate in the developing countries, and coming close to that of advanced countries.

In addition to these significant changes, there is a gradual and continuous process taking place in the life pattern and thinking of the Kingdom's population. I would like to illustrate this development by giving an example of several generations of the branch of a well known family that existed at the beginning of the establishment of the Kingdom's armed forces.

A long time ago, in the Nineteenth Century, the father of my friend Saeeda's grandfather used to lead trade caravans carrying grains, dates, incense, and other goods. This man, Ali, was a good guide of caravans, with a sense of direction based on his reading of the position of stars. Traders had a great confidence in him and therefore he was always busy and immune against poverty. In addition, he was an expert on horses; he loved them very much and they reciprocated his love for them. Ali had a large family of seven sons and five daughters. He always aspired to give his children a good education, although he, himself, was illiterate.

In time, Ali became a good horse trainer and a skilful horseman, and his reputation reached all regions of Hijaz. The then Sheriff of Mecca, who is a descendant of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, offered him a job – to head all the military cavalry in the region.

Once, the Sheriff of Mecca decided to show the skill of his warriors to foreign spectators in a military parade. So he ordered that gold Turkish sovereigns, which were in use at the time, to be thrown to the ground, each separated from the other by two steps. Then he ordered Ali to collect these sovereigns while mounting his horse and riding at

top speed. So the father of Saeeda's grandfather mounted his black horse, which had a white spot on the forehead, and dashed forward, he and the horse constituting one integral body. Ali's ambition was to show his skill and not to let down his master. The horse took off while Ali held to the saddle with one leg in an amazing manner and began collecting the gold sovereign one after the other, leaving nothing behind. The spectators were greatly astonished and the Sheriff gave Ali all the sovereigns he had collected as a token of appreciation.

This was Ali's opportunity to realize his ambition of giving his children proper education. Thus four of his sons became military men, consolidating in so doing the family traditions, and Ali went on transmitting his information and skill to the new generation. He lived to be 90, which was a long duration at that time, and his photograph has pride of place in Saeeda's house. It reveals features denoting strong will, intelligent eyes and moustaches curved upwards of the type on which an eagle would perch, and of which he was very proud, as the family legend has it.

My friend's grandfather, Ali's fourth son, was not a horseman. King Abdulaziz has graciously given him a sum of money that enabled him to travel to Egypt, Syria and Jerusalem to study the latest technology of the time. Thus he learned telegraphy and photography but preferred military technology and specialized in shelling. His four sons preserved the family tradition and became military men. One, Khaled, Saeeda's father, who is still alive as a pensioner, became a prominent expert in his field of specialization.

Khaled's youth coincided with the Second world War. But although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not participate in the military operations, yet it bore its burdens and negative economic, political and military consequences. It was a small world.

Life began to change rapidly, and so did the war. Thus in remote Europe and near-by Africa, armored cars which he had never seen before were roaring savagely and killing people. Iron birds were flying in the sky dropping their destructive loads on cities and villages. No one knew for sure what would happen the following day. This young man was greatly worried about his country and was ready to do anything for protecting it. But he was still young and had little knowledge. The best he could do was to plunge himself in study. So he turned his gaze heavenward and was attracted thereto, probably just like his grandfather Ali had done. So he became a skilful parachutist and stood first among top parachutists. Fortunately, there was no need for him to apply his skills, because the war had ended. But, for years, he kept developing his knowledge and experience by studying Arab and western armies and had the honor, with his pilot brother, to fly King Abdulaziz from Jeddah to Riyadh on board the aircraft which the President of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, had given to the King as a present. Then he worked at Taif, the military capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the time, and founded more than one military academy, teaching a whole generation of young men the profession of courage.

Now for my friend. Let me assure the reader that the

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chain of the family dynasty was not broken, because her brothers became military men. It is true that one of them did not follow on the footsteps of the family tradition and became an ambassador, but diplomacy is also a kind of battlefield where the interests of the homeland have to be defended, at the peace front, but with different means. Being a woman, Saeeda could not join the military but could not but marry a military person, who is now a well known air-general and it seems that their son intends to become a pilot.

As I have previously said, several activities were performed on the occasion of the Kingdom's Centenary, which activities included an air parade. We had received an official invitation, but Elman Arasli was on an official mission to the United Arab Emirates and Saeeda's husband was busy because he was one of the organizers of the parade. So, we had the driver take us to the parade. It was early in the morning and the streets of Riyadh were still quiet. Our car was alone to leave the city, which made me wonder whether this was the correct date of the parade. But soon, everything changed. Thus, there appeared, on both sides of the road, crowds of people and their numbers began to increase as we approached our destination. Elevated places were full of people and thronged with cars. People had apparently arrived early in order to secure a proper place. Where they can watch the parade. Circulating among the people were sellers of balloons, small toys, sweets, and refreshments, trying to sell their merchandise. Children were playing noisily while the grown ups were full of excitement as they were waiting

for something extraordinary to take place.

Saeeda and me decided not to go up to the platforms and we stayed close by: I wanted to be among these people, to observe their reactions and their emotions as they watched the parade.

Time passed slowly and the sun became extremely hot; there were no places to sit and I regretted not having sought a comfortable seat on the platform. Suddenly, all eyes turned to one direction and we saw in the horizon a large red – blue – violet cloud from which, seconds later, there emerged a well-arranged and roaring squadron of aircraft that spread like a fan in the sky. This was the beginning of the great parade.

Activities did not stop thereafter. The aircraft flew in rows of steel, re-grouping directly above our heads. They would swoop down from high altitudes to reach such low altitudes that one got the impression they would never be able to lift up again. They would refuel in mid-air and turn round themselves, as though under a continuous air current, exhibiting the great skills of pilots. From their mouths, the aircraft ejected bright colored parachutes, producing a great deal of admiration. This was not accompanied merely by the noise of the roaring engines but by the cries of appreciation of the spectators. Thus I was watching not only what was going on in the sky, but was also observing those people, most of whom had not seen anything like that before. Thus, reflected on their faces were mixed emotions of fear, excitement, unbelief and pride. They would alternately sit and cover their heads with their hands when the fighter aircraft drew near and

would raise their hands to the sky screaming loudly, may be as their grandfather would have screamed when under great emotion of happiness or sadness. I could also see tears flowing on the faces of some of them.

I could also see tears on my friend's face too. She folded her arms and said in an interrupted voice in view of her emotional commotion: "They have succeeded in everything. You know, until fairly recently, it was not possible even to imagine something like that. I am very happy for my country. I am proud that my family was part of all this. If I were not a woman, I would give all my potentials to my country's air force".

I was not surprised at such enthusiasm at the time. I even admired this sincere love of one's homeland and the tender emotions whose value has declined and lost its meaning a long time ago in this materialistic world.

During our stay in the Kingdom, I had occasion to be acquainted with many important Saudi women of various ages, status and cultural level of whom I can talk about. Thus every life, even if it seems not to be fraught with important events, is in fact unique, if we consider it carefully. But this is not my purpose in this book. Yet, I cannot but narrate another story that has impinged on my memory, may be because it is related to the art of literature with which I am enamored.

Once I was invited to a friend's house. The number of those who were invited was small, all of them being residents in the Kingdom: two were typical Saudis and I found out later on that they were princesses in blood but not of first rank. The remaining four, including the

hostess, were obviously Lebanese. Having lived for so many years in the kingdom, I learned to easily identify people's nationality. The four were of a light color, with a presumably dyed blond hair. One of them I immediately identified, as she was between 50 and 52 years old. She dressed elegantly and wore beautiful, expensive diamond ear rings and a diamond ring to match the turquoise ear rings that matched the edge of her dress.

Her complexion was a rare white with slight traces of red. Her hair do was short to a certain extent. Her spectacles were made of transparent horn bones inlaid with small diamonds at the upper edges, which looked amazingly appropriate.

The conversation was in English and was sometimes mixed with Arabic. The puzzling blond – I shall refer to her in this manner – was almost always inclined to remain silent, occasionally saying one or two words in her mother tongue, which prompted me to conclude that her English was either poor or that she did not know any English at all.

During the years I lived in the kingdom, I very often was a guest of local people. All lunch, tea and dinner parties were alike, whether at the villa of a an average Saudi family or at the palace of a princess. A dinner banquet usually takes place not before eight or nine p.m. The maids receive the guests at the main entrance and escort them inside the house. The internal furniture is similar in Saudi houses except for the price thereof. A number of sofas and arm-chairs are lined against the walls. Before them are placed small low coffee tables full

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of exotic sweets, as well as inlaid China boxes containing chocolate, oriental candies, nuts and pistachios. There are also cabinets of different styles full of boxes made of expensive wood and very thin china and pure silver. In palaces, these things would obviously be expensive and unique. The walls are covered with tableaux and mirrors. In the empty space between the heavy curtains are found big vases and Chinese supports in the shape of old columns on which are placed decorated receptacles full of dry fruit and flowers. Every time I looked at them, I wondered how these fragile items can be dusted. Flower shops are full of such items, some of which are very expensive. One day a friend of mine sent me a bouquet in one of those vases. Between the wonderful dry flowers there emerges an old copper pot that has a long curved mouth and several big exotic fruits of tennis ball size, dry and bright in a special way. I am sure this objet d'art must have cost quite a lot.

The small coffee tables constitute part of the internal local furniture. They are covered with embroidered cloth decorated with gold and silver strings. Thus the guests enter the reception hall and greet the hostess and the other guests who had arrived earlier (we are talking of course about women gatherings), each of whom would stand up to return the greeting with a three-fold embrace or a handshake, depending on the extent of acquaintance. If not previously acquainted, there would be an exchange of names and countries of origin. Bosom friends do not just exchange three-fold cheek-touching. It is not uncommon to see two nice smiling women talking to each other at the same time and exchanging cheek-touching every

now and then. If we consider the fact that guests do not arrive punctually, we can imagine that the ceremony of exchanged greetings continues for quite some time, which at first seemed to me rather tiring. Later on, however, I came to consider this as a kind of exercise, standing, kissing and sitting and repeating this on and on.

While the guests continue to arrive, the aids would circulate among the guests offering them pieces of chocolate, tea with mint in small cups, fruit juice, Arabic coffee and cookies. Between 10 and 11 p.m. and on special solemn occasions, incense is brought and burned and its perfumed vapor is brought near each guest so that, if she so wishes, can direct the vapor to herself by waving her hand and the whole air would be filled with sweet and strong perfume. This tradition signifies that dinner is served and all the guests, together with the hostess, move to the next hall where long tables are laid on which a collection of rectangular receptacles made of shining metal and full of different kinds of food are placed on burners. Here are found not only Arab dishes but Chinese, Korean and Indonesian dishes as well. Saudis are hospitable and love their guests. They, themselves would fill their plates with all the delicious dishes. The banquet ends rather late, after which the guests leave almost immediately, while the nearest of kin usually stay behind.

But let us now go back to the mysterious blond. Here is the beginning of the most original of oriental stories that have a happy ending.

Once a young twenty-eight-year old prince arrived in Riyadh coming from Hijaz in order to celebrate with his

cousin, prince Khaled, Id Al-Fitr (the “break-fast Id). The two had been friends since their childhood. So, Khaled proposed to Mansour – the name of our hero – to stay with him at his palace for a while. It was spring and the lemon and other citron trees which were heavy with fruit that had not been plucked were blooming with flowers. It had rained heavily before and the desert bloomed with a colorful cover inviting people to rest before the advent of the hot days.

The two youths spent all their time together watching camel and horse races, participating therein and spending whole days hunting and driving over the sand dunes (an amusement that was not without hazards, which had recently become quite popular with the young generation of the royal family). Life seemed wonderful and the future looked as though it would be better than the present.

One day at dawn, Mansour had a dream of a charming blond girl walking in the orchard surrounded by three gazelles and talking to them. When the princess saw him she smiled and extended her hand to him. The dream was quite tangible as when he awoke suddenly, he could still feel the touches of her warm fingers. He did not open his eyes right away as he wanted the dream to last longer.

I should mention that Mansour's parents and aunt had been trying to persuade him to get married and proposed to him various candidates, but in vain. Khaled was aware of such attempts, but did not join in the persuasion. In the morning, when Mansour saw his cousin and told him of the dream while he was still agitated, Khaled did not hesitate to propose to him to travel to Lebanon to look for

the blond because the Lebanese are known in the Arab world to have light hair.

