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"Affectueusement, Laila": Being a Communist "Foreign" Woman in Post-colonial Egypt

Abstract

Noémie Canel (1927–2012) was an Egyptian Jewish communist who spent a total of 11 years in various prisons in Cairo and was deported from Egypt twice. Throughout the period of her activism and long incarceration, she persisted in "the democratic struggle", all while resisting her exclusion from Egypt and from her political family. Yet, the historiography of the communist movement in Egypt is almost devoid of any mention of her name or existence. Noémie's experience—and her subsequent invisibility in the historiography—was shaped by her being a woman and a so-called "foreign" Jewish communist in post-colonial Egypt. I examine hundreds of letters written by her and about her in the period 1948–59, to analyze the gendered nature of communist activism in mid-century Egypt, and to argue that her feminized role in the movement entailed the complete fusion of her personal and political being and aspirations. On the other hand, I trace in Noémie's prison letters the increasingly precarious position of the communist Jews of Egypt, and, in response, their embrace of post-colonial nationalism and their striving towards their "Egyptianization". In the case of Noémie, both her being a woman and a "foreign" Jewish communist made contingent her personal fate and her emotional well-being upon the fate of the movement, and particularly upon the fate of the increasingly excluded Jewish communists of Egypt. Ultimately the defeat of the movement, and the inability of Egypt's Jewish communists to maintain their place in it or in the country, meant her personal defeat and desolation.

Keywords

Communism, Women, Jews, Egypt, Post-coloniality

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On 17 April 1953, Mimi left the cheap room she rented at Hotel Esedra in Rome and set off to Alexandria, Egypt. She had a passport and a tourist visa, but hers was not an ordinary trip. The day before, she had asked a hairdresser to make her look like someone else. From the Ciampino airport near Rome, she wrote a letter to her dearest friend and comrade exiled in Paris, Henri Curiel, with words filled with excitement and emotions.[1]

She landed in Alexandria, her hometown, with a racing heart. Luckily, the Egyptian border policeman inspecting the passport of a French woman called Honorine which she carried, did not suspect a clandestine return of the formerly deported communist, Noémie Canel. He could not have guessed that fifteen months earlier, this young woman of 25, carrying a regular tourist's document, was escorted by the police from the prison of Cairo, where she had served a three-year sentence for "subversive political activity", to Alexandria to be shipped away to Italy.[2]

Noémie's *Vacances* plans (code word for clandestine return) had succeeded. She was back to the country she wanted to live in and be part of its struggle against Anglo-American imperialism, oppression and the exploitation of the working masses. She was back to her *chère famille* (code word for her organization), the Mouvement Démocratique de Libération Nationale (MDLN), and to her comrade husband whom she married during her incarceration, Kamal Abdel Halim, known in the movement as Khalil or Kelly.

A few months earlier, on 26 July 1952, the Free Officers had toppled the monarchy in Egypt, and both Henri Curiel and Noémie rejoiced at the coup, seeing it as an opportunity for their return and a step forward towards a free Egypt.[3] However, barely seven months after her happy return, in November 1953, she would be arrested again, and this time condemned to eight years of imprisonment with hard labor, at the end of which she would be deported again.

The following years in Noémie's personal and political struggles would be recorded in her prolific correspondence with the Rome Group—the offshoot of MDLN in exile formed in Paris by the deported members of the movement—particularly her letters to Henri Curiel (code name: Jacques,Younes), to Joyce Blau (Colette), and to her family living in Israel and Italy. Noémie Canel's trajectory illuminates the process by which the Jewish Egyptian communists of the post-war movement were made into "foreigners" and "Jews". Her letters—mostly signed in her *nom de guerre* Laila—give a close insight into how people like her struggled against their exclusion.

The Rome Group archive, housed at the International Institute for Social

History in Amsterdam, contains hundreds of letters and reports written by and about Noémie in the period 1948–59, which constitute the material used for this study. She remained in political prison for a total of 11 years, and was deported twice despite her tireless efforts to stay in Egypt and be part of its national and communist struggle. Yet, the historiography of the Egyptian communist movement is almost devoid of any mention of her name(s) or existence. She shares this absence with other "foreign" communist women, despite the critical work they contributed to the movement.[4]

Rifaat al-Said's authoritative history of Egyptian communism for instance never mentions Joyce Blau, Didar Fawzy-Rossano, Noémie Canel or Marie Rosenthal. Likewise, historians who addressed the predominance of Jews in the movement such as Selma Botman (1986), Rami Ginat (2011), Raouf Abbas (1988), and Joel Beinin (1998), have focused on Jewish men who occupied leadership positions, and hardly mention the women communists. Significantly, when female members of the movement are mentioned, they are often not identified by their name, but figure in designations such as: "a foreign woman comrade", or "the wife of...".

This paper addresses this absence in the historiography, as well as the marginalization of "foreign" women communists in the movement. During their years of activism, they were rarely to be found in leading positions in the movement, however devoted they were to the cause. They were instead relegated to the non-intellectual, non-political tasks of courier/liaison in the gendered distribution of roles. Their feminized activism remained however critical to the movement. It was they who carried out the invisible work of care-giving: from sustaining the political prisoners and their families to reinforcing the bonds among members of the movement in and out of prison, and in and out of Egypt, especially at times of crises and factionalism. In that sense, the role of Noémie Canel, as well as the role of Joyce Blau, Didar Fawzy-Rossano, and others, was gendered and marginalized during their years of activism, and retrospectively remarkably overlooked in the male-dominated historiography.

