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Atta's Odyssey

By John Cloud

Before we get to his dislikes and disorders, his vexations as a child and his entanglements as an adult, let's poke inside Mohamed Atta's brain the night before he helped slaughter 7,000 people. "You have to remind yourself to listen and obey that night, for you will face situations that will require your obedience 100 percent," reads a letter found in Atta's luggage and in the belongings of two other hijackers. Atta would be happy to know that his evil was steadfast.

Though investigators are still excavating the hidden trails that led to Sept. 11, many point to Atta as the linchpin of the 19-man hijacking gang. From Hamburg, Germany, to South Florida to Las Vegas, Atta crossed paths with at least seven other hijackers. While some of these terrorists were barely out of their teens, Atta turned 33 days before the attacks. He seems to have been the center of gravity, the dour and meticulous ringleader. This is the story of how his malevolence was unleashed.

In Egypt, where Atta grew up, his family and friends describe a shy, unassuming young man who struggled to make his mark. They say he must have undergone a stark personality change to become the terrorist who supervised Sept. 11. Born in Kafr El Sheikh, a city on the Nile delta, Mohamed was the son of a lawyer and a homemaker. As a kid, his father says, he liked to play chess and disliked violent games. He was a scrawny youth--only 5 ft. 7 in. and until recently quite thin. (His dad called him "Bolbol," Arabic slang for a little singing bird.) Atta seemed overshadowed by his two sisters, who rose to become a zoology professor and a medical doctor. Atta graduated from Cairo University with a degree in architectural engineering and was an average student, according to his peers.

Atta made a few friends in school, but he was such a loner that when a classmate, Iman Ismail, drew a caricature of their class, she depicted Mohamed standing next to a sign posted on Egyptian military fences: COMING NEAR OR TAKING PHOTOS PROHIBITED. When it came to politics and religion, topics no Egyptian can avoid, he offered mainstream opinions. His friends don't remember ever seeing him pray, and they recall his harsh words for Islamic terrorists--"brainless, irresponsible people."

Which is why several of his Egyptian classmates could not accept his guilt in interviews with TIME. "I could never imagine him on a plane threatening people, killing people," says Ahmed Khalifa, 33, Atta's best friend at Cairo University. "He would be scared to death...He was not a leader. He had his opinion, but he was

modest in everything. His emotions were steady, and he was not easily influenced or swayed. Mohamed was well liked because he never offended or bothered anyone." Says Ismail: "He was good to the roots."

But he had what could be interpreted as some ominous undercurrents. Atta could get exercised by the world's shortcomings, big and small. He spoke out impulsively against injustice. He was so sensitive that he could become emotional if an insect was killed. "He was a little bit pure," says Khaled Kattan, another classmate. "If he thought that I said or did something wrong, then he would say that in front of anybody."

Atta's father could be quite strict, according to friends. In interviews since Sept. 11, Mohammed El Amir, has denied that his son was involved in the attacks. "He is a moderate in his adherence to his faith like me and his mother," El Amir has said. But El Amir's politics suggest that Atta learned a few things about the world from his father. In a press conference last week, El Amir heatedly blamed the Israelis for the attacks and called the U.S. "the root of terrorism."

Cairo is one of the world's most crowded, impoverished cities, and by the early '90s, Atta felt the intense pressures on middle-class Egyptians not to slip in social rank. His friend Khalifa says Atta grew frustrated because he was unable to fulfill his academic ambitions in his homeland. He believed that political favoritism at Egyptian universities would keep him from the top spots.

So in autumn 1992, Atta enrolled at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg, in a sleepy corner of northern Germany. He hoped to earn a degree in urban planning and then return to Egypt. In 1993, he befriended fellow student Volker Hauth, and the two often traveled and studied together in the next few years. Hauth liked Atta but sensed a rigidity in his friend. "I knew Mohamed as a guy searching for justice," Hauth told the Los Angeles Times. "He felt offended by this broad wrong direction the world was taking."

