



FREEDOM AND FRIENDSHIP
ELIAS KHOURY

Global Distinguished Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, novelist. Born in 1948, Elias Khoury is one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the Arab world. Trained in sociology, in the mid-seventies he began to develop from a militant Palestinian freedom fighter to one of today's most significant Arab authors. He has taught at Columbia University, New York, the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese University, the Lebanese American University and New York University. Between 1993 and 2009 he served as editor of *Al-Mulhaq*, the weekly cultural supplement of the Lebanese daily newspaper *Al-Nahar*, where he has repeatedly sought (self-)critical confrontation with social and political conditions in the Middle East. Since 2011 he is editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Publications (among others): *Yalo* (2009); *The Gate of the Sun: Bab Al-Sham* (2006); *Al-Dhakira al-mafquda* [=The Lost Memory] (1982). – Address: Ashrafieh, Sioufi, Furn Kasha St., Khoury Bld. 5th floor, Beirut, Lebanon.
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By the end of July 2011, we left Berlin and went back to Beirut after 10 months in the Wissenschaftskolleg. What can one say about a whole academic year in which each one of the Fellows found himself in an atmosphere that he or she never experienced before?

Two things dominated our lives: freedom and friendship. And my work as a writer and intellectual was to be reinvented in an atmosphere of a feeling that we came here to accomplish a book or a research.

To tell the truth, I felt for the first time in my life the privileges of being a full-time writer. I had never experienced this in my life; my writing had to be done early in the

morning or late at night, because I have to go to work. Here there was no work, and I was afraid that this freedom could give my residence the feeling of a prolonged holiday.

My plan was clear: I have to finish the last chapter of my novel, and this must not need more than three months. The plan was to begin my new project, a kind of a continuation of my novel *Gate of the Sun*, by January 2011.

What happened was the classical thing; you think that you are finishing a book when you are about to begin it. The novel began to take a new shape and new dimensions. I discovered that what I thought was a novel was only the first part of it. And that what was emerging was a huge work that went beyond my plans and expectations. I had no choices and *Sinalcol* (this is the title of the novel) had to reinvent its own ways.

On the other hand, I wanted to benefit from Wiko's library to complete my preparations for my novel, especially in working on Hebrew Literature. This obliged me to organize my day between two activities: the mornings for the work on *Sinalcol*, and the afternoons for the preparation (reading, research, contacts) for my new project.

This arrangement didn't last long, not only because the work on *Sinalcol* was able to dominate my time, but also because the Arab Revolutions began, and with them a huge work was waiting for me, here in Europe, and mainly there in the Arab world.

For me the moment that I had waited all my life came at last, and I think that my role as an intellectual was clear, my duty was not only to defend the idea of the revolution here in Europe, but to participate in the struggle in the Arab world, knowing that revolutions are very complicated and need huge intellectual and cultural work.

My engagements with the revolutions were a new fresh beginning in my life, and the atmosphere in the Wiko was so helpful; we organized more than one panel in the Wiko itself, and with the help of my Arab and German friends in Berlin we arrived to organize many activities in Berlin, Brussels, Paris ...

What was the outcome of my year?

- *Sinalcol*, a novel of 500 pages, was finished by June 2011 and will be published in Beirut by the end of November 2011. The French translation will be published in October 2012.
- Lectures and readings in Berlin, Munich, Marburg, Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam.
- The documentation of the Hebrew literature for my new novel was accomplished.
- Articles published in various newspapers, mainly in the *Arab World*.

- The beginning of a new project that will be done with Wiko and its multi-disciplinary research program “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” (EUME), and will take the form of a yearly conference of Arab scholars and intellectuals around the idea of change, democracy and justice.

But the main outcome was the discovery of new friendships; here one can say is the secret of Wiko. Friends from different parts of the world emerged and became part of my life. On this level I don't know how things developed, and how all these new friends emerged and enriched and are still enriching my life.