

A Life Devoted to the Kurds

Joyce Blau, 1932–2024

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Abstract

Joyce Blau (1932–2024) was for many years the sole professor of Kurdish in Western Europe as well as a strong supporter of the struggle for cultural and political rights of the Kurds. Her engagement with the Kurds owed much to her background of political activism as an Egyptian Jewish anti-Zionist leftist and general solidarity with anticolonial movements. As a scholar of Kurdish language and literature based in France, she constituted a link between the older generation of Kurdish scholars in imperial service and the younger generation of scholars emerging from or in close contact with the Kurdish diaspora. She played a role in organizing networks of scholars in academia as well as in institutions of the Kurdish diaspora such as the Kurdish Institute of Paris.

Keywords

obituary – Joyce Blau – Kurdology – Henri Curiel – Egyptian Jews – communism – INALCO – Kurdish Institute of Paris

With her warm smile and modest but always elegant and well-groomed appearance, Joyce Blau, who passed away in Paris on 24 October 2024, did not look the part of a revolutionary political activist nor of an adventurous field researcher. Yet these were crucial aspects of her long engagement with the Kurdish national movement, the Kurdish language, and the organization of Kurdish studies.

Joyce came to Kurdish studies as an activist and the beginning of her scholarly career coincided with, and remained intimately connected with, the emergence of the Kurdish movement in Iraq after 1958. She travelled alone to Northern Iraq to carry out linguistic fieldwork in difficult circumstances the late 1960s and early 1970s. From 1970 to 2000 she taught Kurdish, first as a lecturer and later as a full professor, at the prestigious National School of Living Oriental Languages (Langues O') in Paris.¹ For most of that period, she was the only professor teaching on Kurdish subjects in Western Europe. She constituted the bridge between the earlier generation of Kurdish experts in imperial service (Nikitine, Minorsky, Edmonds, Lescot, Rondot, and the Soviet Kurdo-logists) and the younger generations that were to shape Kurdish studies in the new millennium, especially the scholars emerging from the Kurdish diaspora. Together with exiled Kurdish intellectuals, she took part in the establishment of the Kurdish Institute of Paris in 1983, the first and most important of such institutions of the diaspora. After her retirement from the university, she remained active in the Kurdish Institute almost to her last days, as the treasurer and in charge of the secretariat and relations with the recipients of student grants.

Joyce, as she was commonly called by most people who knew her, rather than Professor Blau, never spoke much about the political activist side of her person. When she was later interviewed by younger scholars, she hinted obliquely at solidarity work with liberation movements and mentioned her involvement with the group around Henri Curiel, the charismatic Jewish-Egyptian communist leader who was assassinated in Paris in 1978, but she refrained from giving many details.² Much of the Curiel group's political activism had been confidential if not clandestine; it involved logistical support for Algeria's National Liberation Front during France's Algerian war (1954–1962), and later similar support for other anticolonial liberation movements in Africa and Latin America, besides efforts to organize a confidential dialogue between leading Palestinian and Israeli personalities.³ This earned them many enemies—but also some friends—in high places. A right-wing journalist accused Curiel of being a Soviet agent, not long before he was assassinated. The accusation was repeated in

1 Langues O' was later renamed National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) and integrated in the Sorbonne university.

2 Scalbert-Yücel, "Une perspective historique"; Six-Hohenbalken, "Reflexionen"; see also Bozarslan, "Un récit de vie". There is more on Joyce's political activism in the few recent studies of the movement in which she was involved: Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*; Naguib, "Affectueusement, Laila".

3 On this last aspect of Joyce's activism, see Dayan-Herzbrun, "Connaissance et reconnaissance".

one of the last influential Cold War books, which wove a conspiracy theory connecting all terrorist groups with the Soviet Union and which devoted an entire chapter to Curiel and his group, though acknowledging that they were never involved in any violent action. Joyce was mentioned there as Curiel's second-in-command.⁴ In the hope of seeing the assassination properly investigated and correcting the misinformation of the Sterling book, Curiel's friends decided to give the investigative journalist Gilles Perrault, whom they trusted, access and to answer his probing questions about their personal lives and political choices. His two-volume biography of Curiel is a fascinating group portrait of the Jewish-Egyptian Marxist exiles around Curiel and their French Catholic allies in the anti-imperialist struggle.⁵