In the mid-'90s, Atta began disappearing from school for extended periods. He would tell his thesis adviser that he was going to Aleppo, Syria, to work on his thesis. (It explored the conflict between Islam and modernity as reflected in the city's planning, and it won high marks when completed in August 1999.) Atta was away from his job at a Hamburg consultancy for months in 1995; he reportedly said he had gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Co-workers recall him condemning terrorist attacks on tourists in Egypt. But he also bemoaned Western influence--specifically, the rise of skyscrapers--in Arab cities.

From mid-1997 to October 1998, Atta seems to have disappeared from Hamburg entirely. He told his thesis adviser that he was gone for family reasons, but it's clear that he underwent profound changes during this time. He returned to school with the bushy beard favored by fundamentalists. He was more serious. Hauth, who left the university at the end of 1995 and lost contact with Atta, told the London Observer his friend could laugh at jokes about Arab dictators. But Chrilla Wendt, who knew Atta after he returned, said she couldn't remember him smiling.

Atta had grown more sullen about his life prospects. His old friend Khalifa ran into him on a Cairo street one day in 1999. He found Atta depressed about not having a career or a family back home. Atta said he had made few German friends. "I think he felt that he had just been studying all those years," Khalifa recalls. "When I said goodbye, I was sad."

German authorities now believe that sometime that year, Atta began touching base with a wide range of people connected to terrorism. They point to his association with a Syrian businessman, Mamoun Darkazanli, who had power of attorney for a German bank account in the name of a man thought to be Osama bin Laden's finance chief. Darkazanli denied any ties to terrorists last week.

Whatever Atta was doing behind the scenes, he was publicly spreading the word of the Koran. Early in 1999, university officials gave him permission to found an Islamic student group. (Investigators believe he eventually met hijackers Marwan Al-Shehhi and Ziad Samir Jarrah in the group.) The 40 or so members gathered to pray every day. The moderate boy from the outskirts of Cairo had grown devout, and he was surrounding himself with like-minded compatriots.

At the end of 1999, Atta, Al-Shehhi and Jarrah reported their passports stolen, possibly to clear any record of travel to Afghanistan. Within weeks, Atta and Al-Shehhi flew to the U.S. for a visit. Even at this early date, Atta may have been planning an air attack. Sometime in spring 2000, Atta--now a clean-shaven cartoon version of an American in Tommy Hilfiger and heavy cologne--walked into a U.S. Department of Agriculture office in Homestead, Fla., and inquired about loans for buying crop dusters. The office doesn't offer such loans, and it turned him away.

Atta returned briefly to Europe, but on June 3, 2000, he arrived in Newark, N.J., from Prague with a six-month tourist visa. Within a month, Atta and Al-Shehhi signed up for flight training at Huffman Aviation International in Venice, Fla. When the two men moved into a little pink house in nearby Nokomis, they brought sweets to their rental agent. Their Venice landlady, Dru Voss, says that while Al-Shehhi was a likable guy, Atta was an icicle who never looked her in the eye.

Atta and Al-Shehhi were eager students. Together they paid Huffman some \$40,000 for about four months of training. Huffman owner Rudi Dekkers took an immediate dislike to Atta, the smaller man. Dekkers recalls that Atta once told him he had lived in Germany. Dekkers then launched into German, but Atta just turned away. Neither Atta nor Al-Shehhi socialized with the other 15 to 20 students.

Atta's tourist visa expired on Dec. 3, 2000, but no one seemed to notice (one of several lapses in immigration procedures that aided the hijackers). On Dec. 21, Atta and Al-Shehhi got their pilot licenses. About a week later, they trained for three hours each on the Boeing 727 simulator at Simcenter Inc. at Opa-Locka Airport, outside Miami. By that time, the two men, who called themselves cousins, had each logged about 300 hours of flying time. They were still beginners, but they knew enough to maneuver an airborne plane.

Around this time Atta and other hijackers purchased global-positioning devices known as GPS-3s from Tropic-Aero, an aviation-supply shop in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. These \$475 devices, about the size of Game Boys, are used by pilots to navigate. Says Jerry Carbone, Tropic-Aero's president: "It's so simple to use, you and your wife would be able to find your way in a 767 once it's up. It's sad if [the hijackers] were able to use something anyone can get at K Mart."

