Latifa Zayyat—the Egyptian writer, professor and political activist—died in 1996, leaving several novels and short stories that are only now beginning to be translated into English. Not long before her death, after consulting with her closest friends, Zayyat published her autobiography, or, rather, a collection of “personal writings,” including fragments from her diaries, unfinished life stories, and sections from unpublished fictional works. She did not expect the book to be a success. However, not only did it meet with considerable attention when published in Cairo in Arabic in 1992, but it also attracted attention in Europe and became her first work to be translated into English and French.

When a person who defines herself according to political action and a political community writes an autobiography, the work often takes shape around a key moment or moments of becoming. In his autobiography Nelson Mandela is so aware that the reader expects such a moment of revelation that he seems almost to apologize for not having one:

I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people.

Author’s note. This article is based on a talk given at Princeton University at the conference, “Women Center Stage,” held in honor of Natalie Zemon Davis. I am grateful to Laura Engelstein and Christine Stansell for inviting me to speak at the conference, and to my mother, Natalie Zemon Davis, for providing the inspiration that generated these reflections. While preparing this article in March, 1997, I had the good fortune to meet with two of Latifa Zayyat’s closest friends: the writer Radwa Ashour (who was “like a daughter” to Latifa Zayyat), and Amina Rashid, a professor and activist who met Zayyat in a women’s group in Cairo in the seventies. I am deeply indebted to both of them for sharing their perceptions of their friend. Any errors are mine alone.

1 Lamlat taftish—awrag shakhshiya (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1992).
2 Latifa Zayyat’s autobiography has appeared in English [The Search: Personal Papers, translated by Sophie Bennett, (London: Quartet Books, 1996)], French [Perquisition! Carnets intimes, translated by Richard Jacquemond, (Paris: Sindbad, 1996)], Italian (Carte Private di una femminista, Jouvence), German (Durchsuchungen, Lenos), and Dutch (Het Onderzoek, De Geus) as part of the European Cultural Foundation’s Mémoires de la Méditerranée series. I am indebted to Yves Gonzalez-Quijo, director of the series, for introducing me to Latifa Zayyat’s work.

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Mandela's incapacity to explain his leadership is perhaps itself an expression of the kind of political person that he was and is. For many others, however, the definition of life-defining events comes naturally. For middle-class leftists, whose situation involves an element of isolation, these key moments may involve the overcoming of that isolation though a visceral recognition of injustice or a passionate merging with the people.

The leaders of the Egyptian communist party arose out of the bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie, and for them, these key moments were "blood red" (to borrow a phrase from Gilles Perrault): moments of horror and engagement. Said Marcel Israël:

My father owned a factory, a cotton gin.... The workers were mostly the sons of peasants, from seven to thirteen years of age. They worked at least sixteen hours a day. This was in the thirties. When I went to the factory, I saw the foremen, armed with whips, circulating among the machines hitting the children to make them work faster. The foremen, of European origin, wore masks to protect them from the suffocating dust. The children wore none. When I asked why, I was told: "They're Arabs." The children, who came from the country, were lodged fifty to sixty to a room. A third of them became consumptive and died within a year. Starting from that factory, because of that factory, I went to communism.

Didar Rossano, passing for the thousandth time down a familiar street, for an unknown reason approached the mass of humans collapsed in the entryway of a building, stopped before a man whose body was an open wound:

Before such a spectacle there is no place for pity. Either anxiety leads you to flee this hell and to insult mankind, or else revolt leads you to decide that nothing is more important that to overthrow the system that brought about such human degradation.

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5 Faye Ginsburg, in open interviews with women in Fargo, North Dakota about their pro-life and pro-choice activism, found that the women spontaneously organized their life stories around such "key events" [Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989), 136].

6 "Only about 1% of the people in the country could read and write," one militant explained to me. "Those who read Marx and became communists were a tiny minority of that tiny minority." In The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970 (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), Selma Botman writes that "in the main the communists were of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois origin. There were the sons and daughters of landlords, there were even the children of a few distinguished pashas, and there were those with working class roots; but from 1939 to 1970, leftists were inescapably middle class" (19). Operating concurrently and sometimes collaborating or overlapping with the communist movement was the militant labor movement that arose in Egypt in the 30s and 40s (Botman, 21-22, 41-43, 75-77).


8 Perrault 1984, 75.

9 Perrault 1984, 76.