

The Lost Generation

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 28 December 1947

I fear this rising generation of our own young people may well be the generation lost beyond recall, beyond any hope of return. To my deep sorrow and profound grief, it finds itself exposed, in its own educational life, to trials the like of which no generation before it ever faced — some coming from governments, others from what we habitually call fate and destiny, as we tend to attribute all great calamities to fate and destiny, and others still from the hateful circumstances of the social life we now live.

Last year, Sidqi Pasha wished to travel to London to negotiate with the English, against the wishes of the entire Egyptian people, and feared unrest breaking out during his own absence, as he himself put it — so he postponed the opening of the educational institutes until his own departure and return. He then came back, still fearing unrest, and postponed studies week after week after week, costing students and pupils two whole months of their own academic year. He then finally permitted them to study — but the circumstances of social life then stood between most of them and their own education, since the state demanded payment for schooling, and, when they proved unable to pay it, refused to grant it to them regardless. Students and pupils lost yet another long stretch of time, seeking an education they could not afford, while the Ministry insisted on teaching them only once tuition had been paid up front, with no deferral whatsoever.

Educational matters settled down for two or three weeks, and the Ministry then decided to cancel the winter break customarily granted to teachers and students alike — so students and pupils decided they would simply grant themselves this break regardless, whether the Ministry liked it or not. The Ministry made as if to resist, but capitulated in the end, and students and pupils lost two more weeks. They had scarcely resumed their studies before summer overtook them, and they were driven into an examination I have no idea how it actually went, nor how they managed to pass it — since I cannot imagine what exactly they were examined on, having scarcely learned anything at all. Summer passed, the institutes prepared to reopen, students and pupils prepared to attend them, and families exerted every effort they had, and did not have, to scrape together whatever money all of this required. But then the epidemic

arrived, from a source no one has yet identified, and the institutes remained closed, and young people remained idle. Teachers and students had scarcely prepared to resume their own activity before grave crises arose that neither teachers, nor students, nor the government, nor families could find any solution to.

The state insists on selling education; the people are unable to buy it — and there is your crisis. Between the epidemic and the state's own insistence on payment for schooling, students lost three full months. Young people then sensed that the syllabus was too long for whatever time remained to them, and demanded it be shortened; the Ministry, for its part, refused to do anything but enforce the regulations as they stood, so the young people went on strike, and yet more lost time was added to the time already lost.

Then teachers in the private schools began to complain, and insisted on their own complaints — and the Ministry listened to them with one ear, while turning a deaf ear entirely with the other. So the teachers went on strike, students were left idle, teachers occupied the schools in protest, and young people and children began wandering the streets aimlessly, and yet more time was lost, added to the long stretch already lost. I do not know whether these crises, and others resembling them, will end soon or late. But it is certain that students and pupils have already lost, or had circumstances take from them, half the academic year. And if we assume the other half will remain theirs, with no further obstacles standing in the way of their studies, there is no doubt whatsoever that they will learn far less than they were once accustomed to learning, and no doubt that the formation of their own minds, hearts, and characters will be affected by all of this in a genuinely serious, damaging way. Nor is there any doubt the examination will come down to one of only two possibilities: either it will be a genuinely serious examination, in which case the great majority of these young people will fail it — and you know well enough what failure does to a young person's own life, and to their family's — or the examination will be a farce, in which case both those who pass and those who fail will alike be lost.

And so last year was lost to our young people, and this year too seems bent on being lost to them as well — and there is nothing more dangerous to a people than for two whole years of study and learning to be lost to its own children and youth. We ourselves may sense only the lightest of this danger's own effects — perhaps only the idleness and inactivity of young people, and their exposure to whatever afflictions

idleness and inactivity bring, afflictions touching body, mind, and character alike.

But wait a few years with this generation, and look at it once it goes to university, and once it graduates from it; look at it listening to its own lessons unprepared to understand them, and bearing the responsibilities of life unprepared to bear them — and reckon the results of all of this for the life of this people, for its own future, and for whatever problems still await it.

I do not know whether those overseeing educational affairs think about any of this at all, or whether they occupy themselves instead with the same trivialities officials habitually occupy themselves with. And if they do think about all of this, and do reckon its results, its effects, and its danger to this people's own future life, do you suppose they feel satisfied with themselves, and at ease with their own policy, sleeping soundly through the night? Or do you suppose them anxious and troubled, their own conscience reproaching them each evening, their own conscience depicting for them the full horror of this wrong in whatever dreams visit them by night?

