

Need an Interpreter, Quickly!

A story by Salam Al Rassi

The parliamentary elections of May 25, 1947 were considered the worst ever in Lebanon - due to the fraudulence which was exercised by the Lebanese government against the opposition. Because I spoke 'eloquent' Arabic, I was chosen by the opposition to be stationed as an observer at Beirut's Armenian quarter, Bourj Hammoud: since most of our Armenian friends at that time did not know Arabic well.

Local police had taken severe action in the area to terrorize the Armenians, hoping that they would stay away from the polls. On the Election Day we gathered early in the morning with a large number of voters who were supporting our side and walked together to the polls. On the other side, a group of our opponents were encouraged by the police to create trouble and pretend that they were fighting one another. When they came close to us, the police drew their guns at us instead of turning at the troublemakers. They fired at our crowd and a few people fell dead. Others were wounded.

The police surrounded us from all sides, moved the bodies of those killed and took the wounded away to be interrogated. It didn't take long before the Minister of Interior Sabri Hamadeh arrived and went straight the police station. We all started to yell and scream, demanding permission to see him. After a big argument, the police allowed two people to enter, an Armenian 'comrade' called Antranick and myself.

When we went in, Antranick began talking using his 'broken' Arabic with his 'bastardised' Armenian with some 'Lebanised' French. Hearing this Sabri Bey screamed at my friend: "Hey ... enough.... enough.... we need an interpreter quickly." The police rushed to push us out. "I am an interpreter," I shouted loud. "I am an Arab, son of an Arab. I can speak with his excellency in eloquent classical Arabic." "No, no, no," said Mr. Hamadeh "Then we will need two interpreters..."

Several years later, I happened to meet Mr. Hamadeh again. When I reminded him of the May elections and the story of the interpreters, he laughed. "This is the problem in Lebanon," he said. "The people don't understand the language of their leaders, and the leaders don't understand the language of their people.

"Even if both speak Arabic, we still need an interpreter

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