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Review Essay

Najati Sidqi (1905–79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik

Salim Tamari

Mudhakkarat Najati Sidqi (The memoirs of Najati Sidqi), ed. Hanna Abu Hanna. Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001. xiv + 234 pages. Index to p. 243. $7.00 paper.

The subject of these memoirs, Najati Sidqi (1905–79), is almost forgotten in the annals of the Palestinian national movement. Even in the ranks of the Left, there are few who remember him. Yet at one point, Sidqi was a foremost figure within Palestinian and Arab communism. A leader within the trade union movement, he represented the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in the Comintern, was one of the few Arab socialists to join the anti-Fascist struggle in Spain, and contributed significantly to the political and cultural journalism of the Left in Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

Now, thanks to Hanna Abu Hanna's meticulous editing—and his extensive annotations and glossary—we possess a valuable record of what went on behind the scenes in Syrian and Palestinian partisan politics as well as a vivid account of how Arab socialists and communists lived in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era.

At various stages of his career, Sidqi was privy to personal (and sometimes intimate) contacts with Joseph Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin (author of the Soviet constitution and one of the founders of the Comintern), Georgi Dimitrov (the leader of Bulgarian communists), Dolores Ibaruri (the legendary "Pasionaria" of the Spanish Republican movement), George Marchais (leader of the French Communist Party), and Khalid Bakdash (the Kurdish leader of the Syrian Communist Party with whom Sidqi had chronic and bitter disputes over the nature of Islam and Arab nationalism). One of these disputes occasioned a party session in Moscow, where Dimitrov and a forty-three-year-old Mao Tse-tung acted as arbiters between them (pp. 116–17). He witnessed the arrest and execution of Gregory Zinoviev and Bukharin, the fall of Madrid to Franco's forces, and the rise of the Nazi movement in Berlin. He was also an eyewitness to the entry of the British army into Palestine, the exile of King Faisal from Damascus, and the exit of the French army from Lebanon and Syria.

An important element in these memoirs is that they expose an overlooked aspect of political life in Jerusalem. During the Mandate period, political life was generally

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seen as the domain of Haifa and Jaffa, with their trade union activities, radical politics, and left-wing journalism. But Sidqi sheds light on the earliest appearance of left-wing politics in Jerusalem, first in the context of attempts by Jewish radical groups to break with the Zionist movement and then in the attempt by Arab socialists to "infiltrate" such traditional groupings as the quasi-religious Nabi Musa processions (see excerpts below). Sidqi also highlights the mobility of left-wing activists, and presumably other militants, as they moved from one city to another, and the relative ease with which they smuggled themselves across the border into Lebanon and Syria. Only four years before the memoirs begin, Mount Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Transjordan were all part of a single Ottoman domain, with no borders between them.

Sidqi published a fragment of his "public" memoirs in 1968.[1] The current memoirs are supposed to expose the "secret" and clandestine aspect of his political history, yet they leave many questions unanswered and several issues unresolved, which the editor, himself a veteran Palestinian socialist, could have clarified. For example, why did the young Sidqi join the communist movement in the 1920s when his sympathies were clearly nationalist? Why was he expelled from the movement in the 1940s? Why did his older brother Ahmad, a party militant who lived with him in Moscow, become a state witness against Sidqi when he was arrested by the British police during the Mandate—a crucial factor in his imprisonment?

Above all, the personal dimension in Sidqi's life is missing from the memoirs. In Abu Hanna's introduction, we learn in a schematic manner about Sidqi's biography, but the diarist's own account remains enigmatic. It is as if his clandestine Bolshevik lifestyle kept him from disclosing his intimate thoughts for fear of posthumous exposure. Luckily some of the undisclosed biographic material can be gleaned from Ya'coub 'Odat's compendium on Palestinian writers published posthumously in 1975.[2]

Sidqi was born to a middle-class Jerusalemite family in 1905. His father, Bakri Sidqi, was a teacher of Turkish, and possibly of Turkish origin, who later joined Prince Faisal in Hijaz as an officer with a rank equivalent to lieutenant in the campaign against the Wahhabis. His mother was Nazira Murad, from a prominent mercantile family in Jerusalem. Sidqi spent his childhood in Jeddah and Cairo, later moving with his family to Damascus when Faisal was proclaimed king. He received a modern secular education in the most prominent Ottoman schools of Jerusalem, al-Ma'muniyya and al-Rashidiyya.[3] In the early 1920s, he returned to Jerusalem and worked in the Department of Post and Telegraph, where he joined the nascent PCP, at the time dominated by immigrants from Eastern Europe, including leftist Zionists. Sidqi's recollection of the ideological program of the Left-Zionists in this period is of questionable accuracy, but it does reflect the ideological mishmash on the "Arab question" that prevailed in the ranks of Zionist left-wing immigrants in that period:

> The left-wing labor movement represented by the Jewish immigrants in Poaleh Zion called for the establishment of a socialist Jewish state to replace the Israelite bourgeois hegemony. They did not recognize the Arab social formation. In their view, the Arabs were a socially backward people and far from suited to adopting socialist principles. The party believed that the "Arab problem" in Palestine could only be solved through naturalization [*sic*] and in-

> termarriage. With time, Arabs would have been absorbed into the crucible of a socialist Jewish state. (p. 16)

In 1921, he was sent by the party to study in Moscow at the KUTV (the Communist University of Toilers of the Orient), where he became acquainted with the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet and members of the Nehru family. His university thesis was on the Arab national movement from the Unionist Rebellion against the Ottoman state to the formation of the National Bloc. This short dissertation, which is attached to the memoirs, sheds some light on the kind of scholarship that was conducted at the KUTV and establishes Sidqi as a minor Marxist scholar (although it is quite possible to surmise, as Abu Hanna suggests in his introduction, that the available manuscript—which he collected in fragments from three different sources—is incomplete). Sidqi's recollection of daily life in Moscow in the early years of Bolshevism remains vivid (see excerpts below). He describes the austerity of the War Communism period (when the socialist regime introduced regimentation of labor and consumption) and the ideological debates between Stalin's followers and the Trotskyites after the death of Lenin. Sidqi was reprimanded by his local party branch for expressing unorthodox views against the repression of small landholders and had to recant them. He also participated in the debates that raged in the early 1920s on the future of the Soviet family and relations between the sexes under the new Soviet morality code:

