

# SEKEM Insight

SEKEM's Journal for Culture, Economy, Society and Ecology in Egypt

## Editorial

### Dear Readers,

you know how it all began with SEKEM? Do you know how the long-standing and extremely fruitful relationship between Germany, Austria and SEKEM in Egypt originally came about? Dr. Hans Werner, a physician who still personally assists SEKEM's development today and has been since the early 80s together with his wife Elfriede Werner, recalls the beginnings of SEKEM and of the German SEKEM Friends in his post in this issue. He remembers how the foundation was laid for a partnership that has already lasted more than 35 years.

In addition, in this issue we report on Helmy Abouleish's trip to The Netherlands, where he met with a number of students from an organic education institute and from the renowned University of Wageningen in a debate on the future of eco-agriculture.

Finally, we report on the redesign of the Internet page that presents SEKEM's medical products. They have received their own attractive and highly innovative website for the first time.

### Your Team of Editors

Find SEKEM also on the Internet at:



### How It Began

The German  
SEKEM Friends

### Agriculture

Helmy Abouleish in  
The Netherlands

### SEKEM Health

New Website  
Launches

## The Beginning of SEKEM and of its German Supporters

**German-Egyptian relations:** In his contribution, Dr. Hans Werner, physician and long-time supporter of SEKEM, recalls the beginnings of SEKEM that eventually led to the creation of the German "SEKEM Friends".



*How everything began: Elfriede and Hans Werner visited SEKEM at the beginning of the 80s and laid the foundational stone for a long-standing friendship and collaboration.*

Early in December 1983, on the 9th of the month, to be precise, Elfriede Werner together with Renate Raubald, Elke von Laue, Helga Yan, Uta Lochmüller and Christian Helms founded the German SEKEM Friends, the SEKEM initiative's first private support association based in a European Country. The Friends set themselves the task of promoting the SEKEM initiative in Egypt, an Islamic initiative. But how did it come to this decision?

In January of 1981, Elfriede Werner and Frieda Göglar stumbled into a young woman (the teacher Monika Kuschfeld), then unknown to them, in the great pillared hall of Karnak (Luxor) in Egypt. Mrs. Kuschfeld told the two of an anthroposophical initiative in the Northeastern desert of Egypt, lead by physicians, pharmacists and farmers who were seeking for practical assistance. The initiator was said to be one Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish. Elfriede was intrigued and



*Frieda Gögler significantly shaped the beginnings of the German support association.*

did everything to arrange for a visit of this desert farm still during our stay in Cairo. And she succeeded!

When we arrived on the little patch of desert land just a short while afterwards, we were approached by a man whom everyone just called "Dr. Ibrahim". He had appeared from a large, round mud hut, raised his hands in greeting and exclaimed: "I knew that you would come!". And this Dr. Ibrahim immediately treated us like an old friend. Elfriede, Frieda Gögler and I left the SEKEM Farm deeply impressed and with the firm resolve to help this young, still fledgling initiative. But who was this "Dr. Ibrahim"?

### The Beginnings of SEKEM

As a fourteen year old boy, Ibrahim Abouleish finds a book by the German poet and scientist J. W. von Goethe place in the library of his uncle, reads it, and immediately decides that he must later visit the places where Goethe had lived and worked. At age 19, he secretly leaves his family, leaving only a letter addressed to his father: "When I get home again...", he writes, and then continues explaining that intends to transform the village of his youth, Mashtul, into "a shining centre of development in Egypt". He also recounts all the

individual advancements he intends to embellish Mashtul with in this letter. They basically encompass what has been achieved in SEKEM today.

The Austrian city of Graz was his first destination of travel. At the local university, he studied technical chemistry, medicine and philosophy; next he studied European culture, particularly its history of the arts. He passed his exams with top marks, worked as a scientist in Austria, Germany, and the United States of America, and was then awarded a contract to install and develop a research centre in the Austria city of St. Johann. There he met Martha Werth, a music teacher, and through her he encountered anthroposophy.

A trip back to Egypt in 1975 allowed him see first-hand the major changes brought about by the socialist dictatorship of Nasser. This shocked him in such a way that he dreamed up the vision of SEKEM and, after his idea had matured, he decided to return to Egypt and to realize it as an exemplary solution to the modern problems of Egypt.

