

HENRI CURIEL I

by MITCHELL ABIDOR

In 1976 the name of Henri Curiel was spectacularly brought to the attention of the French public: a cover article in the popular right-wing newsweekly, *Le Point*, characterized him as "the boss of the terrorist support networks", the man behind groups as diverse as the German Red Army Faction and Rakach. Two years later, in the heated atmosphere of the second half of Giscard's final term, he was again front page news: a right-wing commando had assassinated him, a result, it is assumed, of hatred festering since the earlier article. In 1984 he returned to celebrity status, this time as the subject of a best-selling biography, Gilles Perrault's *Un Homme A Part*, recently translated into English as *A Man Apart* and published by Zed Press in England, distributed in the U.S. by Humanities Press International of Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey.

Henri Curiel was born in Cairo in September 1914, the scion of a wealthy Sephardic family which, under the system of concessions then in place in Egypt, had taken Italian citizenship. Curiel had no formal attachments to the Jewish community, but in the network of comrades he worked with throughout his life, in the way he was viewed by others, and in the constant concern he felt for the Middle East, there can be no doubt as to the importance that being Jewish played in his development. Being a Jew, and raised as a European, he was set apart from his surroundings and liberated from the constraints placed upon Arabic-speaking Egyptian Moslems and Jews. Ideas which did not reach the Egyptian masses until much later (often with Curiel's aid) were made available to him in the European schools he attended in Cairo. What is more, his circle, from which the Egyptian Left was to develop, was almost entirely Jewish and "European", and men with names like Marcel Israel and Hillel Schwartz were to lay the groundwork for Egyptian communism.

After a privileged youth, Curiel joined various Popular Front-type groups of the 1930's and later opened a left-wing bookstore, which was to play a crucial role in the dissemination of Marxist thought in Egypt and the Middle East. Aided by the non-existence of an Egyptian Communist Party, Curiel developed his own line of action during World War II; he insisted that the Left avoid any connection with the British who, as occupiers of Egyptian soil, were hated by the Egyptian masses. Curiel understood that this hatred, and the concomitant sympathy for the Nazis, had less to do with belief in Germanic superiority and support for corporatist ideology, than with the sharing of a common enemy with the Reich.

Understanding the people's feelings does not mean he shared them; when Rommel was at Cairo's gates, Curiel began to plan an organized resistance movement. The Afrika Korps was defeated, but Curiel was arrested anyway. Egyptian security forces,

acting independently of the British, wanted to have a Jewish Communist ready to hand over to the Desert Fox.

In jail Curiel shared his cell with pro-Nazi Moslems. For Curiel they were not lost to the good cause; as Perrault defines it, Curiel's political credo was: "In order for people to change their opinions, you must not impose your own ideas but take off from theirs". In keeping with this, Curiel participated in a hunger strike in support of his fellow-prisoners' right to elect a pro-Nazi delegate to deal with the prison administration. Then, in an effort to be with the people in everything, he joined them in their Ramadan fast and, for a brief while, for political reasons, even considered conversion to Islam.

After his release from prison, Curiel and his friends established the Egyptian National Liberation Movement. The time had come to reach beyond their narrow Jewish intellectual circles and involve the Egyptian working class. Curiel's group contacted workers and soldiers and brought the most promising to a clandestine school for cadres on the Curiel family estate outside Cairo.

In 1946 his efforts bore their first fruits. Popular rage against continued British occupation was mounting. Demonstrations and strikes broke out, with the Egyptian National Liberation Movement and its fellow pro-Communist groups (with names like Iskra, Liberation of the People, and New Dawn) leading the people. After a month of bitter struggle, the British announced their evacuation of the Nile Valley and their retreat to the Suez.

The major left-wing groups attempted to unify, but their organization collapsed at just about the time the first war with Israel broke out. On the question of Israel, Curiel had no doubt as to the correct position: the Soviets had come out in support of Israel's (and Palestine's) existence, and that alone would have been sufficient reason to oppose the war. The Egyptian Left was anti-Zionist (Marcel Israel had founded the Anti-Zionist League in response to

Cairo's Zionist organizations), but for Curiel the issue went beyond this. He considered the war a fraud, fomented by the ruling class to distract the workers from their real struggles, those against the King and the British. Curiel's acceptance of the Soviet position was neither dishonest nor cynical. Until his death, and especially so in the last years of his life, Curiel was to work actively for Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

Curiel once again paid for his beliefs with imprisonment, this time in the concentration camp in Huckstep. At war's end, as a condition of the armistice, Egypt agreed to release all those imprisoned because of the war. Curiel refused release from prison under such terms, feeling it would render further political action in Egypt impossible. In 1950 he was released and deported to Italy.

