It gives me sincere pleasure to offer this contribution to the Festschrift honoring my friend Jack Josephson. His erudite scholarly dedication to the art of Egypt’s ancient civilization has provided many absorbing topics for discussion, from which I have derived both knowledge and enjoyment. His keen insights regarding many diverse subjects enlivened and enriched our wide-ranging conversations over the past decade and a half of our acquaintance, since his marriage to Egypt’s Ballerina, Magda Saleh.

I recollect his delighted response to my tale of the fateful encounter with the American Ambassador and the Director of the Metropolitan Museum. This meeting proved the catalyst so urgently needed to set in motion a train of events, more fully recounted elsewhere, leading to the unprecedented international campaign to preserve the monuments of Nubia. I present this abbreviated English-language version to my friend Mr. Josephson, knowing he will appreciate learning how matters unfolded to their happy outcome.

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2 I have in this essay endeavored to render the full scope and extent of our daring undertaking. I must not omit mention here of some of the many without whose unshakable faith in the project and its inestimable value to the cause of human culture, to the preservation of the icons of civilization and its common heritage, and to the noble ideal of international cooperation and mutual understanding, the impossible dream could never have become reality. First among these are the three UNESCO Directors General, foremost among them René Maheu, that great human being with whom I stood side by side for 13 years, who was devoted to the principles of the international organization. He never wavered, despite the often vicious attacks to which he was subjected. Next is his predecessor Vittorino Veronese, who unhesitatingly embraced the project in 1959 and ushered it through its initial steps, going where another might have feared to tread. And finally is their successor, Amadou-Mokhtar M’Bow, who saw the final phase of the project—the rescue of Philae—through to its completion. Brazilian Ambassador Paulo de Berredo Carneiro, who chaired both the International Action Committee and the Executive Committee for the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, was a loyal ally and devoted supporter. He instantly adopted the project and was steadfast in his support thereafter. Nor can I forget Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, who worked on our behalf his worldwide network of influential connections; or Mme Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, the UNESCO consultant, with her passionate love of Egypt and its antiquities, her enthusiasm and boundless energy. She was a prime mover in the documentation endeavor, the salvage of Aman Temple, and the organizer of the exhibition of Tutankhamun in Paris.

A stellar contingent of Egyptian archaeologists, engineers, and administrators have earned the gratitude of the nation: the capable engineer Dr. Hassan Zaki, former Minister of Irrigation and chairman of the Advisory Council for the Abu Simbel project; Dr. Anwar Shukri, earlier Undersecretary of State for Antiquities; Mr. Abdel Moneim el Sawi, Deputy Chairman of the Fund for the Rescue of the Monuments of Nubia from September 1962 to September 1966 during my absence from the ministry; Dr. Abdel Moneim Abu Bakr, former Professor of Egyptology at Cairo University; Dr. Gamal Moukhtar, the senior Egyptologist at the Center of Documentation, then Undersecretary of State for Antiquities and the first Chairman of the EAO; engineer Mohammed Mahdi, earlier Director of the EAO; the chemist Dr. Zaki Iskander; engineer Taha el Shaltawi, former Deputy of the EAO; engineer Mohammed Abdel Mo’i Amer, the Director of the Engineering Bureau; Dr. Ahmed Qadri, General Director of the Nubia Fund; and Dr. Shehata Adam Mohammed, Director of the General Administration for the Rescue of the Monuments of Nubia.

Before all these, and to the legions of anonymous foot soldiers, workmen, engineers, archaeologists, restorers, technicians, and artists who tirelessly participated in this endeavor, civilization itself must bow in respect and gratitude.

Nor do we forget the High Dam Ministry for its aid, for out of its services budget came Egypt’s contribution to the fund for the salvage of Abu Simbel, to the amount of L.E. 5,000,000, with another L.E. 1,000,000 for the salvage of the other temples.

