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Journey of Czechoslovak Cultural Delegation to Egypt in 1956. "Cultural Agreement" between Egypt and the Czechoslovak Republic¹

Abstract:

Czechoslovak interests in Egypt were fostered since 1920s. Diplomatic relations were already established in 1922 and smoothly continued even during the World War Two. In the second half of the 1950s there was more noticeable regeneration of mutual relations when Czechoslovakia, as a result of the Soviet Union's new political trend, supplied military equipment to the Egyptian Army. Additionally to the arms supply, the economic relations revived and both countries also established cultural cooperation. In 1956, Czechoslovak Cultural Delegation arrived in Egypt within the Cultural Agreement negotiations. The delegation's assignment was to prepare the documentation for this agreement. However, one of the substantial results of these negotiations included the establishment of the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology, based in Prague and in Cairo.

Key words: Egypt, Cultural agreement, The Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology, František Lexa, Zbyněk Žába, Andrej Bagár, Jaroslav Putík, Adolf Hoffmeister, Ivan Frič

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Klíčová slova: Egypt, Dohoda o kulturní spolupráci, Československý egyptologický ústav, František Lexa, Zbyněk Žába, Andrej Bagár, Jaroslav Putík, Adolf Hoffmeister, Ivan Frič

Czechoslovak political, economic and cultural relations with Egypt had a tradition dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. In early 1920s the Czechoslovak republic established a consulate in Alexandria and in 1922 the office of a minister plenipotentiary was established in Cairo.² During the Second World War Egypt recognized the Exile government of Czechoslovakia and so the minister continued his activity. After the war, political and economic relations functioned only within a restricted scope and they almost froze when the Communist Party grew in power in Czechoslovakia. After the political change in Egypt in 1952 and mainly in connection with growing influence of Gamal Abdel Nasser³, the mutual relations were revived, especially within political and economic area. The flourishing economic relations finally led to the fact that the status of the office was promoted to an embassy in 1956.⁴

The Czechoslovak trades and industry export were accepted already in interwar Egypt. Mutual trade comprised primarily of Egyptian export of high quality long-staple cotton. Czechoslovakia exported textile products, consumer goods and, in 1930s, also heavy manufacturing commodities, although, export of arms was, with few exceptions (machine guns ZB 26), precluded due to British-Egyptian agreement about the arms compatibility.⁵ Trade tradition continued after the Second World War, when especially the export of arms and military equipment intensified. Czechoslovakia exported weapons to Egypt as soon as in 1946 and 1947, yet the most important contracts were implemented only in the course of the 1950s. In October 1951, the Economic and Payment Agreement between Czechoslovakia and Egypt was signed; it included a confidential protocol about exchanging Czechoslovak weapons and ammunition for Egyptian cotton.⁶ Though, this agreement was not implemented in the end. In consequence of Egypt-Israel relations deterioration, Nasser endeavoured to purchase weaponry for the Egyptian Army.

2) Viz Jůnová Macková, A., Navrátilová, H., Havlůjová, H., Jůn, L. (2009), pp. 85–110.

3) Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970). *In 1952 was in the vanguard of the military coup which deposed former Egyptian king Faruk I, and after a short rule of Faruk's minor son Fuada II, the republic was established. In 1954 Nasser became a prime minister, then a president in 1956.*

4) Příručka o navázání diplomatických styků a diplomatické zastoupení Československa v cizině a cizích zemí v Československu 1918–1985, Praha 1987. Bareš, L., Veselý, R., Gombár E. (2009), pp. 680–681.

5) Viz Jůnová Macková, A., Navrátilová, H., Havlůjová, H., Jůn, L. (2009), pp. 111–127.

6) Zídek, P., Sieber, K., (2009), pp. 52–53.

After lengthy negotiations with the United States and West European countries, Nasser appealed to the Soviet Union. The first serious negotiations with the Soviet Bloc countries began in Cairo in March 1955, where a delegation of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Trade participated. In August of the same year, the Egyptian delegation negotiated with Czechoslovak and Soviet sides in Prague, as the Soviet share in the supply was more than 50 %, though it was all mediated via Czechoslovakia⁷ On September 12, 1956 the Agreement between Czechoslovakia and Egypt was signed, and four days later, the Czechoslovak-Soviet Agreement about weapons supply to Egypt was agreed.