The two arrived in Beirut, disguised, in order to give a romantic touch to their trip. They stayed at a small hotel and found a distant relative who was much older than them and who had been working in Lebanon for a few years. This relative of theirs was always welcome in Lebanese houses and knew where beautiful girls were to be found. At the time, it was not easy, even in Lebanon, to become acquainted with a girl from a good family. So they used to invent ways and means for acquaintance in each particular case. Their relative would introduce his cousins to the head of the family as businessmen. As is well known, it is difficult to find a Lebanese who did not practice this kind of activity or did not like to practice it. All that remained was to practice the art of making acquaintances. As a result, within two weeks, they succeeded in seeing a large number of charming beautiful girls. But none of them appealed to Mansour, as the dream girl was all the time alive in his memory. After a while, the two decided to go back to the Kingdom, considering the trip a kind of amusement. On the last day before their departure, they were invited to a horse-farm by a rich Lebanese. The two cousins loved horses and knew a lot about them. Therefore, they readily accepted the invitation.

The morning was rather cool and it had rained a little before. The edge of the sun protruded over the round tops of the wrinkled plateaus and the leaves of the cedar trees were shining with the sun's jovial rays. The two sat on a special kind of rug that was stretched specially for them,

on which silver plates full of oriental sweets were put on a snow-white cover. There were also receptacles full of fruit, dates, cheese and loaves of hot bread in a round tray, together with the coffee pot in which fresh, fragrant coffee had been prepared. Black servants were preparing the ground where the horses would appear. The host wanted to please the two guests whom he intuitively felt were no ordinary Saudi citizens.

Finally, the stable door was opened and five pedigree Arabian horses rushed into the track. On one of them there was a beautiful and graceful young girl with blond hair. The two did not notice her at first. But when they did, Mansour pressed Khaled's hand, and Khaled immediately got the message.

Thereafter, the wedding took place. Arriving in Beirut on that night, was a large number of relatives, and the fourteen-year-old girl took the presents like a spoiled child. She admired the shining jewelry, the exquisite, expensive clothes, as well as her bridegroom who realized all her aspirations. They spent their honeymoon in Germany. Laila – that was the girl's name – had never been abroad and jumped like a gazelle in the old streets of the German cities and climbed the rocky statues with which the fountains were decorated, all the time rejoicing and laughing merrily. The newly married bridegroom looked gently at this wonderful creature and his heart was filled with tenderness.

The month was over and the couple returned to Riyadh. Life went on as usual. The girl began to feel homesick and wanted to see her father and mother, to hug her brothers

and play with her sisters. Thus she stopped laughing and the beautiful things and even the toys no longer interested her. One day she wept bitterly to the point that Mansour felt pity for her, upon which he went to Beirut and brought all her relatives along to the Kingdom, even the brothers and sisters of her grandfather and grandmother. Laila gave birth to six healthy children: three girls and three boys, who were grown ups when we made her acquaintance.

Now you know that the mysterious blond was Laila, who had one day invaded the heart of the young Mansour. I was struck by this story, may be because it is actually similar to an original story I wanted to narrate to you. In any case, I am sure that the life of any human being, no matter how simple he or she may be, is unique and can evoke real interest.

Two weeks after having made acquaintance, Laila invited me to visit her. Frankly speaking, I went there feeling somewhat afraid that something unusual would happen. I had been told that she had lost her husband seven years before and that she was living with the family of one of her sons (according to Saudi law a woman is not allowed to live alone even if she owned several houses). I was acquainted with her beautiful daughters; the eldest seemed to me to be her mother's age. I got to know her nineteen grandchildren and the close friends of this house which was full of warmth. But what struck me most when I entered the reception hall was a large photo of Prince Mansour that filled a whole wall, overwhelming everything else in the hall. Thus wherever one sat, one saw the photo as though Mansour was somehow living



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among those who were alive.

I had plenty of time to scrutinize the photo, which had been taken when the prince was in middle age. His face was big, giving the impression of strong will, his eyes imparted a sense of intelligence and a good heart and his lips revealed a gentle sarcastic smile. When I saw the picture, I immediately remembered that Laila had led a truly happy married life, free of any misunderstanding or trouble. At that time, I was sure that Mansour deserved to be loved and respected for he was able to make even one woman happy in this strange world.

The Governorate of Hijaz

In the early twenties of the past century there were two states on the territory now occupied by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: The Sultanate of Najd and the associated territory, and the Kingdom of Hijaz (the mountainous western part and the Red Sea Coast of the Arabian Peninsula), including the two holy cities: Mecca and Medina). Relations between the two were always tense. Suffice it to say that the Muslims of the neighboring state were denied access to pilgrimage. For this and other reasons, the first being the desire to restore the lost territory, Sultan Abdulaziz decided to attack Hijaz. Thus in 1924 he invaded Taif and Mecca and performed pilgrimage in Mecca. In the following year, he invaded Jeddah, and on October 8, 1926, and in the main mosque in Mecca, Abdulaziz declared himself king of Hijaz. In 1932 the King issued a decree providing for “the unification of all parts of the Arab Kingdom”, and the country assumed its present name. Thereafter, National Day was celebrated each year on September 23.

The history of Jeddah, known as the “gate of the

Red Sea” is hundreds of years old. In the early part of the first thousand years of history, it was a small village wherein fishermen lived. It survived the inclement climate on the rocky desert coast thanks only to the generosity of the sea. Houses were built out of the fragments of the coral chains. From them was later on built a wall round the settlement to protect it against enemies. The suitable location on a suitable gulf has helped old Jeddah to become a commercial port, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Thus it received ships from America, Europe and Africa on their way to Yemen, India and China. Such ships stopped at Jeddah in order to buy and sell and to get supplies of food and drinking water. Clever traders contributed to the flourishing of Jeddah and many were enriched as a result of its enrichment. Obviously, the two holy cities, Mecca and Media, were the absolutely important motive for their growing importance.

Until the forties of the Twentieth Century, Jeddah was a mere small settlement surrounded by castle-like walls, stretching over an area of one square kilometer only. But after the discovery of oil in the Peninsula, these walls were removed and the city grew fast to its modern dimensions. This, in any case, reflects the general transitional movement in the Kingdom. In the nineties it extended over an area of 550 square kilometers and its population grew to 1.5 million.

At the time, Hijaz had certain political and administrative traditions in comparison with the other territory of the Saudi State. Hence, its cities, particularly Jeddah, adapted rapidly to the radical changes taking place

in the Kingdom in all fields of life. Until 1985, Jeddah was the financial center of the country, wherein banks spread in great abundance. Thus here arose ministries and agencies like the growth of mushrooms in a fertile land after rainfall, and the education system was established. Until today, Jeddah is considered the second capital of the State, to which the ruling king moves in the summer, and where the Council of Ministers meets every Monday and Ministers arrive there almost daily (The aircraft of Saudi Airlines covers the distance in 1 hour and 15 minutes).

I like coming to Jeddah very much, for it is more lively and active compared to Riyadh, the strict official city. Thus Jeddah streets are always full of people, fishing boats are on the move in various directions on the turquoise surface of the sea water. Swings and merry-go-rounds are active along the shore and the screams and cries of children fill the air. In the evening, when advertisements are lighted it is pleasant to walk into one of the many restaurants that are built along the shore for a delicious meal cooked in a wonderful manner and to listen to the waves as they hit the wooden buoys.

In Jeddah, there is King Abdulaziz University, a scientific – artistic center, a few museums that are wonderfully equipped, one of which, in particular, I would like to talk about, namely, Abdul Raouf Khalil Museum, which caught fire last year.

I must say in all honesty that it creates a fascinating impression on the visitor. I have never seen anything similar and I do not think there is anything to compare with it in any country. Thus behind an iron interlaced

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wall there rises high a big variegated, multicolored house stretching over one whole district. Rising from its roof at various levels are twenty minarets of different shapes and colors, semi-circular friezes and balconies of ornamented wood, precious stones and colored glass, all constituting wonderful objets d'art. All in all, it looks like a legendary toy and reminds us of a legendary tower.

When we got inside, we were amazed to see its contents that were no less wonderful than the outward appearance of the mysterious museum. First, there were no people in it. Not even one single visitor, although it was full of so many interesting things. In fact, it was full of countless items that are beyond one's imagination, in addition to exotic and unique things that were placed next to ordinary everyday life objects that have no scientific significance. An example is a glass vase that contains artificial flowers made of glass. Another is a cheap decoration in the bathrooms. Yes, in this museums there are exhibits of bathrooms that are bright with shining lights with open doors. They may be also operational!

There are also unique collections of fire arms, swords and daggers that are engraved with precious stones, as well precious collections of books, ancient coins, expensive jewelry and a set of dresses, clothes and national dresses, in good condition, from all over the world. There were also furniture, receptacles and other items, that were discovered in the processes of exploration, and ancient manuscripts and tableaus painted by modern and ancient artists, as well as statues and other items. We had the impression that in this museum had been assembled,

unsystematically and without any order, valuable and precious items, and it turned out that this was the case in fact. The secret of this mysterious place is that its history is a totally romantic history, almost like things we hear in the stories of a Thousand and One Night.

Once upon a time, there lived in the commercial city of Jeddah a rich youth who decided to build a house in honor of his beautiful wife. Such a house should be unique with none to compare therewith.

Thus, he invited the best masters among masons from various countries, who built for him an amazing exquisite palace. The couple lived happily amidst the joy of the relatives and acquaintances. Every morning the young husband used to give his wife a present to make her happy.

Years went by and the couple had children, and the morning presents kept accumulating. So they made cabinets with mirrors in which they exhibited the accumulated presents. Guests would stop with their mouths open as they watched such amazing items. For the couple, it was difficult to stop, and the collection of things became for the cute couple a deeply entrenched hobby. At this point, the family, whose members had multiplied, decided to move to a new house and to convert the old one into a museum to be preserved as a symbol of matrimonial life.

May be this story is far-fetched. But this was what the museum attendant told us. In reply to our question “why are such treasures not properly guarded” he said, “First of all, because no one would dare to steal them because it is haram (religiously proscribed); secondly, there are

cameras in all halls by way of precaution”.

Jeddah is not a merely financial and cultural center; it is also an industrial center. In Jeddah there are pharmaceutical factories, basic electronic plants, a large network of furniture workshops and household elements, and particularly the famous jewelry. The production of food materials and services are among the important branches of the economy. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which was established more than forty years ago, has helped in the progress and development of crafts and encouraged all positive initiatives. Dealing with foreign markets is very active and this has helped in the development and flourishing of the city and, of course, its population, who are most hospitable. This is not merely a question of tradition; in my opinion, it is a genuine indication of affluent life.

The architecture of Jeddah represents a mixture of the tradition and modernity. This gives the city a unique and distinctive touch. The building of the Municipality Museum is perhaps an illustration of this combination and is seen in the background of its white marble walls, the arched windows that are covered with hand made dark colored wooden lattices, the interlaced balconies that are hidden by fine engravings. These are typical balconies of many buildings in Hijaz. These are not merely architectural decorative elements; they have a functional role in that they protect against the burning sun and permit the residents to watch the life of the city without violating the traditional rules of conduct. The central part of the city is of special interest. Here many old houses have been

preserved after being restored. The exquisite buildings of the major companies and trade centers with their ordered lines, modern materials and formidable arcaded vestibules leave a strong impression on the spectator.

King Abdulaziz Airport, which is constructed by using the most up-to-date technologies, is an example of the sequence of architectural traditions. It occupies an area of 150 square kilometers and consists of three terminals: the international, local and the pilgrim terminals. The latter receive pilgrims and is built in the shape of tents, a shape that is close to the heart of every Saudi. Thus there are big cones made of glass fibers that come close together to form a silicon roof that protects tourists from the hot sun. Its unique design involves an effective ventilation system that provides comfortable air conditioning in the hot and damp weather. This airport was awarded the prize of Islamic architecture in 1983.

Six years later, the prize was awarded to the snow-white mosque on the shore. This is a beautiful mosque specially when seen from the direction of the sea where the ordered lines of the walls, the domes and the spear-like minaret are reflected on the flat surface of the sea-shore water.

It is no accident that Jeddah is called the commercial capital of the Kingdom. It does not merely import and export goods; it is rather a large trade center. Thus there is the Jamjoom Trade Center, which is in fact a city within a city. To see all the stores in it one needs more than one whole day. In it there are company branches, restaurants, big stores, children entertainment centers, barbers, tailors and departments of very special goods and

other establishments. Another big trade center has been recently opened – Mahmoud Saeed Center - which I have not seen personally but which my husband says exceeds the Jamjoom Center in terms of size, the number of stores and the richness of its contents. In short, Elman Arasli says it is something beyond imagination. As to the rows of markets in Jeddah, they are puzzling in view of the variegated goods, the fragrance of their oriental perfumes, and the sound of grocers who advertise their delicious goods and invite people to taste them.