> Arab students who came to Moscow in the early Soviet period were mesmerized by notions of "Free Love." These ideas were diffused by the Russian revolution, when it released young people from many restraints. The revolution was also very hostile to the religious order, and even more opposed to inherited social conventions. A movement among women emerged calling for licentiousness, and among young people there was a call for Free Love. For a limited period they actually experimented with these ideas until the Soviet authorities clamped down severely on these movements. It reasserted the view that the new order does not call for the abolition of the family, but advocates the establishment of a new family under new [revolutionary] conditions. (p. 53)

In Moscow, Sidqi married a Ukrainian communist who remains nameless, faceless, and voiceless throughout the diaries. Paradoxically, the only time we hear her in the memoirs is when she is arrested by Lebanese gendarmes during one of the family's escapes from the British authorities across the Palestinian-Lebanese border. At that time she was veiled in disguise and only bows her head in answer to their questioning. Similarly, his son and daughters—one of whom became a prominent doctor in the Soviet Union—are mentioned only in passing.

Sidqi's memoirs, while muted on personal details, show him to be a keen and sometimes critical observer of political developments in the early evolution of the Soviet state. On a second visit to Moscow (in the mid-1930s) he was sent to Tashkent by the Comintern to observe how the "national question" was resolved in a Muslim republic (Uzbekistan). Accompanied by Khalid Bakdash ("who insisted on coming along with me"), Sidqi held deep discussions with Uzbek leader Hajayef and the chairman of the Uzbek Communist Party, Akmal Ikramov—both aligned with Bukha-

rin's agrarian policies (pp. 119–21). Through them, Sidqi became acquainted with the main theses of the Right (Bukharin) and the Left (Zinoviev) opposition to Stalin. Although he was clearly sympathetic to Hajayef and Ikramov—both were executed soon after he visited them—Sidqi was more interested, with Palestine in mind, in how a traditional Muslim society could make the transition to modernity, industrialization, and socialism without weakening its traditional social fabric.

Having completed his academic training, Sidqi returned to Palestine—or rather, was sent to participate in Arabizing what was essentially a Jewish party. In 1930, he was arrested by the British police and spent three years incarcerated in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Acre. The Comintern then had him smuggled out of the country to Paris, where he edited the Comintern's Arabic journal, the *Arab East*, which was distributed clandestinely in North Africa and the Mashriq. Eventually, the French authorities closed the journal and had him expelled.[4] Back in Palestine, Sidqi becomes thoroughly involved in the internal debates about the composition of the party. Clearly the problem, as seen by the Comintern, was how to reconstruct the leadership of a party dominated by Jewish socialists—many of whom harbored crypto-Zionist sympathies—to reflect the Arab majority in the country. The intercommunal clashes of 1929 exacerbated these difficulties. Here is how Sidqi saw these events:

> The rebellion of 24 August 1929 shook the party severely. It was particularly perplexing for Jewish communists. Some of them defended the predicament of their coreligionists, others preferred to take a more neutral position. This situation created a problem in the relationship between the Jewish and Arab comrades. Stormy meetings were held in which the rebellion was debated: was it a national revolt, or a sectarian massacre? At this point the party began to split. Some Jewish communists claimed that it was a massacre. Others supported the position of the Central Committee which regarded it as [mainly] a national uprising against British repressive rule, and as [a reaction] against land seizure and the pauperization of peasants. . . . During that period, I was overseeing the party branch in Haifa and was in close contact with the Labor Federation there. . . . I began clandestine contacts with the Imam of the Haifa mosque, Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, who had a striking tall figure. . . . He would tell me about his struggles in Syria against the French in 1920, and how he sought refuge in Haifa since then, only to begin his fight against the British, and how they began to pursue him. Later in 1935, I received the news about the martyrdom of Qassam and four of his comrades near Jinin. (p. 86)

Sidqi's arrest and imprisonment in Palestine in the early 1930s for his communist activities introduce us to the most enigmatic part of his memoirs: the appearance and testimony of his older brother Ahmad as the chief witness for the prosecution. Primarily on the strength of that testimony (which was followed by Sidqi's confession) he receives a two-year sentence. It transpires that Ahmad was Najati's fellow student at the KUTV, and he was active in the movement under the pseudonym of Saul: "poor, fragile Ahmad, who seemed to have been beaten and hounded in jail, came to the stand . . . and began to narrate how, as my elder brother, he loved me but tried to

dissuade me from falling prey to subversive movements. Despite his advice that I should withdraw from the party, I persisted in my dogmatic adherence and obstinacy" (pp. 96–99). When asked by the judge why he chose voluntarily to testify against his brother, Ahmad responds that his aim was to help reduce Najati's sentence. What is baffling about this episode is that it appears abruptly, and out of context, in the section on Sidqi's underground period in Jerusalem. Although "Saul" is mentioned as one of his comrades in the student movement in Moscow, we are never informed that he was actually his elder brother. And why, of all the people who knew him during his long stay in the Soviet Union, were the police able to recruit his own brother to testify against him? Abu Hanna suggests that this incident underlines "a deep understanding of human frailty and filial affection on the part of Najati, without any trace of vindictiveness" (pp. 6–7).[5] Perhaps, but it also shows his convoluted life and his inability to come to grips with his personal and intimate relationships.