I will further argue that the nature of the activism of the "foreign" women liaisons resulted in the fusion of their personal and political life and aspirations, making contingent the personal fate of Noémie on that of the movement, and particularly on the fate of the increasingly excluded "foreign" Jewish communists. Ultimately, the defeat of the movement, and the inability of Egypt's Jewish communists to maintain their place in the movement or in the country, meant her personal defeat. The experience of seeing her deepest aspirations

and ideals vanish, while incarcerated, ultimately broke her, both physically and emotionally. In April 1959, she would write in one of her last letters to Curiel, "My dear Jacques, I never imagined I would be broken like this. Everything is falling apart around me. I had better leave you now, but please accept a strong handshake from your former comrade, Laila".[5] What ensued after her liberation at the end of 1961 was a complete *volte-face* to her past convictions and aspirations.

Jews and "Foreigners" in Second-wave Egyptian Communist Movement

MDLN (or HADETO in Arabic: al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya l-il Taharror al-Watani), was formed out of a merger of organizations conceived predominantly by Jewish so-called "foreigners".[6] The merger was largely the initiative of Henri Curiel, a Sephardic Jew born in Egypt to a wealthy family with Italian nationality. HADETO's first Central Committee included him and two Jews, among a total of 15 members. Shortly after its foundation in the summer of 1947, HADETO became the most influential communist group in mobilizing protests and strikes around the demands for the independence of Egypt and Sudan from British colonialism, democracy, nationalization of big industries, and redistribution of land. It struck roots in various sectors of Egyptian society. HADETO and the communist movement in general was nevertheless riven with factionalism, alternating with attempts at unity, partly over issues of "Egyptianization" (Al-Said 1988).[7]

Historians of Egyptian communism have all addressed the large presence of "foreigners" and Jews within the organizations that launched the "second-wave" (Botman 1986; 1988; Al-Said 1988).[8] This paper will use the category of "foreigner" critically and, along Joel Beinin (1998: 6), will adopt the premise that "ethnonational identities are historically and socially constructed". This is especially important in the case of the Jewish communists of Egypt, as the term "foreigner" here designated individuals who were born in Egypt, and who did not necessarily possess foreign nationality. Rather than corresponding to an actual legal status, the term—as it has been historically used—bear a clear extension from the colonial-era distinction between local and European subjects, which bestowed substantial advantages on those among the population who could claim European subject status or protection, by virtue of the Capitulations (Hanley 2017). With the abrogation of the latter in 1937, "for-

eigner" still designated residents of European descent, even those who had opted for Egyptian nationality at their reaching adolescence (as stipulated by the 1929 Egyptian nationality law), such as Henri Curiel, or those who were born into families who migrated from different parts of the Ottoman Empire and did not possess any nationality other than the obsolete Ottoman subject status (as in the case of Noémie before acquiring Italian nationality through marriage). Some of these "foreigners" indeed kept their inherited European subject status, but never lived or had intended to live in the European country of their citizenship before their deportation, such as Joyce Blau (Perrault 1984). Certainly, the "cosmopolitanism" of Egyptian Jewish communists was a determining factor in their earning the "foreign" appellation: they were all schooled and socialized in francophone institutions and communities, and few of them mastered the written Arabic, or spoke the language fluently. Their families had historically been well-connected to European commercial centers and tended thereof to benefit from the resulting legal and economic privileges (Beinin 1998: 6).

In this sense, there existed a large disparity between the way many Egyptian Jewish communists felt and acted in terms of their belonging in Egypt on the one hand, and on the other hand, the way they were perceived as foreigners, i.e. European, and outsiders to Egyptian society and political community. They strove to prove their loyalty and patriotism to Egypt, perhaps by virtue of this ambivalent position they occupied (Ginat 2011: 4); "the more political developments appeared to lead to the conclusion that they could not be accepted as Egyptians or participate fully in Egyptian politics, the more they insisted on asserting their commitment to Egypt" (Beinin 1998: 149). In the case of Noémie, working towards her *égyptianisation* would drive her to great sacrifices.[9]

Regardless of the legal and social bases of the categorization of the Jewish communists of Egypt as foreigners, it served the state well in its policing of communism. The second-wave was heavily repressed, both before and after the Free Officers' coup in 1952. In the process, "foreigners" (or "local subjects of foreign extraction" in British colonial terminology) were singled out for deportation; an established practice since the British campaign against Bolshevism in inter-war Egypt (Naguib 2020). Accusations of Zionism were also conveniently leveled against Jewish communists of the second wave, especially following the participation of Egypt in the war in Palestine and the declaration of Martial Law on 15 May 1948. This was exacerbated by the communists' endorsement, along with the USSR, of the UN partition plan and the establishment of a Jew-

ish state in Palestine. The arrest of Jewish communists was thus concomitant with the arrest of Jewish Zionists, and the state deliberately confounded the two (Beinin 1998). Thus, 1948 struck a deadly blow to the already precarious position of the "foreign" Jewish communists (Perrault 1984: 195).[10] Put succinctly by Joel Beinin (1989: 160), "already marginalized by their embrace of European culture, [the creation of the state of Israel made Egyptian Jews] into potential enemies of Egypt".

The return of the more liberal Wafd to government in January 1950 allowed HADETO to experience a resurgence. However, Henri Curiel was arrested in July 1950 and deported to Italy. The Ministry of Interior declared null the Egyptian nationality certificate it had granted him when he conceded his Italian nationality.[11] In Paris, he established a branch of HADETO in exile, made up of the deported Jewish communists of the organization: *le Groupe de Rome*. Curiel remained a member of the HADETO Central Committee for a number of years, and continued to send to Egypt political essays written in invisible ink (Beinin 1998; Perrault 1984).