Jeddah's corniche, which extends many kilometers, plays an important role in the life of Jeddah's population. It is planted with high-rising trees and is decorated with all sorts of beautiful and ultra modern sculptures. Here one can see a breath-taking view of a strong jet that springs from the depths of the sea. Its pumps are so strong that they push the water to an altitude of 150 meters. Hence, the water column and the cloud of drizzles can be seen from a distance that is a few kilometers away, even at night when strong lights illuminate it. As the evening approaches, the corniche attracts great multitudes of people. The children find a great deal of amusement in the fully equipped plazas where they can enjoy the swings, the merry-go-rounds and riding ponies, horses and even camels. Families fill the hundreds of small and big restaurants that overlook the seawater and serve various kinds of national dishes that satisfy different tastes. People who are careful about their health can take walks or jog along specially designed paths near the sea. Some prefer just to sit and watch the slow movement of the setting sun in the warm and quiet

waters of the Red Sea.

If you visit the place early in the morning you will see plenty of fishermen who prepare their boats just as fishermen used to do hundreds of years ago. Soon they come back with abundant fish which they caught and the fish market would become boisterous with fresh-fish lovers. Before the noisy engines of motor boats begin to roar together with the water bikes and other sea sport devices begin to disturb the quiet sea water, one can embark on a boat with transparent bottom or one can hire diving gear and dive, assisted by a trainer of beginners, and see the wonders of the world under the sea.

The Red Sea is considered one of the exquisite landmarks of nature, although its coasts are desert-like and monotonous. I saw it for the first time when I was very young from the African coasts on our first mission to Egypt. I remember how struck we were to see the red shadow on the surface of its water. We stood spell-bound watching the changing colors. I learned later that this was due to the reflection of the sun rays on the coral forests. But my memory still treasures the miraculous feeling. A decade later we swam many times and enjoyed the view of the Red Sea at Aqaba Gulf on its opposite north eastern coast on the Jordanian side. Finally, we were lucky enough to come to its opposite eastern coast in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Red Sea is undoubtedly a unique sea basin in which one can see the most varied and exotic animal species which I cannot possibly enumerate. But I can say with great confidence that the sea animals here are

the most beautiful, colorful and exotic, though some are dangerous.

Between the glimmering coral ramifications, shoals of fish of multicolor are seen swimming swiftly and gracefully. A patient spectator will be rewarded as he is bound to see the huge sea tortoise pass by majestically, together with other species of fish which are now under government protection as they are threatened with extinction.

The Red Sea is home to innumerable varieties of fish, some of which have unusual shapes and unusual names. Thus there is the cat fish that has colored spots, the butterfly fish with its beautiful stripes, the imperial angel, the rocky fish that looks like a rock, the hedgehog fish, the global fish, which is a very curious fish with its dark yellow face and a somewhat flat body that is covered with thorns. It is so named because when exposed to danger, it swallows great quantities of water and is transformed into a ball (We have one such fish at home, which looks like a cactus).

If one plunges down to the bottom of the sea, one finds it crowded with sea creatures. These include the leopard fish with eyes on its left side. Another fish is characterized by burying itself in the sand and is not seen by its potential prey. Another fish looks like a rainbow and extracts its food by sharp horns that hang from the lower part of its head. Mention should also be made of crabs and lobsters that live in this water basin that abounds with a rich variety of sea creatures. There are of course dangerous fish such as the hammer fish and many varieties of sharks. The city authorities deserve all praise as they have installed

protective barriers against the danger posed by such kinds of fish to enable the guests of this city to swim, dive underwater and fish safely.

There are many coral islands in the Red Sea. Most of them are uninhabited, with the exception of two or three because there are no fresh water in them. Tourism agents organize trip to such islands for people who are interested in fishing, as their catch in these islands exceeds all expectation. In other words this is a fishing paradise for fishing experts.

The coral islands are located en route of migrating birds that stop therein for rest, incubation and hatching. In the old times, fishermen used to lay primitive traps to catch these birds and collect their eggs from the nests which they build on the earth. The law prohibits such activities these days and many such places are now considered reservations where no hunting is permitted.

Since time immemorial the Red Sea used to be a source of living for the local population. With the advent of navigation, they began to have contacts with the outside world. Jeddah sea port is today not only a source of pride for Jeddah citizens, but is the location of the Main Port Authority with absolute powers over the ports that were established in 1976. The Port Authority exerted great efforts to develop Jeddah Port, which is today an integral part of the natural surrounding mountainous view. Giant cranes and winches operate round the clock to unload an endless queue of ships on 45 modern piers. The annual loads exceed 15 million tons. There is a special quay for receiving pilgrims who come for performing the

pilgrimage duty. Its capacity is 40 thousand travelers at one and the same time.

Throughout the year, millions of pilgrims arrive in Jeddah by planes and ships. They receive a friendly and courteous welcome from the citizens of Jeddah. The authorities make sure that they are comfortable, probably more so than they are at home. The highly organized method of dealing with such great multitudes of pilgrims is simply amazing. Thus the pilgrims are shown to places where they can find rest and hospitality after a tiring journey. Here goods are not lost. There are plenty of rooms at hotels and buses await the pilgrims at pre-determined places in order to transport them to Mecca.

Thus we headed towards Mecca, the religious capital of the Kingdom, or as they call it "Um al-Qura" (The mother of cities), which is 80 kilometers from Jeddah. The highway with its four lanes is simply wonderful. It looks like an aircraft runway. The buses have sleep-inviting comfortable seats, are air-conditioned and have a toilet. They drive smoothly towards the Holy City. Suddenly, a huge arch appears straddling both sides of the highway. On top of it is a large open book in the form of the Holy Scripture. This great monument is a present from King Fahd to the millions of believers, under which only Muslims can pass. We proceeded along a desert place, rocky mountains and round hills inside which lies, like a cradle, Holy Mecca, the first Islamic city, home of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, the messenger of the last world religious message.

The time of appearance of the settlement of Macoraba

(Mecca of today) near the spring of Zamzam water is not known. It goes back to very ancient times. Before the advent of Islam, it was a place of worship for the nomadic tribes. It also played an important commercial role between Asia and the countries of the Mediterranean basin. The caravan routes helped not only in the transformation of the small settlement into a city, but also in the emergence of professional traders and of people that specialize in leading caravans. The major factor that contributed to its development is the pilgrimage whose impact affected other regions in Hijaz. Most pilgrims used to trade the commodities they brought along from neighboring countries. Sometimes they traded their own children to cover, albeit partially, travel expenses. On their way back they would carry the coffee and spices they bought together with other local goods. The Mecca market used to attract handicraft and agricultural products from all over the Arabian Peninsula. This has contributed to the growth of internal trade and commercial – financial relations. At the time of the birth of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, Mecca was not so much a city as a settlement with narrow alleys and low houses. The only important monument was of course the Mosque and the small Kaaba, which was a man's height, as well as the Black Stone at its eastern corner. The Kaaba was built at a certain time by Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael.

Muhammad, peace be upon him, was brought up by his uncle Abu Taleb, who implanted in the youth lofty ethical principles. When the angel Gabriel brought down to the Prophet, be upon him, God's revelation, when the Prophet

was forty years old, he disseminated the teachings of the new religion in Mecca and informed people that he was the Messenger of God. Thus he invited his countrymen and all mankind to abandon their old pagan beliefs and to worship their one and only God.

Naturally, many of the population did not support him at first. So, he was forced, together with his followers, to migrate to Yathreb (now Medina Munawwara). This event, which took place on 22 September 622, is known as “Hijra” (migration) and is the starting point of the Islamic (Hijra) Calendar. The attraction and comprehensiveness of Islamic teachings, which, primarily, advocate equality among all believers, a fair distribution of wealth and piety in the way of life, in addition to the political and organizational talents of the Prophet, peace be upon him, have helped in attracting a great many followers. Thus in the year 630 – 631 the Muslims, led by the Prophet, peace be upon him, were able to subdue Mecca, and, subsequently, the major part of the Arabian Peninsula. Later on, as is well known, this religion has won the hearts of hundreds of thousands and spread over many countries from Spain in the west to India in the east. Muslims have established the wide-spread Islamic – Arab caliphate, mixed with the people they conquered, digested their cultures and produced an outstanding civilization in which science and art flourished and won the appreciation of many subsequent generations.

Mecca had for centuries attracted the various greedy, ambitions powers, ranging from the small Arabian tribes to the successive great empires. As it changed hands

from one ruler to another, it always remained a place of worship. During the last three hundred years, Mecca's history was associated with the Saudi House, and in 1932 it became, for good, an integral part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

During the twenties of the last Century, it was still a small town with a population of about 50 thousand. People of various nationalities and races settled therein (Indonesians, Egyptians, Sudanese and others). They came on pilgrimage and stayed on permanently. The city did not change much during more than 1300 years, since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. A contemporary writer describes Mecca in the early twenties as follows:

“Mecca is guarded by several towers and two citadels. The life of the city, as well as the whole of the Islamic world, is centered on the main Mosque, the inviolable House of God, which is an old building that has no particular beauty or size. It has 19 gates and 7 minarets. In the midst of the Mosque stands the Kaaba in all its majesty. During prayer time, shops are not open for business, nor are the cafés. The streets are wide but winding. The water of wells is somewhat salty. It has many schools and charity institutions. Industry is confined to the production of a great quantity of rosaries. Commerce is weak...”

The discovery of oil towards the end of the thirties of the Twentieth Century has undoubtedly led to the growth and development of Mecca, particularly in view of the fact that the desire to which the first king, Abdulaziz, has aspired was to make the holy places a center that

attracts and constitutes the great and cherished hopes of all Muslims in the world. However, the Second World War was an obstacle in the way of the realization of this desire and hope. The low level of all aspects of life in the Kingdom required huge financial investments. Therefore, the urbanization projects were put off for quite some time.

Finally, implementation time was at hand. Cleaning work round the inviolable House started in 1960. It had been literally full of one-storey houses, and small merchant shops and stores.

Under the leadership of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz, plans for reconstruction of the Mosque and the holy places were drawn up for implementation during a period of 20 years. As a result of works that lasted many years, the Inviolable House which went back to the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries was changed together with the surrounding landscape and became a place that people look forward to and is appropriate for the object to which it is consecrated.

During those years, a sophisticated sewage system was established, which finally rescued the Mosque and the main court from the violent torrents that fall from the surrounding mountains during the rain season, particularly in view of the fact that the level of the Mosque was lower than that of the court. This also was changed, two new minarets were constructed and a wide path was dug in both directions linking the Safat with the Marwa hills where Hagar and her son Ishmael were looking for water. The path was paved with marble slabs and a roofed gallery

was erected above it. Three floor levels were built in order to enable all those who pray to see the Kaaba. In addition, the well of Zamzam was developed.

In 1986, King Fahd announced that he had changed his title from “his Majesty” to “the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”, i.e. the Inviolable Mosque in Mecca and the Mosque of the Prophet, peace be upon him, in Medina. This is not strange, given their undisputable importance for the political and economic life of the Kingdom. This noble gesture means that the King focuses his care upon the two Holy Cities. It would seem that he has inherited the task from his brother, and that life itself has so dictated. Thus the numbers of pilgrims who come to perform Hajj and Umra have multiplied. The narrow roads and mosques in both cities could no longer accommodate all those who desire to perform Hajj. Moreover, the health conditions that had prevailed, when all the multitudes gathered together were not up to healthy standards. Hence, the old houses were pulled down.

At this point, with the direct participation of King Fahd and his two brothers, Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan, colossal plans were drawn up for modernizing Holy Mecca and the Prophet's City and the rebuilding of their major and other holy places. Such plans were in fact highly original and innovative, so much so that many thought they would not be implemented. Work went on for ten years. The King's involvement was not confined to the laying of the corner stone and the reviewing of the reports; indeed, he monitored all the activities directly and visited the sites regularly. Work continued and never

stopped despite the falling of the oil price and the Gulf War. Time has proved that for the realization of lofty objectives, everything would be possible, provided there is a strong desire, a sense of duty, a determined will and plenty of money.