During the second half of the 1950s when, in consequence of the Suez Crisis, Egypt became more closely attached to the Soviet Union, additional contracts were concluded, this time not only for the weapon supply, but also for the whole investment units supply within Egyptian industry development support. Arms exports thus opened the way for Czechoslovakia not only to augment its total export, but also to develop mutual cultural relations between Czechoslovakia and Egypt.

Cultural Agreement

The Egyptian government despatched a delegation of experts to find out new opportunities for business, political and cultural contacts in Europe in December 1953. One particular result of these initial negotiations also included the Cultural Agreement. The first proposals of Czechoslovak – Egyptian cultural cooperation were discussed at the end of 1953 and in 1954. They were dealing with mutual licensing of gramophone records, exchange of archaeological objects, translating of specialised publications, film export and fellowships for students and scholars in both countries, as well as with the idea of exhibitions representing culture and industry of each country on its partner's premises.

The new Arab Republic of Egypt was to look for partnerships, especially after the Suez Crisis (1956) modified the horizons of the Egyptian foreign policy, however, the Central European connections developed gradually. If we make a list of cultural contacts at the beginning of the 1950s we can see only rare actions. Czechoslovak tourist posters were exhibited on an international exhibition in Cairo, the Demotic grammar of Professor František Lexa was sent to eminent Egyptologists, Czechoslovak films were screened during an industrial exhibition in Cairo and the Czechoslovak mission obtained cultural advertising materials to disseminate. These were singular activities, whereas there was – at least formally – an interest in a more durable cooperation and contact. This is illustrated by an official document of the Ministry of Culture from 1955:

7) *It concerned a contract for 921 million Czechoslovak Crowns. Egypt then purchased airplanes, armored vehicles, tanks, torpedo boats, anti-aircraft guns, etc. See Zídek, P., Sieber, K., (2009), chapter Československo-egyptská smlouva (1955), pp.54–59. Wanner, J. (2006), pp. 136–165. Durman, K. (1966), pp. 410–411.*

*"The interest of the Egyptian side in a formalised and stabilised contact with Czechoslovakia in terms of culture and education exceeds our expectations, and it is undoubtedly closely related to recent Czechoslovak import of arms to Egypt. The Egyptian Foreign Affairs Ministry speaker Mr Saleh Khalil informed our ambassador Karpíšek, that the Egyptian government has a clear interest in a cultural agreement."*⁸

In 1956 an Egyptian delegation should have been sent on a tour to Europe including the Czechoslovak Republic, and a Czechoslovak delegation should reciprocally visit Egypt. They should have concluded the cultural agreement and elaborate a plan of actions for 1957. Due to the difficult political situation in Egypt the Egyptian delegation was postponed.

The visit of the Czechoslovak delegation to Egypt was planned for autumn of 1955. The Egyptians expected a political delegation but the Czechoslovak ministries preferred a team of scholars. Therefore the delegation was comprised of Andrej Bagár, Vice-Chancellor of the Arts Academy in Bratislava, two Egyptologists, professor František Lexa and Dr. Zbyněk Žába, a journalist – Jaroslav Putík, an artist – professor of Prague Academy of Arts Adolf Hoffmeister and Ivan Frič, a cameraman of Czechoslovak state film agency.

Documents concerning preparation and realisation of their travel are preserved in Ministry of Culture, including a report⁹ by the leader of the delegation, Andrej Bagár. Mission accomplished, several documents were purposefully created for the general public. There are of course also more private papers. However, our evidence about the journey is still not complete. There was undoubtedly an activity behind the scenes, for which the academic entourage was a plausible cover. In any case, the overt aim, i.e. building up cultural contacts with Egypt, was later promoted by the members of the delegation in their published work. In this paper we would like to concentrate on the open, more or less public face of the delegation and introduce the papers which enable us to do so. The wider circumstances as well as a discussion on the general political setting are outside the scope of this paper, though not outside the scope of our research.

