



The Mena House Oberoi

HOTEL & CASINO
CAIRO, EGYPT

A member of
The Leading Hotels of the World



by Nina Nelson

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Mena House Oberoi entrance 1920

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Mena House Oberoi 1920

A coach and four ran once a day between Shepherd's hotel and Mena House. This was always booked up. Miss Caillard was watching a pretty young American heiress being seen off by her father at Shepherd's one morning. As the girl mounted the box her father remarked that there were 'more millions on that coach than there were horses to draw it.'

Despite all the wealthy visitors who came to Cairo, Mena House was run at a loss because the Locke-Kings were very extravagant and when the moment of tackling the bill came, tended to say they had invited their friends at their own expense ! When they were away, or grew tired of the business of hotel keeping, a Polish friend of theirs, Baron de Rodakowsky, was engaged to 'see to things.' The Baron was a character well known to everybody. He used to drive the eight miles to Cairo from Mena House in a dog cart. This was drawn by a very fast grey Arab pony that galloped there in less than forty minutes — a record at the time.

The Locke-Kings were almost as well known in England as in Egypt. When they returned there permanently, they redesigned 'Brooklands' their Weybridge home. Hugh was tremendously far-sighted for his day. The house was given a flat roof to allow helicopters to land there (this before the First World War) and on his estate he bred Shire horses and made the famous Brooklands Racing Track. He had a hatred of publicity and was unknown to the press of his day. He died soon after the First World War in which he helped Ethel run a chain of hospitals for which she was given the D.B.E. After Hugh's death she turned the Brooklands track into a paying proposition. The Second World War saw the track's demise as a large part of the banking was dug up to prevent its being an easy target for enemy bombing.

Ethel Locke-King continued to have the controlling interest in Mena House during the seven years that Baron Rodakowsky was there. It was Rodakowsky, with a Swiss architect — Mr. Brugger — who built the 'Villa', the stables, the stand for gymkhana and the famous swimming pool — probably the first of its kind at an hotel.

When Baron Rodakowsky went to England (he ran the Brooklands racing track for a year) Mena House passed to a Mr. Schick and Mr. Weckel.

The Egyptian Gazette ran the following advertisement in their paper for some weeks in 1900 :

MENA HOUSE HOTEL

at the Pyramids.

EMIL WECKEL LESSEE AND MANAGER

1st Class Hotel and Restaurant.

Concerts on Sundays and Wednesdays.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

1913-1914 was an excellent tourist season and the Nungovich hotels were completely booked up. A well known German choir, that had come on tour, and was 300 strong, had to be accommodated in private houses close to Shepherds as they could not be fitted in. However, ruffled feelings were calmed down when Auguste Wild gave a buffet luncheon for them at Mena House. Bright red poinsettias ornamented the table and the menu read : *file gras, caviar frais, saumon fumé, poularde de Bresse, jambon de Westphalie*, sandwiches, patisseries, ices, champagne, German hocks, brandy and liqueurs.

Cairene society was so busy and having such a gay time that when war came, noone could believe it. Martial law was declared in Egypt — but with a velvet glove. The hotels were still full but the clientèle changed. Tweed suits were replaced by khaki. The Savoy was used for army headquarters. Mena House was told to hold itself ready for an influx of Australians. An English contractor, Alfred Warner, was awarded a contract to erect a camp for the Australian Light Horse just behind the hotel. This entailed building many horse troughs of stone and for a year or more, Alfred Warner employed every dragoman, camel owner or donkey owner in Mena Village to bring in stone from outlying quarries. Hamed Ibrahim Kataab, who owned the shop in Mena House (the Kataabs had owned it ever since the hotel began) was one of the subcontractors and he eventually built one of the most charming villas in Nazlet-el-Samaan.

Alfred Warner had a young son, Allan, and during the boy's school holidays he was put in charge of the foreman, a great giant of a man called Abdel Aziz Osman. Abdel Aziz was a wonderful overseer and could work as hard as any of his men.

He was fond of children but he had one defect — he could not get on with women. He murdered his first wife and several years later murdered his second!

Young Allan camped out with the men, he shared their food and their work and thoroughly enjoyed it all. He also picked up perfect colloquial Arabic. He never forgot those days and when he went to live in Egypt several years later he rented a villa in Mena Village.

The Australians and their horses were soon encamped behind and in the grounds of Mena House. The officer's mess, for whom the hotel did the catering, was in the annex.



Robert Taylor at Mena House



Barbara Hutton (Photos Al Ahras)



Omar Shariff, a regular at the Mena House