Today the area of Mecca is 70 square kilometers and its population exceed half a million. It is obviously beautiful, modern and unique. It is unique not only in view of its sacred functions and of the fact that it is visited by a few million people from all over the world. The authorities have assumed the responsibility of regulating and protecting this universal wealth. It is very difficult to provide the best appropriate conditions for the performance of the main pillars of Islam for all the Muslims on earth. I feel certain that if any other country were to face a similar task it would not be able to solve the great and routine problems involved in facilitating the performance of the rites of Hajj with such success. Every year millions of Riyals are spent on modernizing the infrastructure of the two Holy Cities and on the increasing demands for receiving the increasing number of visitors year after year.

The population of Mecca have managed to adapt to the continuous flow of great multitudes of pilgrims and to provide a good reception to the guests of the Most Merciful. Thus a great many hotels open their hospitable doors to receive the pilgrims, and the inhabitants of the city traditionally lease their residences during the Hajj and Umra season. To accommodate the great number of pilgrims, thousands of camps are set up on the outskirts of Mecca and are equipped to provide comfortable conditions

for the visitors for a few days. To serve passengers there is a regular and frequent transport service provided by small buses and limousines (as taxi cabs are called in the Kingdom). Many wide tunnels that lead to the main plaza have been dug in order to facilitate the movement of the heavy traffic. For quick action and the efficient solving of problems that pilgrims may face, the Ministry of the Interior and Hajj, the Security Forces, the Passport Department and the Traffic Police work day and night in order to serve the innumerable hosts of pilgrims.

As a result of the latest modernization of the Holy Mosque, the prayers courtyard was extended and roofed till it reached 60 thousand square meters. A new entrance was built and the old entrances were repaired. The most powerful air-conditioning devices were installed not only for the internal space but also for the open place round the Kaaba. Lifts were also installed to facilitate the up and down movement of pilgrims. More than two million pilgrims can now pray simultaneously in the Mosque.

There is no doubt that all these figures are quite impressive. But for the ordinary person, particularly for those who come for the first time with no knowledge of these statistics, all that they see creates a stunning impression, and most certainly provokes a special sensation in them. I still remember this amazing feeling of serenity and tranquility which I felt. It was as though time had been frozen and all yesterday's concerns and problems seemed trivial and insignificant.

By modern standards, Mecca is not a big city. It is a radiant city, however. The clean roads which are planted

with trees on both sides are like small rivers flowing from the mountains in the direction of the center and punctuated by squares that are decorated with memorials in the wide streets. The four main squares are not there only to beautify the city. They are indeed special climatic areas wherein special devices have been installed that sprinkle drops of cold water and are a pleasant place for rest for the people of the city and the pilgrims. The rebuilt old buildings and the ultra-modern buildings are constructed at various levels as though rolling from the hills that surround the city in a closed chain from any point of which the Holy Mosque can be seen.

The large plaza whose area is 13,250 square meters, which surrounds the Mosque, is paved with marble slabs that have beautiful geometric shapes. At the edges of the plaza there rise buildings, offices and hotels of 10 to 13 storeys. And yet, the Mosque dominates the general view. God's House itself consists of the majestic cubic-shaped Kaaba. The Inviolable House has a main gate and 18 ordinary vaulted entrances, whose doors are decorated with yellow copper engravings. In the corners of the polygonal courtyard, there rise into the wide expanse of the sky majestic minarets that are a few dozen meters high on top of which are fixed golden crescents. The decorated arcades of its entrances seem to invite pilgrims into the cool shade. Here pilgrims take off their shoes and enter into a "forest" of 500 columns with crowns that are decorated with marble mosaics, drawings and beautiful calligraphy. The rosy ceilings are also decorated with golden Arabian ornaments, spirals, octagons and other shapes. The floor is

covered with innumerable carpets. The vaults overlook the courtyard in the midst of which is the cubic shaped Kaaba whose cover is inlaid with gold. The rows of people who stand in prayer face the Kaaba from all directions. The Holy Mosque is the only mosque in the world that has no prayer niche that faces the Qiblah, the direction of the Sacred Mosque.

The Kaaba is erected on a building that goes back to the time of Prophet Abraham, peace be upon him. Throughout its long history, it was rebuilt several times; its size and the number of its doors have changed and once it caught fire. The Black Stone, which is one and a half meters above the floor and which is fixed on its eastern corner was also broken into three parts. Then the parts were collected, gathered, tied with a wide pure silver band and fixed at the place where Prophet Abraham used to pray. It has an oval shape; its color is between red, brown and black with yellow parts. Its diameter is about 17 centimeters and has a twisting surface. Its front part is glossy and shining as a result of the billions of the touches and kisses of pilgrims.

It is well known that the Kaaba used to be covered with a kiswa (covering), whose color and fabric were according to the taste of those under whose protection it was. These included the rulers of Egypt, Turkey or Yemen. In the early days of Islam, it was white and red and was sewn with embroidered cloth. During the rule of the Ottoman Empire the kiswa was made of cotton and silk. But it was always decorated and embroidered with Arabian decorations and verses from the Quran engraved

in golden and silver threads. The present kiswa was made at a special factory that was inaugurated in 1975 and was given as a present by the ruling King Fahd at a cost of 5 million dollars (it is hand-embroidered by men only).

The Zamzam Spring was also restored and reconditioned. A plastic bottles factory was also established at the expense of the King. During the pilgrimage season cold bottles of Zamzam water would be distributed among the thirsty pilgrims. Hundreds of washing basins were also built for the comfort of pilgrims. The name "Zamzam" has originated from the ancient story of the Angel Gabriel whom God sent to Hagar and her son Ishmael, who were about to die of thirst and struck the ground with his wing as a result of which fresh potable water gushed at the feet of the child. When Hagar saw this miracle she exclaimed "zam zam", a verb meaning keep flowing. Since then, the water has never stopped gushing from this noble spring for the last four thousand years. Pilgrims have traditionally drank this water and poured it over their heads, bellies and backs. Then they take a sip and invoke Almighty God in supplication.

After the rites of devotion, the population go back home and the streets and roads become empty. But at the main plaza round the Mosque, ecstatic believers keep walking, swimming in a sea of light that floods the main Mosque. It is such that the hundreds of lit windows on the surrounding hills appear as faint spots. I have never flown over Mecca; but I can imagine the beauty that is revealed to travelers from the sky if they happen to look down at the proper time. I can imagine the scene like a brace surrounded by a

field of soft lights on the bosom of the earth.

At a distance of 400 kilometers to the north of Mecca, in a large oasis, is situated the City of the Prophet, peace be upon him, the cradle of Islam and the spring of light. It is the second holy City in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Its 1.5 million population comprise various races. The date of its establishment is not known. But what we are historically interested in begins in September of the year 622, the year of the migration of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

At that time, Prophet Muhammad and his followers were forced to leave Mecca and travel a distance of 363 kilometers through the desert. At the entrance of the City, its people gave a warm and bright welcome to the newcomers. At the place where the Prophet's camel stopped, he had the Qiba Mosque built, the first Islamic mosque in the history of humanity (at the time it was a small building of mud and straw).

Every one in the city would have liked to play host to such an important guest. But the Prophet did not wish to offend anyone; so he said he would stop where the camel would stop and be the guest of the owner of the house situated at that place.

At this place, he later on built his own residence. Throughout the following years, he received the revelation which had started in Mecca and continued in Medina through the Angel Gabriel, who brought down the teachings of Islam and gave the good tidings to people of the religion of Islam (submission to the will of God) and his followers came to be known as "Muslims" (those who

have surrendered to the will of God).

Eight years after his migration, Muhammad returned to Mecca victorious and purified the House of God from the idols. In the year 632, after a short sickness, the Prophet died at his residence, and after some time the original Mosque was extended and expanded several times to become one of the most sacred places for all Muslims – the Mosque of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Since the beginning of the implementation of the colossal plans for the modernization of the two Holy Cities and under the close supervision of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and his two brothers, Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan, the Medina Munawwara, and particularly its main Mosque, have received more extended and original repairs and modernization than even Mecca itself. Today, it looks as if it was a newly born city. Thus, it now has an airport that can receive all sorts of aircraft, a health center that is fully and magnificently equipped, an ultra-modern sports complex, high rising buildings, beautiful parks, wide streets and a network of roads and highways that are comparable to any modern network in the world. Water was brought to the city through pipes that crossed the desert and the mountains of the Red Sea coasts from a distance of 220 kilometers where the desalination plants are situated. This has given a strong impetus to the development of various industries. The plaza was emptied and all old buildings were pulled down and three ring roads were dug round the Mosque. Tunnels and bridges were also established to facilitate access not only to the Mosque but to all the landmarks of the city

from any place therein. In general, the renovation of all that is connected with the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him, is continuing in full swing all the time. Thus, a newcomer to Medina senses the subtle presence of the Prophet, peace be upon him, everywhere.

I have already talked about Qiba Mosque which was built at the entrance of Medina (at the time the whole city occupied a small area and was surrounded by a citadel wall that had four gates and there were two intercrossing streets that ended there). At this location, there rises now a lofty Mosque built of white stone in Islamic style. It has 62 domes and is crowned with four decorated minarets rising 42 meters high. There is a roof that can be opened when needed and that protects the internal section against the hot sun. This Mosque extends over an area of more than four thousand five hundred square meters and can accommodate 20 thousand pilgrims. It is also surrounded by beautiful parks and a thicket of palm trees.

This Holy City does not form part of the pilgrimage rites, though the Prophet peace be upon him, encouraged Muslims to visit it. Hence, throughout the year, the streets abound with visitors who are eager to visit all the holy places associated with the noble Prophet, peace be upon him, and with the history of Islam, and to offer prayers therein.

The Mosque of the two qiblas is unique in that it has two qiblas. It is well known that during the early days of Islam the qibla was directed towards Jerusalem. Then the Prophet was ordered, while praying at this Mosque, to turn towards Mecca in his prayer. Ever since then all

Muslims turn towards the Holy Kaaba in Mecca five times a day during their prayer. Thus the second, or rather the first qibla, was kept at this Mosque as a memory of times past. But in other mosques, the qiblas that were in the direction of Jerusalem were demolished .

There is another interesting Mosque “The Ghamama” (Cloud) where the Prophet used to pray very often, especially when invoking God Almighty to send rain. At the “Jumaa” (Congregation)) Mosque, the Prophet called believers for the first time to offer congregational prayer. The “Miqat” Mosque was built in the holy valley where the Prophet stopped to change his clothes and don the special pilgrimage garb (two white pieces of cloth). After being repaired, it was transformed into a gathering place that occupies 88 thousand square meters and can accommodate five thousand believers. This Mosque is also unique like the other mosques.

As to the Prophet’s Mosque, it underwent great repairs and extensions and was equipped with unmatched comfort facilities anywhere in the world. These were the outcome of intensive and elaborate work undertaken by leading construction companies from many countries. It should be pointed out that Western engineers, who are not allowed in the city, supervised the work from a distance outside the city by using the most up-to-date communication devices. A documentary film has been prepared showing all stages of this unique undertaking.

The Prophet’s Mosque complex occupies an area of 170 hectares, which equal the area of the whole city during the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him. It can

accommodate one million believers at one and the same time. Such huge multitudes can enter and leave through its wide gates without any congestion problems. It also contains 18 elevators (lifts) that enable visitors to go up and down the roof for prayer. Communication roads were built through a seven kilometer long tunnel to ensure the functioning of emergency systems, the distribution of sound, the extinguishing of fires, ventilation and air-conditioning. All over the 82 thousand square meters of the ground floor there are the most up-to-date electronic equipment, including computers. The unique audio equipment permit a balanced audio system that is free of echoes and without time gaps throughout the various parts of the floor building. The fire-fighting equipment are no less perfect.

Underneath the main plaza, there are parking lots for four thousand cars. Attached to the Mosque are 5600 washbasins, 18,900 toilets and 690 drinking water faucets. There are also 134 elevators (lifts) that facilitate the rapid movement of believers, specially during extremely crowded periods. I cannot omit mentioning the huge umbrellas that are installed on the roof to provide shade and protect the believers from the hot sun. These are operated mechanically and can be opened and closed at will. There are also 27 squares for prayer. These are provided quite an architectural innovation! Imagine -with mobile domes that you can now push a button and you move a ceiling dome that is beautifully decorated, as though you were opening the cover of a box.

My decision to give all these statistics is not prompted

by a desire to show off, but is simply to enable the reader to appreciate the colossal installations, transformations and funds that have been spent on them during the last ten years. Such spending amounted to 70 billion Saudi Riyals (equivalent to US\$ 18.7 billion!)

