



## The Vagabond Café and Jerusalem's Prince of Idleness

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The return of Khalil Sakakini from his American sojourn in the autumn of 1908 was an occasion for contemplating the creation of a new kind of cultural space: the literary café; a public meeting place to accommodate his newly-formed circle of literati, the "Party of the Vagabonds" (*hizb al-sa'aleek*). For Sakakini and many like-minded intellectuals of the period, the time was ripe. The new Ottoman constitution had just been declared and calls for decentralization, Arab autonomy and freedom of press and assembly were spreading throughout Syria and Palestine. Sakakini was penniless and heavily in debt. To supplement his teaching income he became a copy editor in two Jerusalem newspapers, *al-Quds* owned by George Habib, and *al-Asma'i*, a literary paper that had just been published by the al-Issa family in the Old City.<sup>1</sup> In 1911, the al-Issa brothers, Dawood and Issa, moved to Jaffa where they launched *Falastin*, the newspaper that became an instrument of the national



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*An Arabic café at the seashore in Jaffa. Source: J. Benor-halter.*





movement and often clashed with both the Ottoman and British Mandate authorities.

In this essay I will attempt to trace the appearance and demise of a literary café, *Maqha al-Sa'aleek* ("Vagabond Café"), and its association with Sakakini's circle of vagabonds in Ottoman Jerusalem during and immediately after World War I. Sakakini's philosophy of pleasure (*falsafat al-surur*) and the cosmopolitan atmosphere that prevailed in Jerusalem during and immediately after the war years constituted the social milieu for this café-circle. I will also introduce *Maqha al-Sa'aleek* in the context of the earlier evolution of similar cafés in Ottoman Syria and Egypt.

### A New Kind of Public Space

Jerusalem, as all medium-sized Arab cities of that period, had two kinds of public spaces where urbanites engaged in celebratory events. These were the major family revelries associated with weddings, births, circumcisions, baptisms and the like - all of which were celebrated within the confines of the household; and religious ceremonials involving ritual celebrations and processions. Those included Ramadan processions, *Sabt en Nur* ("Saturday of Fire," following Good Friday processions), Nebi Musa, Purim, and al-Khader. Although obviously religious in character, many of these ceremonials had acquired a clearly worldly, if not mundane, character by the turn of the century. Some, like the Nebi Musa processions, were religious occasions that became almost exclusively nationalist in character. Nabi Rubeen celebrations in the south of Jaffa, in which Jerusalemites participated, had entirely lost their ostensible religious character by the end of the nineteenth century.

In earlier periods - probably around the sixteenth century - coffeehouses emerged elsewhere in the Arab world as an Arab (or

rather Islamic) response to the taverna; that is, a site for secular socialization that did not serve proscribed substances.<sup>2</sup> Ralph Mattox argues that the absence of a restaurant tradition in the early modernity of Middle Eastern towns (except for the traditional merchants' *khans* for overnight stays) made the coffeehouse a necessary instrument for receiving guests outside the more intimate confines of the house. The domestic atmosphere of the house was too restricting, and the new public space of the café allowed the host to forgo issues of rank and prestige, which had permeated social interaction in family-controlled environments. "This would imply," according to Hattox, "a subtle shift in the relationship of host and guest, and a break, if only symbolic, with old values."<sup>3</sup> It was this break that created a café atmosphere that was both informal and potentially dangerous. The danger did not come from coffee as a drink (which was attacked early on by some *ulama* as potentially intoxicating),<sup>4</sup> but from the atmosphere associated with the coffeehouse, and the recreational activities that were soon to be hosted in it.

By the late Ottoman period Levantine coffeehouses served a predominantly transient population. Initially they served three kinds of clientele.<sup>5</sup> In areas surrounding public buildings (land registries, courts, police stations) they received clemencers, applicants, and people waiting for official redress of grievances. Those cafés usually included a *katib adiliyyah*, or public scribe, who filled out official forms and petitions for a fee. A second type of café began to proliferate in mid-nineteenth century provincial centres, serving the travellers discharged from carriages and motor vehicles in the local square. A third type of café evolved in port cities and served mainly sailors, travel agents, and customs officers. These last two brands of cafés branched into other economic and social functions,



becoming hang-about for porters, stevedores, and other itinerant workers seeking work and *poste restentes* for those bearing letters and packages to be picked up later by other clients.

But it was as a place for spontaneous and often anonymous encounters that the café began to serve a wider recreational and entertainment function. The imbibing of alcohol, small-scale gambling (with cards and dominoes), music in public places (cafés boasted the earliest gramophones and radios), prostitution (pick-up areas), and the sale and consumption of tobacco and hashish were all components of the cafés recreational function.<sup>6</sup> The relative anonymity of the café milieu permitted the emergence of political and literary groups who found them convenient for unscheduled meetings, and easy escape when necessary.<sup>7</sup> The transgressive nature of coffeehouses was particularly felt in port areas (Jaffa, Alexandria, Beirut), where the consumption of proscribed substances (alcohol and later hashish, which was initially more tolerated) combined with dissenters' political activities, gave cafés their early subversive character, as viewed through official eyes.

In Palestine, Jaffa's Manshiyyeh quarter was an ethnic border area between Jaffa and Tel Aviv where such cafes proliferated. Café Baghdadi was one of several cafés on Shabazi Street observed by the Mandatory police:

*Without a doubt this place is the main attraction of Shabazzi Street. All hours of the day it is crowded with very shady characters, who sit and gamble, playing all manner of card games and dominoes. Here too, the 'chalk and slate' system of scoring is favoured, although on a few occasions players have been apprehended in flagrante delicto passing money. Many women, undoubtedly prostitutes, gather in this*

*café, and hang about, passing from table to table.*<sup>8</sup>

In a study of public morality in turn-of-the-century Beirut, Jens Hanssen argues that it was not until the 1840s that the public's perception of cafés and their clients changed. Until mid-century, most coffeehouses were located inside the walled city by the port area, where merchants, soldiers and sailors gave them a disreputable, if not dangerous, reputation.<sup>9</sup>

Only the increased security brought by Ottoman city planning and street lighting enticing coffeehouses inside the city walls (particularly in the Zaytuneh, Ras Beirut and Corniche areas) "allowed" patrician family members to patronize cafés and other recreational centres. Suddenly, cafés became respectable.

In his social history of coffeehouses, Ralph Hattox offers a rather different reading of the origins of café society in the Middle East. He rejects this distinction between "respectable" and "ill-reputed" cafés, which is implied by Hanssen, and suggests the main divide to be between bars and cafés. While the former were associated with gambling and drunkenness, "the coming of the coffeehouse signalled the beginning of an entirely new phenomenon. Perfectly respectable people went out at night for purposes other than piety."<sup>10</sup> But in Cairo and Istanbul, the public café tradition had a much earlier pedigree. Jabarti chronicled the co-existence of wine taverns and coffeehouses in Cairo during the late eighteenth century, before the French Expedition. During Ramadan, coffeehouses were major centres for public entertainment and *arghileh*-smoking. What seems to have given cafés an aura of respectability was their patronage by Al-Azhar scholars and sheikhs, who supported their own coffeehouses.<sup>11</sup>

These different perspectives about the origins of Levantine cafés suggest that local



conditions provided different responses to the new institutions, and that often, the foreign presence, as in Napoleonic Egypt, elicited unfavourable responses in some major Arab cities but not in others. This suggests another important distinction in nineteenth century cafés. The main dividing line among late Ottoman cafés was between popular cafés (*maqahi sha'biyyah*) and the subsequent modern cafés (*maqahi franjiyyah*), which had the distinction, from the turn of the century, of catering to female and mixed clientele. To these options, Abdel Mun'em Shmais adds the artistic café-cabaret (*maqha al-'awalem*) which began to proliferate in Cairo during (and possibly before) the French Expedition, and spread from there to Alexandria, Beirut and Jaffa.<sup>12</sup> A further distinction is to be made between 'Awalem cafés that offered stylised "belly dancing", which had an aura of respectability, and Ghawazi cafés, where more fleshy (*suqi*) dancing was performed for a lower-class clientele.<sup>13</sup>

The kind of literary cafés that were associated with Sakakini's circle after World War I seem to have originated with the *hakawatiyyeh*, or narrators of popular ballads. Wasif Jawhariyyeh notes several places where classical ballads such as the *Tale of Antara* and *Sirat Abu Zeid al-Hilali* were performed in Jerusalem's Old City during his boyhood (1904-1910). The demise of these balladeers resulted in all likelihood from the spread of literacy and the invention of the radio/phonograph, which was always placed prominently in popular cafés. In Cairo, Beirut and Jaffa, literary cafés seem to have been the domain of journalists and copy editors, who used the café to meet with their sources, exchange views, and write their prose.<sup>14</sup> Poets, lyrists, songwriters, and - later - film scriptwriters also frequented these establishments.<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, the café scene in Palestine was considerably less versatile than that in Egypt,