8) Original: "Ochota egyptské strany k úpravě kulturních styků s ČSR – která bezpochyby také přímo souvisí s posledními dohodami o dodávkách čs. výzbroje pro Egypt – jde dokonce až za hranici očekávaného zájmu, neboť podle zprávy, sdělené při jednáních čs. vyslanci Karpíškovi mluvčím egyptského ministerstva zahraničních věcí p. Sálehem Chalíl se egyptská vláda zajímá přímo o uzavření dohody o kulturní spolupráci s ČSR, National Archives, Prague (NA), documents of Ministry of Culture, box n. 330, n. 7214580/1955.

9) NA, documents of Ministry of Culture, box n. 330. Report about the travel of Czechoslovak delegation to Egypt May 25-June 27 1956, 20 pp.

We must bear in mind that an open stance toward "Orient" was *de rigueur*. The Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences still possessed an Oriental Institute, inherited from the interwar period. This institution embodied the interlaced economic, political and scholarly interests. For the general public, there appeared a new periodical "The New Orient" having for a time a Czech as well as an English version.¹⁰ The Czechoslovak public was to be acquainted with the "oriental" countries as possible partners on the long way of the progress of humankind.

In this context, two publications by delegation members Jaroslav Putík and Adolf Hoffmeister appeared in the later 1950s.¹¹ Papers of an Egyptologist František Lexa contain four letters¹² written by Lexa to his wife and a text for the Czech broadcasting company¹³ about the journey and its results. The Czech institute of Egyptology has its own rich archive from this period concerning the foundation of the institute¹⁴, whose beginnings were discussed exactly during this official visit to Egypt.

The delegation was in its beginning planned as a part of a bilateral exchange of Egyptian and Czechoslovak delegations, so the Czechoslovak republic was to pay travel costs and accommodation of Egyptians and Egypt was to cover these costs for the Czech side. In the end the accommodation and other expenses of Czechoslovak delegation during its four-weeks- stay in Egypt indeed were met by the Egyptians.

Because of its allegedly non-political character the delegation, consisting of men of art and the academy, was neither expected nor in fact officially empowered to deal about the Cultural Agreement. The Czech Ministry of Culture expected that the delegates would act as a propaganda team of the Czechoslovak republic in Egypt and would bring new information important for dealings about the agreement.¹⁵

The Egyptian Ministry of Culture sent its proposal of the agreement to the Czech government, and the Egyptians expected to finalise the official version during the stay of the (unrealised) Egyptian delegation in Prague. However, eventually, the leader of the Czech group was given sufficient powers to discuss the first proposal.¹⁶

10) *The New Orient* was printed from 1945.

11) Jaroslav Putík (1957), Adolf Hoffmeister (1957).

12) Archive of the Academy of Science, Prague (AAVČR), personal papers František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27.

13) AAVČR, personal papers František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27.

14) Archive of the Czech Institute of Egyptology, box n. 1.

15) NA, documents of Ministry of Culture, box n. 330, part n. 32586/1956, Prague 1956, Report from Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo.

16) NA, documents of Ministry of Culture, box n. 330, part n. 32586/1956, Prague 1956, Telegram from Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo.

The arrival, originally planned on May 15th, was postponed several times, because of the Ramadan. On May 21st the programme for the delegation in Egypt was not yet ready and the Czech government sent several telegrams to the embassy in Cairo clarifying the official status and importance of the delegation.

We can follow the itinerary and activities of the Czech group in Egypt with the help of letters of F. Lexa and a report by Andrej Bagár. As the report tried to be objective, and to inform what happened each day, who they were talking to and what did they visit, letters of professor Lexa are quite often subjective.

The visit lasted from May 25th till June 27th. We can follow three rather distinct aims of the Egyptian visit; first – official meetings with persons of Egyptian cultural and political scene, second – touring ancient Egyptian and Islamic monuments, and third – inspecting factories, as well as attending theatres, and meeting journalists active in Egyptian newspapers and magazines, as well writers, artists, and scholars, especially Egyptologists.

The delegation boarded an Air India flight in Prague; the flight took nine hours and they landed in Cairo at 7 a. m. They were met by the Czechoslovak ambassador Dr. Karpíšek, the undersecretary for culture Foukal and the undersecretary of the Egyptian ministry of national interests, Abd El Salam Badran, who became their translator and guide for the whole stay in Egypt.