The Prophet's Mosque was re-built several times throughout its long history. It caught fire in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. But each time it was diligently re-built. Today, however, it is a majestic building overlaid with light colored granite stone. It has graceful minarets of white marble which are crowned with golden crescents. Its rigid looking front reflects the austerity and simplicity of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and is not as magnificent as the Holy Mosque in Mecca. The plaza round the Mosque is glossy and reflects the image of the Mosque like a mirror. It looks like a natural continuation of the Mosque. It is in fact a stone tapestry and so glossy that it reflects, like a mirror, the minutest of details, including the endless rows of electric lamps that are erected all over the Mosque's plazas. In fact, they should not be referred to as electric lamps; they are rather 10 to 12 meter-high granite works of art that are decorated with stone engravings and inlaid with sky-blue crystal glass.

The inside of the Mosque exhibits exquisite artistic splendor and refined taste. I will not describe the decorated ceilings, the graceful arcs, the unique chandeliers, the interlaced windows. The usual attributes and descriptions will not do. One needs to be a specialist to give an accurate description of the inside of the Mosque. The reader will somehow, but not completely, appreciate this from the

picture in the book, as the space of the place has a special color, a spiritual atmosphere that cannot be felt from the one-dimensional pictures.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about another “monument” established in the Prophet’s City in 1985. This is King Fahd’s Printing Complex for printing the Holy Quran, whose corner stone was laid by the King himself. Here the Quran is studied, interpreted and translated into several languages. Many impressions of the Holy Book have been made together with volumes of the Prophet’s traditions. Here also are produced tapes wherein is recorded the recital of the Holy Quran by famous recitors. This is a unique establishment in the whole world. It occupies an area of 250 thousand square meters wherein 1,700 specialists are involved in a highly specialized work comprising various disciplines. In the midst, there is a printing press and a sound recording studio equipped with the most up-to-date technical apparatus. This magnificent place comprises a consultative council, a linguistic board and committees that are specialized in Islamic and other studies. This Center produces 7 million copies of the Holy Quran every year, as well as 30 thousand cassettes which are sent, free of charge, to all Muslims the world over – an invaluable gift.

On inauguration day, King Fahd wrote in the honorary register the following words: “ I was here, two years ago, for laying the corner stone of this colossal project in this great City. I pray that God Almighty will crown my work with success in serving my religion, my country and all Muslims”.

The Eastern Province

We now draw near to the Arabian Gulf, to the Eastern Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or to the Hasa area. It lies between Kuwait (to the north), Qatar and Bahrain (to the east) and the United Arab Emirates (to the south). It has a 700 kilometer coastal strip. Here are found the largest, almost one quarter of the total world oil reserves. Palm trees and the sea were once upon a time the main wealth of the province, although people here were much better off compared to the remaining parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Spread between the endless chains of moving sand dunes and dry salty lands are beautiful orchards and palm tree thickets.

This province is also well known for its high-calorie dates, millet, oats, wheat, vegetables, cheese and yoghurt. The coast population were also involved in fishing and pearl diving. Caravans used to travel coming from Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq now) following the “incense road” on their way to Yemen and remote India and China along the coastal strip, avoiding the salty lifeless lands and the waves of sand hills, proceeding inwards in order to

exchange commodities at the oases and take provisions of food and water. None of the traders riding their camels ever thought that underneath the feet of their docile and toiling camels, deep in the earth, there was an invaluable wealth. Time passed slowly and it seemed that life would not ever change its ordinary way of living.

But things did happen. Thus, the tremendous reserves of black gold that were discovered in the late thirties of the last century have radically changed the life of the population in this province. Thus a new age began and left its great impact on the Saudi community.

Prior to the oil period, conditions were different in the Kingdom. The community was predominantly feudal and the economic activities centered on agriculture and cattle. Industry was confined to textiles. The majority of the population led a life of nomads and semi-nomads. The major needs of the population were imported; there were no cars and no railways, camels being the basic means of transport. There were no advanced means of communication and only some cities had small power plants. The major treasury revenues came from customs duties and the fees collected from pilgrims, whose number had been sharply reduced as a result of the world economic crisis between 1929 and 1933.

Under such extremely difficult conditions, King Abdulaziz decided to grant concessions to American and other companies. After long negotiations and unpredicted difficulties, an agreement was signed with the American Company Socal (Aramco later on), which granted the latter exclusive rights for oil prospecting, exploitation and

future export throughout the Eastern Province. Ever since then, the Kingdom's rapid economic development started, barring the years of the Second World War.

The initial industrial oil reserves were discovered in 1938. Less than a year later, the first liquid fuel tanker sailed from Ras Tannura sea port. Although the prospecting and excavation work had stopped during the war years, it was clear at the time that unimaginable oil reserves had been discovered in the Province. Since the late forties these reserves have multiplied and modern industrial cities have developed, thanks to these reserves: Dammam, Dhahran, Jubail and Khubar.

Dammam is the administrative center of the Eastern Province. It is the largest and most significant sea port and terminal of the only railways in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is a new city that was built in the seventies of the Twentieth Century on the basis of a unified plan: residential areas surrounded with thick verdure at a certain distance from the industrial quarter, where the many industrial plants are situated, as well as a commercial port and a desalination plant whose pipes that extend hundreds of kilometers bring fresh potable water to Riyadh and the other populated areas of the country. It also boasts of an archeological museum, where ancient tools, traditional bedouin clothes and household items are exhibited. Along the shore there extend for several kilometers shaded roads branching from the sea road, where the local population take walks in the early morning or during evening hours.

Dhahran is a few kilometers from Dammam. There are 40 major oil wells in it. From here, thousands of kilometers

of pipelines carry oil to one of the four major oil refineries in the world at Ras Tannura. Huge tankers carrying Saudi oil to America, Europe and Japan sail from this port, which King Abdulaziz has selected at the dawn of the oil age. Dhahran is the heart of the oil industry. Here the administrative center of Aramco is located, together with King Fahd University, which is a complete complex of modern buildings that is surrounded by parks containing jet fountains, waterfalls and a water pumping tower. Within the University campus, there is a special mosque and a large conference hall, a rich library and a permanent exhibition that reflects all stages of development of the oil and gas industry in the country.

The city of Jubail is situated at a distance of 90 kilometers to the north of Dammam. It started from scratch in place of a small fishermen village. It is now a big industrial and commercial port and the main industrial center in the Kingdom, where the oil technological plants and oil refineries are situated, together with everything connected with the black gold. This settlement was named after a small mountain (jabal) that stands close by. Although the original village was raised to the ground from the very start, the name did not lose its meaning and form. Thus Jubail now stands on a three-meter-high plateau that was erected on thousands of tons of sand specially brought for this purpose. This quantity is enough to cover the ground of 67 thousand one-meter-high football grounds. Wherever possible, it was planted with tidily shaped grass. There are three channels that extend from the sea to the industrial area. Although their water play a role in the

industrial process, it nevertheless returns environmentally more pure.

Thus in addition to the practical function, these facilities have an aesthetic one, being an embellishment for the city and a resting place for the population. The main road runs for several kilometers along the costal strip. Work is pleasant in this city, despite the thickets of brightly shining posts in the industrial area. I should mention in passing that a few specialists from Azerbaijan work here and in Riyadh and are doing a good job. Aramco's management and Saudi universities greatly appreciate their work and have expressed readiness to cooperate with our scientists for many years.

As in other new cities in the country, Jubail has an exhibition where a few things are shown. Needless to say, it cannot be compared to any of even the most modest of exhibitions in advanced countries.

Yet, when visiting these facilities I am struck by the care given by the authorities to everything that is taking place and their determination to record this historical period in the life of the area., one which is short, very swift and full of events for the present population and for the future generations.

One other thing about Jubail. It appears in the Guinness record as the largest construction project in the world, for the completion of which specialists from sixty different nationalities were involved.

The Eastern Province is not known only for oil. It is also known for its agricultural fields (by Saudi standards), for its cities and oases. In the latter, wind towers have

been preserved together with many old residential houses whose doors are of bright natural colors and balconies with wooden decorations. The first floors of these houses were used for storing dates, the currency of the population of the province at the time. Within the province, there is Al-Hafoof Oasis, which is the most beautiful area in the Province and which is considered the largest oasis on earth, with its green orchards and trees. Here there are many water sources and food resources for migrating birds heading south. Hence, the shaded areas would be full of the beautifully feathered birds whose singing fills the whole place from sunrise till sunset.

In the midst of the oasis and within the lush trees, is hidden Kara Mountain with its perpendicular slopes that have been eroded by the wind and its winding dark cold grottos. Legends have it that they were a safe haven in the continuous tribal wars in past centuries. Near Kara Mountain there is a village where pottery is made according to the old methods of drying in the sun and are decorated with bright colors. This pottery is in great demand by tourists.

Al-Hufoof is also known for a castle that goes back to the Thirteenth Century. It has two ancient mosques and the prince's palace. In addition, it has a large traditional camel market. This is an exotic place and is worth visiting if ever the reader has the opportunity to do so. This market is known, as well, to the neighboring Gulf States. Here one can buy camels, horses, falcons, parrots and the white donkeys for which the Eastern Province is well known, together with handicrafts made of wool, palm

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tree branches, yellow copper, pottery, wood, and old and modern bracelets.

Near the Qateef Oasis (meaning “fresh potable water”), in the turquoise water of the Arabian Gulf, there is a small island by the name of “Taroot”. Archeologists have it that this was the oldest settlement in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This settlement was one of the major centers of Sumerian civilization that flourished in the south of Mesopotamia five thousand years ago. The city was known for its pearls and precious stones market. It was a link between the Arabian Peninsula and the oldest centers in the world, which are now Pakistan, Iran and Egypt. In the Sixteenth Century, the last of the Arabian Peninsula’s conquerors rebuilt and completed the citadel, which had a great strategic importance once upon a time. But now there arose a cute and unusual situation. Thus while the presence of women in the citadel was quite natural, the representatives of the masculine sex are now strictly forbidden from entering it. These solemn archeological places have been prepared for the comfort and relaxation of women.

Adjacent to the eastern coast of the Kingdom are many islands in some of which one can find remains of old Turkish fortresses. The Ottoman Empire was keen on protecting its outer edges. Today such islands attract holiday makers.

Khubar is the most youthful part of the eastern Province. Before oil, its population were involved in pearl-diving. Today it is a modern multinational city. It has a high-rising business center, an international airport that serves the

whole Province, a large pier equipped for the anchoring of oil tankers that transport oil to Bahrain where it is refined, many hotels, parks, restaurants and amusement centers.

I visited Khubar with my husband more than once, on our way to Bahrain. This youthful city has left a pleasant impression on us with its wide boulevards, the glittering shop windows and beautiful beaches. What we remember most is a trade center with hundreds of stores, restaurants and children's recreation spaces, an amazing computerized jet that has what looks like glass pipes that wind and intercross, attracting many curious spectators.

I still remember the circular restaurant, which provides seafood. Its furniture reminds one of an old pub. Its walls are lined with dark seemingly burned wood planks, within which are erected water basins wherein exotic sea creatures abound. Ropes were hanging all over the place together with sails of old ships that exhibit old designs. The outside glass wall is circular like a bow and overlooks the sea that extends behind the horizon, giving the impression that one is on board a ship.

At the entrance, there was a one-meter long fishing boat that was skillfully made, with all the necessary accessories, on an old piece of wood as though it had been in the water no less than a hundred years before. In the main hall and behind the glass of the refrigerator, one can see all species of sea creatures: crabs, lobsters various types of fish of unusual size. Here we were asked to choose the dish we would like to eat. We sat round a huge wooden table covered with a cannabis cloth on which there was a basket full of loaves of bread, fresh from the oven, from which

there emanated a wonderful smell. We helped ourselves to this bread and were almost full before they served the main dish we had ordered. I am, personally, not keen on seafood, but I must say that I had never tasted anything so delicious! We had quite an experience, tasting almost all types of delicious dishes in this area.

In 1986, an unusual engineering project was completed. It was one of the longest bridges in the world extending for 25 kilometers from the shores of Khubar to Bahrain (now Kingdom of Bahrain). It bears the name of King Fahd because it was constructed with direct participation of the King with Saudi Arab funds (870 million dollars). It was instrumental in the development of the bilateral economic relations between the two states. Thousands of cars cross the Saudi-Bahraini borders daily, as the distance from there to Riyadh is merely 400 kilometers. Customs and border control is carried out on an artificial island near the Saudi coast. It is full of verdure and has two observation twin towers on both sides of the borders, their glass balconies overlooking a breathtaking view along the Persian (Arabian) Gulf.

