



مذكر
نجاتي صدقي

تقديم واعداد
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مؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية

The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik

Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi

(The Memoirs of Najati Siqi), edited by
Hanna Abu Hanna. Beirut: Institute for
Palestine, 2001

Reviewed by Salim Tamari

The subject of these memoirs, Najati Sidqi (1905-1979), is almost forgotten in the annals of the Palestinian national movement: even within 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 Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

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 of Syrian and Palestinian partisan activities and 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 sometime intimate) contacts with Joseph Stalin, Nicolai Bukharin (author of the Soviet Constitution) and one of the founders of the Comintern), Jorge Dimitrov (the leader of Bulgarian communists), Dolores Ibaruri (the legendary leader of the Spanish Republican movement), George Marchais (leader of the French Communist Party), and with Khalid Bagdash (the Kurdish leader of Syrian Communist Party with whom Sidqi had chronic and bitter disputes over their divergent assessments of Islam and Arab nationalism). 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 to Palestine, the exile of King Faisal from Damascus, and the exit of the French army from Syria and Lebanon.

An important significance of these memoirs is that they shed light on an overlooked aspect of political life in Jerusalem. During the Mandate period, the city was known for the factional rivalries between the two leading Jerusalem families (the Nashashibis and the Husseinis) and their respective political parties, as well as for being the seat of the colonial government. But, in general, political life was the domain of Haifa and Jaffa, with their trade union activities, radical politics and left-wing journalism.

Sidqi sheds light on the earliest appearance of left-wing politics in Jerusalem

- and his own participation in it, 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' traditional groupings such as the quasi-religious Nebi Musa processions (see excerpts below). Sidqi also highlights the degree of mobility with which left-wing activists, and presumably other militants, moved from one city to another and the relative ease with which they smuggled themselves across the border to Syria and Lebanon. Only four years before the setting of these memoirs, Syria, Mount Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan were part of one 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, that the editor, himself a veteran of Palestinian socialism, could have clarified. For example, why did the young Sidqi join the communist movement in the 1920s when his sympathies were clearly nationalist? And 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? But, 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 rendition of the memoirs remains wooden and enigmatic. It is as if his clandestine Bolshevik militant life

style kept him from disclosing his intimate thoughts for fear of posthumous exposure.

Sidqi was born to a middle class Jerusalemite family in 1905. His father, Bakri Sidqi, was a teacher of Turkish who later joined Prince Faisal in Hijaz in the campaign against the Wahhabi movement. His mother was Nazira Murad, from a prominent mercantile family in Jerusalem. Najati spent his childhood in Jeddah and Cairo, later moving with his family to Damascus when Faisal was proclaimed king. 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 Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and leftist Zionists.

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 Hikmat 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 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).

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 escapades, when she is 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.

Having completed his academic training, Sidqi returned to Palestine - or rather was sent to participate in Arabizing what was essentially a Jewish party. During the thirties, he was arrested by the British police and spent three years incarcerated in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Akka. The Comintern had him smuggled out of the country in the thirties 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, presumably because of its anti-colonial tone in Algeria.

In 1936, the Comintern sent Sidqi to mobilize Moroccan soldiers against Franco. (In the early days of the fascist rebellion, it must be recalled, a significant section of Franco's army that landed in Malaga was formed of Moroccan mercenaries, while the bulk of the International Brigades that fought on the side of the republic were European leftist volunteers. It was against this background that the communist movement had a movement had an interest in approaching the Moroccans). Sidqi lived within the ranks of the Republican movement in Barcelona and Madrid, disseminating leaflets in Arabic to the North African militias of the fascist movement. (One can imagine how ineffective 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 some inexplicable reasons. At this stage, the Comintern ordered Sidqi to relocate to Lebanon where his journalistic career in the left-wing newspapers flourished.