1 Jewish, Egyptian, and Communist

Joyce Blau's life as a scholar and activist was marked profoundly by the experiences of her early years, the place where she grew up, and the political turmoil of the Jewish-Arab struggle for Palestine, the Second World War and the anti-colonial struggles of the postwar period. She was born into a French-speaking Ashkenazi Jewish family in Cairo in 1932. Her paternal grandfather hailed from Wallachia in present Rumania, had been sent to study in Paris by his family, and upon graduation found employment in the service of the Egyptian government. On her mother's side the family was originally from Poland; her maternal grandfather had been a schoolteacher in Tunis before being recruited to a similar position in an Egyptian government school. Her father was also a school teacher, her mother a housewife, and she held Tunisian nationality.⁶ This made her family stand apart from most other Ashkenazim in Egypt, who had arrived in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century fleeing pogroms in Ukraine and were not well-off generally, as well as from the mostly poor and uneducated Arabic-speaking Jews of the Jewish quarter.⁷ She was educated in French and British religious schools in Cairo, where she met other chil-

4 Sterling, *The Terror Network*, 49–69.

5 Perrault, *Un homme à part*, I–II. The assassination of Curiel was never convincingly solved. It was claimed by a shady far-right organization but Perrault cites strong indications that police or secret services were involved.

6 Perrault, *Un homme à part*, I, 42; *A Man Apart*, 20–21; Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*, 259; Braibant, “Joyce Blau, une femme à part”.

7 The complex composition of Egypt's Jewish community and the relatively low status of Ashkenazim are discussed in Krämer, *Minderheit, Millet, Nation*, 44–54 and the introductory chapter in Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

dren of the (mostly Sephardic) Jewish economic and cultural elite. Unlike the Arabic-speaking Jews, most members of this elite held French, Italian or British citizenship. Under the influence of French teachers, she early developed an interest in Marxism and anticolonial (i.e., anti-British) resistance and she and her sister Sarah joined the communist group Iskra, which in 1947 merged with a rival communist group into the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), led by Henri Curiel, who was the son of an Italian-Jewish banker but rejected the privileges that came with his background. Jews and other minorities were strongly overrepresented in this group, but Curiel was one of the few leading communists who actually and successfully sought to involve indigenous Egyptians of working-class background.⁸

Besides the World War, the major political development affecting Egyptian society, and the Egyptian Jews in particular, was the increasing tension between Arabs and Jewish settlers in Palestine, which had seen an Arab revolt in 1936–1939 and Zionist militias taking up arms against Britain as the end of the British mandate came in sight. Zionist agents attempted to persuade Egyptian Jews to resettle in Palestine but initially with little success.

Like her political friends in Iskra, Joyce adopted a firm anti-Zionist position in those years, insisting that they felt part of the social fabric of Egyptian society. In their view Palestine should, after the end of the mandate, be the land of all the people who actually lived there and not be subjected to new waves of settler colonialism. The DMNL, into which Iskra merged, strongly favoured a bi-national Jewish-Arab state. Nonetheless, it became one of the very few parties in the Arab world to accept the UN partition plan (which was perceived by Arab nationalists as an anti-Arab and pro-Zionist stand).⁹ The de facto establishment of Israel and the ensuing Arab-Israel war in 1948 were traumatic events for many Egyptian Jews. As one of the men from her circle reminisced decades later: “The war in Palestine was a staggering blow to us. It marked the end of a dream that had been coming true. We had thought of ourselves as Egyptians, even while admitting that Egyptians saw us as foreigners. It was all over. Now we weren’t just foreigners, but Jews, therefore the enemy, the potential

8 Gilles Perrault’s two-volume *Un homme à part* is a detailed political biography of Curiel and overview of the activities of the Jewish-Egyptian left, based on interviews with friends, acquaintances and a few political rivals in France and Egypt. The critical but appreciative review by Joel Beinin (“Henri Curiel”) provides a more balanced evaluation of the man’s significance in the history of Egyptian communism. See also the observations in Krämer, *Minderheit, Millet, Nation*, 341–350 and Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*, chapter 9.

9 On the debates on Palestine in Egyptian Jewish communist circles, see Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*, chapter 12 (and specifically on the DMNL, pp. 332–336).

fifth column.”¹⁰ In a few years’ time, most of them would be forced to leave the country, many ending up in France.¹¹

The first to be literally expelled, in 1950, was Henri Curiel, whose activities among workers, students and officers were considered as a threat to public security. Although he had long ago deliberately given up his Italian citizenship to become legally Egyptian, he was declared an unwanted foreigner and put on a ship that took him to Marseille.¹² In the following years other Jewish communists followed; they came to be known as the Rome group, though most were based in Paris and their hearts remained in Egypt. Continued communication with the movement in Egypt was essential to them.