The bridge itself has a winding shape and is made up of a series of supports. Travel along these unique heights is quite an experience, particularly as one descends. I remember that our grandchildren were thrilled here. Every now and then we would see shoals of small gay dolphins in the transparent water and we took pictures of them and enjoyed breathing the fresh sea air.

Description of the Eastern Province will not be complete if we omit talking about the pearls that are desired by every

woman. Its extraction from the Arabian (Persian) Gulf goes back to ancient history. History tells us that until recently, before the spread of Japanese artificial pearls, this was a highly organized and profitable business. At certain times, the Persian (Arabian) Gulf provided 80% of the world output of this exquisite natural jewelry. At Jubail only up to 200 boatloads would be extracted (boats were the counting units at the time) and the Gulf ports abounded with ships from London, Paris, New York and Bombay. Foreign traders would go ashore to conclude trade deals and send their agents along the coast for gleaning news from the markets on a big black or rosy pearl that was found by a certain person and then they rush to find the happy pearl-diver before other potential competitors find him.

Pearl-diving used to take place from May till September from boats and small ships. Divers would dive close to the coast round coral islands and would go as far as the Indian Ocean. A typical team would consist of a chief, who is usually the owner of the boat, a diver, who puts a weight round his waist, and an assistant who would pull up the diver at the proper time. Businessmen, in their private boats or in hired boats, would roam round the fishing boats and buy the recently extracted pearls from the chiefs of the teams. Then they would sell them to the traders or their agents. The new owners of the pearls would classify the pearls according to their size, color, shape, touch and brightness. Then they would gather them in strings and sell them in far off lands at prices that are many times their original price. As to the divers, these could hardly make

both ends meet and keep doing the hard and extremely hazardous work. Theirs was a short life because of the constant shortage of oxygen and the recurrent attacks by sharks. Whenever the head of the family died, his older, and even young, sons would take over. Thus this profession was transmitted from father to son to grandson, because the commodity is in great demand at all times.

In the thirties of the last century, the Japanese succeeded in implanting pearls in special nurseries. Such pearls are not chemically different from natural pearls. But the latter have a longer life. To distinguish between the artificial and natural pearls one has to break the pearl, as it is difficult to distinguish them by merely looking at them. X-ray helps of course. However, I do think that natural pearls are brighter and are never dimmed. But this is a personal impression.

During the last few decades, the extraction of pearls has nearly stopped. However, I have learned that it is being revived, this being for a number of reasons, particularly the new demand on natural pearls, and the emergence of a generation of amateur sportsmen, as well as the security provided against assaults by sea monsters (by using special techniques).

As to the boats, these have hardly changed during the last two thousand years and are still made in the same old manner without any nails or mechanical tools (drills are rarely used). These boats are quite durable and it is said that they are safer than those made the modern way.

Diplomatic Life

The reader may be interested in knowing something about the function of an ambassador's spouse and how she spends her days. Obviously, her main task is to provide a comfortable and peaceful home life in addition to giving moral encouragement and support to her husband in his demanding and variegated work. In representing his country, an ambassador does not bear responsibility alone, not even the embassy staff and their families alone. He is a link between his government and the leadership of the country to which he is accredited. He continuously receives a flood of information; he classifies and analyzes same and gives directives. He arranges meetings and press conferences and many such things. He does not have a comfortable and peaceful sleep because responsibility weighs heavily on him. The role of an ambassador's wife is confined to her standing by him, sharing his feelings and supporting him morally. In short, she has to be a real friend, an advisor and even a critic. Obviously, she has to have superior qualifications because she is considered not merely a woman but a representative of her people.

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Many are under the impression that the life of a diplomat is one of continuous enjoyment. This, however, is not true. His life is not always without clouds. The main difficulty relates to having to live away from home, from relatives, friends and one's children and grandchildren, all this in the absence of books, things that are cherished and in a different community and atmosphere. While an ambassador is busy in his favorite work, his wife would often have to sacrifice her own work. But if she is a self-dependent person, such sacrifice would not be much, as she is bound to find something to busy herself with and an opportunity to exploit her talents and seek to expand the scope of her information.

An ambassador's wife must be sociable. Therefore, she should be fluent at least in English, and preferably in the language of the country where she is staying. She must know the history of her country, its physical characteristics, customs and other information about it. She must have a good taste and a special costume. It would be a good thing to learn some national dishes of her country and how to prepare them well. Obviously, she must be widely knowledgeable so that she can make conversation with her neighbors at table during parties and diplomatic banquets (there is a special seating arrangement according to diplomatic protocol. Husband and wife may not sit adjacently. The same applies to guests. The hosts would sit at the opposite ends of the table). Finally, an ambassador's spouse must be on good terms with the spouses of other ambassadors, particularly those of states that have mutual interest with her own country. I can assure you that good

relations among such women have a great influence on the relations between their husbands.

The ambassadors' spouses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as in other countries, are members of the Society of Ambassadors' spouses (AWA). Groups are formed according to geographical distribution. Each group choose their chief and coordinators, who, together with all the other members, draw up the programs of the society's activities. These comprise charity auctions, bazaars and banquets throughout the country, as well as visits to schools, retarded children, the wounded in hospitals, and participation in official occasions and other visits.

The ambassadors are also united in groups. The most senior ambassador is considered the dean of the diplomatic corps and is the head of the diplomatic mission who would have spent the longest period in the country of accreditation. My husband is at present the dean of the Asian Group. I, myself, am the head of the European Group (part of the Azerbaijan territory is in Europe). The dean is usually greatly respected and is usually invited to all diplomatic functions. The Saudi Foreign Ministry communicates many of its decisions and recommendations to the state ambassadors through him.

Receptions given on official occasions, such as National Day, the Army Foundation Day, and other important events are among the elements of diplomatic life. Given that Saudi Arabia has 100 foreign ambassadors, financial institutions, representations and missions of various international organizations that have annual celebration occasions, you can imagine the frequency of such occasions. To these

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are added the functions given every now and then by the Royal Family, like the inauguration of exhibitions, charity bazaars and special invitations. Now since attending such functions is considered an important part of the duty of an ambassador, the latter cannot ignore them, and if forced to be absent, he would delegate the second in command at the embassy to attend on his behalf.

All diplomatic functions follow certain stereotype scenarios with little variation. To begin with, a row of couples of the diplomatic hosts would stand at a wide-open door, headed by the ambassador and his spouse to receive the guests. As the guests enter, pictures are taken of them as they shake hands with the hosts and express the compliments that are appropriate for the occasion and then they penetrate into the main hall or the garden (depending on the season). Often a film is shown on the host country to the accompaniment of low singing of the national anthems. Delicious national dishes are served, but what is more important is the opportunity of meeting of colleagues to discuss with them various matters, some of which are usually solved. Some may be so much absorbed in their conversation that they forget about the food. Thus, very often, my husband returns home hungry from such receptions and I would have to warm for him our own food at home, after he had missed the delicious food at the reception.

The women would choose the persons to chat with depending on their various interests and they get acquainted with the newcomers. Thus, they exchange cards and addresses, show their particular dresses and

partake of the delicious and appetizing food. But this is not a comfortable way of eating, for a woman should have the ability to hold in both hands at one and the same time a glass full of juice, a plate, a paper tissue, a knife and a fork, make sure she does not drop her handbag which is flung over her shoulder, and be able to talk at ease in a foreign language, without losing track of the subject of discussion.

The party keeps going for some time, and the guests keep arriving for an hour or more. Those who came first begin to leave and bid good-bye to the host in reverse order. All the while, the ambassador and his staff do not leave their position at the entrance for a period of 2.5 to 3 hours, which is not an easy matter, specially for the females who would be wearing high heels. Half way through the function, high-ranking military officers appear and the main guest (usually a prince) appears together with his entourage and circulates among the guests and sit on pre-arranged sofas. They would talk for a while and then the prince solemnly cuts a big cake on which is drawn the national flag of the host country, and then he tastes a piece thereof before he leaves.

The guests leave the place gradually and only the embassy staff and the representatives of the community remain. So they fill their plates and sit on the comfortable chairs in order to rest their tired legs, happy because many guests have come, which is an indication that the function was a success.

In addition to the receptions given on important occasions, ambassadors' spouses in the Kingdom



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participate in charity bazaars that are organized under the supervision of a princess, most often the spouse of the Crown Prince. The revenues are allocated to needy people in various countries. Usually, each embassy is assigned a long table or an open pavilion where all that the embassy has prepared for sale is exhibited. All the revenue would be handed over to the organizers of the bazaar. Each country tries to decorate its pavilion with bright colors and hoist the national flag over its pavilion. It usually takes a good look at its neighbor's pavilion, driven by a natural instinct of curiosity and competition. The latter begins with the start of the sale. The spouses of the members of the royal family, of the ambassadors and diplomats stand behind the tables and show their commercial talents. People would circulate willing to rid their fat wallets of their burden as soon as possible, as they have come here for this purpose, particularly as they are aware of the destination of the money they spend.

Our embassy always participates in such activities and sells ready-made dishes. I usually gather the spouses of the embassy staff two days in advance and ask each of them to cook a dish she is very good at preparing. Then we would discuss various details. Before the opening of the bazaar we arrange our exhibits in such a manner as to make the mouths of buyers water.

From experience, I realize that it is not easy to sell ready-made dishes. Buyers have a conservative taste and would prefer to buy sandwiches rather than an unknown dish even when very hungry. I remember the bazaar I participated in for the first time and how I felt upset when

potential clients would stop at our tables, look at our products and then leave without buying anything. So I took a newspaper and folded it in the form of a bugle and began to announce aloud: "Please don't go. You now have the opportunity to taste Azerbaijan food for the first time. If you taste our dishes once at least, you will want nothing else..." This announcement had a magic effect. Clients flocked to us; may be they never had a similar experience before.

Thus they bought Azerbaijan sweets, tasted them and came back to buy more for the family. Half an hour later, our table was empty and we were the first to hand over our revenue. Now, after a few years, and as a result of our participation in such bazaars and receptions and after showing films on Azerbaijan, I can say for sure that our dishes have become well known to many Saudis and are just as popular as Lebanese dishes.

During our stay in the Kingdom, we met many important people and have witnessed many events. Every year, the Royal Family would give a special reception to the heads of foreign missions and their families. One day a letter from the Royal Court was received by the Azerbaijan Embassy. It was an invitation by King Fahd to the ambassadors and their spouses to visit some towns on the Red Sea coast. A special aircraft was designated for this trip. So, on a certain day and at a certain time we went on this extremely organized trip. We were in good company. We visited technical cities including the industrial city of Yanbu, which means in Arabic "a spring". In this city there is an industrial zone that contains an oil refinery and the largest

desalination plant in the Kingdom, which is isolated from the residential areas. It was so well protected that we were under the impression that this was a comfortable summer resort (in the desert!). We were shown the exquisite local park which has a pond and a resting building, where we could listen to the singing of birds. Then we were shown a miniature of the city and the developments that had taken place therein and its future industrial development. There were so many water jets and arbored streets along the sea shore. Then they took us to the desert coast where all this would be done in the near future. At the time, I could not believe that the time designated for completion of all this would be enough. I haven't visited the place yet, by I have heard that the work is about to be completed.

On another occasion we visited Assir, which I will talk about in detail below. As I have already said many times, we have attended several weddings of the members of the Royal Family. They are joyful occasions which are never forgotten. The last of such weddings I attended in the year 2001 on the occasion of the marriage of the son of the Crown Prince Abdullah to the grand daughter of the son of King Abdulaziz. The wedding took place at an exquisite palace to which thousands of guests of the fair sex were invited. It was an exceptional exhibition of luxurious modes, exotic hair-dos, unique jewelry worn by the beautiful guests who were keen on showing their dresses with long queues.

The bride was 21 years old. She was dressed in a snow-white, white dress. Elegantly dressed children carried the long tail of her wedding dress watched by curious and

joyful eyes, while exotic perfumes filled the whole place. When the bride finally sat on her canopy, soft silver papers began to fall from the ceiling in honor of the bride. After watching this beautiful spectacle, I decided to take a look at the palace. The wide passages and the vast halls were covered with colorful carpets; the canopies and sofas were decorated with golden strings and edges; the cushions were covered with silk brocade. Behind the crystal glass of the cabinets which were made of decorated wood, exquisite decorative pieces, old silver items and lacework boxes were exhibited. Over all the doors there hung decorated curtains that ended with golden tufts. The walls were decorated with all sorts of beautiful tableaux, pictures of horses, which are dear to the hearts of all Saudis, and mirrors enclosed in precious frames. The faucets in the bathrooms were also decorated in fine taste. The faint lamps threw light not only on the perfume vials which were placed on marble and heaps of pepper mint, chewing gum, cardamom and carnation that filled beautiful vases, but also make beautiful reflections of the ladies in the mirrors because they hide the wrinkles on their faces.