In 1936, the Comintern sent Sidqi to mobilize Moroccan soldiers against Franco. In the early days of the Fascist rebellion, it will be recalled, a significant section of Franco's army landing in Malaga was formed of Moroccan recruits and mercenaries, whereas most of the International Brigades fighting on the side of the Republic were European leftist volunteers. It was against this background that the communist movement had an interest in approaching the Moroccans. Sidqi lived among the Republican ranks in Barcelona and Madrid, disseminating leaflets in Arabic to the North African militias of the Fascist movement. (One can imagine how effective these leaflets were, given Sidqi's Palestinian Arabic and the low level of literacy among Franco's rural Moroccan troops.) At the beginning of 1937, he was sent to Algeria to set up an Arabic radio station (his own idea) to broadcast anti-Franco propaganda to the Moroccan fighters—a mission that failed for inexplicable reasons. The Spanish episode in Sidqi's memoirs is moving and cryptic. The party's strategy toward the Arab soldiers was not clear. This is illustrated in this entry of 24–25 September 1936:

> I was told in the Central Committee [of the Spanish Communist Party] that a group of officers from the International Brigades were heading toward Cordova, and that I had to accompany them to talk with Moroccan captured prisoners and to induce through loudspeakers those who were still fighting on the other side to join the Republicans, and then to distribute leaflets to them written in Moroccan Arabic. . . . [W]e eventually reached the front line [past the Sierra Morina range]. Several officers from the IB accompanied me to meet the Republican fighters. One of their officers approached me after he was told that I am Arab and said, "Do you want to see the Moroccans?" I said yes. He took me to an embankment and directed me to an opening. From there I could see crowds of Moroccan fighters with their headgear readying themselves for battle. I raised the loudspeakers and shouted, "Listen Brothers!!!" They froze and started looking toward the embankment. I continued, "I am an Arab like you; coming from a distant Arab country. . . . I beseech you brothers to abandon the ranks of your [Spanish] generals, who are oppressing you in your country. Come to our side where you will be well treated and given a daily allowance. Those of you who do not want to fight will be returned to his land

> and family. *Viva el Frente Popular! Viva la Republica! Viva el Presidente de Espana!* [sic] *Viva Marruecos!*" (p. 138)

Basically, it was a call for surrender, in eastern Arabic and broken Spanish. Apparently the Moroccans were not pleased, and neither were his Republican comrades. "I had hardly finished my call, and by the time it was translated to the [Fascist] leaders of the rebellion, all hell broke loose with every kind of weapon imaginable firing on us. I was pulled back by the Spanish commander standing next to me, 'What have you done? Did you shout missiles at them?'" Soon after that incident, the Comintern ordered Sidqi to relocate to Lebanon, where his journalistic career in the left-wing newspapers began to flourish.

It was during this period that his relations with Khalid Bakdash became so strained that Sidqi was eventually expelled from the party. Abu Hanna suggests that the main reason for the expulsion was his opposition to the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact in August 1939, but this is not clear from Sidqi's own narrative. In fact, the author's assessment of his differences with Bakdash's supporters is symptomatic of a striking political naiveté that prevails throughout the diaries. He claims, for example, that the pact was welcomed by the party loyalists because it signified a rapprochement between international communism and German National Socialism. He himself opposed the treaty because it was "a fake agreement, meant to gain time [for Stalin]" (pp. 165–66). It is more likely that the opposite was true: the pro-Soviet Arab communists supported the agreement, perhaps with some hesitation, because it would give the Russians a reprieve from their global isolation. It is extremely unlikely, as Sidqi claims, that they were sympathetic to the ideological affinity between the two movements.

Eventually, Sidqi comes out as an Arab nationalist with socialist sympathies. His break with the Comintern and Bakdash did not turn him against the Left. Rather, he pursued a successful career in literary criticism and broadcasting in Lebanon and Cyprus. By the time of his death in Athens in 1979, he had produced a dozen books on Russian literature, plays, and literary criticism. One of his books, *An Arab Who Fought in Spain,* was falsely published under Bakdash's name—an episode that inflamed Sidqi against Bakdash and the party. Another work, *Nazism and Islam*, meant to mobilize traditional Muslims against the Nazi movement, was translated into English and received citations from the French and British governments. The book became a decisive factor in his expulsion from the party since—according to Sidqi—it relied too much on Islamic texts for the taste of his secular party colleagues (p. 167).

But Sidqi will probably be best remembered for his popular literary books introducing Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and Aleksandr Puskhin to the Arab public in the mass circulation Iqra' series published by Dar al-Hilal in Cairo. In the 1950s, he also published selections from Chinese, Russian, and Spanish literary masterpieces. He translated several works by Edgar Alan Poe into Arabic, as well as short stories by Guy de Maupassant from the French. Later on, in the mid-1950s, Sidqi began to publish his own short stories, which included *The Sad Sisters* (Cairo, a collection of eighteen short stories, 1953), and *The Communist Millionaire* (Beirut, 1963), a satirical collection on Arab communists he had encountered. Neither his expulsion from the party nor his cynical attitude toward communism deterred the Soviet authorities from publishing a selection of his stories in Russian (Moscow: Institute of Foreign Publications, 1963).[6]

Sidqi's memoirs do not do justice to his spectacular presence at critical junctures of momentous events. He was in Arabia (with his father) at the launching of the Arab

Rebellion by Sharif Hussein against the Ottomans in 1916. He was a witness to the end of Ottoman rule and the beginning of Zionist immigration to Palestine. He became an early participant in one of the great revolutionary movements of the twentieth century immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power. He lived in Russia through the civil war period, the great famine, War Communism, and the ideological debates between Bukharin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Zinoviev. He was one of the few Arabs to fight with the Republicans in Spain against Franco. In France, he edited the Comintern organ in Arabic, the *Arab East*, presumably distributed throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Finally, in Palestine he was one of a handful of left-wingers entrusted with the Arabization of the PCP. He was imprisoned several times and severely maltreated by the British, and he lived to narrate these events. Yet reading his memoirs one is left with the impression that Sidqi did not grasp the significance of what he was doing. One gets the uncomfortable feeling that underneath it all he was a communist tourist hopping from Moscow to Kiev, to Barcelona and Madrid, and then back to Paris and Jerusalem to check how the lads were doing. Still, to his great credit he left (or was made to leave) the movement to which he had dedicated his life without bitterness and without losing hope in the justice of the cause he had propagated.