Curiel and his handful of Jewish comrades had not succeeded in all they had set out to do, but they had accomplished the essential. Men who had learned from Curiel were to be found in the Free Officers Movement, which overthrew King Farouk in 1952 and, remaining behind after Curiel's comrades left Egypt, were Arabs who were to form the Egyptian Communist Party and its spin-offs.

After a brief sojourn in Italy, Curiel passed illegally into France, but Egypt remained his sole concern. Although Curiel saw himself as the most faithful and orthodox of pro-Soviet Communists, he swam against the Communist stream and supported Nasser's coup, refusing the Communist characterization of the coup as an "imperialist plot". When the new Egyptian regime began jailing Communists (partly as a result of Communist hostility), Curiel temporarily adopted an anti-Nasser attitude, but only temporarily: in 1956 he delivered the Anglo-French invasion plans to the Egyptians. The plans, according to Perrault, were circulating openly in Parisian diplomatic circles. Curiel managed to obtain a copy and pass them to a former collaborator of Nasser who then sent them on to Egypt. Nasser subsequently admitted having the plans of the invasion nearly three weeks before it had begun, but hadn't believed in their veracity. Curiel himself, wanting desperately to return to his homeland and unable to do so legally, considered joining the Anglo-French expeditionary force as a means of entering the country, but was dissuaded from doing so.

Perrault says that this "stateless Jew [was] one of the great citizens of the Third World", and that the period 1957-1978 provides ample support for this statement. It was only in 1957 that Curiel entered non-Egyptian politics, and in the most courageous of fashions: he participated, and eventually led, the French network which aided the

Algerian F.L.N. in its war against France, the innocently named *porteurs de valises*, valise carriers.

Again going against the Party line, which was not militantly anti-war until relatively late, (only the marginal Parti Socialiste Unifié was consistently opposed to the war) Curiel and other *porteurs* rendered invaluable service to the F.L.N., carrying in their valises propaganda and money, operating clandestine printing presses, aiding French deserters, and hiding and transporting leaders of the F.L.N.

The *porteurs* were a mix of anarchists, Trotskyists, existentialists, and communists. As a result of this mixture, this lack of a common political language between "Stalinists" like Curiel, and those such as Sartrean *Temps Modernes* editor Francis Jeanson, a certain personal ugliness mars the history of the network. But in spite of this, the history of the network is an exalting one, of men and women willing to put their careers and their lives on the line in order to contribute to the ending of French colonial rule in Algeria. For this Curiel once again spent time in jail, from October 1960 through May 1962.

Curiel saw resistance to the war not only as a fight against the French, but as a golden opportunity for Israel to achieve friendship with its neighbors. Curiel suggested to Uri Avneri that Israeli aid be given to the F.L.N. in the hopes of showing the Arab nations that Israel, far from being an ally of imperialism, was at their side in the fight against it. An Israeli Committee for Free Algeria was formed, its members including Avneri, Nathan Yalin-Mor, Amos Kenan, and Maxim Ghilan. Avneri wrote in *Haolam Hazeq*: "Curiel asked the Algerian leaders in what way we could aid them. When they learned that members of our Committee were members of the Stern Gang they leapt at the occasion. They sent us a message requesting that we send a group of instructors in chemical and electrical sabotage to F.L.N. training camps in Tunisia and Yugoslavia...The Israeli Government opposed it, and we didn't have any volunteers."

Once victory was achieved in Algeria and he was released from prison, Curiel decided to expand his field of activity. Continuing the work of the *porteurs de valises* the clandestine group Solidarite was founded, one purpose of which was to provide aid to liberation movements all over the world. The aid was not in the form of guns, however, but rather in the formation of cadres in key areas such as the fabrication of false papers, mapmaking, coding, sabotage, and the handling of arms.

Solidarite did not attempt to impose ideas on any of the groups it assisted; indeed, the refusal of any form of dogmatism was a key element in its success: three different groups from the Dominican Republic received aid and instruction from Solidarite, and Curiel insisted on the group's obligation to provide aid to a group of Spanish Maoists. Curiel's lack of

dogmatism at times reached nearly absurd levels: Curiel wanted to provide aid to Holden Roberto's C.I.A.-backed UNITA in Angola. As far as Curiel was concerned, liberation was good in and of itself, even if it came as a result of American aid. Living in France he remained an Egyptian, a Third World citizen for whom liberation from colonial and neo-colonial rule were the dominant thoughts.