In 1953 or 1954, Joyce Blau was taken on a holiday trip to France by her fiancé, who was also a DMNL activist. In Paris he arranged a meeting with Henri Curiel, whom until then she had only known from a distance as the leader of her movement. Curiel asked her to act as his chief liaison in Cairo, in charge of maintaining a channel of communication between the Rome group and the Central Committee of the DMNL in Cairo. She was to replace another young woman, Noémie Canel, who had just been arrested in Egypt.¹³ For the next year or so, aided by her charm and innocent looks, Joyce ran a secret message service between Curiel and the DMNL, in the form of coded letters. Late in 1954 she was also arrested and joined Noémie Canel in prison, from where the two women managed to write joint reports to the Rome group. After a half year in prison, Joyce was expelled from Egypt to France. Her fiancé was sent to a labour camp, and they never met again; Noémie remained in prison until the end of the decade. Joyce’s sister Sarah, still active in the same network, held out a few more years until she also felt compelled to flee.¹⁴ Back in France, Joyce worked with Curiel’s group to organize support for political prisoners in Egypt. Curiel was to remain a profound influence, the central figure in Joyce’s life, until his violent death in 1978.

In later conversations I had with her, Joyce continued to blame the Zionist movement and the Arab-Israel wars for the destruction of the Jewish communities of Egypt and Iraq. She insisted that the relations between the Jews

10 Perrault, *A Man Apart*, 149. The man speaking was Raymond Istambouli, another member of the so-called Rome group around Curiel in France.

11 Beinín, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*.

12 Perrault, *A Man Apart*, 161–162.

13 See the excellent biography of Noémie Canel in Naguib, “Affectueusement, Laila”, which is based on the correspondence in the archive of the Rome group, presently held by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

14 Perrault, *A Man Apart*, 192–193; Naguib, “Affectueusement, Laila”, 125.

and their Muslim neighbours had always been far more peaceful and harmonious there than had been the Jewish experience in Christian Europe. Especially in Kurdistan the Jews had generally been treated well, but rising nationalism and the Zionist-Arab confrontation fanned hostility towards the Jews of Iraq and Egypt.¹⁵ Joyce told me with great indignation that the Jewish exodus from Iraq had been provoked by bombings of a synagogue and other Jewish targets in Baghdad in the early 1950s, carried out not by Arabs but by clandestine Zionist operatives. Something similar, again perpetrated by Zionist agents, had later happened in Cairo and speeded up Jewish emigration.¹⁶

Joyce's relationship with Israel was to remain ambivalent: she had no confidence in the state but remained hopeful that the people might ultimately find a way of peaceful co-existence with the Palestinians. To that end, she was to take part in Curiel's efforts to organize secret meetings between prominent politicians on both sides. In the wake of the 1967 war and the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, some members of the Israeli elite could be persuaded that Palestinian leaders rather than the governments of Egypt and Jordan were the counterparts with whom a settlement had to be reached. In the 1970s, Henri Curiel and Joyce Blau and their friends invested much time and energy in organizing an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and building mutual trust in a series of meetings in Paris.¹⁷

15 See the observations in her two articles on the Kurdistan Jews: "Les juifs au Kurdistan" (1985) and "Les relations entre juifs et musulmans" (1998).

16 Joyce avoided mentioning these bombings in her writing. Her 1998 article on the Kurdistan Jews notices that the general regret of the departure from the homeland but only mentions the increasing anti-Jewish sentiment in Iraq after the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948. The bombings and their background, in Baghdad in 1950–1951 and in Cairo in 1954, are studied in some detail, on the basis of official documents, in Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, 86–95 and 107–116. They note that "[s]ome Iraqi Jews maintained, then and for many years afterwards, that the attacks on the Jewish targets, especially on the Mas'uda Shem-Tov synagogue, were organized by the Mossad and/or the Mossad LeAliya Bet in order to persuade hesitant Iraqi Jews that it was in their interest to leave their increasingly anti-Semitic homeland and emigrate to Israel." (91). The historian Avi Shlaim, who was born in Baghdad in 1945 and emigrated to Israel in 1950, devotes the central part of his memoir to a careful investigation of the series of bombings that terminated two and a half millennia of Jewish presence in Babylon and turned the Iraqi Jews into second-rate Israeli citizens (Shlaim, *Three Worlds*, 111–151). Although one of the bombs was placed by Arab nationalists, he finds "undeniable evidence of Zionist involvement in the [other] terrorist attacks." Shlaim is thirteen years younger than Joyce Blau but they must have shared the same sense of loss of a way of life and a rich culture.