When I returned to the hall, where all the activities were taking place, I noticed that it was decorated in refined taste. (At first my attention was focused on the dresses of the guests). From the ceiling there hung soft white palm trees that were intermittently lit with colored lights. The lateral raised floors were decorated with exquisite flower bouquets. Round the hall were huge bouquets in huge vases brought from Holland on that same day.

The bridegroom was an elegant youth who stood beside

the bride, wearing a typical white tunic. On his shoulders was a transparent cloak with golden edges. The couple constituted a beautiful sight and all eyes were focused on them.

I was subsequently acquainted with two sisters of the bride, who were just as pretty. I noticed that they looked like our Azerbaijan girls. I was also introduced to a very elegant lady, the spouse of Prince Khaled bin Sultan, who had played a very important role in the victory of the Gulf War and who had subsequently written a book on this serious experiment of his country, which book was later on translated into Russian.

I could not stay till the end of the wedding and left the palace at 3 a.m. But my more persistent friends had subsequently tasted all the sumptuous dishes and dispersed with all the guests in the morning.

In the context of the Twentieth Anniversary of the rule of King Fahd bin Abdulaziz many celebrations were organized in which the ambassadors' spouses had participated under the supervision of the King's spouse. Films were shown and exhibitions were staged commemorating the occasion, in which Saudi women did a wonderful job. On this occasion, we also visited the Shora (Consultative) Council, which is a consultative body akin to parliament and occupies an important position in the structure of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We watched a meeting of the Council from the spectators' balcony, at the end of which we met with the speaker and some members in the circular meeting hall, who talked to us about the function of this body and answered our questions. Then

they took us to the exquisite garden (a green piece from Europe) and showed us the halls, and many bureaus that had engraved ceilings which are decorated with bronze, marble and other decorative stones. I may not be able to give an accurate description of this wonderful place and its exterior view. But I can say most emphatically that it occupies a special position among the architectural master pieces of which I have talked in this book.

Our visit to the farm of the king's son, Prince Abdulaziz bin Fahd where the celebrations on the occasion of the Centenary had been organized have left lasting unforgettable impressions on us. This part of an old settlement in the desert that is at a distance of 40 minutes from Riyadh by car is one of the landmarks of the capital. To this place official delegations, heads of state and VIP's are invited. Inside the vast land that is surrounded by a mud wall, the traditional Royal Palace was rebuilt together with a high-rising observation tower. It is a true copy of the Masmak Castle in its actual dimensions, a bedouin camp, the ancient market, the school, the well, the plaza paved with stones. All the buildings were built from traditional materials, i.e. a mixture of mud and straw, according to the traditional method. The internal walls were covered with a thick layer of gypsum on which geometric shapes were engraved. The internal courtyard was surrounded by a row of columns, in the middle of which there was a small well. Between the spaces separating the doors there were hung guns, swords, spears and shields. On the stones were printed pictures of King Abdulaziz together with members of his family and his followers.

At Al-Masmak Castle we found, with the assistance of the owners of the place, hidden passages in its outside walls which were three meters thick. When sitting on pillows in one of the many bedrooms, we felt a bit cold, although the outside temperature was less than 20 degrees centigrade. In the old times, people avoided heat by applying certain techniques in building their residence, which techniques had been applied hundreds of years ago (thick mud walls, absence of windows, arrangement of rooms in one row and small triangular openings that produced effective ventilation).

We entered the barns of small camels and tasted their warm fresh milk. Then we returned to the farm and rode on white camels and royal horses. Later on, they offered popular dishes which were prepared in front of us. They led to the narrow alleys of the market where craftsmen practiced their profession just as their ancestors did in the recent past. We saw how they made baskets, decorated the sheaths of daggers with a silver wire, embroidered women's cloaks with golden strings, weaved camel wool, made a thin cloth on primitive machines and traded ancient items, grains and spices. On top of that, they enacted before us a scene of a typical dispute between a buyer and a seller. Finally, they gave us presents which they had produced manually. Then, passing by narrow alleys, we got to a well where two donkeys were extracting water with wooden buckets and ropes. At last, at the only classroom in the school, young actors performed a scene showing how pupils were previously taught and punished.

Towards the evening, the major activity began. The

guests were seated on chairs under a sail umbrella. Tens of carpets were spread on the stones of the plaza before the palace. Suddenly a group of horsemen appeared accompanied by the beating of drums: the men were riding white camels, their daggers stuck in their belts, swords on their shoulders, their leader in the front carrying a green banner. They made a few rounds, regrouped and left. This was followed by typical southern dances to the accompaniment of singing and the beating of drums, reminding us of African dancing. This was followed by dancers in colorful apparel representing the central parts of the Kingdom. Dancing was so inviting that some ambassadors joined in and additional swords were brought to them for that purpose.

Night engulfed us quickly, which is what normally happens in the desert. A cold wind blew gently and the mud royal palace was lighted. The full moon hung over the teeth of the observation tower and lighted the tops of palm trees. The beating of drums began to subside. Suddenly I felt a kind of ecstatic pleasure, as though I was free from time and space restrictions. I cannot explain what the nature of this feeling was, but I shall always treasure it in my memory.

There was, naturally, lunch and dinner. Tables were full of various types of dishes. Everything was just perfect and beautiful. In the bus we sat slightly tired, but grateful for this wonderful day.

The international tourism industry in the Kingdom is still in its first stage of development (with the exception of tourism links with Arab countries). However, the

government has undertaken to develop this field of human activity in the next few years. Nonetheless, I have found here the most appropriate conditions for curious diplomats. My husband and I have traveled extensively and seen almost all its provinces. We still remember in particular Assir area, a large area in the south west of the country, where one can see the chain of great mountains (up to height of 3.5 thousand meters) that are hidden in the layer of clouds. We saw the impenetrable forests, the fertile valleys, the blooming fields, the narrow, rocky mountain passes and the artificial lakes. This was a charming place, a modest climate, rare but abundant rain that fills the deep valleys with rushing streams. This area of 450 thousand hectares starting from the Red Sea was declared a national public park that is preserved by the State. Here grow a group of unique plants that are on the verge of extinction and birds feel completely at ease.

When at Assir, it is difficult to imagine that one is relatively close to a desert area where there is no water or life. There are artificial gradations of land that surround the slopes of mountains, a lush green place whose plantations climb up towards the summits and dig their roots in any small area between rocks where a small piece of soil exists, blooming guava and the thorny cactus fruits. Here, then, are exotic trees covered with a thick bark that looks like a hippopotamus. Other trees have thick leaves that have long interlaced thorns that constitute areas that cannot be traversed. On the graded descent and on the mountain slopes are spread among the palm tree, fruit and vegetable orchards, as well as farm fields, small villages whose

appearance is different from the other residential areas in the Kingdom. They are more akin to Yemeni villages, which is not surprising; for this chain of great mountains extend quite a distance to the south to enter the neighboring state. Moreover, half a century ago, people used to move from one area to another in search for good soil, regardless of the borders. At present, the Assir population build their houses in the same way their ancestors did, or they inhabit the remaining old buildings that are still in good condition, envy though they are hundreds of years old. Some villages cannot be immediately seen, because their houses are built of crushed stones; their straight roofs look like birds' nests.

The old mud houses, the mosques and the observation towers are quite distinctive. I will try to describe them, though this is no easy matter. They represent longitudinal towers of three to five storeys inclined towards the center and are of natural color. Their windows are oblong and narrow. The only impression I had of them when I saw them from a high altitude was that they looked like a chess board. The walls of these buildings were made of layers of a mixture of mud and clay and straight horizontal rows of flat stones that look like slates placed at unequal intervals and protruding from the wall for a distance of half a meter. These decrepit buildings have a beauty of their own. However, I have not been able to reach a plausible explanation of this architectural exuberance. However, I am certain that, in addition to the aesthetic aspect, there must have been a practical function. These protrusions that surround the building most probably protect its not so

strong mud walls against heavy rain.

On the slopes of Assir there is a village whose houses were painted with very strange colors reflecting orange, green and blue bright spots on a background of white and golden colors. Thus, like children who have been given colors for the first time, the local population color whatever can be colored: parts of walls, the foundations of their houses, the stairs and even the soft rocks in the yard. They also color the frames of windows and doors with various stripes of colors that are not always straight. Everything that is plastered inside they cover with drawings beginning with the thresholds, the ceiling, the walls and the floor. Here one can see real objets d'art. The gypsum pictures look from a distance as though they were genuine carpets. At one house, we saw a mud floor of this type that reminds one of a local wooden arched floor as though it was the surface of a sea shell. I am not sure whether it was easy to walk thereon, although it was certainly beneficial.

Curiously enough, the people of these regions prefer not to put glass in their windows. Instead they put laces and in rainy weather they close them with bright colored doors made of olive wood. Saudis do not only cover their doors with drawings but they decorate them with engraved drawings and cover them with hides and brass and use unusual locks for them.

Within ten years, the capital of Assir, Abha, was transformed from an isolated village, which was situated on the cross-roads of caravans and has always water shortage problems, into a modern city with artificial lakes and water jets. It receives water from a 215 kilometer

long pipe emanating from the Red Sea.. One can see in Abha high-rising buildings, hotels, banks, companies and residential areas. It now has a university of its own, a museum and an exquisite conference compound, a medical city and a special ground for the landing and taking off of helicopters, as well as a sports compound. The authorities have repaired the old residential buildings and mosques and take good care of them.

Abha is also known for its skilful craftsmen, its weekly markets, where one can buy juicy pears, water melons, mango and other exotic fruits, together with vegetables from the local agricultural fields. Woodwork masters make, on the spot, before the eyes of spectators, kitchen ware; blacksmiths and metal engravers make agricultural machines for local use, as well as fire arms, swords and exquisite daggers. The goldsmiths make jewelry akin to old ones, including ear-rings, bracelets and other pieces of ornamentation that are indistinguishable from ancient ones.

What is more interesting in Abha are the local population of buyers and sellers, who have managed to adapt to the severe conditions in the mountains, where they experience excessive changes of temperature and collect the valuable drops of water from the falling rain in special pre-fabricated basins called “fanatees”. They move from one mountain to another using ropes, are strongly attached to the places wherein they live and do not like to answer questions put to them by curious people, although they are always smiling and courteous. Mountainous people tie their dark colored tunics with belts decorated with silver

and daggers.

In the markets, one can see the “Flower Bedouins” who live in Assir. They are distinguished from others by their great attraction to the flora of their homeland. The men put black kuhl on their eyes and prefer multi-colored clothes. On their heads, they wear diadems or they simply shove in a bunch of flowers or fragrant herbs under their head bands. Young bedouins crown their heads with luxurious bunches, while the older men use modest diadems of basil, peppermint and wild herbs that grow on the slopes of mountains. Even in their chest pockets they put small bunches to give to the first person they meet if his flowers are withered. They are masters of flower arrangement. I think they are also involved in the business of perfumes, graze goats and cultivate flowers and vegetables. I heard that the Flower Bedouins like dancing to the accompaniment of the beating of drums under moon light. The women also embellish themselves with fragrant flowers. Before marriage, they cover their hair with orange shawls and fix plants behind their ears. Flower Bedouins use well known herbs for treating their ailments and prefer vegetables. I think that such people who live in harmony with nature must be extremely happy.

The road to Assir is beautiful although the greater part of the region is tortuous. There are sharp slopes and narrow paths. But engineers have found unusual solutions. Thus they dug 172 tunnels in the rocky territory and built 580 bridges that are supported by strong columns of various heights, by means of which the winding route traverses one mountain after another. One feels flying over a deep

abyss between high-rising slopes. I must admit that this sight is not for the faint-hearted.

In the places where the mountains seem more docile and less steep, one can see, over the summits and close to people's residences, old stone observation towers and grain stores that are used even these days. These stores were built a few centuries ago and reflect great know-how. Thus the grains are preserved for long periods of time without using any technical devices. We have always thought of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a hot waterless desert. But this region does not only provide grains for itself; it also exports them, thanks to the important role played by the Assir farmers.

We were lucky to see so many important things in the south-western region of the Kingdom. But the space available in this book does not permit us to talk about everything. However, I cannot miss the opportunity of talking about an important landmark therein.