THE MEMOIRS OF NAJATI SIDQI

In the following translated excerpts from his diaries, Sidqi traces his involvement with the Bolshevik movement in Jerusalem in the early 1920s, when he was a civil servant in the Mandatory government (pp. 17–21, 92); his later move to Moscow as a student (pp. 35–49); and his prison experiences (pp. 101–6). The notes in this section are by Abu Hanna.

BOLSHEVISM ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM

The Jewish immigration to Palestine brought to this country ideologies, customs, and life-styles at variance with the Arab Palestinian environment. At the beginning of the 1920s we began to hear about Bolshevism, anarchism, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Herzl. We also encountered workers movements among those Jewish immigrants, such as the Histadrut [the trade union of Jewish workers], the "Fraktsia" [the leftist opposition in the Labor movement], the Poaleh Zion Party, and the Kibbutzim, the quasi-socialist encampments of new immigrants.

Leftist immigrants began to agitate among the Arabs. One of the first demonstrations they led was in the streets of Jaffa during the May Day parade of 1921. They raised red flags in the Manshiyya Quarter and shouted slogans in Hebrew and [broken] Arabic. The Arab inhabitants stared at them in wonderment, unable to figure out what these workers were shouting or what they wanted from them.

At the time [1921], I was a young man employed in the Department of Post and Telegraph in Jerusalem, which was located in the old compound of the Italian Consulate, across the street from what is Barclays Bank today [1939]. That is, it was located at the borders separating the Arab areas from the Jewish areas outside the city walls.

The postal department included employees from both groups and a variety of ethnicities and life-styles. You would observe local inhabitants wearing Arab dress, Ashkenazi Jews wearing colored velvet coats and fur hats; Halutsim ("pioneer" Jewish immigrants), male and female, wearing shorts; Sephardim (Arabized Jews who originally came from Spain); and Kurgis, the remnants of Babylonian exiled Jews.

In the department, we used to associate with Jewish immigrants, either as workmates or through socializing. Many of us patronized a small café behind the building where Barclays Bank is located today. It was owned by a Russian Jew of robust build, who always wore white trousers with a black shirt on top, with its buttons opened on the left shoulder. He used to shave his head with a razor to keep his head cool during the summer and had a trimmed beard and huge mustache curled in the Russian manner. The waitress was a blonde and attractive Polish woman with reddish cheeks and blue eyes.

In this café, my mates and I would congregate in the evening and socialize with its foreign customers. I recall from those days a czarist captain with a white beard who claimed that the Bolsheviks seized his ship in Odessa; a young municipal employee whose father was Russian and his mother Arab; an immigrant painter who used to sketch the customers for a few piasters; an elegant lady who always dwelled on her lost real estate in the Ukraine; and scores of immigrant youth who would buy soda water to dampen their thirst in summer.

I remember in this environment the frequent debates that revolved around Jewish immigration and Arab resistance; Jabotinsky's rebellion, Tal Hai in northern Palestine . . . ; the rebellion in Jaffa [1921]; and armed clashes between Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem after Jabotinsky led his followers to the Wailing Wall. Many of these debates were accompanied by ideological discussions that were translated to us by those immigrants who knew colloquial Arabic. I learned that socialism aims at establishing the authority of workers' councils and that anarchism does not recognize the authority of the state but aims at self-government by the people through syndicates. I also learned that Bolshevism (we did not use the Arabic word for communism—*shuyu'iyya*—in those days) had established a socialist state in Russia through revolution and the Red Army.

Those discussions struck me as strange and divorced from our local concerns. We were preoccupied then with the unknown future, British occupation, and the Balfour Declaration. From our parents, we had learned that the British and the French had arrived ostensibly to liberate us [from Ottoman rule], that Lawrence was the friend of the Arabs, and that the rebellion of [Sharif] Hussein ben Ali was aimed at establishing a unified Arab state. We grew up in this atmosphere . . . . [T]he colonial and Zionist hordes were seizing Palestine, while international doctrines were permeating our impressionable thoughts. We were ready to accept any proposition that would lift the nightmare of the new occupation that had followed Turkish rule.

In the postal café, I befriended a group of new Russian immigrants who belonged to the Fraktsia and to the Palestine Workers Party. Their propaganda was centered on the following themes: First, that British colonialism was the enemy of both Jews and Arabs and that its policy was based on the principle of "divide and rule." Second, that the Jewish immigrants were composed of a well-off bourgeoisie and poor workers and that Zionism was a bourgeois movement that benefits wealthy Jews only. Jewish workers have an interest in allying themselves with international socialism and will eventually get rid of their masters. Third, that Arab effendis are opportunists who collaborate with the colonial authorities and are undependable as allies. Fourth, that only a workers party for all Palestinians will be able to reconcile the interests of working people from both peoples and to radically solve the Palestinian problem.

Those were new and intriguing notions to me which led me to reflect on them deeply. Some of these immigrants would invite me to their club behind the German hospital in Jerusalem. There I learned about the arrest of their comrades in Egypt and

about the death in prison of one of the militants, a Lebanese Arab, after a prolonged hunger strike. They used to distribute an Arabic newspaper—*al-Insaniyya*—published in Beirut by Yusif Yazbek. They also gave me a pamphlet in Arabic by Prince Kropotkin on anarchism.

We used to meet alternately in the club and the Shniller forest. Occasionally, we met in the hills of Ratzbone. One day at the end of 1924, when I was only nineteen, my comrades asked me if I would be interested in traveling to Moscow to study at the university without paying for travel, education, or living expenses. I did not hesitate for a moment. They asked me to prepare for travel within six months.

I started by taking private lessons in elementary Russian from a young Russian immigrant who knew some Arabic. He taught me the alphabet and some basic rudimentary conversational skills. During this period the group invited me to their youth conference in Haifa, where I was elected to the central committee of the party's youth section. That was my formal initiation into the Bolshevik movement in Palestine. From that day, I was expected to attend all the movement's clandestine meetings and to distribute the party's leaflets and brochures. . . .

