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3 Sept
XI/937

USSR
LEBANON

Experiences Of A Mideast Athlete In MOSCOW

SOURCE ATHENS : Greek-Rumanian exile in BEIRUT.

DATE OF OBSERVATION: June 1953.

EVALUATION COMMENT : A typical and often-told tale of a visit to Soviet Russia, this report contains some provocative hints at camouflage and underground installations in that country -- although it seems unlikely that STALINGRAD could be camouflaged in peacetime. The reported Rumanian Communist is Grigore IGNAT. His address is confirmed by the telephone directory.

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One of the players on the Lebanese basketball team which participated in the international athletic tournament in MOSCOW in June described his experiences and observations to our source, a reliable and well-informed Greek-Rumanian exile who lives in BEIRUT.

The Lebanese team journeyed to MOSCOW via TEHERAN and entered the USSR at BAKU. The customs examination at BAKU was rigorous; at its conclusion, the team boarded a Soviet civil airliner for the flight to MOSCOW. As soon as they were on the plane the visiting athletes had to surrender all cameras and photographic apparatus; however, there would have been little to photograph in any event, since the plane flew over villages and open country exclusively. Three hours out motor trouble developed and the plane had to make an emergency landing at an airdome. From above the airdome looked like an open field, and when the Lebanese disembarked they found out why: the runway was formed of concrete squares spaced rather far apart, with grass growing between the squares.

At one side of the field was a control shack and waiting room; as they approached the building the Lebanese

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saw to their surprise a sign above the entrance reading "STALINGRAD". Asked by our source if the city of STALINGRAD was visible from the airdome, the athlete answered that it was not even visible from the air. Parked on the field were several other planes, one of them a big military aircraft which was being loaded with fuel from an underground storage tank. The Lebanese team was confined to the shack during the hour that six mechanics, including two women, repaired the motor of their plane.

On arrival at the MOSCOW airport the team was welcomed by two male Soviet guides and six young women who presented a bouquet to each player. One of the male guides spoke impeccable French. There was no customs examination and the team members were driven in an autobus to the Hotel Metropole, where the Bulgarian and Finnish teams were also staying.

During their stay at the hotel the Lebanese athletes were very well cared-for; they could order gratis any dish on the menu, including caviar, as well as any kind of drink. Each player received on his arrival at the hotel 50 rubles as pocket money for the team's five-day stay in MOSCOW.

The team was given rooms in the fourth floor and the two male guides who met them at the airport had rooms nearby. The guide who spoke French was polite and friendly, but the other - named Anatoli - was brusque and suspicious showed every evidence of disliking to be in the company of the visiting athletes. Anatoli spoke only Russian and a little English.

The two guides never let the Lebanese out of their sight if they could help it. When the players went out on the street the Soviet guide who spoke French walked in front and pointed out the sights, while Anatoli kept a watchful eye from the rear. If one of the team happened to lag behind Anatoli immediately shepherded him back to the group, on the pretext that they would "get lost" if they did not stay together. After a couple days of this the Lebanese athletes and Anatoli had a violent quarrel which ended with the team making a protest to the organizing committee of the tournament against being "herded like

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sheep" when they went out for a walk.

The only result of the protest was that from then on pretexts were found to keep the Lebanese from going out on the street at all. They went back and forth between the athletic stadium and the Hotel Metropole in an automobile closely followed by the two guides in another car. Their cameras had been restored them but they were allowed to take photographs only at the stadium; the vigilant Anatoli confiscated a roll of film when he observed one of the players taking a photograph of the street from the automobile en route to the stadium.

During their five-day sojourn the Lebanese players saw the Soviet basketball players only at the stadium and were unable to make any personal contact with them. For that matter, they were unable to make any contact with any Soviet private citizen because of their full schedule and the close surveillance to which they were subjected. The two guides took the team to see the mausoleums of LENIN and STALIN, two museums, the opera, a church in the Kremlin, the Hall of the Supreme Soviet and the University; they also made an excursion on the MOSCOW-Volga canal.

The athlete told our source that MOSCOW greatly impressed the team members, which, he added, "is only natural since most of us have never seen the great cities of Europe or America." There were long queues before the doors of shops, but everybody seemed able to buy what he wished in unlimited quantities and without ration tickets. However, the people were for the most part shabby and the women without make-up and in outmoded dresses with short skirts.

Asked if he and his companions had developed a taste for the Soviet regime as a result of what they saw in MOSCOW, the athlete replied that he and his friends had talked among themselves about the lack of liberty in the USSR and agreed that they would not like to see

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such a regime established in their own country. With their own eyes the Lebanese were able to observe the fear of the people to speak to foreigners; also, the behavior of the guide Anatoli was eloquent proof of how the Soviets spy both on foreigners and their own people. "Anatoli actually taught us the true nature of the Soviet regime," the athlete said.

As for the food and drink, cigarettes, 10 rubles per day pocket money and other favors, the Lebanese players were well aware that that was "all part of the propaganda," he said.

The Lebanese players were able to make only two visits unchaperoned by their Soviet guides; one was to the Lebanese Legation, where they were entertained at dinner, and the second was to the home of the pro-Soviet Archimandrite Basil SAMAHA, the representative at the MOSCOW Orthodox Patriarchate of the pro-Soviet Patriarch Alexander of Antioch (embracing Lebanon and Syria). The dinner at the legation was of much poorer quality than the food served to the team in the restaurant of the Hotel Metropole. The players told their Lebanese diplomat hosts about the spying of Anatoli and were told that they should not complain because they enjoyed "much more liberty than the foreign diplomats in MOSCOW."

At the home of the Archimandrite SAMAHA the food was much better, since that clergyman apparently benefits by the bounty of his powerful Soviet friends. His house is beautifully furnished and he owns a big radio set of foreign manufacture and an electric refrigerator. Some of the team tried to question SAMAHA on Soviet politics but the clergyman fended off their queries by saying that he was interested "only in church matters."

"In fact," the athlete told our source, "it is next to impossible to gather any political information in the Soviet Union. It would be much easier to get state secrets straight from the mouth of the President of the Republic of Lebanon than to learn the most trivial fact in the USSR."

In the Hotel Metropole was a dancing room in which the members of the Lebanese team met in the evening with

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the two Soviet guides. One evening at about 9 o'clock the interviewed athlete and another member of the team managed to elude Anatoli's watchful eye and slip out of the hotel. They walked to a municipal garden nearby where they met two young women with whom they began a conversation in English. One of the young women asked the Lebanese for the emblem of their team, which they wore in their lapels. The Lebanese presented the girls with the emblems invited them to dinner and dancing at the Metropole. The girls refused the invitation but made a date to meet the youths the next evening at the same spot. One of the girls was a Soviet citizen whose first name was Nina; the second, named Elisabeta IGNAT, was the daughter of a prominent Rumanian Communist who was pursuing special party studies in MOSCOW. The latter told the Lebanese that she was returning to BUCHAREST for the international youth festival in August and would be glad to see them there; she gave her address in BUCHAREST as Strada Beteriilor 52, Raion Balcescu, and her telephone number as 5.64.19.

But there were to be no more "dates" - either in MOSCOW or BUCHAREST. When the two Lebanese youths returned to the Metropole they found Anatoli in a fury because they had slipped away; he had ordered his agents to track down the missing pair in the streets but without success. The upshot was another violent quarrel with Anatoli. As a result of the bickering with Anatoli - and of the refusal of the Lebanese to play the Israeli team - the Lebanese team was fined \$ 300 by the tournament's organizing committee and forbidden to play in any international tournament in the Soviet orbit for six months.

End.