

PART II
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF ĠURĠĪ ZAIĎĀN

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This autobiography is remarkable for various reasons. First of all it is one of the best independent sources for the history of the Syrian Protestant College, especially regarding the crisis of 1882. Secondly, the autobiography contains a wealth of information about contemporary Beirut and the life of its inhabitants. Social structure, traditional mores, the beginning of Westernization, the economic impact of Europe and the development of a westernized social class — all these are topics about which information can be gathered from the autobiography. Thirdly, the autobiography gives us insight into the private life of Zaidān's family and, perhaps most important, into the psychological and intellectual development of the young Zaidān. In other words it is a genuine autobiography in which the development of the personality of the author provides the centrepiece of the narration. It is not a *vita* in which particular stations in the life of the subject are described in an exemplary or almost symbolistic fashion and it is not a form of memoirs, in which the person of the author serves only to connect between various political events or to introduce the description of important contemporaries of the author. Zaidān's autobiography was unique at his time and it was only a generation later when the first autobiographies were published in Arabic literature.¹

Twenty years before Zaidān's autobiography was written 'Alī

1. It is noteworthy that until today no technical term has itself been firmly established in Arabic for the literary genre of the autobiography. Zaidān himself referred to his autobiography as *sīrat ḥayātī*; *Letters*, Zaidān to Emile, Cairo Oct. 24, 1908. Š. Munağğid added to his edition of the autobiography the title *muḍakkirāt* which is frequently used today but usually means memoirs, for which genre it is indeed an appropriate term. None of the older dictionaries gives a technical term for autobiography and even the recent SCHREGLE gives for "Autobiographie" only an explanation rather than a specific term: *tarğamat (sīrat) kātibin linafsihī*. It seems, however, that in most recent usage the term *sīra ḡāṭīya* is becoming accepted as the technical term for autobiography in Arabic.

Mubāarak wrote a summary of his own life, *tarġama* as he called it.² ‘Alī Mubāarak was a man of the new age, a man with a Western technological education who himself helped to introduce the modern times to his society. But his *tarġama* does not yet reflect this modernity. It is a very detailed report which begins with the historical background of his family and then records ‘Alī Mubāarak’s education from the age of six onwards. The first half of the narration is focussed upon the person of the author himself. The second half of the *tarġama* becomes increasingly a general report about reforms and educational innovations in Sa‘īd Pāšā’s (1856-1863) and Ĥidīw Ismā‘il’s (1883-1879) Egypt, though ‘Alī Mubāarak does not fail to note carefully all official functions he occupied and — somewhat pedantically — all the orders and medals he was awarded. But in spite of the large amount of information about the reformer and author ‘Alī Mubāarak we learn very little about the person ‘Alī Mubāarak, his private life and his feelings. About his (second) wife we only hear in connection with some unpleasant struggle over inheritance and property. We never read, for instance, what made the author write *al-Ĥitaṭ at-taufiqīya al-ġadīda*, the encyclopaedical work about Egypt which contains this *tarġama*. When all is said and done ‘Alī Mubāarak’s *tarġama* remains a traditional *curriculum vitae* providing information about the formal education and professional career of the author. *Al-Ĥitaṭ at-taufiqīya al-ġadīda* are organized alphabetically — with the exception of Cairo and Alexandria — according to names of places. Under each entry ‘Alī Mubāarak reports about history and landmarks of the place and records the biographies of famous people born there. It is typical for the traditional concept of the *tarġama* that the author’s own *tarġama* should appear under the entry of “*Birinbāl*”, his own place of birth. ‘Alī Mubāarak did not intend to write an autobiography but wanted only to supply all the information relevant to the place of his birth. His *tarġama* still belongs to that category which F. Rosenthal describes as follows: “Keine der Autobiographien ist aus dem Bewußtsein eines Eigenwertes des einmalig Persönlichen entstanden, sondern alle... verfolgen sachliche

2. ‘Alī Pāšā Mubāarak (1823-1892) was born and lived in Egypt, where he as a trained doctor and engineer became deeply involved in modernization programmes. His special attention was drawn to education reform. For his *vita* see his famous work on Egypt, *al-Ĥitaṭ* IX 37-61.

Zwecke, die dem gesamten übrigen Schaffen des Verfassers weitestgehend kongruent sind".³

Of greater autobiographical character are Muḥammad 'Abduh's autobiographical fragments.⁴ In them some mention is made — even though marginal — of the author's relationship to his family and parents. But again the only personal narration relates to his education. Here, too, the description of his early dislike for reading and studying and his sudden conversion to education and learning is close to a cliché-like symbol rather than a personal record.

Modern Arab literature abounds with political or other memoirs. The genuine autobiography in which the development of the personality is the continuing subject of the narration is rarer. The first autobiographical work to be published was Ṭāhā Ḥusain's autobiographical novel *Ayyām*. It is a work of great literary quality, which displays a profound understanding of and psychological insight into the growing-up of the boy Ṭāhā in his rural and traditional environment. His emotional and intellectual development is complicated by the fact that he lost his eyesight early in life. The result is a very tender and intimate record of Ṭāhā Ḥusain's own childhood.

When twenty years later Salāma Mūsā publishes his autobiography,⁵ he is already fully aware of the problems that the writing of an autobiography pose, the subjectivity of the author, his inhibitions and prejudices, his own understanding of his time and society, etc. Salāmā Mūsā delineates his task in the following way: "Thus, my first aim is to give my life story, while to history proper I give a second place".⁶ Clearly, Salāma Mūsā is aware of the "Eigenwert des einmalig Persönlichen". Since his and Ṭāhā Ḥusain's autobiography before him have been

3. F. ROSENTHAL "Die Arabische Autobiographie" 40. To this category would also belong Rustum Bāz' (d. 1902) *Mudakkirāt rustum bāz*. Here we really have to do with a political history of Lebanon in the first half of the 19th century. At the most we can speak here of political memoirs but not of an autobiography.

4. Riḍā *passim* in the first part of the book.

5. Salāma Mūsā (1888-1858) born in Egypt of Coptic origin, studied before World War I in Paris and London. In his articles and books he insisted on reform and modernization of Egypt. Close to the European liberal tradition he inclined towards moderate Fabian socialism. His autobiography *Tarbiyat salāma mūsā* was first published in 1947; GIBB & LANDAU 219-221.

6. SCHUMAN transl. 4.

published, the number of autobiographies in Arab literature has increased considerably. One of the recent and outstanding examples of the autobiography proper is Miḥā'il Nu'aima's *Sab'ūn*.⁷

To this category of the autobiography proper belongs also the autobiography of Ğurġī Zaidān. Parts of it were published in 1952 in *al-Hilāl* and in 1967 by Nabīh A. Fāris in *al-Abḥāt*. In 1968 all of the autobiography was published by Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Munaġġid.⁸ Thus the autobiography, which was probably the very first to be written in modern Arabic was published only some sixty years later. Like Ṭāhā Ḥusain, Salāma Mūsā and others after them Zaidān, too, made the emotional intellectual development of the author the centrepiece of the narration. But the historical and social setting (Beirut 1860-1883) belongs to a period considerably earlier — and geographically different — from that of the above-mentioned autobiographies.

Zaidān began to write the autobiography in October 1908 apparently fulfilling a promise to his son, Emile.⁹ Obviously he was stimulated to write it by his son's departure for Beirut, where Emile like his father before him was to study at the American University. The autobiography is broken off in the middle, covering only the period from 1861 to 1883, when Zaidān left Beirut for Cairo. Quite clearly he had intended to complete the autobiography. We do not know what kept him from continuing to write it, whether more urgent work had to be attended to or whether he lost interest in it.

The translation is based on the manuscript of Zaidān's autobiography and has been closely compared with the edition of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Munaġġid and the partial edition by Nabīh Amīn Fāris. The title "The Autobiography of Ğurġī Zaidān" is our addition. The manuscript itself is not titled at all. The division of the autobiography into two parts, the second part being sub-titled "The College" follows Zaidān's own arrangement of the manuscript.

7. Miḥā'il Nu'aima born 1889 in Lebanon, received his first education in Nazereth in the seminary of the Russian Orthodox Mission. From there he was sent to Russia for further education. 1911 he went to Paris from where he emigrated to the U.S. He began there his literary career. Social criticism and social reform and literary criticism were the main themes of his work; GIBB & LANDAU 279-282. His autobiography was published in Beirut 1962-1966. See also GABRIELI.

8. See XXXIII 271-275, 373-376, 516-520, 637-640.

9. *Letters*, Zaidān to Emile, Cairo, Oct. 24 and Nov. 3, 1908.

In the translation () has been used to indicate Zaidān's own use of parenthesis. Square brackets [] have been used for additions made by us.

A general comment seems to be necessary for the various currencies and denominations that are mentioned in the autobiography. After the monetary reform of Sultan Abdülmeğid in 1844 the smallest monetary unit in the Ottoman Empire was the *pāra*, a copper coin. 40 *pāra* equalled one *ğirš* (pl. *ğurüş*), a silver coin of 1.2 gram silver content. This coin was also known, especially amongst the Europeans, as *piaster*. 20 *ğurüş* or *piaster* equalled one *meğidī*, a silver coin. 100 *ğurüş* equalled one *lirā*, a gold coin. In 1885 a *gini mişri*, an Egyptian guinea was introduced in Egypt, equalling one Ottoman *lirā*. Zaidān probably meant the latter when he referred, anachronistically, to the former.¹⁰ The *riyāl* was an Ottoman silver coin with a 3.097 gram silver content, but was in the 19th century also a common name for the Maria Theresia Taler. After the establishment of Lebanon as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire apparently also the French currency began to play a role in Beirut. Approximately five *ğurüş* equalled one *franc*. Occasionally Zaidān also used the term *dirhem*, a silver coin which disappeared from circulation in the 15th century and is used in this context as a general term for money.¹¹

10. See 154 ff.

11. See EI¹ *Dirham*, *Ghrüş*, *Pāra*, *Riyāl* and SCHAENDLINGER, 55, 56, 65 and *infra*.