In that period, I became active in the Nabi Musa festival. This celebration, together with the festival of Nabi Rubin in Jaffa, was originally established by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi in the hope that it would remind people of the Islamic conquests. Party supporters raised me on their shoulders. I had a *kufiyya* and *iqal* as headgear and wore dark glasses. I was elevated among the banners of the religious sects, in the midst of drums and trumpets, and village songs and *dabka*s. I shouted some slogans that came to my mind. The comrades raised the Red Flag and a huge slogan saluting the struggle for independence. The demonstrators were delirious with excitement, and the word spread: The Arab Bolsheviks have arrived!!

This event led the British authorities to initiate a campaign to arrest me. Informers were spreading conflicting information about me. Some claimed that they saw me covered in a woman's *abaya* with a black veil on my face; another claimed that he saw me in the Christian Quarter dressed as an Orthodox priest with a longish beard; a third one said that the beggar who sleeps in the Dark Gate leading to the Haram compound is also another disguise, and so on. All these rumors compelled the CID [the Criminal Investigation Department of the Mandate government, equivalent to the FBI] to look for an up-to-date picture of me. They brought in a young acquaintance of mine and had him describe my features to a police artist. They distributed copies of the sketch to security personnel. Within days, they had arrested a schoolteacher, a real estate broker, and a traveling textile peddler. They eventually released them all.

STUDENT DAYS IN MOSCOW

In 1925, at the University of Oriental Peoples, I met the Egyptian students who had arrived in 1924 to study in the Soviet capital. They came in the wake of the reactionary developments that took place in Egypt at the time, which included the execution of numerous Egyptian youths following the assassination of Sir Lee Stack Pasha. I knew these students by the following names: 'Aziz, Hamdi, Fahmi, Hassunah, 'Umar, and Zanberg. 'Aziz, skinny with wide eyes and a nervous temperament, had worked at the railroad in Cairo and had come to Moscow to pursue Marxist studies. He always swore that he would never return to Egypt except to raise the Red Flag atop the Great Pyramid. Hamdi, a beginning medical student, was short and stocky with a slight limp

and claimed that he was the "thinking mind of the Egyptian revolutionary movement." Fahmi had studied engineering at Alexandria University. Skinny with a calm temperament, he liked to draw and avoided arguments about complex ideological questions. Hassunah, tall and slightly slouched, with small bright eyes, had been a dentist's assistant in Alexandria. He argued often and dreamed of becoming an important minister. 'Umar, short and stocky, had come to Russia before the socialist revolution with a foreign circus troupe: his specialty was fire eating and glass chewing. He would light up a flame and extinguish it in his big mouth or take a glass vessel in his mouth and pulverize it to smithereens. Finally, there was Zanberg, of Polish Jewish origin. He was short and fair with blue eyes. His parents had immigrated to Egypt during World War I, and he had become naturalized there. He joined the Socialist movement of Husni al-'Arabi in 1923 and was subsequently arrested and exiled to Russia.

These were the first Arab students to arrive in the Soviet Union, the year of Lenin's death, and they were all Egyptians. I was the first Arab to arrive from the Asian parts of the Arab world. As it was customary to use pseudonyms, the Egyptian students decided to call me "Mustafa Kamil" [the name of the famed Egyptian nationalist of the 1919 anti-British revolt]. The Russians, however, or at least the students from the eastern Soviet Union, thought my new name was "Mustafa Kemal" [the Turkish leader] and began to look askance at me until Nazim Hikmet intervened to explain.

The student dormitory housed most of the foreign students from outside the Soviet Union. Each national group had its own activities. The most active was the Turkish group, which was headed by the poet Nazim Hikmet. He was a young man of twenty-five when I met him, tall with blond hair and blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. Constantly moving and full of energy, he used to wear golf pants and a jacket almost fully buttoned up and would stand among the Turkish students declaiming revolutionary poems he had composed. The students would then move on to a comic performance ridiculing the Turkish sultans. Someone would ride around on a broomstick, saluting the people left and right, while his classmates would recite the sultan's anthem in a derisive way.

I was new at the university then. I would stand at the top of the staircase and watch what was going on around me and laugh. Nazim Hikmet came up to me and began asking me questions to get to know me. When he asked me my name, I told him that my university name was Mustafa Kamil. A shudder passed through him and he said, "What?! Mustafa Kemal? Who gave you this name, who?" I told him that it was Mustafa *Kamil*, the Egyptian nationalist leader, not Mustafa *Kemal*. He still did not like the name, as he said it caused confusion between "freedom" and "despotism," and suggested that it be changed to Mustafa Sa'di to honor the Persian poet. This was how ties of friendship were established between Nazim Hikmet and me. He invited me to visit the Turkish students often and even insisted that I join their group and attend their meetings, since both our peoples until the recent past had been living under the same despotism.

Time passed as I continued my university education. I used to meet Nazim Hikmet at the university club or in the lecture hall or at the university's summer dacha in the village of Odlanaya outside Moscow. But suddenly the Turkish poet disappeared. I found out later that he had returned to Turkey and was in prison for publicly declaring his hostility to the Turkish leader and calling for his removal and replacement by a socialist republic across Turkey. But Turkey at the time was not ready socially or historically to accept this leap in thinking. Indeed, even the matter of replacing the fez with a Western hat had caused Mustafa Kemal lots of problems and numerous con-

spiracies, to say nothing of accepting a Bolshevik ideology in the place of the Islamic one. Besides, Turkey had just emerged victorious from the Turkish-Greek war and was full of admiration for the leader it saw as a great savior. This is why Nazim Hikmet remained a poet living with his dreams and pains until he was able to escape from prison after fifteen years with the help of one of his guards. He then lived between Moscow, Havana, and Prague until his death in Berlin in 1960. . . .

In those times, Russia was in deep economic crisis. It was still trying to recover from the effects of the revolution and the civil war, and signs of poverty and hunger were everywhere visible. At times, for breakfast we would stand in a long queue, each holding a piece of dark bread and a glass of tea while a Russian girl would pass down the line, putting two spoons of sugar in each glass and spreading a little butter on the bread. This notwithstanding, the university administration was providing us with the best available food compared to other universities.

