



Totah and Ziadeh: Mentor and Student

Joy Totah Hilden

Khalil Totah, centre in bottom row, with Ramallah students at American University of Beirut, 1935.

Khalil Totah was born and raised in Ramallah by parents newly followers of Quakerism after being raised in the Greek Orthodox Church. His father, a weaver and trader, saw to it that his son got the best education possible, enrolling his son in the Quaker Friends School. Khalil went on to study for a year at the Friends School in Brummana, Lebanon, and then to the United States in 1906 at the age of 20. He earned a BA from Clark College and continued in graduate school at Columbia University, receiving his Ph.D. in 1926. Khalil married his high school sweetheart, Ermina in 1916, and together they served at the Jerusalem Men's Training College from 1919 to 1925. In 1927, Khalil became principal of the Friends Schools where he studied as a boy. His beloved Ermina died in 1928, and a year later, he married Eva Marshall Totah, an American teacher at the Friends Schools. Khalil was also involved with the politics

of Palestinian rights, testifying before the Peel Commission, and the Anglo-American Commission in Washington D.C. In 1944, the Totah family returned to the United States. For five years, Khalil served as director of The Institute for Arab American Affairs in New York. He died in California in 1955.

The Search For Khalil Totah, My Father

My father died when I was nineteen years old, too early in my life for me to have learned to know him fully as an adult. He died with a heart broken by the crisis in his homeland. I felt that a man so loved by his people and so influential in shaping their lives should have his life recorded—and I needed to get to know him more deeply.

Letters, diaries, journals and other writings, and photographs surfaced like archaeological finds. As friends and relatives learned of my work on a biography, they passed on information that bridged time and place. The story of Nicola Ziadeh is one such find. In April of 2003, I flew to Beirut to interview the historian, author and bon vivant, Nicola Ziadeh. He was a student of my father's at the Men's Training College (*Dar al-Muallimin*) for teachers in Jerusalem (renamed the Arab College, *Kulliat al-Arabia* in 1927) and subsequently a colleague and a friend until the end of my father's life.

When I met Nicola in Beirut, he was 92 years old. He had complete recall and carried on a full social life. He gladly allowed our conversations to be taped over a five-day



Khalil Totah and family, 1940s..

period, never lacking stories about himself, his life and times, and about how his life and my father's intersected. Nicola died three years later, just after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, his neighbour.

The Early Years

Nicola was a student of my father from 1921 to 1924, shortly after Khalil became principal of the Mens' Training College late in 1919. He described his entrance exams.

On the fifth of July, 1921, I was interviewed by the principal of the Men's Training College in Jerusalem, Dr. Khalil Totah. The following morning, we started our examination. I was at that time exactly 13 years and seven months old.

Dr. Totah was one of the examiners in Arabic, History and Geography... [F]or the composition in Arabic, we were asked to write a letter to the principal of the college, explaining why we wanted to be teachers. And it was to be all 'mshakal', that is with 'harakat' [vowels] put at the end of all the words. So that was a very important thing. And it wasn't to be a long letter, just one page.

For reading, they produced an old book and gave it to me, and said, "Open this book." I opened it; it was one of the old issues of al-Muqtatha, a magazine ... and the article I was supposed to read was concerned with Mt. Ararat in Armenia, which is supposed to be the end of the ship of Noah, after the flood [in the biblical book of Genesis]. I read that, and I was asked a few questions by him and the others, which I could answer. I wrote the letter that same evening.

The examination lasted for two and a half days, after which the results were announced and Nicola was selected. He was then given a physical.

[T]hat same afternoon, I was telling my friends from Nazareth, because my family originally comes from Nazareth.... "I succeeded, I succeeded! I'm admitted." And they were all very happy with me. And all of a sudden, I felt two heavy hands on my shoulder. I turned around, and it was Dr. Khalil Totah. And he said, "Nicola, you are not fifteen years old, that was conditional on your being allowed to sit for the examination. Although you have the certificate, I knew you were not that old from the minute I saw you. But we had to accept you." Now I thought at first he was going to say, "Pack and go back home." And I was frightened. He said, "We accepted you, because you were first among the 87 candidates, and many of them had come from

secondary schools and higher classes. He said, "We had to accept you. But now, there's one condition: when you come back from vacation, you must be at least this much taller, otherwise we'll kick you out!"

Students entered Dar al-Muallimin at age 15 and studied for three years, at the end of which they were obligated to teach for four years in exchange for the free tuition, room and board. In three years, the school would educate the boys in basic subjects, such as mathematics, history, geography and language, as well as education, psychology and sports. Under Khalil's direction, the boys emerged as accomplished and resourceful teachers. His students and teachers made a positive and lasting contribution to Palestinian life and culture. Relationships that developed between students and teachers lasted the rest of their lives.

The Teacher Training College was formed soon after World War I at the start of the British occupation, when the educational system in Palestine was developed from the ground up. Khalil Totah expected the British occupation to bring an era of hope and prosperity.

Though the school was called a college, it was in fact barely a high school. The boys were boarders at the school, and during Khalil and Ermina Totah's stay there, they both taught, and Ermina served as housemother and housekeeper. Khalil was immersed in the boys' lives. He taught and supervised their learning; he played sports with them, ate with them, took them on picnics and historical hikes, took them to plays in Jerusalem, and taught them by example about punctuality, trustworthiness and critical thinking.

In students' third year, they did student teaching, coached and counselled by the principal. The college had one big problem, which Khalil dealt with admirably. There were no textbooks, and so he wrote them himself (*The History of Jerusalem, History of Palestine, Geography of Palestine*) with respective co-authors Boulus Shihadeh, Omar Saleh Barghouti, and Habib Khoury. These humble little books continued to be used for decades; many people recognize the name of Khalil Totah because they studied from the texts. Ziadeh said:

I helped copy some of the book on the Geography of Palestine, pages on end, to be sent to the press. My handwriting was especially good, and I was very careful about things. I must have written at least 100 pages, out of a small book which was hardly 250 pages.

For Education class, we had no books, so we took notes. If we were interested enough, we could read articles in magazines. I was interested and I read. As a matter of fact, during my stay at that school, three years, I read every book we had in the library of the school. This doesn't mean much; we

began with about 350 books. But by the time we ended we had about 550. But this helped me in many things.

For lessons in the Geography of the World, Dr. Totah brought us the only available copy of the book of geography, a very thick book printed in Egypt for schools of high learning.

Khalil also taught them critical thinking. He designated a little room as a periodical reading room. Newspapers were available, and he would go around and see if anyone needed help.

One day in 1922, I was reading the paper, al-Sharq, which was edited by his friend Boulus Shihadeh, and Boulus Shihadeh had written on the front page, “The fall of the ministry of Lloyd George. This may mean the end of the Balfour Declaration.” I was reading it [and] I would have believed it, why not? All of a sudden, Khalil Totah was behind me, looking, and said ... “Boys, listen, this is the wrong thing. This is wrong. The fall of a ministry or cabinet in England doesn’t change the policy of the state. The Balfour Declaration was not the policy of the cabinet of Lloyd George. It’s a state policy. There’s nothing changed.”

Nicola told stories about Khalil’s character and personal example:

In teaching you can learn from anyone, if you are talented enough. But Khalil Totah taught me, and taught me at a very early age, when he said four o’clock, he meant four o’clock, not five minutes to four, not five minutes after four. And I say four o’clock especially, because one of his habits was on a Friday afternoon (Friday and Sunday were our holidays), the bell would ring at four o’clock, and there would be Khalil Totah, standing there, saying, “Look, I’m going for a walk to Mt. Olives, anybody would like to join me?” I don’t think I missed any of his trips; it was most educative.

Khalil took students on hikes to visit historic holy places around Jerusalem, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock, and Bethlehem. He took the new students to visit the walls of Jerusalem. Nicola was accustomed to walking long distances from the age of ten, walking from town to town, into the mountains and valleys. So these hikes and tours were natural for him. He talked about other athletic activities at the college: “Another thing about Dr. Totah: he played tennis, and as a result of that, we built a tennis court at the college. Our students did it, all of it, with one man to guide us. Then we played tennis... He was very keen on doing athletics.”

Khalil loved poetry, and recited it daily. A poem he taught the boys influenced Nicola for the rest of his life:

I remember, one day, Khalil Totah quoting a verse of Arabic poetry: "Itha marra bi yowmun wallam aska ma' yadan willam ashkaf il-'ilman wa hathak al 'umr'." "If a day passes that I do not do a good thing, or learn a new thing it is not part of my life." That one line of poetry was so helpful for me, it became one of my motives in life. . . The things that come to a young boy. They become imprinted. They just go and seek and remain. How often I remember this verse.

Unlike other teachers or administrators, Khalil would sit with the students at meals when he was on duty. Other staff would do their duty by looking in and then go back to sit with the faculty. Khalil would eat with the boys and engage them in conversation. Since students' food was not as high quality as the instructors' food, the boys took note and appreciated the fact that he ate with them. This was not the norm at the time. Nicola also appreciated Khalil's exposing the students to the cultural life of the city.

In Jerusalem, from at least when I was in Jerusalem in 1920, there was the theatre group for British employees and their wives. They always formed a group, called the British Theatre Group. The first play I saw in, I think, 1922 was Macbeth. And of all things, to go and attend a play by Shakespeare when I could hardly understand the English! But Khalil Totah told us about it in advance. The price for the ticket was one shilling, five piasters.

When he knew who wanted to go, he collected us one evening, gave us a summary of the story, told us who Shakespeare was, and Macbeth. At least I, for one, knew what I was seeing. And this he did many a time. The YMCA in Jerusalem was active in giving lectures. He would arrange for us to go and attend those lectures when he felt they were good. I remember a series of lectures given at the YMCA by a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian and a Bahai, each about his own faith. . . . But they were in Arabic. Even the Jewish one was given in Arabic. The one who spoke on Christianity was Elias Marmoura, the priest of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem, but he originally comes from Nazareth, from my town. Sain Ruhi, in the Department of Education, spoke on Bahais. And a Muslim, Sheikh Medin Millah, gave a talk about Islam.

The first year I was at the school, football was compulsory. . . . We had a teacher from Egypt called Shaykh Mahmoud Ahmad Nasif. He was a shaykh wearing a proper shaykh outfit. He wanted to play football but as a shaykh, he couldn't expose his knees. So he kept on his long underwear, and put on shorts and long socks.

Nicola told a long story about inspirational songs that Khalil created with the help of the famous Iraqi poet, Marouf al-Rasafi, in 1920-21. Rasafi would compose the lyrics

to go with European music, which Khalil chose. He described my father and his wife Ermina playing the tunes on the piano. Rasafi wrote the following lyrics to Santa Lucia, which Nicola could still recite in its entirety:

*Sama'itu sha'ran
Il'am dalibi
Talahu fog al us il ratif
Wa gal nafsi, nafs il wadi'a
La tahwa ila tabi'a
Fa in aratum, an tasma'uni
F'il atfal si la tahbisuni
Wen aratum an tasmau in shadi
Fa ini bi huq bil izhari radi*

A nationalistic song that caused him trouble later on used the music of the Marseillaise, the French national anthem. In the school in Acre where Nicola later taught, he and the headmaster taught the students to stand in formation in the yard and sing before going to class. A British officer was told about the singing of the Marseillaise in the school yard. He reported it to the chief of police, who began to make inquiries. After Nicola came in and explained, the officer laughed and the matter was dropped. Nicola remembered the lyrics:

*Awtan an al wahial 'awali
Al waha.ma.laha taman
Inna ma.hil.in ma'ali
Unna.ma uz il.watan*

A song book was created that included all the specially-composed songs and sold for one shilling. Nicola kept this book and took it with him everywhere he went. Then, in 1948 when he was in England, his home was taken over by Jewish Zionist forces, and everything was lost, including this song book, his academic books, and family photographs.

In 1924, the official relationship between Khalil Totah and me came to an end, in the sense that he signed my certificate, and I went out to teach. And then I did not see him for some time. I taught in a village in the neighbourhood of Acre and at that time the only way of knowing what was happening in the country was to wait for a stray newspaper, maybe three weeks old, to come to the village. And this didn't happen very often. Sometimes the police, with whom I was very friendly because one of them came from Nazareth, received this paper and I could read it.

But I had no idea what was happening in Jerusalem in the spring of 1925. The Jews had established a university in Jerusalem, called Hebrew University. The inauguration was to be conducted under the auspices of Lord Balfour.

Training College was part of the educational system, so the students went on strike [to protest Balfour's presence]... The director of education, Humphrey Bowman never had a liking for Khalil Totah, I knew that. . . . He was this type of man: military background, probably limited in concepts, and he felt this was disobedience for some of the students of one of the government schools to go on strike. Khalil Totah was blamed for that, although Khalil Totah couldn't do anything [about it]. . . . So Bowman decided to transfer Khalil Totah from the directorship of the school to be an inspector at the Department of Education. Khalil Totah, being confident and slightly obstinate, said, "No, I won't leave the post." So he was dismissed.

All this I did not know in my stronghold in Tarshiha until some time in June. This took place in the spring. We knew there were troubles in Jerusalem, but about what, nobody could tell. Nobody understood the meaning of the opening of a university. It was far beyond their imagination.

While Nicola taught in Tarshiha he corresponded with Khalil and Ermina. He was trying to learn English "with the help of a dictionary" and teaching English at the same time. He studied *Lectures to Teachers*, by William James, because Ermina recommended it.

Nicola went to England to study at the University of London at age 28. Khalil had returned to complete his PhD at Columbia University in New York and came home to Palestine with Ermina in 1926 to become principal of the Friends Schools in Ramallah. Nicola did not know about the death of Ermina in 1928 and my father's remarriage to my mother until later. He wrote to Khalil from London, asking his advice about an English girl he wanted to marry. "Nicola, you asked me about this and you know I've been twice married to American ladies. I certainly approve of marriage to foreign girls." But Nicola chose not to marry the English girl. He taught in Acre until 1935 and at Dar al-Muallimin from 1939 to 1945.

There were many visits, parties and other events shared by Nicola and my parents in Ramallah and Jerusalem. My mother, Eva Marshall Totah, mentions those frequent get-togethers in her diaries. Khalil and Eva visited Nicola in Jerusalem. Several times, he brought his fiancée and then wife, Margaret, to visit. In August of 1943, Eva says that Nicola "brought his fiancée for us to look [her] over." On April 18 of the next year, she speaks of attending their wedding at Terra Sancta in Jerusalem. Nicola remembered that my parents gave them a tablecloth as a wedding gift. In August of 1943, my parents met Nicola in Lod, on their way back from the family orange grove in Gaza. He drove them to Ramallah and spent the night.

Our family left Palestine in 1944, but my father’s friendship with Nicola continued through correspondence. They visited one another for the last time when Khalil toured the Middle East in 1952, three years before Khalil died. My father mentioned in the book *Dynamite in the Middle East* that the two had lunch in Beirut with Hanna Bisharat at Ajami Restaurant.

Nicola knew that my father had a book published posthumously that was based on that trip, but he had not seen it. He was upset to learn that his friend, publisher Munir Baalbaki of Beirut, had translated *Dynamite in the Middle East* into Arabic in an abbreviated version, without Nicola’s knowing, and without the permission or knowledge of my mother. Nicola admonished Munir and told him, “If you’d have given me the book, I’d have translated it all.”

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