17 The most prominent participants were on the Israeli side the former general Matti Peled and on the Palestinian side Issa Sartawi, a senior PLO leader and confidant of Arafat.

As Joyce came to identify herself increasingly with the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds, the fact that the Kurds also have had ambivalent attitudes towards Israel and the Palestinians no doubt played a role. On the one hand, as stateless peoples with a strong national awareness, Kurds and Palestinians have much in common and there have been various forms of cooperation. Joyce was certainly aware of the relationship between the Kurdish poet Salim Barakat and the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish.¹⁸ On the other hand, especially the Iraqi Kurds have often felt that in facing hostile Arab nationalism they shared an enemy with Israel and therefore also had a basic common interest with the Zionist state and the Barzani movement received between 1964 and 1975 significant military and intelligence support from Israel.

2 Political Activism and Study in Paris

For the first years after settling in Paris in 1955, Joyce supported herself by carrying out modest secretarial jobs, among others for the novelist François Mauriac, while continuing to devote much time and energy to the activities of her political friends. One of her jobs was to organize solidarity with and financial support of political prisoners in Egypt. Meanwhile Curiel's network, which consisted of exiled Egyptian Jewish leftists, was moving from an exclusive focus on Egypt and Palestine to a broader solidarity with anticolonial movements, in which they worked closely with progressive French Catholics. Anticolonialism in the 1950s meant especially clandestine support for the Algerian liberation struggle and later for the other liberation movements in Africa and South America.

It was in this context that Curiel urged Joyce Blau to take up the study of Arabic at Langues O'—she had never learned to speak the language properly when still living in Egypt. It was at Langues O' that she was brought into contact with Kamuran Bedir Khan, who was teaching Kurdish at that institution but who also was the chief spokesperson for the Kurdish national movement in Iraq.¹⁹ Joyce and her friends helped Bedir Khan preparing and producing

Former prime minister Pierre Mendès-France acted as the host of the meetings. See Dayan-Herzbrun, "Connaissance et reconnaissance"; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issam_Sartawi.

18 On these two poets, see Takriti, "The Kurd and the wind"; see also Dayan Herzbrun's observation on Joyce's possible role in the reception of Barakat in "Connaissance et reconnaissance", 36.

19 On the background of Bedir Khan's appointment at Langues O', see van Bruinessen, "Kurdish studies," 25–30.

information and news bulletins on developments in Kurdistan.²⁰ In 1960, at the height of the Algerian war, Curiel, who had been living clandestinely in France since his arrival, was at last arrested and Joyce, by then one of his closest collaborators, narrowly escaped arrest by going abroad.²¹ She continued her studies in Brussels, where her sister Sarah had earlier settled. It was there that she obtained her *licence* (approximately M.A.) in Arabic studies with a thesis on the Kurdish question (published in 1963).²²

Even while in Brussels she remained in contact with Bedir Khan in Paris, who had provided her with much material for the thesis and urged her to continue with her next project, a Kurdish glossary (of the Kurmancî dialect), for which he had himself already prepared an extensive outline, based on the notes of Roger Lescot. She corresponded with the few other experts she could find to complete the word list and find the best translations. The dictionary was published in 1965, that is only five years after the first major Kurdish-Russian dictionary in the Soviet Union and a few years before the first serious attempt made in Turkey by Musa Anter and the Sorani-English dictionary by Wahby and Edmonds.²³ For quite some time this remained the only Kurmancî dictionary of reference, and its appearance was welcomed especially by Kurds in Turkey, where the government still claimed that the Kurdish language did not exist. The dictionary was a tangible proof of the existence of the Kurdish language and demonstrated how different it is from Turkish. Unsurprisingly it was black-listed and not allowed to enter Turkey until a quarter century later. When the ban on publishing in Kurdish was finally lifted in 1991, a Turkish adaptation of Joyce's dictionary was published almost immediately and briefly was a best-seller, to Joyce great joy. She visited Turkey at the invitation of the publisher and was exhilarated at seeing her dictionary being sold by streetside vendors in Istanbul.²⁴

Joyce Blau's academic career owed much to the patronage of Kamuran Bedir Khan, of whom she always spoke with the greatest respect as "the Émir" (as did, tongue in cheek, most of her colleagues at Langues O'). The co-operation of self-professed communists like Henri Curiel and Joyce Blau with the aristocrat Bedir Khan and their support for the socially conservative movement led by Barzani—it was the national liberation movement with which Joyce came

20 Scalbert-Yücel, "Une perspective historique"; Blau, "Le gardien de la flamme" (2019).

21 Perrault, *Un homme à part*, II, 52–56.

22 Blau, *Le problème kurde*.

23 Blau, *Dictionnaire kurde*; Kurdoev, *Kurdsko-Russkij slovar'*; Anter, *Ferhenga Khurdî—Tirkî*; Wahby and Edmonds, *A Kurdish-English dictionary*.