If aid was not tied to dogma, it was not indiscriminate. The Basque E.T.A. received aid until the time it moved on to armed struggle, as did the Quebecois F.L.Q. Both groups were supported while their aims were mass and political; Curiel judged armed struggle in these instances inopportune and cut off aid when it was begun.

Curiel, although forever rejected by the Communists (the Cubans and Soviets, even after his death, considered him an agent of the French secret service) loudly insisted on his loyalty to Moscow and wanted desperately to be accepted by the Soviets. As Perrault says: "Had Curiel been born ten years earlier he would have been one of the Comintern's travelling salesmen of revolution". But Curiel was born too late and, for the Soviets, he was a kind of bad conscience, the last avatar of an era long dead.

After a series of splits caused by personal, political (many Solidarite supporters found Curiel's pro-Soviet line untenable), and generational conflicts, (the veterans of May 1968 found the old-timers old hat), Solidarite was rebaptized Aide et Amitie, and the war against fascism and colonialism continued.

Africa was crucial to Curiel, and he provided much aid to South Africa's African National Congress. In the early and mid-1970's he participated in the audacious plan of setting up a white anti-apartheid organization under the leadership of the Afrikaaner writer Breyten Breytenbach.

Breytenbach received Curiel's unstinting attention, but Curiel made a serious error: Breytenbach was a writer, not a political activist, and he failed dismally in the latter role. Arrested in July 1975 during a foolhardy trip to South Africa, he proved to be a cooperative defendant and an even more amenable prisoner. Breytenbach, to the dismay of his supporters, was to prove no Dimitrov at the Reichstag Fire trial.

The last years of Curiel's life were dedicated to the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peace, as he brought together doves from both sides, including Matityahu Peled, Uri Avneri, and Issam Sartawi. The dismal failure of a 1973 meeting between Israelis and Arabs in Bologna, a meeting Curiel had spent two years arranging, did not deter him. Further meetings between representatives of both sides were set up,

including eight meetings between Israeli doves and P.L.O. representatives between September 1976 and March 1977. Conferences were held, articles were published. Failure followed failure, but Curiel carried on.

In 1956, he had ghost-written for Youssef Helmy, secretary of the Egyptian Peace Movement, a call for common action by Israelis and Arabs against the war-mongers in both camps. Proof of the consistency and sincerity of his beliefs on the Middle East can be found in the posthumous collection entitled *For A Just Peace in the Middle East*. Here he spelled his beliefs out clearly: "Our point of departure is the sacred and inalienable right of national collectivities to national existence. We thus recognize the right of the Jews of Israel to a national existence, but this right must, *a fortiori*, be recognized for the Arabs of Palestine...[I]n defending the rights of the Palestinian Arabs, we are struggling, in the first instance, for a just cause. But we also thus create the most favorable conditions for the recognition by the Arabs of the legitimate rights of Israeli Jews...In order to arrive at such a solution it is necessary that an alliance be established between the forces of progress [on both sides], who must coordinate their efforts against the reactionary forces of the two camps and their common ally, American imperialism."

And then, on May 4, 1978, a commando group calling itself Delta shot him down as he stepped out of his elevator. It is possible that Delta acted for South Africa's BOSS, for the Mossad, or for Abu Nidal. Or they could have been French fascists operating on their own; a year and a half later the left-wing Jewish writer Pierre Goldman was gunned down on the streets of Paris by a similarly mysterious group. Curiel had, in a lifetime of revolutionary activity, won the hatred of many.

In all, Curiel's failures were perhaps as numerous as his successes; the liberation movements of Latin America failed to overthrow their dictatorships, apartheid is still in place, and Israeli-Palestinian friendship is still a chimera. But his successes were real: Mozambique, Angola, Algeria and Greece are now free, and Curiel's role in their struggles was far from negligible. And in a politics which aims as high and far as Curiel's did, even one success would suffice to make his career worthwhile. Perrault says that Curiel's objective was "to break out of the sectarian shell in order to open onto mass action". The European masses never joined him in his work, but for those of the Third World who did, Curiel was, over the course of a generation, the custodian of the European conscience.

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