

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Tales of American Diplomacy

JAMES “JIM” LAROCCO

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NARRATOR: In 1980, James Larocco was a young American diplomat in Egypt--and a new father. His newborn daughter needed urgent medical treatment in Israel. The American ambassador told Larocco “Egyptian President Anwar Sadat called Israel’s Menachim Begin and they agreed that you will be the first family to drive from Cairo to Jerusalem.” Here is that story.

LAROCCO: My name is Jim Larocco. I was a career diplomat for over 30 years -- mainly in the Middle East; also, in the Far East. Then I served, after that, working particularly on the Middle East for the next 10 years for the Department of Defense and as head of an international organization that kept the peace between Egypt and Israel. I want to talk about that this morning, because I was in Taiwan as the number two person in 1993 when I had the typical Foreign Service experience. I get a phone call, and they say, "We need you in Tel Aviv." And I said, "Really?" "Yes, we do." And I said, "When?" They said, "Tomorrow." I said, "Well, can you give me four days? You know, I have a wife and three kids all going to school." They said, "Well, they can stay there, but we need you." So, off I went.

A few months after that, we had our agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis: the Oslo Agreement [Accords]. Now, I want to fast forward to the spring two years after that, in 1995. I had been the chargé [d'affaires] for almost a year. Tel Aviv is a difficult post. Bill Perry was coming -- the [U.S.] Secretary of Defense at the time -- and [then Israeli Prime Minister] Yitzhak Rabin was almost so depressed that it was very, very hard to even see him present at that time. We had such a string of terrorist incidents that had killed so many people, and he was so determined, and had taken such bold risks for peace. And even he began to wonder. So, I decided that I would host at the ambassador's residence -- which I really wasn't living in -- a dinner for Rabin and Bill Perry. So, at the beginning, I stood up and I said, "I would like to say some remarks and then a toast." I could see Rabin kind of slumped over in his chair.

I said, "From 1978 to 1981, I was stationed in Cairo. I worked on the Camp David treaty, which was approved in 1979. Then our first child was born in 1980 at the beginning of the year. The Egyptians called her "Noora," which means "light" because her eyes were so radiant. We called her Stephanie. Anyway, she had a very difficult birth and had a massive knock knot in her neck. As parents for the first time, we were frantic. And we knew we couldn't fly her somewhere because she was days old. I had the most wonderful ambassador, [Alfred] "Roy" Atherton and his wife Betty; and they were so approachable. I went to them -- and they knew we had just had a baby. I said, "What do we do?" They said, "We'll take care of it." Two hours later he calls me

back, and he says, "Jim, I called Sadat. Sadat called [Menachem] Begin. And they agreed that you will be the first family to drive -- to DRIVE -- from Cairo to Jerusalem."

"There we were: a family of three -- sounds a little biblical -- going in the other direction, though; going to Israel in our little Fiat convertible. We screamed across the Sinai with this big military convoy, hard to keep up as our little thing is bouncing. Then we get to the border, and the convoy disappears. There are two young soldiers standing there smiling -- an Egyptian and an Israeli -- and they said, in their broken accents, "We welcome the peace baby." We went to Hadassah Hospital, and there was a wonderful doctor there -- Israel at that time had more doctors per-capita than any country in the world. His name was Doctor Ashkenazi," which, of course, all of the Israelis in the audience, including Rabin, warmed up. That's a great name, if you know Judaism. "He was able through therapy, and no surgery, to remove that knot."

I then commented to the group. I said, "You know, this is really what peace is all about. We were one of the first to enjoy the fruits of peace. It's when parents, children, grandparents, and grandchildren can go to sleep at night without fear, have dreams, wake up, and try to fulfill those dreams." I said, "This is why we must stay the course." And I said, "Let's all toast that we can help more families have the quiet miracle of a normal life." I started to walk back to my chair, and Rabin grabbed my arm. He said, "Jim, I really needed that. I will never, as long as I live, allow the enemies of peace to defeat us." He, of course, only six months later, was assassinated. But I will never forget those words, and I believe all those who work for peace should really understand what this is all about. It's not a piece of paper. It's about normal people living their lives with hope and without fear.

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to "Tales of American Diplomacy," a Tex Harris Initiative for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, "A Personal Life Story" produced by Poss Productions. Donate to support our work at adst.org. Because diplomacy matters now more than ever.