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Success unexpected in common hours

Mashaynaha khuta: sira dhatiyya (The Trodden Path: An Autobiography), Raouf Abbas, Cairo: Kitab al-Hilal, 2004. pp336

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The reader, in his or her Egyptian guise, is so often presumed dead that when a book becomes a bestseller in Cairo this makes news. Among such surprising hits is Raouf Abbas's autobiography, *Mashaynaha khuta*. Surprising, because what it boasts of is the life of an Egyptian historian and of an academic. It could easily have been forgotten on the back shelves of bookstores. Instead, Dar al-Hilal uncharacteristically published a second edition in a larger size last month, only a few months after the first. English and French translations are underway.

Memoirs tend to be popular. The popularity of this one in particular attests to the fact that many readers can relate to and identify with Abbas's story. It is not a sensational rags-to-riches saga. Instead, it is a meticulous, at times romantic, recollection of toil and perseverance -- a story of success unexpected in common hours. Compared to other academics' memoirs, such as Eric Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times* or Edward Said's *Out of Place*, Abbas's is narrower in scope than the former and less personal than the latter. One is left with a story of a life lived in twentieth-century Egypt, a life remarkable in many ways and revealing of society in general, although the reader has to make many of the connections and draw the links between the meta- historical and the personal.

The first part of *Mashaynaha khuta* focuses on Abbas's early life and family upbringing. It is this section that has touched many readers by its honesty and sincerity. Somewhat romantically, Abbas eschews the authorial "I" and opts instead to refer to himself, the protagonist, in the third person as "our friend", a choice reminiscent of such earlier literary figures as Taha Hussein. While it is by definition difficult not to be self-centred when writing memoirs, Abbas tries his best. One result is that *Mashaynaha khuta* is less revealing of its author than other contemporary works -- less personal and less self-critical.

However, what Abbas produces on the early pages of the book is a historical document of the first order. Born in 1939, Abbas grew up the eldest in a family of eight siblings between Port Said, the Delta and the provincial outskirts of Cairo. His father was a simple railway worker of Upper Egyptian origins. The difficult conditions of his upbringing amidst striking poverty emphasise both Abbas's own achievements and the changes that have taken place in society since the 1940s and 1950s.

The narrative follows the various journeys that Abbas has gone on during his lifetime. And in its larger outlines it is indeed an impressive journey: from Port Said to Shubra, from a simple railway worker's family to getting a higher education, including a Ph.D. in history, from various high schools to Ain Shams and Cairo Universities, to Tokyo, Doha, and later Europe and the United States. Abbas went on to occupy the position of chair of the History Department at Cairo University, as well as deputy dean of the Faculty of Arts for graduate studies and chairman of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies. He is also the recipient of the state's order of merit.

Abbas spent many of his school years living with his paternal grandmother in Ezzbet Hermes, Shubra. His memories of this period are Dickensian in character, and the grandmother comes across as a wicked witch. In addition to the poverty they lived in, she sought to make his life harder as an act of revenge against her daughter-in-law, his mother, of whom she disapproved. This section of the book is replete with details of everyday living that bring the social history of the lower and lower-middle classes to life: from dietary details, to transportation and hygiene, to social and community relations.

Abbas's description of the arduous, hour-long daily journey to school on foot is telling of the kind of perseverance he would exhibit throughout his life: obstacles are there to be overcome. The very act of going to school was not one taken for granted at a time when education was still not free, but Abbas recounts his memories of the different schools he went to throughout his life and the difficulties he faced in getting into each one, including the special recommendation letters or the tuition fees that were beyond the means of his railway employee father.

A religious endowment supporting the Saniyya al-Silihdar school was heaven-sent, as was a recommendation card obtained from a large landowner and a government grant to students of merit later on when Abbas decided to go to college, joining Ain Shams University's Faculty of Arts. Many readers will see Abbas's journey -- difficult as it certainly was -- as indicative of the prospects that lay before a young under-privileged Egyptian around the middle of the last century, before and under the July regime. Hard work could pay off. And, more importantly, education was the key to social mobility.

However, in other respects *Mashaynaha khuta* is a history of Cairo University from below (Abbas's academic works include a tome on Cairo University), and just as the first part of the memoir has impressed some readers, the second part has infuriated others. For in it Abbas has no scruples in recounting instances of rampant corruption in Egyptian academic life, and by telling some embarrassing stories and naming names he has angered many academics, some of whom have since chosen to engage in disputes on the pages of newspapers, or have opted to go to court.

Yet, regardless of the particular instances, the stories Abbas tells do reveal the extent of the corruption that has prevailed in the higher echelons of Egyptian academia and the increased influence of the security apparatus on university affairs, as well as nation-wide tendencies towards nepotism and cronyism, especially in appointing new graduates to teaching positions and academic promotion. Elsewhere, Abbas is also critical of the

excessive and exclusionary policies of some old-guard professors whom he thinks have sought to stifle innovation or creativity.