Normally, breakfast consisted of bread and butter, tea, and caviar—caviar was part of the popular diet due to its abundance. Lunch consisted of borscht, a soup of cabbage leaves, beets, small meat slices, and cream, followed by white or black *kasha* (a kind of cereal resembling burghul that is cooked over a low flame) served with a sauce, a piece of rather tough meat, and a cup of *kisil* (apple puree). Dinner was a glass of buttermilk with one spoon of sugar, a Russian salad of chunks of boiled potatoes and boiled eggs with chopped onions and parsley, and a glass of tea—or more accurately, glasses of tea, provided the student would take it upon himself to economize in his use of sugar.

Our clothing was similar to what soldiers wore: a jacket with four pockets buttoned all the way up to the neck, a coarse pair of trousers, a thick pair of shoes, a heavy coat stuffed and lined with cotton, and a hat of cat fur or rabbit skin that droops over the ears with laces that tie under the chin for the cold. In the summer, we got either a khaki military uniform or a pair of Russian pants and a shirt. . . .

The stores of the capital were empty. In their windows, there were only empty boxes and empty cartons next to naked mannequins. People stood in front of government stores and canteens in long queues known as *khofost*. Woe betide anyone who attempted to usurp the place of another citizen. Whoever tried would be met with a wave of condemnation and yells of "*Otchard*!"—meaning "stay in line"—and would retreat in humiliation and panic. Everyone, however, was allowed to leave his place in line to run other errands, provided those standing in front and behind him attested that this had been his place. . . .

As a result of the civil war and the ensuing famine that moved the conscience of the world, groups of homeless children known as *bezprisorniki* spread all over the country. Their plight worried the country's leaders more than the enemies of the revolution did. One morning, I left my dormitory with Hamdi. When we approached the huge water tank that was used to melt tar, ten children burst out with tar-blackened hands and faces. I was frightened and asked my friend what we were seeing. He laughed and replied that these were homeless children with no place to sleep except the tank, which provided them with some cover from the cold.

The Soviet authorities of the time spent great amounts of time and effort to help these homeless children. They set up shelters to house them and gave them training in various skills. But the children often revolted against these constraints on their freedom and destroyed the shelters, even killing the directors, and would flee to the forests or to villages or suburbs. . . .

By the beginning of 1926, the number of Arab students increased at the University of Oriental Peoples, with some of the old students becoming translators and teachers. The Egyptian Hamdi was very keen on translating Marxist writings from English into Arabic and received a good fee based on the number of English words to be translated. Often he would take me as his assistant. He would have me sit at the desk while he paced back and forth, swaying a bit on account of his limp, dictating to me in Arabic the parts he understood from Karl Marx's writings on surplus value or Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. When he encountered a complex idea, or a complicated word with several possible meanings, he would become very agitated and try to enlist the help of 'Aziz, Fahmi, Hassunah, and Zanberg. This would result in a mishmash of opinions leading to disagreements, until 'Umar would intervene with his opinion on the matter, aided by what knowledge he had of Marxist writings. As soon as they agreed on the meaning, Hamdi would turn back to me to dictate, often to find that I had gotten tired and left.

The various groups at the university were competing to translate the *Internationale* into their own national languages, and we got very excited about translating it into Arabic as well. But then our Russian language teacher, Vladimir Androvitch, told us not to bother, for it had already been translated by the late Professor Mikha'il 'Ataya.[7] "Who was this professor 'Ataya," we inquired? He told us that he was the colleague of Dr. Bandali al-Jawzi[8] and Mrs. Kulthum 'Awdah[9] and a friend of Professor Ighnatius Kratchkowski. The Czarist Russian Society (in Nazareth, Palestine) had sent him, and others, to pre-revolutionary Russia to teach Arabic at the College of Oriental Languages. He ended up dying in the Russian capital in 1924, leaving behind valuable textbooks in Arabic and Russian. He had also translated the *Internationale*. Our teacher gave us a copy of it, which I did not preserve for security reasons . . .

. . . By the beginning of 1927, the Arab group had increased still further. It now consisted of ten Egyptians, fifteen Palestinian Arabs, five Palestinian Jews, seven Syrians, ten Lebanese, three Algerians, and two Moroccans. Most of them adopted pseudonyms, such as Sopotin, Saul, Namitov, Ahmidov, Maychen, Muhammadov, Khaltorin, Ibrahimov, and so on. . . .

The Arab group had a political committee that supervised the Arab students' general and private affairs, as it supervised them ideologically and politically. It also supervised their conduct. It had an artistic committee for Arab arts, including singing and dancing at club parties and university-related or other public occasions.

The political committee organized a yearly event, observed in other Soviet institutions and colleges, called "the Day of Accounting," where the students expose each other's deficiencies and celebrate their strong points. For example, someone would stand up and say, "'Aziz is a good chap who cares for his comrades, but he is selfish. His behavior seems to follow the pattern of children of the petite bourgeoisie. . . . Imagine—he stands before the mirror for a half-hour while arranging his hair, sprays himself with cologne, and wastes a lot of time flirting with girls. This behavior must influence him ideologically, because his adventurous interests, learned from bourgeois society, take him away from his political duties."

This would be the text of the accusation, which would then be followed by students' comments, refutations, condemnations, exonerations until nerves were tense, spirits agitated, and thoughts stirred up. The "Day of Accounting" ends with each student receiving a *Karacteristika*—i.e., an ethical and character classification—including his good and bad attributes and praising or, as the case may be, admonishing him with appropriate warnings and scoldings.

There were also "self-criticism" sessions in which the students must engage all year. In these meetings organized by the group or university class, students would stand up and criticize themselves or defend themselves against criticism, provided they showed openness and a readiness to admit their mistakes, as well as complete acceptance of the ethical and moral principles called for by the New Society.