### The Beginnings of the SEKEM Friends

Elfriede, I, and Frieda Gögler returned to Germany Full of energy and with the idea to spread – in writing and through speeches – what we had experienced in Egypt after our first trip. Frieda Gögler in particular put herself behind the project of getting 40 Allgäu cows shipped to SEKEM together with young milkmaid Angela Hoffmann and the young Martin Abrecht. Frieda Gögler was able to acquire a loan of \$ 200,000 from the Charitable Trust Pforzheim to purchase the cows. This loan was later transformed into a gift by the GLS Treuhand. This way, the foundation was laid for the German "SEKEM Friends". Elfriede Werner took the brunt of the responsibility of running the association as Chairman until 2000 and Renate Raubald supported her as Treasurer until 2009.

During the first 7 years, the SEKEM farm experienced substantial difficulties mostly from their immediate neighbours.

At the end of this first period of its life came a serious economic crisis that led to health problems for Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish. In 1985, he spent five months in Öschelbronn, an important time for his recovery and for SEKEM. Together with Dr. Abouleish, we entered into many talks on the further development of the initiative and were able to establish new contacts, such as to Klaus Fintelmann for the education programmes of the planned SEKEM School, or to Winfried Reindl as an architect for a large part of the future buildings that would eventually come to represent the distinctive "SEKEM style" of construction.

A groundbreaking ceremony for SEKEM on the main farm in October 1985 was then the beginning of a rapid growth of specifically its agricultural activities. Through an intensive cooperation of our association's board together with the SEKEM, it quickly became possible to construct numerous cultural institutions over the years, which were funded by a number of people from Germany and later other European countries. This way SEKEM and its supporters were able to develop an initiative that today is perhaps unique worldwide in terms of diversity and cultural complexity.

It has been a special experience for the German Friends to witness during these 30 years the emergence of a comprehensive educational system from infant care groups to a university including a vocational school, a school for the handicapped, an institute providing literacy courses as well as a medical centre offering many different disciplines. Another project, co-financed by the European Union, also warrants mention: The "13-Villages-Project" promotes healthier lifestyles in the communities surrounding SEKEM: street cleaning, waste separation and disposal, sanitation, hygiene education, support to pregnant women, childbirth and infant care education and micro loans are part of it.

The year 2006 brought a major change for the association: Its location was moved to Stuttgart. There, board member Waltraud Bandel with great effort had established connections to the city's administration. Cairo

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**SEKEM**

**YOU CAN VISIT SEKEM YOURSELF:**

[WWW.SEKEM-REISEN.DE](http://WWW.SEKEM-REISEN.DE)

[WWW.AVENTERRA.DE](http://WWW.AVENTERRA.DE)

# Helmy Abouleish Visits Dutch Organisations Meeting Students

On a trip to the Netherlands, Helmy Abouleish recently visited the Warmonderhof and two universities to discuss the importance of organic farming with local students and staff.

The Dutch association of the Friends of SEKEM (Vriendenkring SEKEM) recently managed to organise a series of meetings between Helmy Abouleish, Executive Manager of the SEKEM companies, and students from the Bernard Lievegoed University for Liberal Arts in the Netherlands, the Dutch training centre for bio-dynamic farming Warmonderhof, and the Studium Generale programme of the University of Wageningen.

## Learning from the Future

During a dinner on 16 May, Helmy Abouleish first shared his ideas on learning and acting “from the future” with a selected group of students from the Bernard Lievegoed University. In his view, students today should develop skills to shape and cope with yet unknown future circumstances rather than learn solutions for problems reflecting developments already in the past. In Helmy’s view, it is the duty and opportunity of higher education institutions, to teach just these capacities.

After the dinner, Helmy told an audience of over 50 students from the university, the local Rudolf-Steiner-School and their teachers how he enjoyed exploring the desert by motorcycle after moving from Austria to Egypt, and how over time he took over increasingly more responsibilities in the firm from his father, until eventually he came to represent SEKEM in more than 100 national and international committees on organic farming, economic reform and sustainable development.