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with its cosmopolitan and imperial influences, but it followed the same trends. In Jaffa and Jerusalem, a multiplicity of new newspapers were launched to take advantage of the new Ottoman press laws after the constitution of 1908. Public cafés and newspapers became linked together in the public conscience. It was customary around World War I for a "reader" to alight a platform and read the commentary to customers of these cafés. In a recent study on the diffusion of literacy and reading in Palestine, historian Ami Ayalon discusses the role of the public café in this marriage between newspapers and coffeehouses. He suggests that coffee and tea acted as stimulants for reading and discussion, while proprietors of coffee and teahouses enhanced patronage by subscribing to a number of journals. In Istanbul, the café/reading room created a new institution: the *kiraat-hane* (the café/reading room).<sup>16</sup> Jabbur al-Dweihi cites Sirafim and Sivanaki as the two most popular such reading cafés during the Tanzimat period.<sup>17</sup> In Palestine, there was an added dimension to cafes - reading rooms acted as a space for political propaganda:

*Newsheet reading became a common feature of café life on the eve of the First World War and still more so during the war itself, when they represented an essential source of reports on the rapid events unfolding on the front. Thus Ilyas Hamati - who as a teenager, used to work in qahwat al-bahr ("sea café") in Acre prior to the war - remembered it as a 'gathering place of the educated that used to read Falastin newspaper'. The conquering British army used them as places for spreading propaganda, and even opened new coffeehouses especially for the purpose, in which, one intelligence officer reported, 'all the telegrams and newspapers' were placed.<sup>18</sup>*





"Secretary General" of the Vagabond Party, Jerusalem, 1918, Khalil Sakakini. Source: Sakakini Archives.

### Ottoman Cafés in Jerusalem

In addition to their political efficacy, cafés constituted an arena for mundane social interaction and leisurely activity precisely because they provided secular space that had no pretensions of economic exchange or religious celebration. Unlike the restaurant, there was no utilitarian function of providing food. Cafés offered pure social pleasure. The equivalent in Ottoman Jerusalem for this type of interaction for the upper classes was the *Odah*, the exclusive bachelor pad that served the entertainment pleasures of young wealthy unmarried men.<sup>19</sup>

In his memoirs, Wasif Jawharieh describes a number of cafes and teahouses in Jerusalem and its environs, a phenomenon that mushroomed in the period between the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 and the years before the war. He identifies the most outstanding contemporary cafés that he

frequented:

- The Seraii Café in *Suq al-Attareen* (Perfumers' Market) overlooking Aqabet al-Takiyyah. This café was surrounded by a huge mulberry tree and served supplicants who were waiting for government papers in the department of justice, the land registry (*tapu*) and the population registry (*da'irat al-nufus*). Next to the café in a yard was a temporary holding cell known as "the cage" (*qafas*) where accused prisoners were temporarily held before their indictment.<sup>20</sup> Many of the café clients were relatives waiting for the disposition of the arrested kin's case.
- Qalonia Café and Bar, run by Froso Zahran, was frequented by Ottoman officers and contained a gambling section in the back.<sup>21</sup>
- The Mukhtar's Café, originally located above Bank Credit Lyonnais just outside Jaffa Gate. This was the original Vagabond Café before the buildings outside Jaffa Gate were destroyed by Colonel Storrs in the 1920s.
- Jraisheh Café and Garden, a municipal café, located near the Jraisheh springs. It was annually sub-contracted to Jerusalemite restaurateurs. In 1915, it was run by Giryis Jawharieh, who managed the café until his death in 1918.
- Café and Bar Jawharieh, opened by Khalil Jawhariyyeh in 1918, serving Lebanese *araq* and *mazza* with iced water (thanks to the recent introduction of electricity in the city). Here, as elsewhere, we note the introduction of light meals to an otherwise exclusively café atmosphere. The café was located near the Russian compound on Jaffa



Road, and hosted a number of musicians such as Muhammad al-Asheq, Zaki Murad, and a cabaret show featuring Bad'ia Masabni and her husband Amin Rihani.<sup>23</sup>

A few years later Najati Sidqi, the Jerusalem socialist writer and (later) communist militant, describes the radical atmosphere in the Postal Café, owned by a Russian Jew, behind Barclay's Bank near Jaffa Gate, just after the war:

