SOUVENIR OF CAIRO
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# SOUVENIR OF CAIRO

## Symbol of the Exotic Middle East Is Lost With the Burning of Shepheard's Hotel

By GENE CURRIVAN

WHEN anti-British mobs set fire to Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo eight days ago, something of Egypt itself disappeared into the night. For here, going up in flames, was an institution that symbolized an era and a way of life, a crossroads hostelry that came to mean sanctuary for some, comfort and friendliness for others. Merely passing through its portals was for thousands of persons, from throughout the world, an introduction to the Middle East.

Shepheard's offered needed welcome and respite in an uncertain segment of the globe, an area long selected by the gods of war as a favorite arena. Even when war was not far from Cairo, as when Rommel reached El Alamein and, according to legend, had already booked rooms at Shepheard's, the grand old half-way house never seemed to lose its aplomb.

Shepheard's was a natural target for the mob's torch. It was considered the epitome of imperialism and of foreign influence in Egypt. It was where the British stayed. But its ornate, Arabian-nightish lobbies, lounges and bars also teemed with the most colorful, heterogeneous assemblage of humanity that could be found anywhere except possibly on a Hollywood movie set or in an Oppenheim thriller. During World War II there were German spies in mufti mixing freely with Britons whose uniforms still showed traces of El Alamein's dusty sands.

### Arabs and Israelis

More recently, when another war was raging to the east of the Nile, Arab chieftains in their flowing *gallabiyas* sat with red-tarbooshed Egyptians plotting the next move against Israel while at the next table could be members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the Israeli underground, preparing their next attack on the Arabs. Sipping Turkish coffee in another of the grotto-like nooks beneath a dome of synthetic oriental splendor could be white-turbaned Indian potentates discussing their latest acquisition of polo ponies.

Passing by beneath the hanging mosaic lamps might be the obvious American tourist, complete with pith helmet, horsehair fly swatter and the inevitable reflex camera.

For going to Shepheard's was a "must" in everyone's book, just as seeing the pyramids or visiting the famed Mohammed Ali Mosque was always on the tourist's agenda. Sitting on its spacious elevated veranda or beneath the magnificent royal palms that glorified its outdoor gardens, one could spend hours merely watching Turks, Copts, Nubians, Berbers, Ethiopians, American business men and transient archaeologists pass in a kaleidoscopic parade.

### Table for Farouk

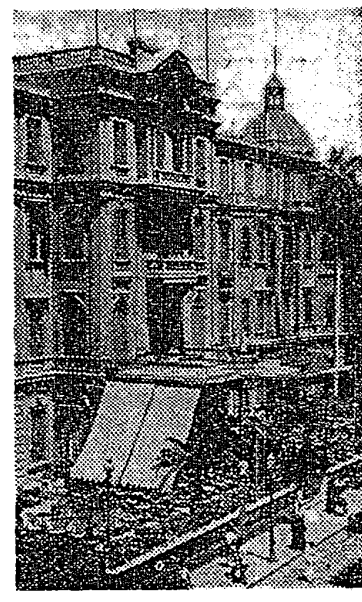
If one sat long enough one was sure to see King Farouk and his entourage arrive in red Cadillacs, paced by an imposing array of palace guards on red motorcycles. Dressed in a well-cut business suit, according to the hour, and wearing smoked glasses and a red tarboosh, His Majesty would go to a carefully pre-selected and well-guarded table in the main dining room and sip coffee. Or if the hour were late he would watch the dancing in the rear garden where miniature illuminated canals flowed by the aisle in a setting that was intended to be Western but had definite oriental leanings so as to suit all tastes.

One of the most interesting spots in Shepheard's was the Long Bar, where embryonic news stories often pecked their way through the shell. Many a high-ranking officer just in from the wars, the blistering desert, or merely glad to get away from his military confinement, was eager to let his hair down and tell what he had long harbored in his mind. Others merely softened under the congenial atmosphere.

A principal contributing factor was the chief bar steward known simply as Joe. He was a debonair figure of Swiss-Austrian origin, who was as much a part of Shepheard's as its byzantine elegance.

In his immaculate white coat and properly leveled black tie he presided at the bar like a surgeon, calling left and right for the appropriate instrument or ingredient. On his left was a handsome Sudanese known as Tewfig and to his right Tewfig's prototype in miniature, whom we used to call One-Fig.

Both answered the summonses at the proper split second and the result was a perfect drink whether it was the common garden variety gin rickey or the famous preparation which Joe concocted as a hangover cure.



John Ross
Shepheard's familiar facade.

The Long Bar, which adjoined the main dining room in the rear of the hotel, had never been changed in basic design since the first days of Shepheard's. Its heavy mahogany furnishings and huge beveled mirrors gave one the impression of an old-time barber shop.

Rooms at Shepheard's, except the suites especially decorated for potentates like Haille Selassie of Ethiopia or Seif el-Islam Ahmed of the Yemen, whose entourage resembled a successful road show, were bare but comfortable. The ceilings were extremely high, as were the beds, which were equipped with overhead wrought-iron grillework suitable for draping mosquito netting or supporting a broken leg.

But people in the torrid Middle East spend little time in their rooms. All the life was below in the lobbies, bars and verandas.

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