An example of this was when one of the Palestinian students did *not* forget to bring his prayer rug with him from Jaffa. He was caught "in flagrante delicto" and was transferred to the court of "self-criticism." He argued forcefully and defended himself on the grounds that Islam is the religion of socialism. He said that prayer is to the spirit what exercise is to the body and that it did not contradict the idea of breaking the chains and ridding society of capitalism and colonialism. People were very lenient with him because he was a new student. One of the professors was assigned to explain to him the history of the development of religions, beginning with man's instinctive fear of the elements, moving on to paganism and idolatry, and then to the monotheistic notion of a god who created the earth and all things living. . . .

The institution of "self-criticism" and the annual "Day of Accounting" were the ethical examinations through which students were to be directed to the right path, correct behavior, and the highest ideals.

In that context, I want to mention an incident that happened to me and caused me many problems. The Moscow of 1926–27 used to go to sleep and awaken to the ideas of Trotsky and Trotskyism. Indeed, the country became divided between two currents, the "Stalinist" and the "Trotskyist." Stalin maintained that it was possible to establish a complete socialist system inside the Soviet republics without linking it to the establishment of socialism in the rest of the world and that the country would be able to overcome its economic problems through universal electrification, the strengthening of heavy industry, and destroying the class of Kulaks, the small agricultural land owners whom the revolution had allowed to remain during the period of the NEP [New Economic Policy].

Trotsky and Zinoviev, on the other hand, insisted on the impossibility of establishing a socialist society in the Soviet Union alone and argued that Moscow must think not only of itself but pursue "permanent revolution," i.e., that it should invest its financial and scientific resources not just within its own borders but put them at the service of world revolution until the socialist idea is realized on a global scale. Trotsky also thought that the Soviet Union should not get carried away with socialist industrialization but instead should grant contracts to foreign capitalist companies. Similarly, it should not depend on socialist agricultural cooperatives but instead have agricultural work performed by "educated tenants." The result of all this was that Trotsky was expelled from the party in 1927 and exiled outside the Soviet Union. He lived in Turkey, then France, and then Mexico, where he was killed by one of his followers. It is said that his assassin was a Stalinist agent. His colleagues and aides were purged from the party, exiled, or executed.

But to go back to my incident. The Arab group in those days used to hold meetings at which Zanberg would present Trotskyist ideas and then refute them. We would agree with everything he said, adding side remarks to prove that we were up to date with what was happening in the country. One day, I decided to study the topic and speak out at the meeting. A Palestinian Jewish woman named Khayah confronted me and began provoking me. I remember saying, "It is well known that the country is suffering from agricultural shortages and needs to win the trust and support of the farmers so as to increase production and strengthen cooperation between workers

and peasants. Don't you think that turning against the small landowners at this time will cause the country numerous problems, which could lead to famine?"

Instead of an answer to my question there was an eruption of anger. Zanberg jumped up and said, "Khayah should be thanked, because she has unmasked you!" Hamdi leaped up too, and said, "What is this, where was all this hiding?" Then 'Umar rose, shaking, and said, "No, no! This is a serious matter! This is a matter that would drive one mad. We cannot let this pass!"

This was how I got into trouble and came to be accused of Trotskyism. I defended myself but to no avail. 'Aziz suggested convening an extraordinary session to look into my case. We walked out to the street while the comrades were sighing in exasperation. Hassunah approached me and said, "So, Mr. Mustafa, you want to create a whole hoopla around you. Must you express your opinion? Wouldn't it have been better if you had waited until you returned to your own country, when you could have said what you wanted? Trust me, you should apologize at the next session and say that you made a mistake."

When the extraordinary session convened, I stood up and said, "Comrades, I expressed an opinion at the last session that was closer to Trotskyism than to Stalinism. I hope that you are confident that I do not share the views of the Trotskyists. It was a slip of the tongue, or rather a confusion in my understanding of the meaning of cooperative farms and government farms and of my not comprehending the policy calling for the destruction of the Kulaks as a class. I acknowledge my mistakes and apologize." As soon as I finished, everyone's face relaxed and the students came to congratulate me on my return to the correct Stalinist line. Thus fell the curtain on this "opposition," which had not lasted more than twenty-four hours.

PRISON SCENES

During the first week of detention, the prisoner thinks he is the most unhappy person in the world—deprived of freedom, sunlight, of seeing his friends, family, and loved ones, unable to eat the food he likes, wear the clothes he prefers, and so on. By the second week, however, he is already used to his surroundings and his tedious daily routine—the 7:00 A.M. wake-up, cleaning the cells and toilets, the meager breakfast of tea and a piece of bread with a bit of cheese or a little oil, the walk in the prison yard or work outside the compound, and so on until the lights were turned off at 8:00 P.M., then conversing in low voices in the dark, falling asleep to the sounds of the guards' footsteps and the jiggling of their keys.

Life in prison was boring, with no end in sight except when new prisoners carrying news from the outside world arrive. . . . [One day] we met two men who had kept the Mandatory government busy for a long time with their guerrilla warfare, namely, Abu Jildah and al-'Armit. These two peasants had started a guerrilla band to fight the Mandatory government. Groups like this, mostly consisting of peasants who had lost their lands and livelihoods, had been formed all over the country in the wake of the 1930 revolt. Abu Jildah's and al-'Armit's group took the mountains as its area of operation, engaging British forces in many a skirmish. The leader, Abu Jildah, a short, skinny man, had donned a military uniform decorated on the epaulettes with two swords and three stars in an attempt to distance himself and his group from the charge of being bandits. He also carried a long polished sword with a gilded handle and called himself chief of staff, while designating his colleague al-'Armit, a tall, well-built man, as deputy with full authority.

When the British closed in on the guerrilla band, its members scattered here and there. Abu Jildah fled to Amman and asked for the protection of Amir Abdallah, who received him and listened to his story. But the result was negative, as Abdallah handed him over to the British authorities, who transferred him to Jerusalem's central prison. In the meantime the British authorities had captured his colleague al-'Armit through a former member of the group who informed on him. After a short incarceration, they were tried in criminal court and sentenced to death by hanging. I remember when al-'Armit's mother visited him one day and he told her from behind bars, "Put a dagger in my grave for me so that I can settle accounts with the informer."