In accordance with its anti-colonial outlook, HADETO was the only communist organisation to aid in the armed struggle against the British in the Suez Canal Zone, and had members in the ranks of the discontented army officers. The close cooperation between the two led to HADETO's full support of the Free Officers following the regime takeover, despite criticism by the other communist organizations who took an opposite stance, and despite the opposition of the USSR to the officers' revolution (Ginat and Alon 2016). The Free Officers regime, however, set out from the beginning to crush the communist organizations, along with all other opposition groups. As a result, HADETO began to oppose the Officers' regime by late 1953, on the grounds of the latter's rapprochement with the US, and its assault on parliamentary life and free expression (Beinin 1987). HADETO's initiation of a Democratic National Front unifying all opposition groups against the regime resulted in mass arrests against its members in November 1953, including Noémie (Al-Said 1988; Al-Wardani 2007). Nevertheless, following Nasser's participation in the Bandung Conference in April 1955, his spearheading the anti-colonial Non-Aligned Movement and his expanded relations with the communist bloc, the various communist groups, including HADETO, began to support his regime (Beinin 1987; Younis 2012). The nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956 and the political victory scored by the regime from the Suez crisis and the invasion of Egypt by Israel, Britain and France in October of the same year further strengthened this support.

Despite the regime's foreign policy reorientation at the beginning of 1955 and the growing support for Nasser among the communist organizations, the latter were heavily repressed; HADETO's members counted 750 in the prisons of Cairo alone (Beinin 1987: 575). At the same time, the conflict with Israel became central to Nasser's ideology, and accusations of Zionism and being foreign agents of imperialism were leveled against the communists. The regime's anti-communist policy and propaganda, including accusations of Zionism, intensified in 1958—after a period of relative relaxation—with Nasser's new regional conflicts and rivalries (Beinin 1987: 530–31; Younis 2012: 355–58). This led a growing number of Egyptian communists to view the position of their Jewish comrades in the movement as problematic (Beinin 1998).

It is in the context of the embattled position of the "foreign" Jews in the heavily-repressed communist movement in mid-century Egypt, that Noémie Canel's personal and political struggles unfolded. Her dearest comrade and friend, Henri Curiel—for whom she expressed great affection, one that is indistinguishable from her political commitment—was out-rooted, first from Egypt, and gradually from the moral and political leadership position that he had occupied within the Egyptian communist movement. Moreover, in spite of being a victim of the regime's heavy repression, and the target of its ideological campaigns, Noémie joined in, and was convinced with, the Egyptian communists' support of the Nasser regime, all while struggling to prove her belonging to Egypt and her loyalty to its national cause. The contradictory and precarious position she found herself in affected her deeply.

Noémie Becomes Laila

Noémie Canel was born in Alexandria on 5 November 1927. Her father, Isaac Canel, was a teacher and an accountant at the Lycée de l'Union Juive where Noémie received her school education. He and Noémie's mother, Ilona Grunhut, were both Ashkenazi Jews born in Palestine. They later moved to Istanbul, and from there to Egypt, where they settled shortly before Noémie was born.[12]

In 1946, Noémie married Raimundo Pinto, a Jew whose family had migrated to Egypt from Syria and who had Italian nationality. Consequently, Noémie acquired the Italian nationality by extension. She obtained a divorce in 1948 at the Rabbinate in Alexandria, and was arrested in April of the following year and sentenced to three years imprisonment. During her incarceration, which lasted from 25 April 1949 to 12 February 1952, she married her comrade Kamal Abdel Halim. Perhaps this marriage was partly motivated by her desire

to avoid deportation at the conclusion of her prison sentence. Marie Rosenthal (Naila Kamel), however, remembers that there was a strong bond of romantic love between "Mimi and Kamal", despite the prison bars and forced exile that separated them for the near totality of their conjugal life (Kamel 2018: 107). Her love for him, a Muslim indigenous Egyptian, a communist activist and promising poet, must have been strengthened by her desire to claim full membership in the Egyptian nation and politics. Upon her marriage with Kamal, Noémie converted to Islam, changed her name to Magda Abdel Halim, and devoted herself to mastering the written Arabic.[13]

During her first imprisonment, her father left Alexandria to Israel; he bid her farewell on one of his weekly prison visits.[14] Her sisters had also left Egypt and settled in Italy and Israel. She was thus the only one in her family remaining, and intent on staying, in Egypt.

Noémie was deported to Italy upon the expiration of her first prison sentence. From there, she joined the Rome Group in Paris to continue her activism with HADETO from exile. That is when she met Henri Curiel who would become her most admired friend and guiding comrade.

In the brief period between her first deportation and her clandestine return to Egypt, from February 1952 to April 1953, Laila accomplished many critical political tasks for HADETO. In early July 1952, she was mandated by "HADETO in exile" to carry out a sensitive task; to travel to Israel in order to meet with representatives of the Israeli Communist Party (MKI) to discuss cooperation.[15] During her mission, Laila handed the representatives of MKI an essay she wrote, titled *The Egyptian people knows its real enemy* which was then used as a basis for an article in *Kol Ha'am*, the organ of MKI.[16] Upon her return to Europe, she represented Egypt along a few comrades from HADETO and HASETO (The Sudanese Movement for National Liberation) in the People's Congress of Peace held in Vienna in November 1952.[17] In addition, Noémie focused her efforts into reinforcing the ties between the Rome Group in Paris and HADETO leadership and cadres in Egypt, a task she would continue to do as best as she could after her return to Egypt and through the years of her incarceration. She also worked towards connecting HADETO to fellow communist organizations around the world.[18]

Gendered Activism: The Care-giving and Liaison Work

Upon her clandestine return to Egypt in April 1953, Noémie immediately assumed the diligent work of liaison, keeping Henri Curiel in contact with the

group in Egypt, and therefore able to contribute meaningfully to its debates and activities. It was barely a few months after her return when Curiel wrote to her: "On behalf of all of us, I send you our deepest gratitude. Thanks to you, we feel part of the MDLN again, and thanks to you, we'll be able to act more and more as such".[19]

Despite the fact that it was thanks to Laila that the correspondence between Egypt and the Paris branch became regular and efficient, disagreements between the Central Committee in Egypt and Henri Curiel were soon blamed on her "correspondence errors," most importantly that she mixed "personal" with "official" correspondence, and that her letters did not pass through the approval of the Central Committee, therefore "giving an incorrect picture of the situation to the CC member in exile [Henri Curiel]". The Central Committee ruled consequently that all correspondence with Curiel must go through the approval of the secretariat.[20]

Noémie was arrested again on the eve of 3 November 1953. Her husband, Kamal, was also arrested, and heavily tortured in the military prison, leading to a nervous breakdown that ultimately prompted his release (Al-Wardani 2007). Immediately, Curiel recruited "the fiancée of a HADETO member" to take over the liaison work with Egypt, Joyce Blau (alias Colette) (Perrault 1984).

However, barely a few months after she began her dedicated work of liaison, Joyce was in turn arrested in mid-October 1954, and joined Noémie in prison for several months, during which they wrote collective reports to the Rome group. Upon her release in April 1955, Joyce was deported, but continued to write and convey correspondences for the movement and the comrades in Egypt from her exile in Paris for at least a decade. It was primarily thanks to Noémie and Joyce not only that the Rome group members were kept informed and in touch with HADETO in Egypt, but also that prisoners in Egypt received aid from the exiled group and correspondences from their family throughout the years of their long incarceration. For years, Joyce would receive and decipher the prison letters in Paris, type them and send them to their addressees, write back to the prisoners in secret ink, transcribe Curiel's letters, reports, and articles, etc.

Laila and Colette's responsibilities as the women liaisons were however put in question when disagreements arose between the male members and leaders of HADETO. For instance, Schlebo (Chehata Haroun) blamed Laila for having imprinted her reporting of the secession of Badr[21] in a partial way, allegedly due to her disliking the latter, causing Henri Curiel to misinterpret

the events. Schlebo also set out conditions for his return to Curiel's group after his secession with Badr: that he takes in charge the correspondence with the organization abroad; that he alone be entitled to decipher the incoming correspondence; that Joyce—who was then still in Egypt and not yet arrested—has no contact with any member of the organization in Egypt but him; and that her activities become limited thereafter to "a few democratic works".[22] Reporting on Schlebo's conditions, Colette remarked that she had no choice but to accept them, and that she will nevertheless continue to do the handy work of writing and deciphering for him. She added that "this meeting [with Schlebo] left me with an aftertaste of mistrust, which is painful".[23]

The tendency to confine the "foreign" women of HADETO to the non-political work notwithstanding, Laila used her acquired mastery of the written Arabic to compose reports and manifestos in the language. She wrote in May 1953 two reports in Arabic, on *Marriage and the Party* and on Dulles' visit to Egypt.[24] Her correspondences with Curiel demonstrate that she was keen on discussing the political issues, on taking her independent stance on them, and on contributing in the political debate. Likewise, before her arrest, Colette attempted to voice to Salah (Joseph Hazan) in Paris, her analysis of the political situation and her criticism of HADETO's inefficiency among the working class, noting that her letter was of course "personal" because she was not confident in her analyses of the situation.[25] A month later, Colette renewed her request that Salah address her concerns regarding HADETO's political work in Egypt, noting, however, that experience made her doubtful that he will ever answer her.[26] She would later abstain from contributing her political opinions.

The activism of the women communists was thus heavily gendered. Despite Henri Curiel's sincere efforts to communicate to the women liaisons the importance of their work and to maintain a political correspondence with them as members of the movement, the general tendency was to relegate them to the non-intellectual and non-political care-giving work, and to resist their being in charge of interpreting the political situation and reporting on the ideological issues and schisms. Moreover, in political matters, the women communists were often treated as extensions of their communist spouses or partners. For instance, in June 1955, Laila writes from prison to Joyce in Paris to ask her whether the expulsion of Curiel and her husband from the Unified Egyptian Communist Party goes for her as well, by extension, "as Khalil's wife and Jacques' friend and admirer".[27]

The care-giving work that was left to the women liaisons included the detailed reporting on the health, psychological and material conditions of each prisoner, for the purpose of organizing the provisions of basic supplies, as well as books and materials according to each prisoner's requests, to be sent from Europe by the Rome Group, and the collection of the information needed on the state of the political prisoners for the international solidarity campaigns for their release. On the ground, and especially after the arrest and deportation of Joyce, the prison visits to collect and convey letters, supplies, and money, were also undertaken by "foreign" communist women and their women friends and relatives; most notably Didar Fawzy-Rossano (Nadia), Joyce's sister Sarah Blau (Marianne), Ruth Greiss (Riri), Odette and others.[28]

The particular experience of women in communist activism as care-giving members and as liaisons between male members in and outside Egypt, attached to certain individuals within the movement, reinforced the contingency between their personal and political existence, which is most observable in the letters and trajectory of Noémie. Similarly to her relationship with her comrade-husband, Noémie's friendship with Henri Curiel blurred the distinction between the personal and the political: her feelings of affection and attachment to Kamal and Curiel motivated her to struggle harder and sacrifice herself to the political cause, which, in turn, nourished her bonds of love and friendship with the two male comrades. She writes to Curiel: "you inspire me with enthusiasm, complete dedication, happiness, you teach me to fight better [...] I recognize in you our leader [...], a comrade and a very close friend [...] I promise to turn my immense affection and esteem for you into a tenacious, persistent and dedicated struggle, into a daily gift of myself, into a continuous application of the many things I have learned from you".[29] Curiel alluded in one of his letters to his reluctance to nourish personal relations with his comrades "so as not to risk troubling in any small way the fraternity of struggle".[30] However, for Noémie, as her letters demonstrate, the distinction between the personal and the political was artificial; it did not correspond to the nature of her feminized activism.