24 Scalbert-Yücel, "Une perspective historique."

to identify herself most closely—is perhaps surprising. Romanticism apart, however, it also made sense in the context of the Cold War and Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet Union supported Barzani's movement at least until 1968 and repeatedly mediated between the Kurds and the Central government of Iraq.²⁵ No other Kurdish party or movement ever received the same degree of Soviet support. Although the Curiel group was deemed unorthodox and untrustworthy by the official communist parties, they considered the Soviet Union as the embodiment of their socialist ideals and generally admired its foreign and internal policies. Joyce was convinced that the position of the Kurds in the Soviet Union, where they were recognized as a distinct nationality with cultural rights, and where they had broadcasts and press and education in their own language, was far better than anywhere else. The Soviet involvement in the Kurdish struggle in Iraq culminated in 1964. This was accidentally also the year when secret Israeli military and logistic support of Barzani began. This was apparently due to the efforts of Bedir Khan, who had approached his Israeli contacts on behalf of the Iraqi Kurds.²⁶

By the mid-1960s Joyce was back in Paris and enrolled in Iranian language studies at Langues O', where she started preparing a dissertation on Kurdish dialects under the supervision of the linguist Gilbert Lazard. This was planned to be part of a larger comparative study of Iranian dialects, for which Joyce was to carry out the Kurdish field research. In 1967, while the guerrilla war was still going on in the North of Iraq, she travelled to Baghdad and from there to Amadiya (Amêdî), where thanks to Bedir Khan she had found a family that was willing to host her. The following year she made a second research trip, this time to Sinjar (Şingal), where she was hosted by relatives of Sami Abdulrahman, Barzani's second-in-command. Her field notes in Amadiya and Sinjar became the basis for her 1975 dissertation, *Le kurde de 'Amadiya et de Djebel Sindjar*.

This study is her most significant scholarly work. Unlike her dictionary and her later grammars, which present an idealized standard Kurdish, this is a work of field linguistics studying two dialects that differ considerably from standard Kurmancî Kurdish. She transcribed oral narratives she had recorded, analysed them to bring out the significant features of each dialect, and provided translations. The work still stands as a significant contribution to Kurdish linguistics.

25 Rasoul, *Grossmachtpolitik und Freiheitskampf*, 145–158.

26 Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, 184–185. Bedir Khan had on several earlier occasions performed secret diplomatic services for the Israelis, such as carrying messages to King Hussein of Jordan. The Israelis were aware that Bedir Khan only served them when he thought this was in the Kurdish interest, *ibid.* 65, 70, 77–78.

She returned later only once to this approach of field linguistics, on the occasion of a visit to Israel, where she recorded a few brief Kurdish narratives recited for her by Kurdistan Jews.²⁷

In preparation for the dissertation she also made several visits to the Soviet Union, the Mecca of Kurdish studies in those years, to learn Russian and meet the leading kurdologists of Leningrad, Moscow and Yerevan. These included Soviet scholars such as Qanatê Kurdo, Olga Jigalina, Yevgeniya Vasil'yeva, and the Jamil (Cemîl) family, with whom she was to maintain contact by correspondence, as well as Kurdish students from Iraq such as Izzeddin Mustafa Rasul and Kamal Mazhar, whom she was later to meet again in Iraq.

3 Consolidation of Kurdish Studies in Paris and of Her Central Place in the Discipline

Meanwhile Joyce strengthened her position at Langues O', where Kurdish studies were gradually becoming consolidated with the arrival of other scholars. In 1967 the Dominican priest Thomas Bois, who had spent most of his active life among the Kurds and their Christian neighbours in Mosul, Qamishli and Beirut, who knew the Bedir Khan brothers well and had published extensively on the Kurds, returned to France and was appointed at Langues O' to teach on Kurdish folklore, literature and religion. Two years later a young French political scientist, Jean-Pierre Viennot, who had written a dissertation on the Kurdish movement and who continued to work on non-state nationalist movements in the Middle East, also joined Langues O' to teach on the sociology and politics of Kurdistan.²⁸ Bedir Khan himself retired in 1970 and made sure Joyce succeeded him; not much later, Bois also had to retire for health reasons, and Joyce took over his courses as well.²⁹ From 1970 until her own retirement in 2000 she