Furthermore, in many of the instances he recounts, Abbas was not an innocent bystander. If anything, he comes across as a rare champion of honourable causes, interfering and using whatever authority his professorial position at the university granted him to right the wrongs he witnessed. One can picture Abbas banging his head against the social-bureaucratic wall, chipping away at its edges and corners. In his own life, he hard-headedly defended his rights as an Egyptian citizen, applying for positions and grants in the face of official disapproval and often getting them. This is how he gained his position at Cairo University, by applying for a junior teaching job against the recommendations of some of the senior professors who were playing their own bureaucratic games.

Among the battles Abbas chose to fight were battles against religious discrimination. The author reveals several instances in which Christian professors were passed over for appointments, and where he stuck to the letter of the administrative code in order to ensure that they were given their due, regardless of their religious affiliations. In writing about this, Abbas has touched on a raw nerve and one seldom acknowledged in academic circles, which claim to be objective. Yet, in addition to recounting instances of this sort in the book, the author also mentions many colleagues of integrity whom he both respects and believes have enriched Egyptian academia, scholars such as Assem El-Dessouqi, for example, a life-long friend, Yunan Labib Rizq (although he does not escape some censure here), Obada Kahila and Mohamed El-Gohary, among others. And even with the apparently endless bureaucratic intrigues and conspiracies, Abbas still found the time to reform the History Department under his chairmanship, introducing a more rigorous multi-disciplinary curriculum and encouraging and promoting outstanding junior scholars.

Politics, in the narrower sense of the word, forms a distant backdrop to this narrative. Abbas does not hide his preference for many of the socialist-oriented policies of the Nasser era and his disdain for what followed under Sadat. Yet, in much the same way as many Egyptian intellectuals he criticises the Nasser regime for its stifling of political freedoms. Similarly, Abbas reveals the extent of the corruption that prevailed under the Sadat regime but does not explicitly relate it to national politics. So, for example, student and faculty activism of the 1970s receive only passing mention. Yet, he cites a controversial instance when he was requested to "assist" one of Sadat's daughters in her graduate thesis, a request he indignantly declined.

After obtaining his BA in history, Abbas was appointed financial comptroller at the Egyptian Financial and Industrial Company in Kafr al-Zayat before embarking on an academic career. However, the administrative experience was a profound one. On the one hand it was the first job Abbas had had that came with a good salary, and this allowed him to contribute to his family's finances. It also taught him administrative and managerial skills that were to prove useful later on and gave him hands-on experience of how many of the grand policies promoted by the July regime were actually implemented in practice. Yet, even more importantly, it inspired Abbas with the topic for his Master's

thesis and provided him with some useful primary sources. Through the workers at the plant Abbas came into contact with union leaders who greatly helped his research on the history of the Egyptian labour movement.

Abbas's later career took him to Tokyo on several visiting fellowships. The years he spent there, and his interaction with Japanese scholars, were, he candidly acknowledges, instrumental in combating his "methodological ignorance." Like many Egyptians of his generation, Abbas also had a stint in the Gulf, teaching at Doha in Qatar for three years. While he comments that the relatively light teaching responsibilities and the mediocre academic standard of the students made it more of a long sabbatical than a teaching experience, allowing him to finish several research projects, he does not go further. He does not, for example, examine the significance of such Gulf-based opportunities for Egyptian academia, even though elsewhere he comments on the negative effects of the brain drain on Egyptian universities, which left many departments understaffed. Yet, perhaps in line with his modesty, he does not reflect on how the Gulf influenced his socio- economic status.

In contrast to the first part of the book, which corresponds to the early years of Abbas's life, the second is very sparing in personal details. We are told little about Abbas's family situation, about what became of his siblings, about his wife (Abbas married his graduate school colleague Soad al-Demiri in 1964), or indeed about his own progeny. We don't read about the family's first car or which schools the children were sent to. We know that the young railway worker's son from Ezzbet Hermes grew up to be a leading history professor at Cairo University, but somehow we lose him somewhere along the way. Indeed, the book's second part is overcrowded with bureaucratic and administrative details to the exclusion of personal ones.

The success of Abbas's journey and narrative notwithstanding, one cannot help thirsting for more, especially from a man who has occupied so prominent a position among contemporary Egyptian historians. The publication of this book in the popular Kitab al-Hilal series indicates that it was meant for the lay reader, which is perhaps why the author has not focused more on the historiography of modern Egypt, which he helped to shape in many ways. It is to be hoped that that will inspire another book.

By Amina Elbendary

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/756/bo3.htm>