*I used to sit in this café every afternoon, where we used to encounter its cosmopolitan clientele. Among those were a Tsarist officer with a white beard, who claimed that he was a captain of a Russian battleship before the Bolshevik seized his boat in Odessa, a young clerk working for the Municipality, whose father was Russian, and his mother Arab, an immigrant painter who used to sketch the café customers for few qurush, an elegant lady who kept talking about her properties in Ukrania, and many young men and women immigrants who would chat and drink siphon [soda drink]. The discussion was always on the same themes: Jewish migration, Arab resistance, Jabotinsky's insurrection, the battle of Tel Hai in northern Palestine, the rebellion in Jaffa [1921], and the clashes between Arabs and Jews. These discussions included ideological debates, which were translated to us in the vernacular. From them we became familiar with the basic tenants of socialism, anarchism and bolshevist doctrines.<sup>24</sup>*

Although they began to mushroom throughout the city at the turn of the century, those cafés located at the seam of physical expansion for the new neighbourhoods around the area of Musrara, Jaffa Gate, and

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the vicinity of the Russian compound provided the cosmopolitan milieu for an intellectual and artistic resurgence. This area soon became the abode of the café-bar, and the café-cabaret, where music was enjoyed with alcoholic drinks. These locations and their association with music and alcohol had a lot to do with their ethnically and religiously mixed character. They were the nodes where the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Armenian populations interacted, creating a confessionally shared space and neutralizing the diktat of social prohibitions. They became centres where Russian, Greek and Balkan pilgrims congregated during the Easter celebrations. With them came affordable alcohol (cheap vodka, Cypriot brandy, and Greek cognac) and anonymous street crowds that encouraged the suspension of the strict conventions of Jerusalem public life.

#### Vagabond Café

Among the most famous of all Jerusalem cafés was *Qahwat al-Mukhtar*, later christened as *Qahwat al-Sa'aleek* (Vagabond Café) by Khalil Sakakini and his intellectual circle. Established in 1918 in an enclave inside the Jaffa Gate by the mukhtar of the Orthodox community in the Old City, Issa Michael al-Tubbeh, it became known as the Mukhtar's Café. The café began as a resting place for Greek, Cypriot and Russian Easter pilgrims, as well as a general consultation office for the Orthodox community in the Old City. In his memoirs, Issa's son Jamil al-Tubbeh recalls the genealogy of the café:

*My father owned a café adjacent to the Jaffa Gate, abutting the southern wall of the city. Known as al-Mahal ("The Place") it was a sort of meeting locus for some of Jerusalem's most renowned intellectuals and humorists. These middle-aged and older residents of metropolitan Jerusalem felt as much at*



Mukhtar Issa al Tubbeh, owner of the Vagabond Café in the 1920s. Source: Tubbeh Family Archives.

*home in this environment as they did in their own homes. The Old City gave them the essential-link to their past, their culture, their religion, and their history. Their discourse, over puffs on narghilehs and sips of Lebanon's renowned firewater at al-Mahal, still rings in my ears. The environment of the café also tolerated occasional blasphemous language away from the cultural revolution that was changing the character of both Jerusalem and Palestine.<sup>25</sup>*

Sakakini had just come back from exile in Damascus, after being freed from Ottoman imprisonment by the army of King Faisal. Following the collapse of the Faisal's Arab government in Syria, he returned to Jerusalem and resumed his journalistic career. Sakakini wrote regularly for *al-Muqtatif*, and *al-Hilal in Cairo*, and for *al-Siyaseh al-Ushbu'iyeh* in Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

Issa al-Tubbeh had corresponded with Sakakini when he was still in New York, and joined him in his struggle for the Arabization of the Orthodox Church. Tubbeh was a writer himself and shared Sakakini's literary tastes. In a compendium of Ottoman newspapers he is listed as the owner and publisher of a circular handwritten paper, *al-Ahlam* (*Dreams*), which began to appear on September 1908.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after the war, when Tubbeh became the mukhtar of the Old City's Orthodox community, he moved his café to the present building inside Jaffa Gate, next to the Imperial Hotel. The café soon began to serve as the point of reference for orthodox visitors coming to the city from Russia, the Balkans, Greece, Cyprus and the Arab countries during the Easter pilgrimages. It was from the Mukhtar's Café that the fire procession of *Sabt en Nour* (Saturday of Lights) usually proceeded to the Holy Sepulchre on the day after Good Friday, with the mukhtar leading the procession.<sup>28</sup> Issa al-Tubbeh became a notary and advisor to the orthodox community and mediated its daily problems with Greek Patriarchate. It was this combination of involvement in literary circles and in the Arabization of the Orthodox Church that attracted Sakakini to Tubbeh and his café. He began to meet regularly with his literary group that later formed what was known as *Halqat al-Arbi'a* (The Wednesday Circle). Those included Adel Jaber, Is'af al-Nashashibi, Issa al-Issa (editor of *Alif Ba*), Issa al-Issa (publisher of *Falastin*) Ishaq Musa al-Husseini, Khalil Nakhleh, and from abroad - Ahmad Zaki Pasha and Khalil Mutran.<sup>29</sup> It was this group that formed the core of the party of The Vagabonds.

