ISMÄ‘IL AHMAD ADHAM (1911-1940), THE ATHEIST

In the following article we should like to give a concise account of the life and works of a Turk, Ismä‘il Aḥmad Adham, who lived part of his short life in Egypt and who had a certain influence on the literary men of his time. This influence should not be overestimated. Adham was full of pretensions to which he did not live up; for one thing, his academic background was entirely fictitious. It is our intention here to assess his position—if one can call it that—in literary circles of Egypt during the last four years before his suicide in the Mediterranean in 1940. However, we must first give a short biography in which we can deal at the same time with his pretensions.

Ismä‘il Aḥmad Adham was born on February 17, 1911, in Alexandria, his father being a Turkish army officer, Aḥmad Adham, and his mother a German lady. In the autobiographical accounts ¹ he gave to his friends he claimed that she was the daughter of the scientist J. H. van ’t Hoff, a member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences and at one time professor at the University of Berlin, whom Adham mistook for a German. It is unlikely that Van ’t Hoff was his grandfather, as it can be established that his paternal grandfather, Ismä‘il Bey Adham, who, he claimed, was professor of Turkish literature in Berlin, was nothing of the sort. His great-grandfather, Ibrāhīm, may have been the person of that name who was a high government official under Muḥammad ‘Alī.

The account of Adham’s first twenty-five years which he gave himself is so improbable that it can be discarded as the fantasies of a pathological liar whose main object in life was to create for himself a reputation he was in no way able to earn through ordinary means. Thus Adham said of himself that, after having obtained a bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Istanbul University ², he went to Russia to study mathematics and theoretical physics at the University of Moscow. In 1933 he received there one doctorate in physics and one in philosophy ³. After that he alleged that he had been professor

¹ The most extensive biography of Adham, based upon notes he provided himself, can be found in Sāmī al-Kayyālī, Ar-rāḥīlān, Cairo n.d. (+ 1941), p. 75-119, which is the same text as published as an obituary in the periodical al-Hadith, XIV, 1940, p. 541-564.
² Sāmī al-Kayyālī, Ar-rāḥīlān, p. 78, in the following abbreviated as Rāḥ.
³ Rāḥ., p. 78, 82 f.
of physics for one year at Leningrad University (which inadvertently he called Petersburg 1). Then he went back to Turkey where he was offered a professorial chair in physics by an Institute of higher learning in Ankara, which did not exist.

Through his study of the history of sciences he developed an interest, he said 2, in the cultural history of the Middle East. He claimed that he had published numerous articles in Russian, German and Turkish orientalist periodicals, none of which could be traced. Furthermore, he alleged that he had written by this time (1935) in German some studies on mathematics and physics, published by the non-existing publishing house of Gustav Fischer in Leipzig, entitled Die Grundlagen der Relativitätstheorie, and Mathematik und Physik. His doctoral thesis, he said, was on a new type of mechanics based on the movement of gases and the science of probability calculation. He also claimed that he had been commissioned by the University of Freiburg to re-edit Sprenger’s three-volume biography of the Prophet. This new edition “with numerous footnotes and remarks added”, as Adham said3, does not exist. On top of all this he pretended to have received an honorary doctorate from the University of Moscow and to have become a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences 4. It could be established that Adham never got any doctorate, never became a member of the Academy of Sciences, never published one book or article in either Russian, French or German, never wrote his two-volume work in Turkish, entitled Islam Taribi, never made friends with the Russian Orientalist Barthold, who had already died in 1930, one year before Adham claims to have gone to Russia, and never met with favourable criticism from the Russian Orientalist Kazimirsky, because there was no such person.

In 1935 Adham went to live on the small estate near Alexandria that his father had left him, and the periodical ar-Risāla started publishing in instalments the first of his writings whose existence can be established. The article bore the title Nagařiyat an-nisbiyā al-khusūṣiya (On the special theory of Relativity). From then onwards he wrote a great number of articles which he published in various literary periodicals such as

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1 Rāḥ., p. 84.
2 Rāḥ., p. 85.
3 Rāḥ., p. 85.
4 Rāḥ., p. 86; cf. Adabi, I, 1936, p. 459, where a list is drawn up of all the references to Adham in Russian, French and English sources, a list which he himself (see Adabi, II, p. 26) gave to Abū Shādī. None of these references could be confirmed.