It was in this period that his relations with Khalid Bagdash 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 non-aggression pact in August 1939, but this is not clear from Sidqi's own narrative. In fact the author's assessment of his differences with the Bagdash supporters is symptomatic of a striking political naivete 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 opposed the treaty because it was 'a fake agreement, meant to gain time [for Stalin]' (page 165-166). It is more likely that the opposite was true: the pro-Soviet Arab communists supported the agreement, perhaps with some hesitation, because they wanted to 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 Bagdash 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 volumes of literary criticism. One of his books *An Arab*

who Fought in Spain about his experience in the anti-fascist struggle was falsely published under Bagdash's name - an episode that inflamed Sidqi against both Bagdash and the Party. Another work *Nazism and Islam*, which he published to mobilize traditional Muslims against the Nazi movement, was translated to English and received citations from the French and British Governments. The book became a decisive factor in his expulsion from the party (p. 167) since - according to Sidqi-- it relied too much on Islamic texts for the tastes of his secular party colleagues.

Notwithstanding these reservations the Najati Sidqi Memoirs make a significant contribution to Palestinian biographic literature and present historians with a valuable glimpse into the formative stages of Arab and Palestinian socialism of the pre-war period.

Bolshevism Arrives in Jerusalem

In the following translated excerpts from the diaries, Sidqi traces his own involvement with the Bolshevik movement in Jerusalem in the 1920s when he was a civil servant in the Mandatory Government.

The Jewish immigration to Palestine brought to this country ideologies, customs, and a life-styles that was at variance with the Arab Palestinian environment. At the beginning of the 1920s we began to hear about Bolshevism, anarchism, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Hertzl. We also encountered workers movements among those Jewish immigrants, such as the Histadrut - the trade union of Jewish workers - the 'Fraktsia', the left opposition inside the Histadrut, the Poaleh Tsion 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 Manshiyyeh quarters, 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 were wanted from them.

I was at the time [1921] 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 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 coloured velvet coats, and fur hats; Halutsim ('pioneer' Jewish immigrants), males and females, wearing shorts; Sephardim (Arabized Jews who originally came from Spain); and Kurgis - the remnants of Babylonian exiled Jews from the eighth century BC.

In the department we used to associate with Jewish immigrants either as work mates 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



Najati Sidqi as a young recruit in the Party when he was an employee of the Department of Post and Telegraph in Jerusalem, 1923

and huge moustache 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 Tsarist captain with a white beard, who claimed that the Bolsheviks seized his ship in Odessa; and a young municipal employee whose father was Russian, and his mother was Arab; an immigrant painter who used to sketch the customers for few piasters; an elegant lady who always dwelled about her lost real estate in the

Ukraine, and scores of immigrant youth who would buy soda water to dampen their thirst in the summer.

I remember in this environment the frequent debates that revolved around Jewish immigration and Arab resistance; of Jabotinsky's rebellion, of Tell Hai in northern Palestine...; of the rebellion in Jaffa [1921]; and of 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 which 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, and that it aims at the self-government of people through syndicates. I also learned that Bolshevism (we did not use the Arab word for communism - *shuyu'iyya* - in those days) established a socialist state in Russia through revolution and the Red Army.

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

In the Postal Café I befriended a group of Russian new immigrants who belonged to the Fraktsia, and to the Palestine Workers Party. Their propaganda was centered around 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, those Jewish immigrants were composed of a well-off bourgeoisie and of poor workers, and that Zionism was a bourgeois movement, which 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, 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 the death of one of the militants, a Lebanese Arab, in prison after a prolonged food 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 alternatively 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 19, my comrades asked me if I would be interested in

travelling to Moscow to study at the university without paying for travel, education, or my living expenses. I did not hesitate for a moment in accepting this offer. 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. Since that day I was expected to attend all the clandestine meeting of the movement, and to distribute the party's leaflets and brochures.

[.....]

In that period I became active in the Nebi Musa festival. This celebration was originally established by Salah ed Din al Ayyubi, together with the festival of Nebi Rubin in Jaffa, hoping that it will remind people of the Islamic conquests. Party supporters raised me on their shoulders. I had a *kuffiyyeh* and *iqal* as headgears, 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 dabkes. 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 instigate a campaign to arrest me. Informants 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 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 travelling textile peddler. They eventually released them all.

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EMBROIDERED FLOWERS OF THE PALESTINEAN SPRING

Arrangement and Text: TAMARA TAMARI KASIR
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