Then there are the myriad institutions, universities, archaeological, scientific and cultural institutes and centers; the scholars and experts; the project’s international committees; the engineering firms and companies; all our partners in the endeavor. To them Egypt was but the birthplace of civilization, a name they yearned for in dreams, exalting her in their noblest thoughts. What better reward for all than the survival of the monuments that they strove to save, speaking to future generations of the genius of those past?
September 22, 1968, dawned upon Egypt, a day of joy and celebration, the joy of daunting challenges overcome and an impossible dream come true, the successful culmination of a decade of unwavering endeavor to preserve the monuments of our ancient civilization from oblivion. Five hundred guests of Egypt gathered before the magnificent temples of Abu Simbel—myself as host representing President Gamal Abdel Nasser, with the Director General of UNESCO René Maheu, the organization’s former head Vittorino Veronese, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, a throng of UNESCO representatives, the ministers charged with the organization’s affairs from the 50 nations participating in the Abu Simbel project and their ambassadors in Cairo, together with their counterparts from the Arab world, the Egyptian ministers involved in the rescue of the Nubian antiquities, a number of eminent Egyptian personalities, and a cluster of intellectual and literary figures, artists, and members of the media.

The international campaign to salvage the imperiled monuments of Nubia in Egypt and the Sudan, during which many hands had joined the world over, united in a spirit of true cooperation and a profound faith in the timeless value of the achievements of human culture, was brought to a triumphant conclusion.

Decades earlier, in his impassioned book The Death of Philae, the French writer Pierre Loti had decried the drowning of that splendid temple by the waters of the first Aswan Dam (built in 1902), bewailing this symbolic death of ancient Egypt and calling upon Egyptians to rally in defense of their immortal patrimony. He vividly imagined a bemused Isis staring at her reflection in the inexorable rising tide. Loti’s anguished, despairing cry was movingly echoed by our Prince of Poets, Ahmed Shawqi, in eloquent verse.

After the July 23, 1952 revolution, concern over the fate of the monuments surfaced in a report submitted by the Director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, Mostafa Amer, to the Minister of Education, Kamal el Din Hussein, and a fact-finding mission was dispatched to Nubia for ten days in December 1954. A detailed study of the endangered sites and proposals for solutions was published in Arabic, French, and English in the Report on the Monuments of Nubia Likely to be Submerged by Sudd-el-Ali Water (June 1955). It included engineer Osman Rostem’s proposal to erect three cofferdams encircling Philae. Recommendations were limited to undertaking a comprehensive documentation of endangered monuments and sites, and preservation of two handily relocatable temples. Copies were distributed to scientific institutions abroad with an invitation to participate in excavations; it elicited scant response.

A significant event took place in May 1955, with the signing of a protocol of cooperation between UNESCO and Hussein’s Ministry of Education, establishing the Center of Documentation and Study on the History and Art of Ancient Egypt (usually referred to simply as the Center of Documentation). The impetus for this important step proceeded from growing anxiety at home and abroad over the increasingly deleterious impact of climate and human activity on the monuments, notably in Upper Egypt, where a rising water table was leading to flooding, erosion, and irretrievable loss. Documentation as a meticulous permanent record and future resource for researchers was perceived as the only realistically feasible response.

In 1958, the newly minted Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, which I established at the behest of the President, was assigned the task of oversight of national heritage, a symbol of the Revolution’s powerful emphasis on a vigorous national cultural policy. A mere eight months later, in November 1958, I received a visit from the Ambassador of the United States in Cairo, Raymond A. Hare, accompanied by the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Mr. James Rorimer. Without preamble, this gentleman announced that he had come to negotiate the purchase of “one or two temples” threatened with submersion under the waters of the projected High Dam at Aswan. The vast man-made lake that would form behind this massive structure, foreseen to extend southward approximately 300 km within Egypt and another 187 km in the Sudan, would flood Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia and all its monuments forever. I was frankly affronted by this casual offer to purchase our ancestral...