27 Published in Blau, "Les Juifs au Kurdistan" (1985).

28 Viennot, "Contribution à l'étude". See also the brief notice on Viennot in the Langues O' bicentenary volume (Blau, "Kurde", 97). Viennot was the leading light of another solidarity committee with a rather different ideological orientation than the Curiel group, the Comité de Solidarité avec la Révolution Kurde (believed to be "Maoist-leaning" by Çelik and Jongerden, "From Nazism to Pro-Kurdish Activism", 7). In the following years, Viennot published various long reports in *Le Monde diplomatique* on political movements in Kurdistan, Iran, Dhofar and Baluchistan. He died of a fatal disease while carrying out research in Baluchistan in 1975.

29 Joyce Blau wrote extensively about these illustrious predecessors, see Blau, "Vie et oeuvre de Thomas Bois" (1995); "Mémoires de l'émir Kamuran" (2000); "Le gardien de la flamme" (2019). See also the interviews with Scalbert-Yücel ("Une perspective historique") and Six-Hohenbalken ("Reflexionen").

remained in charge of teaching Kurdish language and civilization, as a junior lecturer first and later as a full professor. After Viennot's premature death in 1975, she also took over his courses.

She also made an effort to consolidate Kurdish studies more firmly in French academia by lobbying for the inclusion of a Kurdish section at the 29th International Congress of Orientalists that was to be held in Paris in 1973.³⁰ Her experience in networking served her well; she found Thomas Bois, her supervisor Gilbert Lazard, and the British linguist David Neil MacKenzie willing to act as president and vice-presidents of the Society for Kurdish Studies that was established at that congress.³¹ She also managed to arrange for the participation of several Kurdish scholars from Iraq in that Orientalist Congress.

She made several visits to Iraq in the early 1970s to extend her network among Kurdish intellectuals and scholars. In this brief period of peace (1970–1974), the Kurds had five minister positions in the central government, one of which was held by Joyce's friend Sami Abdurrahman. A Kurdish Academy (Korî Zanyarî Kurd) was established in Baghdad, and for a few years there was considerable academic freedom.³² Joyce renewed her acquaintance with several of the scholars she had previously met in the Soviet Union, including Dr Kamal Mazhar, who was the leading scholar of the Academy. On one of her visits, in 1973, she also met Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, who at the time had an office in the Ministry of Planning. In that same year Ghassemlou had recently become, or was soon to become, the most important leader of the Iranian KDP, elected at the third party congress that was held in exile in Iraq. Both Sami Abdurrahman and Ghassemlou helped her financing the trip of several scholars to the Paris Orientalist congress so that five of them, including Kamal Mazhar and the poet Hejar, could be present.

Joyce's teaching always went hand-in-hand with her solidarity work and caring concern for people in precarious circumstances, especially if they were Kurds. For her language classes she worked with teaching assistants who were mother tongue speakers of the Northern and Southern dialects, and repeatedly she recruited political refugees to assist her. The first well-known personality who came to work with her was the lawyer Mehmet Ali Aslan, the former chairman of the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP), who had to flee the country

30 On these Orientalist congresses, see fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congrès_internationaux_des_orientalistes.

31 Scalbert-Yücel, "Une perspective historique". MacKenzie had preceded Joyce in carrying out comparative linguistic field research, see his *Kurdish Dialect Studies*.

32 On the Kurdish Academy and academic life in those years generally, see van Bruinessen, "In Memoriam Kamal Mazhar Ahmad."

after the 1971 military coup and lived as a refugee in Paris until the amnesty of 1974. For most of those three years he was Joyce's teaching assistant for Kurmancî. In 1976 she heard that Abdulrahman Ghassemlou had arrived in Paris. He had been forced to leave Iraq and return to Czechoslovakia, where he had studied and where his family lived, but was expelled from that country too. He became Joyce's other famous teaching assistant and her close friend until the Iranian revolution, when he travelled to Kurdistan to lead the struggle for autonomy.³³ Through Ghassemlou and later through the diplomatic representatives of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), who always visited her when they passed through Paris, Joyce remained connected with the struggle in East Kurdistan, like she had been with the movement in South Kurdistan through Kamuran Bedir Khan, Sami Abdulrahman and KDP representatives. Her involvement with Kurds from Turkey was less intensive, though she occasionally supported the European network of Kemal Burkay's Socialist Party of Kurdistan and in the 1990s came out in support of Leyla Zana and the other Kurdish parliamentarians who were imprisoned. She even travelled to Ankara to collect Zana's daughter Ruken, both of whose parents were in prison, and bring her discreetly to France.

