

In memoriam

Alain Roussillon (1952-2007)

Arabist and Scholar of Middle Eastern Studies



Photo: W.G. Schwanitz

The renowned Arabist Alain Roussillon, born 1952 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, passed away on the 2nd of July, 2007 in Cairo, suffering from a brain hemorrhage. He was one of the most creative scholars in Middle Eastern and especially Egyptian studies.

I met him the first time mid April 15 years ago in Cairo, knowing him before only from his publications. Soon he visited me in the new place of the German Academic Exchange Service at as-Salih Ayub street. Before that *Villa Almaniya ad-Dimuqratiyya* had served four decades as residency of East German envoys to Egypt. Thus its backyard was in my boyhood my preferred playground on the beautiful Nile island az-Zamalik.

I told Alain this story. Having himself a Coptic mother and multiple identity, he had a genuine interest in this chapter of twofold German relations to Egypt under president Abd an-Nasir. He invited me for a presentation on the German unification process in Middle Eastern studies at the *Centre d'Etude et de documentation économique juridique et social*, CEDEJ. Later, after having served as the director

of the *Centre Jaques Berque* in Rabat, Morocco, he would become the director of CEDEJ. A decade before, in 1994, he finished his dissertation on *Réforme sociale et identité. Pensée, idéologie, société en Égypte* at Sorbonne. His mentor was Muhammad Arkun. Already at that time Alain was concerned with the integration of Muslims in France.

When I visited him at CEDEJ, then located in the *Gam'iyyat an-Nissim* lane of Ad-Duqqi, I found him and Iman Farrag busy with new prospects of computers in Middle Eastern studies. Both wanted to preserve the famous Egyptian journal *Al-Muqtataf*. Nearly 80 years of history would be saved, making the journal electronically accessible. For I had just completed a study on online accessibilities from overseas to computer catalogues of Middle Eastern studies in American libraries of Princeton, Washington, and New York, we were enthused on new tools for academic research. In hindsight, we realized first swallows at the internet sky in Middle Eastern studies; or the discovery of the internet in our field in 1992. Last time we met in Cairo during a conference on the history of Egyptian and German relations that Wagih Abd as-Sadiq Atiq of Cairo University and I had organized in the named villa.

Since my topics and sources would draw me away from Egypt into the American hemisphere, the revolution in media and the web kept me well informed on Alain's research. I found him a most pleasant, knowledgeable, and thoughtful spirit with a cute sense of Egyptian and Middle Eastern affairs. I remember vividly our debates about Egypt's old-new society coping with emerging seeds of democracy. Alain cared much about reforms on the Nile. If there are three great topics of his to be named, then these are the reforms, intellectuals, and modernity in Islamic lands. From his works after the millennium one can see how he grew concerned on rising social tensions. Indeed, he indicated the return of the social question in Arab politics.

Regarding the *New Muslim Intellectuals*, one approach was typical for him who lectured on this subject also during his recent visits in academic institutions of Berlin, Germany. He looked always for starting points in the Arab and Egyptian history. For example, he regarded the concept of *ijtihad* and *shura* most productive. Thus he described in his works flexible modes of interpretation of *Qur'an* and *hadith* by modernists. He named the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur and the European Tariq Ramadan; and post-modernists such as the Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid or the Iranian Abd al-Karim Sarush. Of course, Alain knew that Islamists like Yusuf al-Qaradawi on the opposite side of those academics command a vastly larger audience.

Alain shared a passion for other countries as well, namely Lebanon, Algeria, Japan, and Morocco. He developed great research skills, intellectual qualities, and social feelings. I will miss him though I know he bestowed us many gifts of his wisdom in Middle Eastern studies.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz