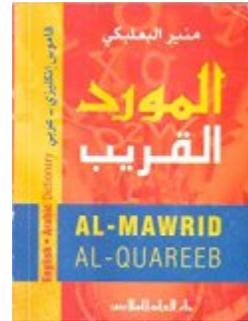


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Salim Tamari, Issam Nassar, eds. *Al-Quds al-uthmaniyya fi al-mudhakkirat al-jawhariyya: al-Kitab al-awwal min mudhakkirat al-musiqi Wasif Jawhariyya, 1904-1917*. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 2003. xxxvi + 273 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-9953-9020-2-9.

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## Private Life as Historical Center

Wasif Jawhariyya (1898-1973) was a civil servant, amateur musician, and native of Jerusalem whose extraordinary exertions in writing a memoir of his life and times produced a text that offers not only the proverbial gold mine for historians but also an amazing and utterly entertaining read.[1] In an introductory passage, the author notes that his civil service work entailed entering people's homes; and his passion for and performance of music put him into varied company, giving him ample material for this closely observant, lively, and often funny memoir. More important, he had a flair for description and anecdote, and a style that unabashedly moved from the "literary" register of *fusha* to the colloquial reproduction of dialogue, song, and proverb, producing a text that is riveting: rich, funny, moving, colorful, and ever so slightly risqu.

The editors and publishers of this volume (and hopefully of its successors) have done a superb job of presentation, both in the physical format and in academic apparatus and conception. Beautifully printed in a large-format but affordable paperback volume, the text is prefaced by two editors' introductions, interspersed with many photographs drawn from the family archives and those of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, and accompanied by judicious explanatory notes as well as several appendices giving information on personalities, events, prices at the time, and the like. It is fascinating to read, in Issam Nassar's introduction, that Wasif Jawhariyya produced

not only three volumes of memoirs covering a span of 64 years, but also that he put together seven albums of photographs and a manuscript of song lyrics. Nassar suggests that the photographs were in effect a contextual public history (perhaps the first pictorial history of Palestine) for the more intimate history that the memoir provides. Wasif's project overall, then, seems to reverse the usual expectation. Photographs are the public record, which the text "illustrates"; yet by positioning the text as "private" world and photographs as the public record, the written memoir of family life becomes the historical center.

For music historians (which I am not), this text should be extremely useful, as the record not of a famous professional but of an amateur musician clearly passionate about his craft, who collected and learned songs from the peasants of Palestine as well as from the best known musicians of the day. His father, also a music lover, encouraged Wasif's musical interests, getting him tutors and helping him to buy instruments, while also insisting on a formal education that would make possible his employment in the Ottoman (and later, British-run) civil service. The author devotes many pages to his acquisition of musical training and of the instruments that he yearned to own and play. He details his acquaintance with famous and less famous musicians of the time, as well as his delight with the phonograph, which first came to Jerusalem in his boyhood. He reproduces several songs, and men-

tions many more, as well as recounting in great detail the venues in which he and his friends played and sang many a night away.

For historians of the city, as well, and for art and architecture scholars, this volume should prove of interest. The architecture of Ottoman Jerusalem as living space receives close attention; in fact, after a brief genealogy of his immediate family, the narrator begins his chronicle with a detailed description of the old family home, not only its rooms but its furnishings, and the daily patterns of living recalled from his childhood. This home in Harat al-Sa'diyya is the memoir's theater of events; and as the narrator takes us up each flight of stairs, as it were, and onto the roof, the view over old Jerusalem seems to take on symbolic significance, representing this private history as a window on the public political history of Palestine during the late Ottoman period. Family ways, integrated closely into this description of space, become central to that public history: Jerusalem is mapped from atop the family dwelling. Later, describing wartime Jerusalem and Jericho, Wasif Jawhariyya again historicizes that moment by recalling the spaces of family survival: the sister who had come from America with her children for a visit and was forced to stay through the entire war, crowding into the home of her sister-in-law whose husband was in hiding, both families utterly vulnerable to poverty and disease. Or, another sister, stricken with typhus, alone since her husband had been drafted into the Ottoman army, taken to a hospital by a panicked brother (the narrator). On the other hand, the rooms set aside for evenings of music and araq, a space of pleasure and warmth (for young men and sometimes their female companions) amidst the terrors and sadnesses of war. While, as Nassar notes, this is "more a memoir of a place than of a person" (p. xiii)—for al-Quds as social space is a unifying thread in the work—it is Jerusalem's populace that give the text life, described through Wasif's wide network of friends, drinking buddies and musicians, comrades and patrons, as well as family. There are wonderful portraits here: of the extravagant head of an Ottoman veterinary detachment in Jericho, young offshoot of a well-off Istanbul family, who shared Wasif's love of musical soirees ("if you entered his room, you found not a bottle of cognac but a case," p. 210); of Husayn Effendi al-Husayni, local politician from a leading Muslim family in Jerusalem, close friend of Wasif's father and employer and patron of Wasif; of the educator Khalil Sakakini and of many musicians. If Issam Nassar makes an overly strong distinction in his editor's preface between the "autobiographies" of public personages, intended for publication, and

the "memoirs" of the ordinary, written with more private concerns in mind, it does appear that the author was refreshingly unconcerned with public reputation, his own or others. (The distinction between public persona and ordinary person, between a carefully shaped "autobiography" and a less self-conscious "memoir," which Nassar constructs, seems constantly challenged in this text, by references to "the reader"—who was perhaps never conceived simply as the author's son—as well as by the interplay of "private" and "public" in the text.)

Wasif's tracing of family relationships offers a rich source as well to historians for whom gender is a central category of analysis, as does his rarer but wonderful focus on his mother and sisters. That this focus is so occasional is itself significant, of course: a memoir that concerns itself so heavily with scenes of entertainment (as well as work), and with male networks—a memoir of men's lives—is not likely to feature the spaces in which urban middle- and upper-class women spent their time. Yet, Wasif offers brilliant and hilarious glimpses of his mother's world and of family relations. (Among the funniest stories he tells of his own childhood is an anecdote about how he would save his pennies and bought a single musical-instrument string, which he stretched across the dining table, angering his mother by pounding two small nails into the table so that he could keep the string taut.) Particularly fascinating are stories of how this illiterate daughter of a middle-class urban family confronted new material practices: there was, for example, the primus stove that Wasif's father bought despite its very high price, which his wife complained of "night and day because of the fierce sound it made, someone would knock at the main door but she'd be next to the stove and would not hear, and finally when she found the knocker barging into the house she would start swearing at the primus and its inventor" (p. 49). She bartered it to a local Jewish merchant one day, in her husband's absence. Here and elsewhere, the author beautifully represents the colloquial speech of this no-nonsense mother. She is one of the stars of this particular panoramic show.

Yet the text also suggests the unpredictable malleability of gender regimes. Wasif recalls that his father had a passion for order at home "and encouraged us in the ways of virtue: for example, after the marriages of my sisters, Afifa, Shafiq, and Julia, he let his will be known: that it was our duty—mine and my brothers', Khalil, Tawfiq, and Fakhri—to help our mother in everything the house required: keeping things in order, moving furniture, sweeping, dusting, rubbing the brass, even the cooking. We cooked, which attracted the neighbors' no-

tice. They begrudged us this setup, which competed favorably with women's efforts; and God is the witness" (p. 14). Moreover, a young man's induction into mature masculinity is at issue throughout, and sometimes explicitly, as in the narrator's comparison of going to the public baths with his mother as opposed to his father. Or, describing the famous caf storytellers of his time, who related the popular epics of Antar and others, Wasif notes, "In this way the young men of that time received an understanding of patriotism, honor, revenge against the aggressor, and all sorts of chivalry, and they would reject those among them who were effeminate [man kana mutakhannithan minhum] (p. 133).