As is common in France, Joyce's teaching and research took place in different institutions. Her language and literature teaching remained at INALCO, but she also joined the research staff of CNRS, France's National Centre for Scientific Research, where she was a member in the group of historians, anthropologists and geographers studying the Iranian world. Her research focused mainly on Kurdish literature but, as the list of publications below shows, she also took a strong interest in the relations between the Kurds and the minorities living in their midst, as well as in the history and social background of Kurdish studies.³⁴ Her handbooks of standard Kurmancî and Soranî Kurdish represent a great advance upon earlier works and have retained their value.³⁵

4 Networking, Lobbying, Organizing

Joyce Blau's strength lay in her social skills and patience and perseverance in persuading people to support her efforts. The skills that Curiel first called upon

33 Blau, "Mon ami Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou"; there are brief notices on other Kurds who worked with Joyce at Langues O' in the institution's 1995 memorial volume (Blau, "Kurde").

34 She wrote on many of her seniors and friends: Kurdo (1986), Bois (1995), Rondot (2000), Bedir Khan (2000, 2019), Ghassemlou (2020), and Galletti (2015).

35 Blau, *Manuel de kurde: dialecte sorani* (1980); Blau and Barak, *Manuel de kurde: kurmanji* (1999); Blau, *Méthode de kurde: sorani* (2000).

to organize support in France for political prisoners in Egypt also served her well as a scholar and organizer of Kurdish studies. At the beginning of her academic career she succeeded in bringing her seniors in France and Britain together in the first society for Kurdish studies and, more remarkably, she managed to get a strong Kurdish representation present at the 1973 Orientalist Congress. She corresponded with colleagues and fellow activists all over Europe and made efforts to establish contacts between Soviet Kurdology and Western scholars of the Kurds. She always made efforts to stimulate and empower especially scholars who by gender or ethnicity were disadvantaged or weakly represented: women and Kurds.

In another of her efforts towards communication between different traditions of Kurdish studies she organized a team of colleagues across the world who together mastered a broad range of languages and whom she asked to write brief summaries of books on the Kurds recently published in the countries or languages of their specialization. These appeared in the periodical *Abstracta Iranica* (of the French research institute in Tehran) and were later collected in her *Les Kurdes et le Kurdistan: Bibliographie critique 1977–1989* and its subsequent Turkish adaptation.

Joyce was in regular contact with many of the Kurdish exiles living in Paris or passing through, whose numbers increased considerably from the late 1970s onwards. In 1983 a group of exiled Kurdish intellectuals and artists, including Kendal Nezan, filmmaker Yılmaz Güney, the poets Cegerxwîn and Hejar, Tawfiq Wahby and Ismet Chériff Vanly, established the Kurdish Institute of Paris, the first such institution and arguably the most effective and influential one. Joyce took part as a modest supporter in the background, patiently and perseveringly as always seeking sponsors willing to contribute. The institute became a hub where Kurdish activists, scholars and friends gathered. It built an important library enriched by donations from prominent personalities, including the personal archives of such scholars and diplomats as Pierre Rondot and Kamuran Bedir Khan.

The visible culmination of Joyce's networking efforts was probably the conference she organized (with Bernard Hourcade of CNRS and myself as co-organizers) in Sèvres in 1996 on "Kurds and the City".³⁶ She insisted on the representation of Soviet kurdology in the persons of the two leading women kurdologists from St Petersburg and Moscow, Vasil'yeva and Jigalina, as well as Kurdish scholars from the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, and Kamal Mazhar from Baghdad. Several Kurds from the dia-

36 Leezenberg, "The Kurds and the City"; Bruinessen, "Kurds and the city".

spora presented papers, along with young scholars from Germany, Italy, France, Britain and Canada besides some of the more established older scholars.

Joyce formally retired from teaching and research in 2000, and from then onwards she devoted her considerable energy to the Kurdish Institute, where she was the treasurer as well as in charge of the secretariat. She continued her efforts to bring together scholars of the Kurds from various backgrounds as the editor of specialized journals. Together with the historian Keith Hitchins she edited *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, which appeared irregularly from 1995 to 2008 (published by Peeters in Louvain), and from 2000 onwards she was the editor-in-chief of the Kurdish Institute's journal *Études kurdes*, in which she worked together with mostly young Kurdish collaborators.