### **The Philosophy of Pleasure and Vagabond Ideology**

In his memoirs, Sakakini explains the Vagabonds' origins:

*During the early years of French rule*





*over Syria, it expelled several nationalists to Palestine. Among those was the well-known writer, Ali Nasir adDin - who joined the Sa'aleek group. When he was finally allowed to return to Damascus, he requested from the Vagabonds of Palestine to provide him with an affidavit that would allow him to represent them in Syria. We sent him our manifesto (faraman). Somehow the Vagabond's faraman fell into the hands of some journalist from [the newspaper] Falastin, which published it. When Nasir Ed Din arrived in Beirut he was arrested on the spot and expelled for the second time to the island of Irwad on the strength of the affidavit, which made him a member of the "Vagabond Party". We tried in vain to intercede on his behalf.<sup>30</sup>*

At the local level, the Vagabond Party and their so-far nameless café became public in 1921 when the Bethlehem Club wanted to honour Sakakini for his educational and literary contributions. Sakakini sent an apology on the grounds that the "by-laws of the Vagabond Party to which I have had the privilege of belonging for the past three years forbids its members from accepting any honorary citations." (He went on to say, "They insisted on celebrating my virtues, but I looked at myself in vain and could not find anything worth celebrating.")<sup>31</sup>

Sakakini's involvement with *sa'aleek* café-party did not mean that he was "above politics" as the milieu of the group may suggest, but rather that he developed two personas - one reflecting his immersion in the public struggles of the day, the other his work creating a new cultural space in late Ottoman Palestine. Of the former, we know that he belonged to one political party - the Party of Union and Progress, which promoted Ottoman de-centralization of the Arab provinces, and to which Sakakini was

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recruited by Sheikh Tawfiq Tabanja and two other Turkish officers in the autumn of 1908. His main contact in the party was Ismael Husseini. He describes, with a sense of comic relief, how he was blindfolded and swore on the Bible and a loaded pistol to "defend the nation and the constitution till death."<sup>32</sup>

The oath may have been made under duress, for two months later we see Khalil joining another group, the Society of Arab Brotherhood (*Jami'at al-Ikha' al-Arabi*), which included Musa Shafiq al-Khalidi, Nakhleh Zureik, and Feidi Afendi al-Alami (that group could also have been a local branch of Union and Progress).<sup>33</sup> He also contributed to the founding, within the same year, of the Society of Orthodox Amity (*Jam'iat al-Ikha' al-Urthodoxi*) to which he was to devote the bulk of his energies and enthusiasm in the next few years. Sakakini felt strongly about his links to the Orthodox community and the campaign to Arabize the Greek Church - a movement that had little to do with religion and much to do with wresting communal control from the Greek clerical hierarchy. "If the [Orthodox] community aims at demanding its rights from the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre today, my objective goes further. Namely to have the Brotherhood expelled from this country and cleanse the Jerusalem Seat from their corruption. My aim is bring to an end Greek [ecclesiastical] tyranny..."<sup>34</sup>

But this struggle for a new "Arabized" identity within the Orthodox community was taking place in a larger context of nationalism (which included his Muslim, and sometimes Jewish circle of acquaintances), as well as within a wider - and in many ways more profound - humanist dimension that transcended nationalism, and was eventually to triumph in Sakakini's ideational preferences. It was to this framework - exemplified in the *sa'aleek* group - that Khalil began to devote his energies.



In 1925, Sakakini published the Manifesto of the Vagabonds (*Faraman al-Sa'aleek*) containing eighteen articles and one appendix.<sup>35</sup> It was clear from its language and leanings that it reflected his philosophy of pleasure whose roots go to his early association with Farah Antoun in New York (1907-1908). He managed to synthesize within it his popular interpretation of Nietzsche's notion of power and - with a streak of the absurd - his own philosophy of hedonism.<sup>36</sup>

Initially, that philosophy, as expressed in a letter to his young child, borders on authoritarian worship of power. "The strong shall inherit the earth," Sakakini wrote from his Damascus prison. "The right of the strong is self-evident and is based on a strong mind, and a strong body." In order not to be misunderstood as a Social-Darwinist he added, "When I say that man should be powerful, I mean that he should restore himself to that inner [potential] strength that he was born with."<sup>37</sup>

