

# Press Martyrs for Democracy and Peace

## Pedro Joaquin Chamorro

by Frances R. Grant

*The following memorial tribute to Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the recently assassinated editor of Nicaragua's La Prensa, was delivered at a meeting honoring the slain journalist at Freedom House in New York City. Frances R. Grant is Secretary General of the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom. In 1948, following the wave of military coups in Latin America, together with such Latin American democratic leaders as Romulo Betancourt of Venezuela, Jose Figueres of Costa Rica, Eduardo Frei of Chile, and Eduardo Santos of Colombia—all at one time president of their countries—she organized the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom at the first conference of democratic forces of the Hemisphere in Havana in 1950. The association remains a focus of North and Latin American democratic leaders in the struggle for civil and political liberties in Latin America.*

We are here to pay tribute to Pedro Joaquin Chamorro—a colleague and friend. A great editor and a champion of truth, he was, above all, a great Liberator who has fallen in battle in the still unfinished War of Independence of Nicaragua. For truly, in all but three of the countries of Latin America, the unfinished Wars of Independence cruelly continue against military oppressors who are despoiling their peoples.

Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was born in Granada, Nicaragua, on September 23, 1924—nine years before the progenitor of the Somoza Dynasty seized power. As an American I feel saddened that the withdrawal of my country's occupation troops left no leavening of democracy in the country. Instead an ambitious and ruthless chief of the constabulary, Anastasio Somoza, poised to rid himself of the potential democratic leaders and to assume his anthropoidal control.

Early in life Pedro Joaquin knew the indignities of political exile, for his historian father was himself a champion of freedom, driven to political exile in Mexico. When Pedro Joaquin returned to his country in 1944, it was to begin his unremitting battle for the liberation of his country. By 1950 he had succeeded his father as editor of *La Prensa* of Managua. Thereafter his pen, through the pages of his great journal, became a weapon in the cause of freeing Nicaragua from its troglodyte government.



As with his pen, Pedro Joaquin's voice was never silenced in the cause of his country's freedom—never until January 10 last, when an assassin's cowardly bullet struck him, believing thus mistakenly to end his crusade. Instead Pedro Joaquin's martyrdom has at last aroused the unity and fury of the Nicaraguan people to their common cause. Vice-President Mondale, in talking of Senator Hubert Humphrey's death, said: "He taught us to die." We would say that Pedro Joaquin's death is teaching his countrymen how to live in courage and daringly to raise their united voices against the scourge of the imposed rule.

I cannot now remember exactly when I first met Pedro Joaquin, because the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom, for which I speak, has in its fellowship the entire legion of democratic leaders of the Americas. In the past decades of our common fight we have come together in sadness and in rejoicing, as the tides of freedom rise and fall in our Americas. Today they are sadly fallen, and a lost leader such as Pedro Joaquin Chamorro has indeed—as Zarathustra told us—reduced the army of the righteous.

Again and again Pedro Joaquin Chamorro met with us of the Inter-American Association—whether in his exile with Violeta de Chamorro in Costa Rica, that hospitable asylum for political exiles; or in relief in the Dominican Republic, after the death of its dictator; and often in a

great sense of participation in the triumphs in Venezuela. I can do no better perhaps than read some words of my own in *Hemispherica* of April, 1977, when Pedro Joaquin was once again forced to answer spurious accusations in the courts of Somoza:

"Anyone familiar with the self-perpetuating history of the Somozista Dynasty needs no identification of Pedro Chamorro. But for those ignorant of the Nicaraguan scene let it be known that Pedro Chamorro, unremittingly and almost single-handedly, has been the unwavering warrior in the fight for the dignity and civil and political liberties of the Nicaraguan people under the stifling oppression of successive Somozas who foisted themselves into power. From time to time other warriors have appeared on the battlefield, but some of them soon lost heart or succumbed to the wily seductions of the Somozas. Not so Pedro Chamorro."

At that time also Pedro Joaquin wrote to me: "We have great hopes in the new policy of human rights." Now that he has been martyred, our country must not diminish that ideal which has raised the spirits of all Latin American peoples. Yet only a few days ago an official of the Department of State expressed before the Committee for International Affairs of the House of

Representatives his opinion that Nicaragua was showing marked improvement toward the human rights of its people. Similar unsupportable statements are being made about Paraguay, Cuba, and other unredeemed dictator governments of this Hemisphere.

This perennial optimism as to the good intentions of Latin American dictators toward improving the civil and political rights of their peoples, in high degree unfounded, has been one of the great deterrents in the democratic development of Latin America.

If our present highly commendable policy of human rights is sincere, we must base it on proven criteria regarding the countries to the south and on the degree to which their people are actually enjoying the civil and political liberties recognized in the covenants by the Inter-Governmental Community of Nations.

Otherwise the shibboleths of "Human Rights" will pass into the limbo of good intentions never consummated, like the "Good Neighbor" policy and "The Alliance for Progress." Today as we honor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro let us ask: "Must men die as martyrs in order to convince us of the torture and cruelty that is crushing the spirits of the peoples of our American Hemisphere?"

## Yousef el Sebai

by Judith Kipper

*Judith Kipper, a consultant and writer on Middle East affairs, knew Yousef el Sebai and spoke with him frequently in Egypt and on his visits to the U.S. She has traveled extensively through the Middle East and has visited Egypt eight times, where she twice interviewed President Anwar El Sadat. Ironically, Kipper also was a friend of Gail Rubin, an American freelance photo-journalist in Israel, murdered by Palestinian terrorists in their March attack on an Israeli civilian bus.*

**Y**ousef el Sebai, editor of Egypt's daily newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, and a confidant and supporter of Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat, was gunned down by radical Palestinian terrorists in the lobby of the Nicosia Hilton Hotel on February 18. The gunmen claimed Sebai was killed because "he published good things about Israel." Their self-proclaimed mission was to murder Sebai "for the liberation of Palestine."

The murder of the prominent Egyptian editor is a portent of the new era in the Middle East, which began with President Sadat's courageous voyage to Jerusalem. Sadat's bold plan presented a serious dilemma to both the Israelis and the Arabs. For the Israelis it requires a shift of policy and attitudes. For the Arabs it requires their acceptance and recognition of Israel. Sadat understood and boldly declared Israel's valid security needs, but he



also warned that there could be no lasting peace without an appropriate resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects.

There is irony in the assassination of Yousef el Sebai by two Palestinian gunmen. Sebai was in Cyprus, in defiance of warnings by friends, to attend a meeting of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization, which has consistently supported the Palestinian cause. Among the delegates assembled in Nicosia were several officials of the PLO. Sebai held the post of secretary-general of

the organization since 1957, when he gave up a military career to head the Afro-Asian movement.

The PLO, dominated by Yassir Arafat's Al Fatah, denounced the attack on Sebai as "barbarous and brutal" and denied any responsibility for his assassination. For Egypt, Sebai's violent murder was a national tragedy, which produced shock waves throughout the country. The bloody shootout at the Nicosia Airport that left fifteen Egyptian commandos dead further inflamed the Egyptian reaction.

Violence is virtually unknown in Egypt, although this deeply ingrained cultural characteristic may surprise Westerners unfamiliar with Egypt. The 1952 revolution that ousted King Farouk was bloodless. A murder of a religious figure by a fanatic group in the summer of 1977 was treated with weeks of public discussion, disbelief, and horror. For centuries Egyptians have been a peaceful people passionately attached to their land. They are a nation of farmers, dwelling mainly in the narrow Nile Valley and depending on the waters of the Nile for survival. Minutes from Cairo a visitor returns to Egypt's past. Egyptian "fellahin" work the same land that has sustained and nourished them for centuries. There is a special strength derived from Egypt's seven thousand years of civilization. This monumental history and the civilization it produced have given Egypt's people a particular human richness and, despite a crippling lack of resources, a nearly inexhaustible patience.