Noémie sought to invest everything into her activism and her integration in the Egyptian nation. Her music practice reflected this tendency; she strove to excel in the field that she had taken up before her incarceration, out of her desire to contribute to "the democratic struggle" and to Egypt using her music skills. But her violin practice fluctuated with changes in her morale under the effect of her growing exclusion and alienation, which in turn instigated in her growing feelings of guilt, failure, and shame.[31]

Revolutionary Hope and Self-sacrifice

Laila's first letter to her exiled comrades after her arrest exudes considerable optimism: "Onwards to new victories as beautiful and complete!".[32] She will see her being subjected to prison as a useful learning experience, and will not regret her return to Egypt; to the contrary, she celebrated its anniversary every year, as an act that, in her words, "corresponded to my conception of duty and the aspiration of my whole being".[33] To her family members, she writes positive letters, reassuring them that she is in a very good state, and that she is even becoming a better person in prison. She writes to her sister Sula in Italy: "you will be amazed to see that I love humans more, I love music more and I love life more".[34] She explains what makes her experience of prison a happy one this time: she felt a communion with fellow Egyptian communists and their families. Likewise, she writes to the mother of Raymond, her ex-husband, then living in Brazil, that prison has brought her closer to Egyptian culture.[35]

Her desire to be a dedicated communist and a faithful Egyptian will be the motor of her continued activism and endurance of imprisonment. She soon begins to write extensive reports to the Rome Group, including updates on what is happening in the women and men prisons and on the state of the movement, and conveys messages between the Central Committee in Egypt and Henri Curiel in Paris. She also wrote and circulated, in the name of the women political prisoners of the Cairo Central Prison, solidarity statements with victims of fascism and dictatorship around the world, such as on the occasion of the commemoration of the execution of the Rosenberg couple, or the campaign against the death sentence passed on Michalis Karaolis in Cyprus.[36]

At the same time, she continues her activist care-giving work: to coordinate with the Rome Group the supply of money and various aids, books, and socialist magazines to the political prisoners in the women and men wards.[37] Her care-giving work extended to political prisoners of different ideological affiliations, and to non-political inmates. In her memoirs, Marie Rosenthal expresses admiration for Mimi's sense of "human responsibility" towards inmates with whom she shared neither ideology, interests nor age (Kamel 2018: 115–16).

She also conducts the "democratic struggle" among the common-law inmates, such as organizing the celebration of the International Children's Day, and the Muslim feasts. She and her comrade inmates used these occasions to raise the awareness of common-law prisoners about political issues, through speeches and slogans.[38] In another instance, they conducted a survey among the criminal-law prisoners, to "develop a clearer understanding of their prob-

lems".[39] In addition, she gave a series of lectures on Zionism, taught French to the prisoners along with physical education and music classes.[40]

Even during Laila's hunger strike, in March 1955, to protest her separation from other communist inmates, Colette reports from prison that, despite the alarming deterioration in her health, "Mimi is valiant and in magnificent spirits".[41] During her strike, Laila writes to Curiel with hope and determination, "whatever our trials and your trials, know that all will be overcome".[42] She perseveres in her hunger strike for 22 days, until the High Martial Court granted her demand. On a personal level, she is determined to concede her Italian nationality and to strive for the Egyptian: "I am going to legalize my marriage with Kelly, I refuse any attempt to have me deported; I renounce my nationality, and this is irrevocable and absolute".[43]

The Nation's Undesirable Patriots

Noémie Canel's trial began in the Military Court in July 1954. In the hearing, she led the slogans and hymns, calling for solidarity and denouncing imperialism, the military dictatorship, and torture in military prisons. When it was her turn in the trial, the prosecutor attacked Noémie as a foreigner, and questioned the sincerity of her conversion to Islam, which according to him was self-serving and aimed at disguising her communist activity. He demanded that she be removed from Egyptian society. At his words, Mimi could not hold back her tears and is reported to have cried.[44]

Her statement in court reveals her striving to prove her belonging and her patriotism: "I don't deny my foreign origin. My face betrays it, as does my accent. But the fact remains that I am Egyptian [...] I was born and raised in Alexandria. My mother is buried in Egypt. I married an Egyptian. There is no doubt that this marriage consolidated my ties with the Egyptian people [...] A homeland is not determined by a passport or a certificate of nationality, which prove nothing. If I went to Italy, I would be a foreigner; I don't speak Italian. I know nothing of Italian customs. But here, I know and love the Egyptian people and its customs [...] True patriotism is the deep love of the people and of everything that concerns the people. [There are foreigners, of whom I am one] who love the people of Egypt and devote all their efforts and abilities to serving them […] I am absolutely certain that tomorrow the Egyptian people will know who their true friends are and who their enemies are. But even today, I suggest you go to the Women Section of Cairo Prison and ask any of the common-law prisoners what they think of Magda or Mimi. The answers

you will hear will convince you that I am not distant from the people, that I am very much a part of them […] All their issues directly concern me as an Egyptian woman, wife and mother-to-be".[45]

Three months later, the verdict was pronounced: she was condemned to eight years of imprisonment with hard labor. The convicted communists issued a call for solidarity, describing the verdicts as having been "applied at the instigation of Anglo-American imperialism, the adversary of national independence, democracy and peace".[46] The new regime was then still attacked by the communists as a puppet of imperialism. However, with Nasser's pioneering anti-colonial third-worldism and his emergence from the Suez crisis as the heroic leader of anti-imperialism and Arab nationalism, the communists changed drastically their stance vis-a-vis his regime, from opposition to support, including the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (Unified ECP), of which Laila was member.

Laila too began to revise her stance regarding the Free Officers' regime: "I am in the process of making and suggesting to the comrades a retrospective analysis of the positions we adopted from July 1952 to April 1955 (Bandung)".[47] Her letters following the Suez canal nationalization and the war express political and personal euphoria and optimism: "I have never been as optimistic, calm, patient and confident as I am today".[48] In June 1956 she wrote to Colette: "We are living unforgettable, grandiose days. Each day brings its joy, its admirable progress towards new advances",[49] and to Jacques: "we are bursting with happiness, patriotism, enthusiasm and zeal [...] the days we are living erase all the bad times".[50] The communist prisoners, men and women, initiated patriotic celebrations in prison, where, Laila reports, "we shook and wept with patriotism".[51] Laila and Marie Rosenthal also sent a telegram of support to the president Gamal Abdel Nasser, praising the government's peaceful and independent foreign policy and its conferral of women's suffrage. They asked for amnesty for the political prisoners, so that the latter may be "able to share in the nation's march towards peace, national independence and the national economic and cultural policy, especially at this time, where colonial conspiracies abound against our homeland […] to ensure the unity of our people and its complete collaboration with the government, and its desire to protect it from such plots".[52]

Laila became confident that a general amnesty was imminent, now that the communists were supportive of the regime. She soon realized, however, that an amnesty was not in order. Despite the disappointment, her morale was still high. Perhaps the reintegration of Younes (Curiel) in the party in July 1956,

after his suspension the year before, was an important factor that injected her with renewed optimism and energy.[53] She reports a high level of activity among the common-law prisoners, including raising their awareness on "what our current government represents, its message against imperialism and feudalism, […] and the nationalization of the canal".[54]

Embattled Faith and Growing Alienation

Subsequent developments in the Egyptian communist movement, however, crushed Mimi's hopes. In early 1957, a new merger was negotiated between the Unified ECP and two other communist organizations. During the discussions, one of the participating organizations demanded that Jews be excluded from the leadership of the considered united party, while other organizations opposed such a demand. A few months later however, the majority of the Unified ECP ceded to the demand, and the new unity was accomplished in June 1957 under the United Egyptian Communist Party (United ECP). Although welcoming unity, Laila would disapprove with much of the United ECP's stances, of which she was a member, which reinforced her feelings of alienation.

In February 1958, she was prey to another painful disappointment following an amnesty from which the communists were excluded, despite earlier assurances by the prison administration to the contrary. Mimi told the Rome Group that what broke her heart was to see the party seemingly indifferent about their continued imprisonment and the exclusion of the communists from all amnesties and early release regulations.[55]

While the communists' support for the regime was growing, the regime progressively adopted a discourse that demonized foreigners and foreign entities and ideologies, especially in its campaign against communism (Younis 2012: 292–96). Mimi stood between contradictory currents. Her letters are evidence of the deterioration in her morale, but also of her striving to keep up her energy and devotion to the cause. Her inability to do the latter made her feel like a failure. For instance, as she felt increasingly unwanted and unappreciated by her party, she decided to intensify her violin training to fill the deficiency in "national violinists" in Egypt.[56] However, she abandons the violin in February 1957, due, according to her, to "yet another psychological crisis".[57] Her letters to Curiel become full of feelings of exhaustion, guilt, and low self-esteem: "I don't deserve [any of your admiration]. [There is] a lot that I am ashamed of, [and I feel] a real deterioration and a certain bitterness".[58] Her body was also breaking down; two infections led to two surgeries, and were only the beginning of endless and debilitating health problems.

But perhaps the biggest blow to Laila was the decision by her party to dissolve the Rome group and to cut relations with its members. The party's political bureau gave the following reasons: that the group had become disconnected from Egyptian reality due to exile, and considering "the [erased word] composition of the group".[59] It was decided that no members of the party shall have political or organizational correspondences with the members of the now dissolved Rome Group. The party's decisions instigated in Mimi "pain and revolt".[60] She reaffirmed her belief in Curiel: "I have faith in you and I know that you, Egypt and the party are one, despite all the momentary obstacles".[61] Perhaps for Mimi, the party's decision vis-a-vis the group and the man who have worked tirelessly for the movement and for its unity while forced into exile, mirrored her own impending exclusion as a "foreign" Jewish communist.

"I confess to having weakened..."

At the beginning of 1958, Noémie was still determined to do all she could to stay in Egypt. She insisted that she would never have recourse to her Italian nationality to shorten her detention: "I am now Muslim and married to an Egyptian. When I leave here, I will do everything I can to get the Egyptian nationality".[62] However, with the growing probability of her deportation, she wrote to Curiel that, in that case, she would want to live in a popular democracy, or preferably in the USSR where there are Muslim republics, "for I intend to remain faithful to Egypt, to my new name, to the new religion I have adopted".[63] Noémie thus wanted to preserve as much as possible of her ties to Egypt.

But prison and her increasing alienation were taking a toll on her. She writes in December 1958 to Curiel: "since the formation of this party (United ECP), a lot of things have broken inside me. I was one step away from suicide in October 1957".[64] She soon left the party to adhere to the seceding group formed by her "esteemed comrades" including her husband Kamal, which, significantly, was in disagreement with the majority tendency of the party refusing to support Nasser against Abdel Karim Qasim and the Iraqi Communist Party.[65] The seceding faction, which called itself Egyptian Communist Party-Democratic Movement for National Liberation tended toward full unreserved support of the Nasser regime (Beinin 1987: 581–83).

In the end of 1958, some of Noémie's long-time inmates had been liberated, including Marie Rosenthal. Her loneliness brings her to the decision that she would live with her sister in Italy in the case she was deported, and not in the Soviet Union or in "one of the popular democracies" as she had affirmed

earlier. She considered this mind-change as a weakening, of which she felt ashamed, and wrote to Curiel: “I confess to having weakened on this point. Don’t be disappointed in me”.[66]

Her change of mind encouraged Curiel, to propose to her in late November 1958—after five years of her imprisonment—what he apparently did not dare to propose to her earlier: that the group takes steps to push for an early liberation, but which would make her expulsion from Egypt almost certain. Laila categorically refused Curiel’s proposition. She explained to him in words that demonstrate best the fusion that had occurred between her personal and political beings: “All my efforts over the last years have been aimed at achieving my Egyptianization, at the cost of sacrifices, disappointments and violent shocks, I don’t deny it. But I think I have taken some positive steps in this direction. Thanks to the radio, I’ve been able to penetrate a little of the country’s artistic life, and I’ve found the field in which I’d like to work: the Egyptianization of classical music. My dream is to become a member of the [Egyptian] Radio Symphony Orchestra. Finally, and this is the fundamental factor, I love Khalil, and living here means my fulfillment as a woman [...] My dear friend, my whole being strives to stay here, to fight to stay here, to spare no effort to achieve this: as a woman and a wife who has duties towards her husband who has already been waiting for ten years and who suffers; as a musician; as a patriot who deeply loves Egypt and the Arabs (a love which is not reciprocal, unfortunately). I am ready to stay another three years in prison, to accept [five additional years of] surveillance, even forced residence. That’s why, for me, taking any step that would lead to expulsion would be moral suicide; it would be crossing out with one gesture all the efforts and aspirations of ten long years. If, despite all my efforts, I am still expelled on my release, a lot will have been killed in me”.[67]

Two months later, she reiterated her refusal of Jacques’s proposition: “I can’t do this. I will stay in prison until the end. If I stay in Cairo, my patience will be greatly rewarded by the realization of everything I aspire to. If I am deported, I will not at least have the remorse of having let slip the slightest chance of staying here”.[68]

She reported to the group with relief that Marie Rosenthal was not deported from Egypt following her liberation; a fact that should have reinforced her hope, but her subsequent letters indicate that something must have happened bigger than she could withstand. Following which, her letters spoke of her now completely broken psychological state: “I accept your suggestion to reduce

my sentence, at the price of being deported [...] The person you are helping is a wreck".[69] The drastic change of mind perhaps had to do with the new and sweeping repression of the communists that took place simultaneously; Sarah Blau reported to the Rome group that more than 500 communists were arrested in two days, and asked her friends in exile to help her get out of Egypt.[70] More likely, the reason behind Mimi's decision was personal: Kamal abandoned her. He was the anchor that made her deep attachment to Egypt personal and concrete.

The group acted immediately and sought the help of the Italian authorities and the Italian Democratic Jurists Association. Since Noémie had no right to early release—as a communist and as a repeated offender—they tried to obtain for her a release for health reasons. Their attempts had no success. After this point, Mimi could not gather her forces to write to her comrades in exile; her letters in the archive become sparse, until they disappear completely after December 1959.

Noémie was kept until the conclusion of her sentence on 3 November 1961. On that day, she was taken from prison to an unknown location, and detained in a dark and filthy room for six days without an explanation, until she was deported on 9 November. Mimi would tell her daughters many years later that these six days were the worst she had been through during the whole period of her lengthy incarceration. This experience hurt her deeply, and made her come out of Egypt deeply depressed and devoid of energy.[71]

She was met in Italy by her sister, and her former husband Raimundo, whom she re-married, and would live with him wherever he conducted his business, first in Brazil, then in Spain, before they divorced for the second time, and Mimi moved with her daughters to Israel in the 1970s. Since her release, she refused and avoided any contact with her beloved friend and comrade Curiel, with Joyce, and even with her prison comrade Marie Rosenthal.[72] She wanted to turn the page on those years of affection, struggle, and faith. It is as if she had turned the page on her old self and lived in a new one that had given in to the reality of exclusive ethno-national belongings, with a sadness and a pain that accompanied her until her old age. She died on 7 September 2012.

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Notes

1 - The International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter IISH), The papers of Egyptian Communists in Exile—Rome Group (hereafter RG) 20, Laila letter to Jacques, 18 April 1953. Noémie Canel figures in the archives under several code-names, including Mimi, Michou, Josette, Lili, Mirelle, and Laila. In this article, I will refer to her as Noémie, Mimi and Laila, interchangeably.

2 - IISH RG 93, Note Concernant le cas de Noémie Canel, August 1959.

3 - IISH RG 143, letter from Jacques to Laila, 31 July 1952.

4 - For a discussion of the "invisibilisation" of women activists in communist historiography, see Strazzeri (2022). For a similar treatment of the absence in the early historiography of women in the Tunisian communist movement, see Abassade (2020).

5 - IISH RG 91/1959, Laila letter to Jacques, 5 April 1959.

6 - One may say that the term *foreigners* designated "primarily francophone local minorities" residing in Egypt, as explained succinctly by Beinin J., *Egypt's Henri Curiel Was a Revolutionary Beyond Borders*, in "Jacobin", 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/09/henri-curiel-egyptian-communism-jews (last accessed on 17 September 2024).

7 - There were disagreements about the identity of the Jewish "foreigners" and its political consequences on the communist movement, and subsequently about the nature and extent of the necessary Egyptianization, although there was a consensus that it was politically desirable to promote indigenous Egyptian leaders. See Beinin (1998: 144–45).

8 - The "second-wave" refers to the communist organizations that emerged during or in the aftermath of the Second World War and their splinters, some of which remained active until self-dissolution in 1965.

9 - IISH RG 91/ 1958, Laila letter to Jacques, 26 December 1958.

10 - Quoting Raymond Stambouli, a member of the Rome Group.

11 - High Administrative Court session of 25 May 1950, Case number 18 for judicial year 18.

12 - Interview with Ilona and Olivia Pinto (daughters of Noémie Canel), online, 29 June 2023.

13 - IISH RG 90.

14 - Interview with Ilona and Olivia Pinto, online, 29 June 2023.

