

HENRI CURIEL II

by MAXIM GHILAN

The Henri Curiel I knew was a completely different kind of Jew from the paradigms known in the American Jewish community. His roots were, by order of priority: revolutionary, Egyptian, Jewish, Communist, banking, business, scholarly. With such a mixture and with a keen intelligence and ruthless determination, there is little wonder that Curiel was wildly loved and admired by his comrades and allies, as well as hated by his class, national and racist enemies. Curiel became a target for all haters of action, for all the enemies of the "outsiders" of our world, as well as for the more conventional anti-Semites, racists, anti-Arab bigots and anti-

Communist fanatics of the Right.

Born in Cairo on September 13, 1914, the son of a wealthy Jewish banker of Italian origin, Curiel founded one of the first Communist-Egyptian groups, the Egyptian National Liberation Movement, or M.E.L.N. Through this small group, he organized aid during World War II to German and Italian anti-fascists in semi-colonial Egypt. At the same time he helped revolutionaries serving with the Allied forces in Cairo and, most particularly, anti-British Empire left-wingers. At this stage of his life, that is to say in his late twenties and early thirties, Curiel broke with the wealthy and sheltered tradition of his father's home to become a young revolutionary, an outsider even among the outsiders of the mid-1940's, who composed the non-native society of Cairo and the summer capital of Egypt, Alexandria.

A particularly interesting chapter of his activities was his dedication to the insurrectionist left-wing Greek underground in Egypt working against the Nazis. He helped organize a strike among Greek volunteers when the British, keen to restore a Greek monarchy after the war and destroy the communist influence there, wanted to send the Greek volunteers to fight in Italy rather than to return to their own country as part of the liberating units.

A fighter for a just solution to the problems of Sudan, Curiel opposed the "unity of the Nile countries", which would have meant control of Sudan by the Egyptian (and British) ruling elite.

In 1950, King Farouk illegally expelled 37-year-old Egyptian subject Henri Curiel, who had matured to become an efficient revolutionary and a believing Communist. These were the times of the aftermath of the Comintern, the Communist International, which though directed from Moscow, was also a confederation of national revolutionary movements. In the secret life of this activity, Curiel remained a Communist, aligned with Moscow's Stalinist party. However, he also managed to remain something else, something much less usual among those of his brotherhood: a true maverick and a true

humanist, able and willing to give his all for those who have nothing, whether an individual or an entire people.

In 1950 Curiel reached Italy and then France, where he lived, at first, as an illegal immigrant and activist. Some of the Jewish members of his group left Egypt or were also expelled and settled, like him, in France. With them he would set up what later became known as the "Curiel network" (*Le Réseau Curiel*), part of the "Suitcase Carriers" (*Les Porteurs de Valises*). These were a group of French and France-based Europeans who helped the Algerian national revolution and most particularly the N.L.F., which collected arms and money from Algerian migrants working in France. The Curiel network took the money to Switzerland and carried arms from one hideout to another. It also started networking with a number of individuals and organizations active in national liberation movements throughout the Third World, including Arabs.

Caught by the French secret police, Curiel went to jail for a long period where, for a while, he was able to put aside pure action in favor of introspective thinking, studying, and writing. It was during this time in jail, I believe, that Curiel made his peace with his father, and changed from a person always drawn to the most clandestine and revolutionary action into a leader able to decide the best and wisest way to fight for justice, peace and national liberation in the Third World.

Curiel was finally set free, thanks to his good contacts among the French elite; some of his relatives and friends in (then) French-speaking Cairo had moved to France while others had lived all their lives in Paris. He obtained a work permit and worked with the Jewish French publisher Nathan, mostly editing schoolbooks.

Soon he set up a new half-clandestine organization, *Solidarite*, whose task was to help a number of liberation movements in South Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Among others, *Solidarite* helped South African white anti-apartheid activist

Breyten Breytenbach return to his country from European exile; but a mistake occurred and he was jailed by the Pretoria regime.

During this period Curiel's communist internationalism and anti-father-born individualism underwent a change. From a "pure" Marxist, he became a Third World revolutionary. From a man of Jewish origins he became an atheist, revolutionary, and self-assured Jew.

This change, together with his basic Egyptian-Jewish origins, turned Curiel's attention more and more toward the Middle East conflict. Far from rejoicing about this, the French Communist Party, at that time one of the most doctrinaire and Stalinist in the Western world, was hostile to Curiel's and Solidarite's work, as was the ruling faction of the Soviet establishment in Moscow. Only a few internationalists inside the U.S.S.R. were friendly to his ideas. The Italian Communist Party (soon to become the mother of Euro-Communism) helped him: Palmiro Togliatti, the legendary Italian communist leader, was, after all, one of those who helped create both the Israeli and the Egyptian Communist outfits. Nonetheless, the Western and principally American and French secret services, and the French extreme right, branded Curiel an "agent of the K.G.B." This would also be the pretext of his murderers, who killed him for probably quite different reasons, and who, in any case, knew better.

Among the Third World elements contacted by Solidarite were, of course, the Palestinians. Curiel opposed the theories and actions of the purported Marxist-Leninists of the P.F.L.P.'s George Habash and Wadyah Haddad and even of the D.F.L.P.'s Nayef Hawatmeh. He kept close links with the Arab — and particularly Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian and Lebanese — Communists. More surprisingly, he began weaving links not only with leaders of Sheli and later on of the Progressive List for Peace, but also with Zionist left-wingers of Mapam, which during this period still sported a Marxist brand of Zionism, and even with the mainstream Israeli establishment.

On April 11, 1964, Curiel wrote a letter to *Le Monde*, the prestigious Parisian daily: "Allow a Jew, born in the Middle East, where he has lived for 40 years (NB: 37, actually), to try and give this drama its real meaning. Actually the problem is not to know whether the Arab Palestinians, who left the war area in 1948, did or did not have reason to fear for their lives, whether they left of their own free will or were incited by the leaders of other Arab countries. That certain Arab governments exploit (or not) this problem, that the refugees may or may not become economically integrated into the other Arab countries — these are after all secondary questions.

"The right of the refugees to return or to obtain

indemnity has been expressed, without ambiguity, by the United Nations since December 11, 1948, reaffirmed solemnly only a few months ago by the General Assembly. One cannot compare the fate of Palestinian refugees to that of, for example, the Bulgarians in Greece or Greeks transplanted in Bulgaria. It is not possible to proceed to the 'repatriation' of a Palestinian to Egypt, to Lebanon or to Iraq — no more than it would be possible to repatriate a Belgian to France. Born in Palestine, his right is not just sacred, it is also something that cannot be abolished, neither for him nor for his children.

"The real problem is that of the very existence of the Palestinian Arab nation. To recognize the existence of this problem, to try and resolve it, is the best way to preserve peace in the Middle East."

In 1971 Curiel wrote in an internal document: "We shall keep a precise evaluation of the peaceful forces inside Israel for our next research, but it would be really dangerous to deal with them contemptuously or to underestimate these forces. They constitute the nucleus of Israel's transformation into a peaceful country. They are also more and more acknowledged internationally...." Curiel then mentioned as these peace forces: Rekakh, the Israeli Communist Party; the New Force (Koakh Khaadash), party of Uri Avneri and Shalom Cohen; the Israeli New left, which broke with Mapam; and Movement for Peace and Security, an intellectuals' group close to Mapam and to Labor doves.

In that same document Curiel wrote: "Speaking of peace and a 'political solution of the crisis' — a different vision of this exists in Egypt and Israel...In Egypt it is thought that everything will be settled by returning to the *status quo ante* (the situation before) the 5th of June 1967. On the Israeli side, this cannot be even considered. It is necessary to understand that, for over twenty years, the Israeli masses lived in the fear of annihilation, a fear which a delirious Arab propaganda has continued to feed and which certain statements by Arab leaders often confirmed... The Israeli masses would only renounce the occupied territories against *real* peace and a *real* security...The Israeli masses will give up 'security borders' only if they are no longer necessary due to *real* peace conditions between them and their Arab neighbors. The Israeli masses will only then start moving and impose 'another way' on their government.

Curiel added: "...Obviously, we do not make acceptance of our proposals a condition for our collaboration. It will be based on the principle: the inalienable right of Egypt and the other Arab countries to the integrity of their territories as of the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian Arabs".

This writer met with Henri Curiel and his friends repeatedly, from 1971 until 1975, when

Curiel was assassinated in the elevator of a building in the bohemian Fifth *Arrondissement* (district) of Paris, where he lived with his wife.

Being neither a Communist nor a Marxist, nor particularly sympathetic to compulsively clandestine activity, I was outside the circles of the "Curiel network". But we, the people later to found the International Jewish Peace Union (I.J.P.U.), and particularly the editors, backers and publishers of *Israel and Palestine*, were doing work not dissimilar to some of Curiel's Middle East activities: motivating Jews and Arabs, Palestinians and Europeans, Americans and Israelis, in order to establish contacts between the warring sides and to build confidence, on both sides, assuring both of the friendliness of those who stuck their necks out and started talking to their enemies.

I am fond of saying that our political report, *Israel and Palestine*, started its work by sending "messages to planet Mars — and that one day Mars responded". Sayeed Hammami, then P.L.O. representative in London, had written us a letter which we published — staggering even in the early 1970's, when "talking to the Israelis" was banned and extremely dangerous.

Curiel then arranged for a meeting at Hammami's home. On the same day, Shalom Cohen, secretary general of the (Oriental Jewish) Israeli Black Panthers, and I visited Hammami - but separately. For Shalom Cohen, it was the first meeting with Israelis who were not anti-Zionist revolutionaries. Of course he had met with then-Marxist revolutionaries, such as Ilan Halevy (later to adhere to Fatah and become the P.L.O.'s observer to the Socialist International), Moshe Mahover, Akiva Orr, the late Elie Lobel (who became assistant treasury minister of Mali before committing suicide in Paris out of political and personal heartbreak), and Haim Hanegbi, who went on to become Parliamentary Secretary to Knesset members Matty Peled and Muhammed Miari of the Progressives.

The meeting I had with Hammami opened another chapter of *Israel and Palestine's* and my own work. Thanks to that meeting I was able to really bridge some gaps between Israelis and Palestinians. Even more important, I was able to become a friend to both sides, advising them how to refrain from falling into the obvious pitfalls of mutual fear and misunderstanding.

Later on I was to meet, (through French politician and anti-Nazi fighter Claude Bourdet and his wife Ida), Issam Sartawi and Ghazi Khoury, who became the main P.L.O. conduit for talking to Israelis and Jews. For their pains, both Sayeed Hammami and Issam Sartawi were assassinated by Arab extremists close to Abu Nidal. Ghazi Khoury died later on of a natural illness aggravated by stress and

the need to constantly escape murder attempts.

The day I saw Curiel for the last time was five days before he was killed. We met in a typical cafe of the Fifth *Arrondissement*. Henri told me he was starting a new initiative linking Israeli peace camp personalities and P.L.O. leaders. He asked whether I was willing to help. I agreed.

As it happens, I was already keeping my own links open to the other side through Issam Sartawi and Ghazi Khoury. I met them at another cafe on the Boulevard Saint Germain on the Saturday morning Henri would be killed. They did not tell me, but after his death we compared notes and discovered that Curiel had wanted to introduce me, among others, to themselves.

Earlier that Saturday afternoon, while going down in his elevator, Curiel was shot and killed by a heavy French Army handgun. The two assassins escaped. An inquest by his friends, and another by French security, evinced unconfirmed reports that Curiel had actually been shot by a Spanish Franco-oriented fascist, hosted by French pro-Nazi rightwingers. A contract on his life was said to have been jointly issued by the Israeli Mossad and BOSS, the South African Secret Service.

When Henri Curiel's coffin was carried to his grave in the historical Pere Lachaise cemetery of Paris (where nowadays only famous men and women or owners of family tombs are buried), the several hundred mourners sang the left-wing anthem, *The Internationale*. But among them you could see right-wing French government members, High Court magistrates, intellectuals, writers, army officers, publishers and actors, Jews and Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians, and, of course, Egyptians. A wreath was brought and speeches made by the Ambassador of Algeria (a country which had meanwhile obtained its independence), by members of the erstwhile "Curiel network", and by members of the French Communist Party, which, after having spurned Curiel for so long, insisted on his ideological closeness to their party.

Sartawi, then still alive, also sent a wreath. He could not come, as he was threatened even then by many groups, including those who later killed him.

After Curiel's death his network, led mostly by aging revolutionaries, shrank and became far more innocuous. It turned into a normal, somewhat staid but quite active non-profit association called "*Palestine et Israel Vivront*" (Palestine and Israel Will Live), playing a role in contacts between the P.L.O. moderates and the Israeli peace camp.

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