In January of this year, Atta hopped a flight from Miami to Madrid. It's unclear why he went, and when he returned to Miami International Airport on Jan. 10, he was allowed back in the country despite his expired visa.

He didn't bother to list his flight or carrier, yet sailed through immigration. The next month, Atta and Al-Shehhi rented a single-engine Piper Warrior from a Gwinnett County, Ga., flight school. Like many other pilots, they were honing their skills. Atta inquired again about crop dusters--this time in Belle Glade, Fla. He and some men with him wanted to know how much fuel and chemicals the yellow 502 Air Tractors could carry and whether special skills were needed to pilot them.

On April 26, Broward County sheriff's deputy Josh Strambaugh stopped Atta for a traffic violation. Atta didn't have his license with him and was given a citation. He did not show up for his hearing, and on June 4 a warrant was issued for his arrest. But it was too late. By this time, Atta and his men were moving every couple of months, drifting from one low-rent dwelling to the next. Nearing the final stages of their plotting, they had become very careful. They kept to themselves and seem not to have even attended a mosque. Only occasionally would somebody notice them. One observer was Jim Woolard, owner of a World Gym in Delray Beach, Fla., who recalls Atta as "driven" on the weight machines (perhaps one reason that the folks back home would have trouble recognizing the newly beefy Atta in photos released after Sept. 11).

On June 29, Atta traveled to Las Vegas, where he stayed in a cheap room, with the DO NOT DISTURB SIGN constantly dangling from the door. While in town, investigators told the Associated Press, he met with two other hijackers, Salem Alhazmi and Hani Hanjour. His Hamburg pals Al-Shehhi and Jarrah were also there, which suggests a planning session. Four of the five men were on separate flights on Sept. 11, and one theory is that the four leaders of the four hijacked planes were there to work out final details.

On July 9, Atta made another trip to Madrid. He spent 10 days in Spain, running up 1,250 miles on his rental car. His time there remains murky, but last week six men suspected of belonging to a group financed by bin Laden were arrested in Spain on charges unrelated to Sept. 11. Investigators are tracing Atta's steps to see whether he met with them.

Atta returned to the U.S. on a business visa. He made another quick trip to Las Vegas but spent most of his time in Florida. Sources have told TIME that in the 10 days before Sept. 11, Atta received at least two wire transfers of money from a man investigators have linked with bin Laden. But the last days weren't all business. On Sept. 7, Atta, Al-Shehhi and another man visited Shuckum's Oyster Bar and Grill in Hollywood, Fla. Contrary to earlier reports of his carousing, Atta was the only one of the three who didn't drink alcohol. Instead, he downed cranberry juice all night, sugary fuel for the pinball machine--Golden Tee '97--that he played for 3 1/2 hours.

When Atta brought hell to the north tower of the World Trade Center, when he perished in the flames and had his picture beamed around the world, friends back in Egypt were dumbfounded. They looked and looked again at the photos, trying to find the kid they once knew. "To fly a plane, what a joke! Mohamed could hardly ride a bike," says classmate Osama Abul Enein. "He came from an average middle-class background. Mohamed no way could have done that," agrees Ibrahim Salah, 33, a Cairo engineer who knew him in college.

But he did. How does someone change so much? Experts point out that extremist groups in the Muslim world have been attracting an increasing number of recruits who grew up comfortably. "Just because you are educated and travel does not mean that you cannot join a militant organization," says Hala Mostafa, an authority on militant groups at al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. "Terrorists should be illiterate or primitive? Not so."

Which still doesn't explain what happened to Mohamed Atta. "Let each find his blade for the prey to be slaughtered," reads a passage of the letter found in Atta's luggage. How Atta found his blade may never be known.

--Reported by Scott MacLeod and Amany Radwan/Cairo; Jeanne DeQuine, Kathie Klarreich, Broward Liston, Siobhan Morrissey, Tim Padgett, Michael Peltier and Mary Sutter/Florida; Jane Walker/Madrid; and Regine Wosnitza/Berlin

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