15 - IISH RG 143, Laila report to Rome Group titled *Rapport sur le travail effectué par Laila en Israel (Août-Septembre 1952)*, 23 September 1952.

16 - Ibidem.

17 - IISH RG 32, Resolution of the members of the Sudanese and Egyptian communists participating in the Peace Congress in Vienna, sent to their respective organizations, undated.

18 - IISH RG 90, Laila letter to Kelly, 1 October 1952.

19 - IISH RG 20, Jacques letter No. 16 to Laila, 22 July 1953.

20 - IISH RG 104, HADETO Central Committee letter to Younes, 1 September 1953.

21 - The secession was over HADETO's support of the military officers' regime. For an account of the secession, see Ismael and El-Said (1990: 76–78).

22 - IISH RG 27, Colette report No. 3 to Rome Group, 18 December 1953.

23 - Ibidem.

24 - IISH RG 20, Laila letter to Jacques, 2 May 1953.

25 - IISH RG 27, Colette letter No. 20 to Salah, 29 March 1954.

26 - IISH RG 27, Colette Report No. 28 to the Rome Group, 30 April 1954.

27 - IISH RG 91/1955, Laila letter No. 1 to Colette, June 1955.

28 - In his memoirs, Albert Arié (2023) mentions the important role played by the women comrades, whom he described as "the unknown female soldiers" (p. 248): Sarah Blau (pp. 222, 235), Didar Fawzy-Rossano (pp. 247–48), and Ruth Greiss/Gresh (p. 248), in transporting letters to and from prison, collecting and conveying money and all forms of supplies to the communist prisoners in various prisons across Egypt.

29 - IISH RG 90, Laila letter to Jacques, 4 July 1952.

30 - IISH RG 91/1955, Jacques letter to Laila, 3 May 1955.

31 - Various letters in IISH RG 91 and IISH RG 92. For a discussion of the importance of emotions in communist women activism see Zohar (2022).

32 - IISH RG 27, Colette rapport No. 19 to Rome Group, 26 March 1954.

33 - IISH RG 32, Laila letter No. 25 to Rome Group, 22 April 1954; 91/1955, Laila letter to Jacques, 17 April 1955.

34 - IISH RG 32, Noémie letter to Sula, 2 March 1955.

35 - IISH RG 92, Noémie letter to Fortunée, 30 May 1958.

36 - IISG RG 91/1955, Josette letter No. 2 to Colette, October 1955. Ethel (1915–53) and Julius Rosenberg (1918–53) were an American communist couple convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and executed by the federal government of the United States in 1953. Michalis Karaolis (1933–56) was a Cypriot member of the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters; a guerrilla organization that fought for the end of British rule in Cyprus. He was sentenced to death and hanged in May 1956.

37 - Several letters in IISG RG 91, dated 1954 and 1955.

38 - IISH RG 91/1954, Laila letter to Rome Group, 12 June 1954.

39 - Ibidem.

40 - IISH RG 91/1955, Laila letter to Rome Group, November 1955.

41 - IISH RG 33, Colette letter to Rome Group. 20 March 1955.

42 - IISH RG 33, Laila letter to Jacques, 23 February 1955.

43 - IISH RG 91/1954, Laila letter to Aida, 12 June 1954.

44 - IISH RG 93, "Jugement de Magda Abdel Halim," 28 July 1954.

45 - Ibidem.

46 - IISH RG 91/1954, Appel adressé par les prisonniers communistes condamnés aux travaux forcés au bagne de Tourah, 23 September 1954.

47 - IISH RG 91/1956, Laila letter No. 8 to Jacques, 20 June 1956.

48 - IISH RG 93, Laila letter to Colette, 20 May 1956.

49 - IISH RG 91/1956, Laila letter to Colette and letter to Jacques No. 8, 20 June 1956.

50 - Ibidem.

51 - Ibidem.

52 - IISH RG 91-1956, Joint letter to president Gamal Abdel Nasser, 20 May 1956.

53 - Curiel was suspended by the Unified Egyptian Communist Party, along four members who were his associates (Kamal included), following the party's formation in February 1955, due to the suspicions raised against him in the Marty Affair. For a detailed account see Beinin (1998: 152–56).

54 - IISH RG 43, Laila letter No. 1 (new series) to Jacques, 20 May 1957.

55 - IISH RG 91/1958, Laila letter to Rome Group, 2 April 1958.

56 - IISH RG 91/1955, Laila letter to Colette, June 1955.

57 - IISH RG 91/1957, Mimi letter to Suzanne, 6 August 1957.

58 - IISH RG 91/1957, Laila letter No. 3 to Jacques and Blanche, 18 August 1957.

59 - The erased word could presumably be either "foreign" or "Jewish". IISH RG 105, Resolution of the Political Bureau of the United Egyptian Communist Party, 14 March 1958.

60 - IISH RG 91/1958, Laila letter to Jacques, 5 January 1958.

61 - Ibidem.

62 - Ibidem.

63 - Ibidem.

64 - IISH RG 91/1958, Laila letter to Jacques, 2 December 1958.

65 - IISH RG 91/1959, Laila letter to Jacques, 17 February 1959.

66 - IISH RG 91/1958, Josette (Laila) letter to Jacques, 4 November 1958.

67 - IISH RG 91/ 1958, Laila letter to Jacques, 26 December 1958

68 - IISH RG 91/1959, Laila letter to Jacques, 17 February 1959

69 - IISH RG 91/1959, Laila letter to Jacques, 5 April 1959

70 - IISH RG 43 Marianne letter to the Rome Group, 6 April 1959

71 - Interview with Olivia and Ilona Pinto, online, 29 June 2023

72 - Interview with Joyce Blau, Paris, 26 February 2023. Interview with Nadia Kamel (daughter of Marie Rosenthal), online, February 2023.

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