## Saving the World, 24 Hours a Day

It was not before he was taken into custody during the Egyptian revolution of 2011, a place where he remained for almost four months, that he realised he had become alienated from the SEKEM

community and from his family by “saving the world” 24 hours a day. After his release, Helmy recalls these 100 days in prison as a wake-up call which enabled him to reflect on his life more easily. He thus decided to spend more time with his family and with the workers on the farm, as this is the place where saving the world actually happens for him in practice. He confessed that talking about his personal life publicly for the first time instead of SEKEM was quite a new experience.

A talk was scheduled the next day at Warmonderhof, where some 40 grade one and part-time adult students were eager to learn about organic farming in a dry climate, which is quite the opposite of the situation in the Netherlands where 80% of the arable land is below sea level and thus has to be constantly drained. Afterwards, the students showed Helmy their fields, and he cordially invited them to visit the SEKEM farm during or after their time at the training centre.

## Can Organic Agriculture Alleviate the Food Crisis?

At Wageningen University, which, according to its website, is dedicated to “healthy food and a living environment”, but in fact strongly supports large-scale chemical farming methods including genetically modified organisms (GMO), Helmy took part in a debate about whether organic farming – and more precisely biodynamic farming – may be the solution to overcoming environmental issues and the world food problem, or if the combination of GMO and factory farming provides better solutions.

The 80 students, many with an international background, were very interested in Helmy’s views and had many questions, which he answered clearly and openly. He invited the students to visit SEKEM to see with their own eyes

how organic farming in a dry climate is working and some students certainly will do so. In between he managed to have an interview with the Dutch branch of Oikocredit, which has supported SEKEM for the last few years, and to attend the SEKEM Friends’ annual meeting.

Helmy, with his visit, was able to win the hearts of many young people for the SEKEM vision, which could result in a stronger cooperation between SEKEM and the Netherlands once these people find their way into professional lives.

*Hendrik Jan Bakker*

Vriendenkring Sekem (Netherlands)

! More information:  
• <http://www.warmonderhof.nl>

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is a twinning partner of Stuttgart. Thus, SEKEM was able to be included in associated programmes. Waltraud Bandel is to be thanked for her dedication towards expanding the Friends’ public relations. Dr. Roland Schaette’ is the current CEO of the association, Stefan Rivoir acts as treasurer and Waltraud Bandel, Magdy Abdalla, and Claus-Wilhelm Hoffmann are part of the board. Dr. Bruno Sandkühler is a particularly active member and I myself contribute as a senior.

30 years of promotion of SEKEM also means heartfelt thanks for 30 years of contributions to the many volunteers and sponsors, not least the board members of the SEKEM Friends. They have contributed, together with Egyptian and European executive personnel, to the realisation of the SEKEM Vision Dr. Ibrahim Abouleish originally had dreamed of.

*Hans Werner*

! More information:  
• <http://www.SEKEM-freunde.de>



## Website for SEKEM's Herbal Medicine Receives Redesign

For many years, SEKEM has been selling non-prescription health-promoting products under the brand name "SEKEM" in Egypt. Now this product line has finally got a new website all of its own, on which all individual preparations, supplements, herbs, and teas can be presented in their greatest detail.

The products, which have been valued by our customers for years, are being presented in the four distinct areas of "Regime", "Mother & Child", "Medicinal Herbs" and "Nutritional Supplements". The consistently high standard of quality in this product segment, of course, a big plus.

The site follows the concept of emotions stimulated by images. The customer is addressed by large, colourful, meaningful images, and thus guided through the website step by step, image by image.

The main pages – "About Us" and "Products" – have been built according to the „One-Page-Principle“, meaning that all content is displayed on a single page, with each of the sections separated only by visual markers. Menus appear only when the user moves within the site and they assist in the navigation. The visitor does not have to click through several nested pages.

The new site is only a first step. She comes to live only through extensions and posts that remain current. Thus, the pages of "SEKEM" and ATOS Pharma will in the future be supported by a team that will take care not only of the maintenance of the pages but also digital customer service.

Thomas Abouleish



## Impressions from SEKEM



**E**ven in Egypt, Spring is the season of birds. Early in the morning at sunrise, it may occasionally seem as if everything that has feathers was clamouring to assure itself how great life is – and, in fact, it *is*, particularly on the SEKEM Farm this time of the year!