They were accommodated in the *Ambassador*, a modern hotel, and at their disposal there was a minibus with a driver for trips round Cairo and Alexandria. The remarks they made about the hotel exceed strict descriptions, and include – at least in a private view by Lexa, many anecdotic details. They were for example satisfied with the accommodation but not with the food. For Bagár it was good but monotonous.

Lexa wrote to his wife: *"I am discontent – mainly with food. We have an appetizer, fish, then some beefsteak and fruit. The beefsteak is large. It is a coarse piece of meat so tough that I do not try to eat it. Piece of fish is also large and very good so it is enough for me to be full. The same is for dinner."*¹⁷

They spent the first eight days in Cairo and its surroundings, sightseeing the pyramids in Giza and Saqqara, then Memphis and the Egyptian museum. They met the director of the museum and the rest of the day was spent in the halls with collections. Lexa and Žába could see only part of what they wanted to see, though for the others it was already more than enough. The director assured Lexa concerning his help with organising archaeological expeditions, and a support for the foundation of the institute of Egyptology.

17) AAVČR, personal papers of František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27, Lexa in Cairo, Mai, 28 1956 to his wife Irena Lexová.

Again, an official report is rather bland, where the Lexa letters are slightly more savoury. The report dryly registers a trip to the pyramids of Giza, but in the letter written by Lexa we find more details: *"We went inside into the pyramid of Khufu, crawled into the sarcophagus chamber and later climbed on the shoulder of the Great Sphinx."*¹⁸

They also had official meetings with Minister Fathi Radwan, and the minister of education Kamel Ed-Din Hussein, in order to discuss the cultural agreement and to convince these dignitaries about sincere Czechoslovak interests in this agreement, especially regarding the foundation of the Czechoslovak institute of Egyptology in Cairo. The Egyptians prepared for them a visit to the Nile Barrage near Cairo and to the region of El Tahrir, where irrigation works fertilized the desert and new villages were being built.

On June 3rd the group left for Alexandria, where they were lodged in the Windsor Palace Hotel. Due to the contacts with politicians and scholars they were invited to a garden party arranged by the rector of the University of Alexandria. They undertook typical sightseeing in Alexandria, made by almost each tourist or traveller and including the Graeco-Roman museum, the column of Pompeius and catacombs. They also visited the port of Alexandria and a spinning factory, as well as a weaving mill and a dyeing house, all related to the cotton production chain. Lexa commented on their stay in Alexandria: *"Alexandria was for me a surprise like Cairo, it has got 1, 200.000 inhabitants and it is really modern. I was swimming in the sea twice, but it is not as pleasant as in Bulgaria. The wind is still quite strong, temperature of air is 25°C and of water about 18–20°C. There is not a lot of importance in Alexandria for Egyptologists, except of some Egyptian Egyptologists. It was a waste of time for me."*¹⁹

On June 7th they went back to Cairo for a few days. Apart from visiting other monuments from Islamic period and also the Coptic museum, the delegation went to Maadi to see a weaponry plant. General Major Yusef Saad Ed-Din, who visited Czechoslovakia three times, became their guide on this occasion.

On June 9th the journey continued to the south, to Luxor, where they spent only two days sightseeing famous ancient Egyptian monuments, including temples at Luxor and Karnak, Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, and temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. They were also sailing the Nile and on a more businesslike note had a meeting with regional politicians of Luxor.

On June 12th, they continued to Aswan. The delegation stayed in the Cataract hotel, usually closed during the summer and now opened for the Czechoslovak delegation only. Their program was similar to that in Luxor, visiting monuments, Kitchener and

18) AAVČR, personal papers of František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27, Lexa in Cairo, June, 6 1956 to his wife Irena Lexová.

19) AAVČR, personal papers of František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27, Lexa in Cairo, June, 6 1956 to his wife Irena Lexová.

Elephantine Islands and meeting with important persons of the town. The Aswan dam was the last trip organised for them. On June 14th a small steamship, prepared only for the members of the delegation, set out for the temples of Abu Simbel. This is what Lexa had to say about their journey: "We have already crossed the Tropic of Cancer, so the sun is shining from the north and it is not so hot. I am wearing only thin underwear, white trousers and white shoes without socks. We have got a good protection against the sun. We have got enough of icily cold drinks, but meat and chicken are so tough, that I cannot tooth it, I am living as a vegetarian, but it helps me."²⁰ They had only two hours to see the temples of Ramesses II and then went back to Aswan and continued by train to Cairo.