But when news came of Sebai's murder, the Egyptians' abhorrence of violence, their disappointment in the peace negotiations with Israel, their resentment of insults by hard-line Arabs, and their weariness at supporting the burden of the Palestinians contributed to a feeling of frustration and caused them to erupt in anger. Periodically in Egyptian history, at moments when events produce a national sense of frustration, people take to the streets. The last time was in January, 1976, when subsidies for basic foodstuffs were to be eliminated. Many were killed and hundreds arrested. It was a setback for Egypt's domestic policies. These food riots gave renewed urgency to the peace process and contributed to President Sadat's decision to make his "sacred mission" to Jerusalem.

Yousef el Sebai, like President Sadat, represented the emergence in Egypt of a new class. The British occupation of Egypt left this generation with a deeply rooted sense of nationalism and a pragmatic approach to politics. Many young officers were able to take a more active role in public life after the revolution in 1952.

Sebai had joined the cavalry corps when he graduated from Cairo's military academy in 1937. He later transferred to the tank corps and became an instructor in military schools. His friendship with Anwar El Sadat, who also graduated from the military academy, began in the years before the revolution, when both young men were members of the Free Officers Movement. Sebai's long association with Sadat made him a loyal and trusted confidant of the Egyptian president. On hearing of the assassination, Sadat said Sebai was "like one of my brothers."

Sebai was born in a popular district of Cairo to a lower middle-class family. His father was a prominent writer,

and Sebai began his own writing career while still in high school. His career as a military officer was mixed with his writing and his political and diplomatic assignments. Indeed, he once held the post of minister of culture. Sebai was a prolific writer, producing some twenty-one collections of short stories, sixteen novels, many essays, plays, and screenplays. Most of his books were romances that used as their setting current political events. *The Way Back Home* was a novel about the problem of Palestine and the repatriation of the Arabs. Later novels centered on the union with Syria, the building of the High Dam, and, in *A Smile on His Lips* (1971), the battle of the fedayeen and Zionism.

Sebai was decorated twice by Egypt for his literary accomplishments and was awarded an Italian decoration in 1963 and the Soviet Union's Order of Lenin in 1970. President Sadat posthumously bestowed on his friend the Collar of the Republic, Egypt's highest civilian award. Sebai was active in the establishment of several writing clubs and literary organizations in Egypt and internationally. Much of his work has been made into movies and translated into other languages.

Sebai was appointed by President Sadat chairman of the board of *Al-Ahram* and editor-in-chief of the semiofficial Cairo daily only three years before his death at the age of sixty. In this capacity Sebai usually accompanied President Sadat when he traveled and was with him in Jerusalem in November. An unassuming figure, he endorsed editorially President Sadat's policies for direct negotiations with Israel and was, as a result, expelled from the Pan-Arab Journalist Union by hardline Arab members.

Yousef el Sebai's assassination generated strong anti-Palestinian sentiment in Egypt at a time when the delicate process of negotiation between Israel and its most important adversary is stalled over the issue of Palestinian self-determination. Egyptians are fed up with war and are ready to make peace, but they are not likely to abandon the Palestinian cause. It is a national commitment born out of Egypt's role in the Mideast.

Egypt's history commands respect, although its dominant position in the Middle East sometimes creates resentment from weaker powers. Egypt is regarded throughout the Middle East as the political mecca of the Arab world and the pillar of civilization on the African continent. The influence and impact of Egypt's policies cannot be disregarded by any of the other parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The murder of Yousef el Sebai, a leading Egyptian, widely respected in the Arab world, should be considered a warning of the process of disintegration that is likely to occur if the hard decisions President Sadat has called for are not made. Only days after Sebai fell victim to Palestinian terrorists another brutal act of terror was perpetrated, in Israel, against innocent victims, leaving many dead and wounded.

The Middle East can move into a new era of peace, cooperation, and coexistence only if other leaders, with the support of their people, show the courage demonstrated by President Sadat. Without that, Yousef el Sebai's death, the terrorist raid in Israel, and Israel's reprisal only add another tragic chapter to the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict.