



MY BERLIN
YASSIN AL-HAJ SALEH

Yassin al-Haj Saleh, born in Raqqa, Syria in 1961, is a Syrian writer and political dissident. While he was studying medicine in Aleppo, he was arrested and then spent 16 years in prison in Syria. Al-Haj Saleh is married to Samira Khalil, a former political prisoner, who has been abducted and “disappeared” since December 2013. He writes for Arabic- and at times for English-speaking outlets. He is a founding member of the Al-Jumhuriya group and of Hamisch (fringe), the Syrian cultural house in Istanbul. Prizes: Prince Claus Award in 2012, Omar Ortilan Prize in 2016, and Kurt Tucholsky Prize in 2017. Publications: نقد ونقد المعاصر الإسلام نقد: الآخرين أساطير (Myths of the Successors: a Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique). Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2011. شباب يا بالخلاص: 16: السوروية السجون في عامما (Salvation, oh Boys: 16 Years in the Syrian Prisons). [Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012]. English edition: *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. London: Hurst, [2017]. الإسلاميين، طوائف وظهور الإسلامية المسألة في: المقهورون الامبرياليون (Conquered Imperialists: On the Islamic Question and the emergence of Islamist Sects). Beirut, 2019.

Friendly was the word that came directly to my mind to dub Berlin when I first visited the city in spring 2017. I still do not know what the friendly thing about Berlin is, but I guess it is related to the breadth of its streets, to the comparative rarity of very high buildings, to the rarity of traffic jams, and to the very good, seldom crowded transportation network. This is humane, respectful to the reasonable needs of humans. Berlin is the most “friendly” to its population of the (few) cities I know.

Are the people themselves friendly? They are formal, and this has been good for me, a person in the second half of his fifties, who likes to keep his safe distance like the Berliners. “Warmth” is not that dear to me.

Berlin is not a demanding or self-imposing city. I do not think that specific credentials are expected for someone to be a good Berliner. A Lebanese friend of mine thinks that Berlin does not change people, unlike London, which he knows very well. I do not know London, and I do agree that cities should change people, that they are spaces for people to change themselves as well. But I think that Berlin does change people, and in more than one way. One way is quite apparent: intellectual life. So active, rich and reachable, and vibrant, with huge and sprawling cultural infrastructure. Changed a little bit, you leave a film or a lecture or an exhibition or a play ... and you go with friends to a bar or restaurant in one of Berlin’s many centers. These are not private spaces nor public; they are in a middle status between the two, a limbo in which you have to spend some time before going back home. The polycentric character of Berlin is one source of its diversity, plurality, and humanity. In Paris, the city that I know a bit, the one center attracts everybody, with many frustrated because they are not central at the center. I mean they feel alienated, not very good for a space so visible. They tend to be aggressive because they are dismissed; some turn into saboteurs. You are not under such pressure in polycentric or a-centric Berlin; you develop a sense that you are okay wherever you are. This keeps you a bit healthier and protects your capacity to learn. To change. As far as I can see, expatriate people are changed and changing themselves here more than in Paris.

At a restaurant, what to eat? Well, you are not obliged to eat German food, which by the way does not deserve its very bad reputation. It can be good at times. It is by no means only *Kartoffel* and pork. However, Berlin is really cosmopolitan from the perspective of the variety of its restaurants. An expatriate Syrian joke exclaims: how do you know that a certain neighborhood in Berlin is really mixed and cosmopolitan? And the answer is: there, you find even German restaurants!

Is Berlin equally friendly to women? Refugees and immigrants? People of color? I cannot authoritatively answer. But for refugees, I know that there are some 750.000 Syrians in Germany, many of them in the *Hauptstadt*. I heard this unforgettable sentence from a German I respect a lot: the only day I felt proud to be German was when Merkel took the decision to open the border to refugees (most of them were Syrians, my fellow citizens). This was at a Wiko Thursday dinner, and it is what I keep most from a second year at the institute.

I know very well that things are not so rosy in daily life. Still, I have only two firsthand experiences of the opposite; in one incident, I was targeted among other people and, in the other, a witness. I think younger people have more bad stories.

Some of my people may say: ah, this is a man who has always had a ceiling over his head in Berlin and enjoyed privacy, never lived in *al-heim* as we, Syrian refugees, call it, the *Flüchtlingslager*, the feared “space of exception” in which one of my friends remained for almost three years with his wife and three children; he never had to register at a job center, nor deal with the notorious German bureaucracy (apart from another “space of exception”: the barbed-wired consulate in Istanbul). Fair enough. I do not mean to defend Berlin, not against those who have had bitter experiences in it, for god’s sake, let alone German integration policies (I have big problems with the very concept of integration). I just want to salute the city I have been living in for two years.

I am sure that the presence of many strangers in the city makes things easier for me by “breaking” its pure Germanness. Break is the verb we use in Syria for adding water to ‘*araq* (*raḳi* in Turkey, and I think they use the same verb) to lessen the concentration of our national alcoholic drink. Not so many people drink ‘*araq* without “breaking” it. They would get drunk soon.

Drunk are those who are addicted to their own pure things. Germany has its share of them today. It had a disproportionately big share of addicts just three generations ago. What I like in Berlin is that it is not obsessed with purities.

And believe it or not, I do not feel specifically depressed by the notoriously gray, long days and weeks of Berlin’s fall and winter. I swear I do not. But I will not defend that. It could be an idiosyncratic leaning of a person who is not very young.