They stayed nine more days in the capital of Egypt. Political and cultural negotiations filled most of these days. They were official guests of all the celebrations of the new freedom of Egypt. Apart from ceremonial duties shared by the whole entourage, each member of the delegation had a special task, and should observe his field of specialisation and its possible development under the new treaty. This included Egyptology, theatre, music, newspapers and magazine journalism, film, exchange of students and scholars.

Different tasks of each member of the delegation led every and each of them to most different projects and institutions ranging from a visit to the art editors of *al-Gumhuria* (the "Republic", a periodical) to theatre performances in Arabic in the Ezbekieh theatre, an exhibition of modern painting, another, this time agricultural exhibition, as well as the club of writers, the house of artists, offices of Egyptian broadcasting agency, where they heard parts of several programs of Arab music, or film studios, allowing them a glimpse on contemporary Egyptian films.

On June 25th the delegation was invited to an official evening organised by the Egyptian ministers; the approval of the Egyptian government of the new cultural agreement between the Czechoslovak republic and Egypt was officially secured. On June 27th the delegation was on its way back to Prague.

Andrej Bagár outlined in his report for the Ministry of Culture useful practical projects for the agreement: a close cooperation of archaeologists and scholars specialising in Oriental Studies and the participation of Czechoslovak scholars on archaeological expeditions, and residencies of scholars as well as exchange of books, alongside translations of prose and poetry, exchange of films, and projects of exhibitions. In the areas of performing arts, in theatre and opera, he saw on the other hand a lesser opportunity of cooperation due to the existence of only one dramatic ensemble and one opera house where the European actors were already performing mainly European music.

20) AAVČR, personal papers of František Lexa, box n. 2, inv. n. 27, Lexa on the steamship to Abu Simbel, June, 14 1956 to his wife Irena Lexová.

However, he recommended propagating Egyptian folk music and songs but refused to promote belly dancing because of its presumed lewd character.

The Cultural Agreement between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Czechoslovak republic was ratified on October 19th 1957 in Cairo. Implementing rules for the agreement were outlined for three years. The three page agreement was written very general. Egypt and Czechoslovakia should support cooperation in research and art activities, especially fellowships of students and scholars and cooperative projects of universities and academic institutions. They should support visiting of museums and libraries and organising of art exhibitions. Both countries should also present history and culture of the other country at schools and prepare radio programmes about it. Each country should also support specialist research of the other country, for example enable the work in museums, archives or laboratories for visiting scholars.

In a way, the optimistic tone of the delegation reports as well as the rhetoric of the agreement had an actual counterpart in reality. As a conclusion we would like to show an example of cultural cooperation which was eventually realised in full. In his report²¹ for the Czechoslovak Ministry of culture Zbyněk Žába wrote about cooperation in Egyptology. He noted the work of Czechoslovak Egyptologists for the *Centre de documentation* in Cairo as well as cooperation with the University in Alexandria in expeditions in the Nile Delta, and in addition there was a publications exchange. In the last part of his paper he mentioned a possibility of establishing the Czechoslovak institute of Egyptology with workplaces in Prague and Cairo.²² The Czechoslovak institute of Egyptology was finally founded on October 1958 in Prague and on May 1959 in Cairo and Czechoslovak Egyptologists started their work in Egypt on the project *Saving of the monuments in Nubia*.

The Cultural Agreement, concluded in 1957 is still effective. The contractually established cultural cooperation of both countries continued. In the year of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology in Cairo, the Czechoslovak Cultural Centre was founded. Czech Language tuition continued²³ at Ain Shams University, where Egyptologist Zbyněk Žába worked, and several Czechoslovak Arabists later. From the 60s, the Arabists participated in research scholarships in the University of Cairo, which enabled them to study the language, literature, and history of Egypt.²⁴

21) Archive of the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology, box 1, n. I/1/1956.

22) Macková, A., 2006 a, pp. 57–60.

23) Macková, A. 2006 b, pp. 1–3.

24) Bareš, L., Veselý, R., Gombár E. (2009), pp. 683–684.

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