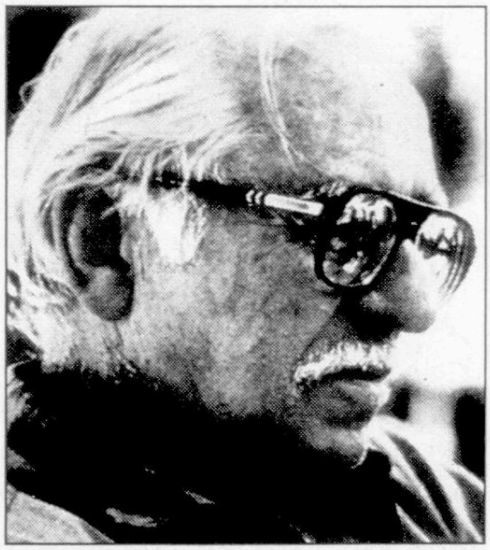
Adel Sabit

Cousin of King Farouk who wrote of Egypt before Nasser

ADEL SABIT, who has died in Cairo aged 82, was a courtier of the late King Farouk of Egypt; having survived the upheavals of revolution, he spent the latter part of his life chronicling the glamour of a bygone era.

"I well remember," he wrote in *A King Betrayed*, his nostalgic memoir of life with the ill-starred monarch, "the obsequiousness of elderly pashas, including an ex-Prime Minister, when, after a large lunch, the King knocked their fezzes off their heads with well-aimed tomatoes and cucumbers."

Through his mother, Sabit was a second cousin of King Farouk, and from boyhood this kinship admitted him to the inner circles of the royal family, their sumptuous entertainments and their grandiose palaces. Yet the relationship was not close enough for him to be considered a member of the royal family when revolution came in 1952; most of the other royals were sent into exile, while their property was seized by the Nasser regime.



Sabit: an astute survivor of revolution

His distance from the king enabled Sabit to make a more critical evaluation of Farouk than someone more closely attached to him would have found possible. "Farouk," he wrote, "was the victim of an endless series of betrayals until, in the end, he betrayed himself." He was dismayed when the indolent Farouk simply shrugged off the monarchy, choosing a luxurious exile in Italy rather than putting up a fight when his position was undermined by Nasser's Free Officers' movement.

Adel Mahmoud Sabit was born in 1919, the son of Mahmoud Sabit Pasha, and Fatima Sabit, who was a cousin of Farouk's mother, Queen Nazly.

Mahmoud Pasha was the chamberlain to King Fuad (Farouk's father and predecessor), and later Egypt's ambassador to Iran under King Farouk. Adel was educated at a French Jesuit school, but he had English nannies and spoke and wrote an elegant, patrician English.

Sabit spent his childhood summers running wild with the children of the royal family. In response to Queen Nazly's wishes that her children have companions their own age, Adel Sabit and his sister were among the first children to be invited to play with the young Farouk and his sisters, four sheltered, doll-like creatures.

After graduating from Cairo University he was employed as a government censor at the English-language *Egyptian Gazette* and the French *La Bourse Egyptienne*, a position he held throughout the Second World War.

As a young man, Sabit was in and out of favour at Farouk's court. He was twice banished from the palace over trifling matters, yet at the height of his fortunes he served as a domestic intelligence adviser to Farouk, and later, while not yet 30, as chief of the king's household. His final assignment for Farouk, in 1949, was to facilitate a secret plan to engage German officers to rebuild the shattered Egyptian army after the Palestine war in 1948.

Sabit was able to find his feet in Nasser's Egypt in a way that the more prominent royals could not. His elegant house opposite the American embassy in central Cairo was not confiscated, and he quickly ingratiated himself with the new regime.

He refused Nasser's offer of the position of chief information officer of the newly formed Arab League, instead receiving Nasser's blessing to found an English-language political weekly, which existed for many years without official interference.

In 1961, however, his luck under Nasser ran out when he and others were arrested on charges of espionage and conspiring to restore the old regime. Of his trial, he wrote laconically: "I was described as 'a creature of the monarchy, nurtured in the palaces of reaction,' and so on and so forth."

He was sentenced to six months in prison. The experience shattered his confidence that he could prosper under Nasser, and accordingly he made secret plans to flee the country. His wife, Frances Ramsden (a beautiful American actress), and their infant son Mahmoud managed to leave Egypt on an American passport, while Sabit escaped to Libya by using forged papers and by hiding in the boot of a car belonging to a German friend, a journalist. He then joined his family in Germany, where they spent the next 10 years.

Sabit eventually returned to Egypt in 1980, and spent the rest of his life in his house in the central Cairo district of Qasr al-Doubara. Here, as the house decayed atmospherically around him, he conducted a lively social life and wrote books on Nasser, on Farouk, and on the Arab League, surrounded by the memorabilia of a grander age.

His marriage was dissolved, and he is survived by his son.

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