It starts with building the nest almost as soon as the small canopy, outdoor lamp post or anything similar originally chosen has turned out to be unsuitable. You can find all the necessary ingredients for building a nest strewn about the ground around many of the buildings at SEKEM. During the mating season, the pigeons are especially hard to miss – and to hear: The trees on SEKEM are noisy places! Then, a little later, the first young birds appear, and in June we see the most colourful of them: a species of the halcyon bird variety in bright turquoise common to SEKEM as well as parrots coloured in green as the grass. The old feed the young, and the latter seem obviously seem to be concerned mostly with sitting and waiting.

For the parrots, Egypt really is just a place of transit. Now, however, some seem to feel at home with us and also the halcyon birds were rare visitors only a few years ago. Meanwhile, there are just two of the many species common at SEKEM. They are very shy. But once one has the chance to come close to such an especially beautiful being, it's like being close to a little piece of paradise!



## Healthy Seeds as a Foundation for Life: Cooperation is the Only Way



The travellers on the „Kulturgutexpress“ debate the protection of our seeds in the salon car.

Roughly 160 passengers on the „Kulturgutexpress 2014“ were recently seeking for innovative ways to protect and care for our seeds. The train, in the organisation of which SEKEM has again participated, rode all the way to Donji Kraljevec in Croatia and provided the travellers with enough room to experiment with their ideas through artistic and socio-dynamic means. A panel discussion on the train gave room to an extensive debate on the different aspects of the topic of seed protection today. Through its own work in Egypt, SEKEM continues to strive for the same goals through biodynamic farming and the breeding of its own healthy seeds.

Mara Müller of the Austrian Association for the preservation and development of crop diversity, „Noah’s Ark“, emphasized that seed is a cultural asset: „It has emerged through the ‘discussion of humans and plants’. The culture and needs of the people who shaped the seed are reflected in it.” Indeed, seeds that are preserved through breeding methods and which are not modified in the laboratory, need „guidance“, Christine Nagel, who is a breeder with Kultursaat e.V., adds. However, the necessary knowledge is getting increasingly lost. Even the professional training profile of the occupation of a „gardener“ does no longer exist. Plus, the issue of funding issue is of special importance. So far, new varieties and preservation of common, healthy varieties have been financed through associations and the support programmes of foundations.

While that is an approach that is necessary and certain to continue, Sebastian Bauer of the Software AG Foundation stresses that such funding should leave the „charity corner“: „You have to see the financing of seed protection and development measures as an investment in the future! Each market partners and the society as a whole [...] should have an urgent interest in it to provide for the growth of robust and healthy varieties in a big way.”

Stephan Illi, formerly on the board of Demeter Germany, is also convinced that lasting solutions can only be developed through close cooperation between all societal stakeholders. „Niche activism markets such as community agriculture and profit certificate models in which consumers combine their power of market advancement and express their solidarity with farmers are in the process of development thus improving quality and variety in the process. Customers want to get involved and we need to exploit this drive!”

Some of the passengers voiced the idea of supporting seed protection through a cultural tax. This could establish financially equal opportunities. Here, the political establishment comes into play. The compensatory tax was named as an already working example: in the context of seed protection, a license fee for those who are today beneficiaries of the processes that man and nature have accomplished together ten thousand years ago would be conceivable.

Organic farming makes high demands concerning seed quality as differences in location and fertility may not be equalised with synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or fungicides. Rather, each strain combines different properties. Developments in seed varieties may only come from this diversity. This can only be ensured if politics, industry, trade and consumers aim to bring about change together. This is exactly what SEKEM is striving for through its work.

*Bijan Kafi with material by  
Software AG Foundation*

## Cairo Days to be held again in November 2014

The „Cairo Days 2013“ carried out at the Stuttgart Youth Hostel for the first time in January 2013 will again be the event to be this year concerning current developments in Egypt. From the 13th to probably the 16th of November, interested participants will be invited to meet SEKEM staff and those co-workers from the SEKEM Friends working for SEKEM’s support in Germany. The event will again be organised cooperatively by the German SEKEM Friends, the City of Stuttgart and other initiatives. Until then, a video of the 2013 days will bring you back to last year’s event and the program provides an overview of what to expect this time. More information will be available soon on the website of the SEKEM Friends in Germany.



**! More information:**  
<http://bit.ly/UEQVO4> (Video)  
<http://bit.ly/1nMLI9r> (Programme)



**Masthead:**  
The editors of SEKEM Insight wish to thank all contributors to this issue.

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