One day in 1932, al-'Armit was taken to be hanged, with Abu Jildah following an hour later. They had to pass through two rows of British policemen, who cheered, "Hip Hip Hooray!" as they were marched to their deaths. Mr. Steele, the prison director, personally executed them. He used to get five pounds for every prisoner condemned to death, in addition to his regular salary. . . .

Life continued in the same manner for the first year in prison until we decided to go on a hunger strike to protest the terrible food. If the prison administration refused our demands, we intended to escalate by banging metal plates against the prison bars to create a big ruckus, which would irritate and provoke the other prisoners.

We carried out our plan until Mr. Steele (a fat, short, ugly man in his sixth decade) came and stood in front of the prison bars asking us what we wanted. We told him that the food was inedible. He responded by grabbing a plate of onion stew and sliding his fingers around the mess until he found an onion to eat. He then lifted the plate to his mouth and lapped up all the sauce, saying, "Delicious food! Good food! Why are you refusing it?" And he left.

We continued our ruckus until the prison administration decided to counterattack. The guards, led by the prison officer, a local Sephardic Jew, opened the gates and beat us with sticks to force us to sit on the floor. Director Steele came into the room and chuckled, "Who won? Me or you?" Two rows of guards formed opposite each other, and Steele declared that British prison regulations required that the leader of the strike had to pass through the gauntlet, so they forced me to walk between the rows of guards who beat me with sticks from all sides as I passed between them. I was taken to the government hospital in Maskubiyya, where I remained for three days. When I returned to prison, I was told that Mahmud al-Maghribi and I would be transferred to the Acre Fort prison.

Being transferred to the fort of Acre was imprisonment and exile combined. They put us in a modern one-story building next to the fort that had originally been built for foreign detainees but was subsequently transformed into a detention center for political prisoners. They also used its courtyard for the daily exercise of prisoners with psychiatric problems, so we often would walk with them, talking and joking. One day, one of them, called Elias, got quite excited and began imitating political orators, saying things that indicated that he was hallucinating. As a result, the prison administration decided that our walking time would no longer coincide with theirs.

A Jewish corporal named Afram was our supervisor. One of his duties was to eavesdrop on us after locking us in. He would listen to what we said from behind the high windows overlooking the courtyard and then report to the prison director, a Mr. Pike. It occurred to me that we should use Elias to spy on the corporal, and I told him that I needed him to do me a favor. "When Afram locks us in and stands under the windows to eavesdrop, start to sing loudly the song 'And I Will Throw Myself to You from the Window,' which will signal to us that Afram was eavesdropping." Elias said,

"Don't worry, Na'im," which is what he liked to call me. The next day, at siesta time, I heard Elias singing. "And I will throw myself to you from the window, O Na'im! And Afram is standing by the window eavesdropping on you! And can you hear me, O Na'im? And I will throw myself to you from the window!"

Afram went berserk and rushed to Pike to report what had happened. As a result, the prisoners with psychiatric problems were not allowed to use our courtyard anymore at all. . . . I found out a few days later that Elias jumped off the moat bridge to his death, thinking that his dead beloved—about whom he had spoken to us—was calling him to join her.

NOTES

1. Najati Sidqi, *al-Adib* (Beirut: n.p., 1968).

2. Ya'coub 'Odat, *Min A'lam al-Fikr wal Adab fi Filastin*, 3d ed. (Jerusalem: Dar al-Isra', 1992), entry on Sidqi Najati, pp. 351–54.

3. Ibid., 352.

4. 'Odat claims that Sidqi produced the *Arab East* under the pseudonym of Mustafa al-Omary. He published twenty-six issues of the monthly before it was closed by the order of Prime Minister Pierre La Valle (who was executed after World War II for his collaboration with the Nazis). However, Musa Budeiri, who has researched the history of the PCP, insists that a thorough search of the archives did not yield any evidence that the *Arab East* ever existed and that Sidqi himself could not produce a copy of this journal when he interviewed him in Beirut before his death. Interview with Musa Budeiri, 4 January 2002.

5. The sources on Ahmad Najati's presence in Moscow come from 'Abd al-Qadir Yasin, "The PCP and the National Question," in *al-Katib*, no. 120, p. 97; and Musa Budeiri, *The Development of the Arab Labour Movement in Palestine: A Historical Introduction and Collected Documents, 1919–1948* (Beirut: Ibn Khaldun, 1981), p. 11 n. 6.

6. The reader will find a complete list of Sidqi's publications in 'Odat, *Min A'lam al-Fikr*, pp. 353–54.

7. 'Ataya (1852–1924) compiled a Russian-Arabic dictionary in 1913.

8. Bandali Saliba al-Jawzi (1871–1942) was born in Jerusalem and studied at the Orthodox Cross School and then in the Kaftayn school in Lebanon. He went to Russia in 1904 and joined Qazan University. After he graduated, he taught at the Spiritual Seminar there. After the end of czarist rule, he moved to Baku and was appointed professor of Arabic literature at the university there. He visited Palestine three times (1908, 1927, 1930), during which he gave a number of lectures at several cultural clubs. He wrote a number of books, including *Intellectual Movements in Islam*, which was his doctoral dissertation; *The Science of Origins in Islam*; *The Origins of Arab Writing*; and *Mount Lebanon: Its History and Present Conditions*.

9. Kulthum 'Awdah (1892–1965) was born in Nazareth and studied at the Russian Teachers College in Bayt Jala. She taught in Nazareth, married a Russian physician in 1914, and moved with him to Russia. Her husband died there, leaving her with three daughters. She worked with the Russian Orientalist Ighnatius Kratchkowski, teaching Arabic at the College of Oriental Languages in Leningrad. She wrote a number of Arabic-language textbooks and translated many books from Arabic to Russian and from Russian to Arabic. Many Orientalists studied with her. She visited Palestine in 1928 to study the situation of the women's renaissance there and in Egypt and Syria, but the authorities did not allow her to visit Syria and Egypt. The Soviet state accorded her the gold medal twice, and an official celebration was held for her seventieth birthday, during which she received a Medal of Honor.