Joyce was, in all respects, a remarkable woman, strong and loyal, opinionated, determined and persevering when she wanted something done. She did not think of herself as a feminist and had little empathy with modern feminism but she admired strong women and was proud to have personally known some very strong Kurdish women. In the early years of her political activism and academic career it was common for women's contributions to be neglected and all credit to be given to men. I never heard her complain about this, but she did make an effort to have her female students and younger colleagues gain adequate recognition and fair representation in publications, seminars, and academic employment. Interviewed about her youthful activism by scholars of the Egyptian communist movement, she helped to draw attention to the neglected role of women activists.³⁷

For a half century, Joyce Blau was the godmother of Kurdish studies in France. According to one anecdote, the great scholar Maxime Rodinson had advised her, when she began her studies at Langues O', to "choose a little-known Oriental language, focus on it with determination and become the sole expert, so that your career will be guaranteed." That is more or less what she did, not only building her own career but also successfully struggling to ensure the survival of Kurdish studies in French academia.

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37 Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism*, and especially Naguib, "Affectueusement, Laila".

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Kurte

Joyce Blau (1932–2024) bo gelek salan li Rojavayê Ewropayê tekane profesora kurdî û herwiha piştgireke xurt a têkoşîna mafên çandî û siyasî ya kurdan bû. Têkiliya wê ya ligel kurdan bi taybetî girêdayî paşxaneya wê ya çalakvaniya siyasî bû ya wek çepgireke dij-siyonîst ya cihûya Misrê û piştgiriya giştî ya ligel tevgerên dijkolonyal. Wek zanayeke ziman û edebiyata kurdî ya li Fransayê, wê têkiliyeke di nav nîfşa kevn a zanayên kurdên li xizmeta keyserane û nîfşa ciwan a zanayên ji an di nav diasporaya kurdan de ava kir. Wê di rêxistina torên zanayên li akademiyê, herwiha li sazîyên diasporaya kurdî yê wek Enstituya Kurdî ya Parîsê roleke lîst.

Kilmnus

Xeylê serrî Joyce Blau (1932–2024) Ewropaya Rojawanî de hem profesora kurdî ya yewkeke hem kî destekdara pile bîye seba mucadeleyê heqanê kurdan ê kulturî û siyasîyan. Çalakîkariya ay a siyasîye de, kamiya ay a misirîja yahudî ya antî-siyonîsta çepgire û piştgiriya ay a pêroyîye seba tevgeranê antî-kolonîyalîstan bibî sebebê bingeyê angajmanê aye seba kurdan. Sey zanyarêda ziwan û edebîyatê kurdî, a Fransa de bîye. Neslê zanyaranê kurdan ê kananê ke xizmetê împêratorîyan de bîyî û cigêrayoxê neslanê neweyan ê ke îrtibatê diasporaya kurdan ra vejîyayêne meydan, a mabênê înan de bîye pirdêk. Aye hem organîzkerdişê toranê cigêrayoxanê akademîkan de hem kî organîzekerdişê enstîtuyanê diasporaya kurdan de, sey Enstîtuyê Kurdî ya Parîsî, rolêdo giran kay kerd.

پوخته

جۆیس بلاو (١٩٣٢—٢٠٢٤) سالاتیکی زۆر تا که پرۆفیسۆری زمانی کوردی بوو له ئەوروپای پڕۆژاوا و ھەروەھا لایەنگری سەر سەختی خەبات بوو بۆ مافە کولتووری و سیاسییەکانی کورد. پەیوەندییەکی گەلێ کوردی ھەبوو بە پاشانی چالاکیی سیاسی ئەو وەک چەپکی دژە زایۆنیستی جوولەکی میسری و ھاوێشتی گشتی لە گەلێ بزووئەو ھە دژە کۆلۆنیالیزمەکان. وەک توێژەرێکی زمان و ئەدەبی کوردی که بێکەکی لە ھەرئەسا بوو، پەیوەندییەکی لە تیوان ھەوێ بەتەمەنی توێژەران کورد لە خەمەتی ئیپراتۆری و ھەوێ گەنجی توێژەران که لە ھەوێ کوردی ھەوێ سەریان ھەلداوێان لە پەیوەندییەکی نێکیا لە گەلێ ھەوێ کوردیدا پێکەھێن. ئەم خاتمە پۆلی ھەبوو لە پێکھێستی تۆری توێژەران لە بواری ئەکادیمی و ھەروەھا لە دامەزراوەکانی ھەوێ کوردی وەک ئینستیتیوتی کورد لە پارێس.