As Salim Tamari emphasizes in his introductory essay, these memoirs show the constant and intimate interaction of Jerusalemites of all creeds—and the physical and social fabric of the city as not so divisively organized into quarters by creed as is suggested by the modern division into "the Christians' Quarter," "the Muslims' Quarter," and the like. Tamari argues that the *Jawhariyya* memoir with its representation of a more intricate set of spatial and social networks (and especially the very close relationship between Wasif's Greek Orthodox family and the Muslim Husayni family) is evidence that the administrative division into these creed-specific (if variously populated) large quarters was actually a product of the mandate period, a deliberate division useful to the British administrators rather than a preexisting pattern "broken down" by the "modern" practices of the mandate. The memoirs also show that gendered spaces were not immutable. In particular, in times of religious festivals, which the author describes at lively length, women and men, as well as Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Protestants, and Jews, mixed, celebrating each other's holy days and rites of passage. Within the close space of the neighborhood and the multi-family home, too, a great deal of interchange went on. "The women ululated, and the festival was no less [grand] than a wedding party, and God is the witness; and thus did the house contain all sorts of pastime and entertainment, on condition that everyone there preserve Arab traditions. You wouldn't find anyone transgressing honor despite the mixing of men and women, old and young and we—I mean my brothers and sisters and I—were among this mass" (pp. 19-20). More controversially, perhaps, Wasif also describes the pastimes of the young male elite:

"The practice followed by sons of the notables from the known families in Jerusalem—Husayni, Khalidi, Nashashibi and others—was to take a mistress, set up a domicile specifically for her, and spend his time there with her. Raghīb Bek Nashashibi had a Jewish girlfriend

while Husayn Efendi [al-Husayni, Wasif's "second father"] kept a Greek from Albania who was very pretty and delicate, called Persephone. He brought her from Istanbul and she stayed with him for more than seventeen years. She learned Arabic; he gave her complete freedom of movement. She had a farming project with Husayn and others. Husayn really had put off legal marriage because of Persephone, until my father's patience wore out and he exerted himself and insisted on Husayn's marriage to the chaste and pure Fatima, daughter of Muhammad Tahir al-Khalidi" (p. 36).

Similar is the engrossing account of the Red Crescent Society whose local chapter Husayn al-Husayni chaired after his removal from the presidency of the Municipal Council by the Turks; Wasif, the chapter secretary, recalls the "young Jewish women" who worked to get local contributions and hand out aid—and who also participated in the members' evening parties. A couple of months later they were no longer there; some had become mistresses of high Ottoman officials, Wasif learned.

It is not entirely clear when this volume of memoirs was written; textual clues (references to "the first great war," for example) clarify that it must have been post-Second World War. Though the structure is anecdotal and often moves from one topic to another somewhat abruptly, there are subtle parallels between public and family life: the presumed "end of tyranny" with the 1908 abdication of Sultan Abd al-Hamid gives way to young Wasif's move from a fiercely dictatorial teacher to the Madrasa Dusturiyya Wataniyya of the benevolent and pedagogically farsighted Khalil Sakakini. Throughout, public politics infuse the picture: hangings of Arab nationalists; Turkish "revenge" against the Arab populace by requiring inordinate contributions to the Ottoman army's stores and coffers; the intricacies of municipal politics; celebrations locally of the 1908 coup in Istanbul; the dreaded entry of the Ottomans into World War I. Parts of this memoir, in Arabic or in translation, would make a wonderful teaching text for undergraduate history and literature courses.

This first volume ends on the eve of the British entry into Jerusalem. This book enriched my scholarly understanding of the period, but more importantly, as a reader I am very anxious for the next installment to appear.

#### Note

[1]. The English translation of the title is *Ottoman Jerusalem in the Jawhariyya Memoirs: Volume 1 of the Memoirs of the Musician Wasif Jawhariyyah [Jawharieh], 1904-1917*.

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