It is well known that the trade route along the western and eastern coasts of the Arabian Peninsula were quite familiar in the second millennium A.D. One of these routes is known in the West by the name of "the Incense Road", which extends from Yemen through the desert and mountains to Syria, Egypt and Constantinople. Assir was part of this route, which is known in the Arab world as the "Elephant Route". This name is connected with the memory of the campaign of the Abyssinian military leader Abraha in the year 570 A.D. who attempted to invade Mecca. This route was later used by pilgrims as well. Many kilometers of this route were paved with long stones

(this is reminiscent of the China Wall and the Egyptian pyramids), which stones were smoothed by the feet of animals that carried commodities and the feet of people during thousands of years. Caravans used to stop for rest at caravansaries, some of which can still be seen today. Travelers used to stretch their tired feet, unload the goods from the back of tired animals, drink, eat and lie down for rest. Others, who were more active and talented would draw on the trees pictures of domestic animals, tigers and lions, which they had seen on their long journey, as well a mountain goats, the hunting scenes and recent battles, together with signs that referred to words or letters.

There are plenty of such exquisite artistic drawings along the routes of caravans in Assir, most of which have been studied and go back to the Islamic and pre-Islamic eras. As to the “Elephant Route” and the rare wells all along such route, these were buried under stones and sands, but some have remained and are greatly appreciated by scientists and knowledge-loving tourists.

Conclusion

Until the early Twentieth Century, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with its severe climate, very poor population, traditional patriarchal social systems and the minimal potentials for economic development, was considered a negligible party in which nobody was interested in the civilized world. Hence, the country's jump, within a short time, from the Middle Ages to today's accomplishments, excelling developed countries, is, by all measures, nothing but a miracle. Obviously, the main reason is the discovery of the black gold, thanks to which the country seemed to be floating on a sea of oil. However, we cannot tell how its further development would have been, had it not been led by the great and strong willed personality of King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman, "the Father of the Nation". For he devoted himself to building the state which he had established and to strengthen same, by implementing the plans and projects which had seemed an unrealizable dream at the time.

However, irrespective of the fact that the flow of petrodollars, particularly after the Second World War,

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has increased year after, and lifted the country from the deep abyss of backwardness to what it is today, this has necessitated the exertion of special and unusual efforts that succeeded in bringing about this miraculous change and development. I would like to point out that the people of Saudi Arabia were very lucky, for from the very start, their kings have considered the Saudi citizen as an absolute and ultimate priority. Thus, in a few decades, the sons of King Abdulaziz have effected radical socio-economic reforms that have raised the country to a high level of development and secured for the population an unprecedented quality of life.

While the Kingdom possesses a quarter of the world's oil reserves, it occupies first position today in terms of the extraction and exportation thereof. The export revenues still represent the basis for the socio-economic development of the country. Therefore, it is to the great credit of its leaders that they have managed to take full and complete control of the oil aspect of the economy, which has made the Kingdom free of world oil monopolies. However, despite the present rates of extraction of the black gold in the Kingdom, experts say that its reserves would last for a hundred years. For its part, the government, headed by the King, also looks to the future and makes preparations therefor. They have laid down, as a strategic objective, the gradual reduction of the extraction of the liquid fuel, on the one hand, and the acceleration of the extraction of natural gas and the development of the industrial branches of oil refining and of the petrochemicals, on the other. Even today, the national economy meets the internal

needs of the country in terms of oil chemical products, constructions materials and many consumer goods. Moreover, the Kingdom has at its disposal substantial fund balances, a large part of which is invested in the economy of foreign countries. Its banking sector, that is developing aggressively, and has become a part of the world financial system.

As a result of the balanced economic strategy of the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the country did not feel the impact of the strong financial crises, particularly during the Gulf crisis in the Arabia Gulf. Thus it has exposed a large part of its reserve to develop at a low rate under any circumstances, even those that are not appropriate and plays an important role in protecting and defending the region. In addition, King Fahd has decided to reduce, by half, the prices, which had not originally been high, of some public services. Moreover, even if the country were to suffer any difficulties, the citizens would always be under the care and protection of the Monarch.

The time when foreign companies used to own, wholly or partially, the national wealth of the country, was gone a long time ago. Today, it is the citizens themselves who participate directly in the development of their country and they themselves distribute the oil revenues. Hence, they have one of the highest standards of living in the world. They do not pay taxes; they receive loans that do not bear interest for building their houses. They receive free education and medical care. Their medical care system is equipped with the most-up-to date technology and the high-quality medical care and education are accessible to

the whole population, from the dwellers in major cities to those who live in the isolated bedouin tents in the desert.

Saudis should be proud of their agricultural activity. Three decades ago the Kingdom could not provide food for itself. Consequently, the government, feeling the danger of the consistent increase in the import of food, has sharply increased its expenditure on agriculture.

Many artesian wells were dug in several areas, expensive pumps were bought, fertilizers were used and the most up-to-date technology was applied. The result was that in the mid-nineties of the last century the Kingdom was self-sufficient in terms of the basic food commodities. Indeed, it became an exporter of poultry, fish, fruits and vegetables, and even wheat (this was in the desert, on mountainous terrain and artificial, narrow areas!), thus competing with the imported food commodities and driving them out of the market.

I remember how the head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry has accompanied us, my husband Elman Arasli and I, on a tour of a newly established dairy factory, explaining to us all the processes, although, by virtue of his position, he was not supposed to know all such minute and small details. Then he urged us to taste all the products of the factory which were no less than twenty different items.

I can say in all honesty that during my stay in the Kingdom, and having tasted all the dairy products of many countries, I came to the conclusion that those produced in the Kingdom are the most tasty. This is because synthetic fodder does not exist in the Kingdom, and the rural

population cultivate, in the shade of palm trees in the fertile land, the clover that grows in abundant quantities, with which the grateful cows are fed and produce delicious milk.

The Kingdom has scored another world record by erecting 29 major plants for the desalination of water, together with hundreds of kilometers of water pipes, thus putting an end to the permanent water shortage. Modern roads and means of communication were constructed for connecting all parts of the country, together with transport means that linked all the major regions by modern highways. The exceptional 25 Kilometer highway was constructed over the water of the Arabian Gulf that linked the State of Bahrain (now the Kingdom of Bahrain) with the Kingdom.

While the Saudis have made great progress and success in all fields of life, they nevertheless did not blindly imitate the West in everything. They merely confined themselves to the adoption of the western accomplishments that did not run counter to the moral rules and national principles and values. In other words, and in the first place, the sons of King Abdulaziz, who have ruled the country, have always shown great respect to the deeply rooted traditions of the Arabian Peninsula and popular customs and have been staunch defendants of Islam.

In the field of international relations, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents a leading country of the Islamic world that takes into account not only its own interests but also those of the Arab and Islamic worlds. At the same time, it has military-political and commercial – economic

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relations with the West, particularly with the United States of America and stands against the all-out confrontation of the West. It firmly condemns the emerging tendency to radicalism and all forms of international terrorism. The Kingdom may be counted as one of the most influential factors affecting the current processes in world politics, and is the actual, effective force in its impact on the balance and security of the Gulf region and the Middle East region.

Thus, pursuant to the Islamic solidarity approach, the care given to the citizens of the Kingdom has secured for them one of the highest standards of living in the world,. The Kingdom confronts any crises and responds to any calls for assistance in catastrophes, providing the needy countries with generous assistance. It is no accident that this country is described as “the heart of the Islamic body”. In terms of the scope of assistance which has exceeded seventy billion dollars during the last twenty five years, the Kingdom has made such progress as to have left other countries way behind. Thus refugees and displaced persons from Azerbaijan receive basic aid from the Kingdom in the form of food, medicine, school accessories and sacrificed meats (2.5 to 5 thousand slaughtered sheep annually). A bakery was established as a gift and a farm was bought in order to provide employment for the refugees. Care was also extended to the participants in the Karaback War in 1998. Those disabled as a result of this fierce war have exceeded the period of treatment at Riyadh’s hospitals. Some of them have undergone extremely complicated surgeries.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was among the first states to recognize the national independence of the

Azerbaijan Republic and established diplomatic relations therewith. The actual embodiment of the readiness of both countries to collaborate more closely is linked with the name of the President of the Republic, Haidar Aliyev. The decree connected with the opening of an embassy for our country in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the visit of the President of the Republic that followed in July 1994, his discussions with King Fahd bin Abdulaziz and the Azerbaijan-Saudi Agreement on cooperation in all fields of activity concluded by the governments of the two countries – all these have laid down firm foundations for the development of relations between both states.

Our two countries are successfully cooperating in the political, economic and human fields. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports the efforts of the Azerbaijan leadership connected with the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute. Despite the repeated attempts of Armenia that occupies 20% of Azerbaijan territory, the Kingdom did not establish diplomatic relations therewith. Many major Saudi companies have invested capitals in developing the economy of our country. Joint establishments have been formed, and the Islamic Development Bank has granted easy loans for the establishment of collecting canals and external highways for motor cars, for the redesigning of an electricity generation plant, the re-exploitation of the freed territory, and the reparation of the damages of earthquakes that had hit the area of the capital, Baku.

The Saudis have also contributed financial aid in restoring the rich collection of the ancient Arab manuscripts that were kept at the Manuscript Institute in

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our capital (one of the founders of this institute was the well known scholar who died a long time ago, my father-in-law, the Republic's academician, G. Arasli). There is also active cooperation in respect of labor migration. Azerbaijan doctors are now operating successfully at medical institutions in Riyadh, Mecca, Medina, Jubail and other Saudi cities, and their work is greatly appreciated by the Saudi Ministry of Health. As to the patients, they usually wait in queues before their clinics. A group of Azerbaijan specialists are preparing themselves to join the medical staff in the Kingdom. On the other hand, I cannot omit mentioning the chemical scientists who came from Azerbaijan and did a wonderful job in the Kingdom, as a result of which they earned the respect and admiration of those in charge of the institutions and departments wherein they worked. In short, relations between Azerbaijan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undoubtedly constitute an accomplishment of the people of both countries, who have many things in common and similar aspirations.

Today, towards the end of April 2002, as this book is about to be completed, eight years have elapsed since I first set foot on the soil of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A long period has elapsed in our accelerating life. It has been an active and interesting period. I have already said that at first I experienced psychological difficulties and depression during the first months of my sojourn here. The environment seemed to me incomprehensible and strange. I felt uncomfortable and annoyed by the unusual dresses. I came to the conclusion that real life was there in my own country. The severe heat was a source of great

discomfort. I had no desire to leave the places which were air-conditioned. But one morning, probably in late September, when I went out into the garden, I suddenly felt a wave of cool and perfumed air. I remember that this sudden sensation made me feel that life was sweet and full of significance and that anywhere on earth there is something that is amazingly interesting.

Throughout the years, with some interruption, and without depending in particular on my memory alone, I have recorded in my diary the important and interesting facts and events that had affected our life in the Kingdom. While in Riyadh, during the trips we made all over the country, I have tried not to confine my observations and impressions to what I saw with my own eyes but have stored what I saw in my inner intuition the world we discovered, the odors, the sensations, the emotions resulting from coming into contact with this world that surrounds us. During my meetings with the princesses and ordinary women I have always tried to understand and comprehend their life, which was unlike our own. Therefore, I have won many real friends. Thus, everything I saw and experienced in this country was interesting to me. I wish that my description of all this will convey to the reader my own sensations of all that was interesting and beautiful and that it will dispel any boredom that might be felt as the pages of this book are unfolded. I take this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to my husband, who has given me such support and encouragement as enabled me not to stop half-way and to complete what I have attempted to do in writing this book.

When I reviewed the manuscript of this book from beginning to end, I discovered that it was written from a clearly rosy point of view. But I will not change anything in it, not a single letter, because the many things I saw and experienced in this country have provoked my sincere appreciation and amazement. When I first arrived in the Saudi capital, I had to accept Riyadh as an indispensable duty. But when I knew that at this place where there are high-rising buildings, and hundreds of thousands of cars roam all over the city, and the lights of advertisements illuminate the dark night, transforming it into bright day, when I realized that 25 years ago it was a mere desert of many hills, where mad dogs barked all night, I thought to myself: Isn't this a miraculous magic?

Now I can say with all confidence that my first impression of rejection of local life here, which I first felt upon our arrival here, is gone for ever. I recall in this context the saying that "one should live long in a place in order to comprehend what exists and what has existed previously". I have loved this country, its people, its stern nature, ancient, recent and most recent history, which has taken place before our own eyes, as though we were spectators observing the unfolding of events that take place on the platform of a theater or on a cinema or television screen.



**Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Seen by a Diplomat's Spouse**