There was no real necessity for the Minister of Education to submit to Sidqi Pasha's own whim, losing two whole months for students and pupils alike, for no reason other than that he wished to negotiate with the English against the people's own will. The right course for the Minister of Education and his own aides, at that moment, would have been to stand firm, leave education and students free of interference, and refuse Sidqi Pasha's own whim, however unruly it proved. Nor was there ever any real necessity, nor is there now, for the state to insist so rigidly on selling education, to the point that this rigidity ends in wasted time, disrupted study, the humiliation of people, the corruption of character, and the squandering of an entire generation of Egyptians.

There is no doubt certain necessities cannot be avoided — no one asks the Ministry of Education to keep its own institutes open in the midst of an epidemic; the Ministry of Education bears no responsibility for the epidemic itself, and there is another ministry entirely to be questioned and blamed for that, and a social system to be questioned and blamed for it too. But it is sheer foolishness and shortsightedness that, once the epidemic had already cost young people two months, the Ministry of Education did not then pursue every possible avenue to ensure not a single further day, or part of a day, was lost to them.

Instead, we look, and see — and how ill what we see! — young people turned away from schools because they cannot afford the fee; young people turned away from schools because there are no teachers for them; young people refusing to attend schools out of fear of the syllabus's own length and the examination's own difficulty; and a Ministry of Education occupying itself not with education at all, but with warding off teachers and students alike!

The Ministry of Education, in these very days, is not occupied with curricula, with its own institutions and textbooks, with easing its own means and methods, or with advancing its own subject matter and pedagogy — it is occupied, instead, with calling in the police to protect itself, and protect its own institutes, from teachers and students who demonstrate, strike, or stage sit-ins. And so the Ministry of Education finds itself preoccupied with itself, at education's own expense; and so disorder reaches the very last place disorder and corruption ought ever to reach — the raising of young people, and the formation of the very generation that will inherit these same responsibilities, and shoulder the public burden, in a time shorter or longer still to come.

The Ministry of Education finds itself in continuous war with teachers and students alike, even though it was established precisely to assist both teachers and students — not to wage war upon them, nor to have them stand as its own enemies.

The truth must be told, however bitter and unwelcome: the Ministry of Education's own share of blame in this whole disgrace is far smaller than those disputing with it imagine. The Ministry of Education did not send Sidqi Pasha to London; it did not tempt him into suspending education; it is not the one insisting so rigidly on selling schooling; it did not summon the epidemic; and it is not the one forcing teachers into the wretched life they now live. What is truly responsible for all of this is the social system, which must be reformed in every one of its aspects, and the political system, which must likewise be changed in every one of its aspects.

It is the social system that has rendered families incapable of purchasing an education for their own children; it is the social system that sent the epidemic across the whole of Egypt, costing students whatever time it cost them, exactly as it cost Egyptians whatever effort, lives, and money it cost them.

And it is the political system that tempted Sidqi Pasha into that foolish self-indulgence of his; it is the political system that compels the Ministry of Education to sell education outright; it is the political system that compels the Ministry of Education to leave teachers unsatisfied, denying them even the most modest dignified life that ought to belong to anyone entrusted with raising up the coming generations.

Had the social system been sound, families would never have been unable to pay for schooling — indeed, would never have needed to pay for it at all. Had the social system been sound, Egypt would never have been exposed to this epidemic. Had the political system been sound, Sidqi Pasha and men like him would never have held such power over young people's own lives. Had the political system been sound, Parliament would have compelled the Ministry of Education to provide free education to every student. And had both the political and social systems been sound, this shameful, disgraceful distinction between one teacher and another, and between one student and another, would never have existed at all.

Among the things that wound the heart, grieve the soul, and shame Egypt herself, is that indignant teachers now outnumber teachers who accept their own lot only reluctantly, and that displaced, homeless students now far outnumber students who are merely kept on strike from their own education.

Yes, the corruption of the social and political system is the true root of this evil, and the true source of this affliction. But there may well be another corruption too, neither trivial nor of little consequence: a corruption touching certain individuals' own character. Had certain ministers and certain senior officials among the men of education been able to simply say no, to demand reform, or to resign, Egypt might well have spared her own young people a great deal of harm. But as long as the social and political system remains as corrupt as it currently is, and the character of ministers and senior officials remains as weak as it currently is, Egypt may well need to brace herself — not merely for the loss of one generation, or two, but for the loss of every single one of her own generations, until she finally commits herself to reform in earnest, rather than in farce.