But by the time he formulated his manifesto seven years later he had modified his position. It announced - obviously tongue in cheek - that "All men and women are members of this party, whether they like it or not, unless they violate its principles... The party has no president, no chair, no treasurer, and no headquarters; its members meet in the street, where all vagabonds are brothers," and, "the party does not recognize titles, and only the article of personal address are used *anta*, *antuma*, *antum*, *anti*, *antuma*, *antunna*, one for one, two for two, and plural for plural. No [to your] excellency (*janab*), no [to your] honour (*hadrat*), no patron, and no servant."<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, "Idleness is the motto of our party. The working day is made up of two hours. Every holiday, including the memory of obscure saints, is a legitimate occasion for taking time from work in order to indulge in

eating, drinking and merriment. We thus raise the doctrine of Yahya Ibn Khalid who counselled his son as follows: 'My son, do not fail to seize your fair share of idleness in this life.'"<sup>39</sup> The manifesto does not lack any basic moralizing: "Our party sees black as black, and white as white - there is no left or right, and we do not recognize people as elevated or demoted,"<sup>40</sup> and "our party is ruthless in its criticism - we do not favour a friend, nor do we compromise over what is true and just."

### "Who Will Inherit the Prince of Idleness?"

This mixture of populist egalitarianism and sardonic moralism in the party's manifesto camouflaged what was essentially a narcissistic streak in Sakakini's character, and one that was eminently suited to the emerging café culture of the new class of literati and *salariat* flaneurs in Mediterranean cultures. The culture of the public café suited Sakakini's like a glove. He expressed this narcissistic philosophy of pleasure in several-entries of his diary, which he began recording on 13 April, 1918 and continued after his return to Jerusalem:

*I have the greatest pity on those who do not experience pleasure in their daily life...I wake up from sleep having the greatest joy during my sleep; I start my exercises with a great deal of sensuality; I bathe my body and find the greatest bliss in engulfing my body in cold water; I eat as if the greatest reward comes from eating - even if it is a dry piece of bread; I smoke my arghileh and think that happiness lies in smoking; I read and write and enjoy what I have recorded; I take a walk and find great delight in walking; I sit and talk with my friends and find contentment in socializing with them. Even when I have problems I find a great enjoyment in overcoming my travails. I face catastrophes with*



*fortitudes and experience a strange satisfaction from confronting them.*<sup>41</sup>

Sakakini's enforced exile in Damascus (1917-1918) gave him ample opportunity to develop his narcissism into a philosophy of pleasure. It was also the period when his scepticism towards religion turned into an implicit atheistic stance. There is no doubt this turn in his mindset was enhanced by his conflict with the Orthodox Church and the (failed) attempt on the part of the Greek clergy to ban his betrothal to his beloved Sultana (who later did become his wife). In one significant entry in his Damascus diary, he records the following conversation with his German student, a Mr. Bern, who was a missionary:

*We are both preachers. He preached the teaching of Jesus Christ, and I preached my philosophy.*

*He asked me: Do you pray?*

*"No."*

*Do you beseech God to forgive your trespasses?*

*"No."*

*"Do you not thank God for his bounty?"*

*"No."*

*"Do you not depend on God's support?"*

*"No".*

*And with this his puzzlement increased until he was assured that my fate lies in hell indeed.*<sup>42</sup>

He derived his philosophy of pleasure from Ibn Miskawaih's medieval manuscript *Character and Morality (Tahdhib al-Akhlaq)* to whom Sakakini attributed the notion that "Sorrow is neither necessary nor natural. We should immerse ourselves in life and cherish it by celebrating our nights... We should indulge in music and singing. If disasters come our way we should receive them courageously and prevent grief from consuming us."<sup>43</sup> From this philosophy of pleasure Khalil created a code of conduct that

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involved a rigorous regime of play (exercise for one hour every morning), cold showers (twice a day), diet (vegetarian), sleep (long siestas after the midday meal), and socializing in public places. Above all, Sakakini advocated a systematic attitude towards leisure.

*The old conventions stipulated a day of rest per week, regulating work for the rest of the days. I say: one day is not enough. At the minimum we need two days a week, to which we must add a third day once a month. Furthermore any kind of employment requires three periods of rest: two weeks at the beginning of the year; two weeks at the end of spring; two and a half months in the summer... Work days should be no more than four hours a day, workers should take a ten minute break every working hour, as in the new school system.*<sup>44</sup>

And, instead of religious pilgrimage, Sakakini advocated tourism: "Go to the nearest port and take a trip to a new land, this will give you health and revive your youth, and enhance your knowledge."<sup>45</sup>

In Damascus, Sakakini had the opportunity to live his philosophy in the company of Jerusalem exiles. On 10 January 1918, he was released on bail by order of Jamal Pasha (the Younger), and found lodgings in the Qasaa neighbourhood while Emir Faisal's army was advancing on the city from the south. Sakakini's company included Musa Alami, Tawfiq Jawhariyyeh (Wasif's brother, who was serving in the Ottoman army), Ahmad Sameh al-Khalidi, Rustum Bey Haidar, Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, and his teacher Nakhleh Zureik. The arrival of the Arab army, and the liberation of Damascus did not stop Sakakini from having an active social life. His diary narrates daily visits to cafés on the Barada, with those friends, or in the company of two neighbourhood ladies he befriended, Afifa





Entrance to Vagabond Café at Jaffa Gate, 2003. Today the café has reverted to its old name, *Qahwat al-Mukhtar*.  
Source: Author.

and Malaka. In the evening they would take strolls towards these cafés (his favourite was Café al-Kamal in Rabweh, where they would dance and sing - mostly in the company of Musa al-Alami.<sup>46</sup>

The Vagabond Café had a short life during the Mandate years. Literary cafés were rare in Jerusalem, as well as in Palestine. In his discussion of coffeehouses in Nablus in 1907-1914, Muhammad Izzat Darwazeh noted that, despite their profusion, they were mostly popular hangouts for men who smoked *arghileh*, played cards and dominoes, and drank coffee and tea. More elaborate socializing took place in the neighbourhood *diwans*, the site of storytelling and political debates.<sup>47</sup> As in Jerusalem, some Nablus coffeehouses held *Kara Koz* shadowplays for

adults, and Magic Boxes (*sandūq al-ʿajab*) for children.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Beirut, Damascus, and Cairene literary cafés where intellectual debates flourished and belonged to competing circles, Palestinian cafés were overtaken by cultural and confessional clubs during the Mandate. The Vagabond Café was therefore a striking exception in a provincial capital like Jerusalem. Its appearance and decline can be attributed primarily to the magnetic personality of Khalil Sakakini and his ability to create a new cultural space (as he did with his radical schooling system) out of sheer energy and determination.

In 1926, Sakakini resumed his position as inspector general for education in Palestine. During the tenure of Herbert Samuel he had refused to serve in public office in protest of



Samuel's partisanship towards the Zionists. Now the demands of his new job meant that he had to dissociate himself from the Vagabond Party and his visits to the Mukhtar's Café became rare. On that occasion he wrote to a friend in Egypt lamenting the end of his "age of idleness" ("asr al-batalah").

*Tomorrow is my last day with the age of idleness, and what a magnificent period it was. Tomorrow the Vagabond Café will be deserted. Our fabulous sessions will meet no more. The Brotherhood of Amity (ikhwan al-safa) will seek me and not find me. 'Til today I have never left my home without spending a [substantial time] in bathing, playing, reading, writing, singing, and smoking. From today on, I will leave in black [attire], going straight to work, greeting nobody on the way.*

*Who will inherit me as the champion of idleness in [Palestine]?<sup>49</sup>*

But the demise of the Vagabond Café was not related exclusively to the departure of the "prince of idleness." There were other factors involved. In the 1920s, most newspapers and journals moved either to Jaffa or Haifa. The Jerusalem intelligentsia became heavily involved in nationalist politics in the newly formed parties, or in the municipal politics of the city. Café culture continued to flourish, but mostly as social centres alone, rather than the domain of literary societies.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kadha Ana Ya Dunya: *The Diaries of Khalil al-Sakakini*, edited by Hala Sakakini (Jerusalem: Commercial-Press, 1954) 37. I would like to thank Rema Hammami and Penny Johnson for their helpful comments on the draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Hattox, Ralph. *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social-Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985) 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>4</sup> Shmais, Abdel Mun'im. *Qahawi al-Adab wal-Fann fil Qahira* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1991) 9. See also Hattox, 29-45.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of how those cafés evolved in Beirut, see Shawqi Dweih and Muhammad Abu Samra, "Maqahi Beirut Bayna mahattat al-Naql al-3am wa dumu3 al-Muthaqafeen" ("Beirut's Cafés: From Public Transport Stations to the Tears of Intellectuals"), *AnNahar Cultural-Supplement*, 4 April, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Dweih, Jabbur. "Al-Maqaha al-Adabiyyah" ("Literary Cafés"), *AnNahar Literary Supplement*, 4 April, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Deborah Bernstein, "Contested Contact: Proximity and Social-Control", unpublished paper delivered at a conference on "Mixed Towns", Van Leer Institute (Jerusalem: 13 June, 2003). I would like to thank Deborah Bernstein for allowing me to quote from her paper here.

<sup>9</sup> Hanssen, Jens. "Public Morality and Marginality in Fin-de-siecle Beirut," in Eugene Rogan, ed., *Outside In: On the Margins of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 190-191).

<sup>10</sup> Hattox.

<sup>11</sup> Shmais, Abdel Mun'im. *Qahawi al-Adab wal-Fann fil Qahira* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1991) 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 102-106.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 107-109.

<sup>16</sup> Ayalon, Ami, *Reading Palestine: Texts and Audience 1900-1948*, forthcoming. See also his "Modern Texts and their Readers in Late Ottoman Palestine" *Middle East Studies*, Vol. 39, No.4 (October 2002) 17-40.

<sup>17</sup> Dwiehi, J.. o cit. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ayalon.

<sup>19</sup> See Wasif Jawharieh, *Al-Quds al-'Uthmaniyyeh* Volume One (Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 77

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>23</sup> Tamari, Salim. "Jerusalem's Ottoman Modernity," *Jerusalem Quarterly File 9* (Jerusalem: IJS, Summer 2000) 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> Sidqi, Najati. *Mudhakkarat Najati Sidqi*, edited by Hanna Abu Hanna (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 2002) 19.

<sup>25</sup> Tubbeh, Jamil Issa. *Day of the Long Night: A Palestin-*



*ian Refugee Remembers the Nakba* (McFarland and Company, 1998) 35.

<sup>26</sup> Haddad, Yusif Adib. *Khalil Sakakini: Hayatuhu wa Atharuhu* (Nazareth: 1985) 68.

<sup>27</sup> Listed in Jawharieh o cit., (Jerusalem, 2003) appendix 6, 265.

<sup>28</sup> Qandalaft, Ibrahim. "Ta'ala ma3i ila Muqha al-Sa'aleed" ("Come with me to the Vagabond Café"), *al-Bilad* (30 October, 1960).

<sup>29</sup> Haddad, Adib. o cit., 68.

<sup>30</sup> Sakakini, Khalil. *Tayassar*, Vol. 1, 184.

<sup>31</sup> Haddad, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Sakakini, *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya*, 43; on his relationship with Ismael Hussein and the party see entry for 14 November, 1908, 46-47.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 39-40.

<sup>35</sup> Khalil Sakakini, *Faraman al-Sa'aleek* (Jerusalem: 7 July, 1925), published in *Ma Tayassar* (Jerusalem: 1943) 84. Sakakini refers here to the rejection of pluralized forms of address for high status people, both in forms of address and other references of deferential. Not calling people by their titles and addressing them as "you" in the singular must have been quite revolutionary.

<sup>36</sup> During his imprisonment in Damascus, Sakakini expounded on this philosophy of power in a letter he wrote (but never sent) to his newborn child Sari. "Power! Power is the message we must preach. Some say that power is derived from justice, and some say that justice belongs to those who are powerful. With a little contemplation we find that justice belongs to those who are powerful, meaning that those who acquire strength in mind and body, are more worthy to exist than those who are weak in body and mind. The right of the powerful is evident and is based on the soundness of body and soul and principles. By contrast the right of the weak is dubious since it is based on a weak mind and degenerate principles, and a weak body...I want Sari to absorb this philosophy and to be strong in his body and soul." *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya* (24 November, 1917) 116-117.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>38</sup> Khalil Sakakini, *Faraman al-Sa'aleek* (Jerusalem: 7 July, 1925), published in *Ma Tayassar* (Jerusalem: 1943) 85.

<sup>39</sup> *Ma Tayassar*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya*, 141.

<sup>41</sup> *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya* (20 June, 1918) 153-154.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>43</sup> *Kadha Ana Ya Dunya*, 14 April, 1918, 142-144.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 142, 151 .

<sup>46</sup> Darwazeh, Muhammad Izat. *Memoirs*, Volume One (Beirut: 1993) 106-107.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 108. Magic Boxes were rectangular wooden boxes enclosing a hand-operated cylindrical film and lens, which the audience, mostly children, would view from portable chairs. The narrator (*hakawati*) would tell the story of the moving pictures as the children followed the scrolling cartoons through the viewer.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Haddad, o cit. , 71.