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## From East Germany's Stasi Files For Post-Revolution Egypt

By Géraldine Schwarz

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Pro-democracy leaders from Egypt have traveled to Berlin to learn how former East German dissidents peacefully managed revelations of the explosive files of the Stasi, the brutal secret police. Can Egyptians unearth the same details about its past? Do they really want to?

BERLIN - Basil Al-Adel suffered no illusions when he decided to enter Egyptian politics in 2005. By co-founding the opposition Al-Ghad political party, Al-Adel knew there would be a price to pay. Up until that point, the then 32-year-old engineering graduate had led a relatively tranquil existence. Overnight, he landed on the radar of the secret police of President Hosni Mubarak's regime, under the code name "a-Muhandis," The Engineer.

"I always knew they spied on dissidents," says Al-Adel. But just how closely? Will we ever know?"

In an effort to answer these questions, Basil Al-Adel traveled last month from Cairo to Berlin to visit the office in charge of managing the files of the Stasi, East Germany's infamous former secret police network. Other representatives of Egyptian democratic parties also came with him at the invitation of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation to explore this temple to the memory of totalitarianism, located in the Stasi's former headquarters.

As East Germans did 21 years ago, Egyptians should look to the memories of the past to create a healthy foundation for their transition to democracy. The Federal Office for Stasi Archives in Berlin, the most accomplished in the world in terms of protecting and allowing access to the archives of a deposed, repressive regime, has offered to advise them.

“After the collapse of the [Berlin] Wall, we asked ourselves: Should we open or prohibit access to the files?” Joachim Förster, a senior official from the Archives, explained to his Egyptian guests. “In the east, the same as the west, several politicians were reticent about the idea of opening them up. We were afraid this would be a hindrance to democratization and the unification of Germany. But civil society won out.”

The German Parliament voted in the summer of 1990 to approve a law allowing anyone who had a file with the secret police to access that information, and to learn the identities of those who had spied on them – some strangers, but often people known to them. To date, 1.7 million people have consulted their files, and though demand slows down, the Archives continue to receive 18,000 requests every year.

“If people learn the names of informers, those who betrayed you, it will create tension. This risks dividing the Egyptian people – how can we prevent that?” asks Anwar Sadat, 55, founder of the newly formed Party of Reform and Development, and nephew of the eponymous former Egyptian president, assassinated in 1981.

Herbert Ziehm, one of the Berlin archive experts, responds to Sadat’s question. “We too were afraid of acts of revenge, but it never happened.”

Ziehm, 64, was there in January 1990 with the East German citizens who took the Stasi’s headquarters by force in Normannen Street -- and occupied it day and night to prevent the destruction of the archives. Upon their arrival, the floors were littered with shredded papers. Stasi employees had begun to make the proof of their collaboration disappear. But millions of documents remained intact.

On March 5th of this year, history repeated itself for Ziehm. From Berlin, he watched on television the dramatic images of protesters storming the headquarters of the Egyptian security services (Amn a-Dowla) in Cairo. Basil Al-Adel was among them. “I saw the news of the assault on Twitter. When I got there, they had forced open the huge metal door,” said Al-Adel, who is now the co-president of the Free Egyptians’ Party, founded after the January 25th revolution.

On the inside, the building had been hastily evacuated. Protesters discovered bags full of shredded papers, the remainder of the documents blackened by fire. In the labyrinthine underground of the fortress, the shelves were empty. “We were upset that we arrived too late,” Al-Adel said. “The archives had disappeared.”

Shortly thereafter, the Egyptian intelligence services were dissolved, or more precisely, renamed. The director of the “National Security Services” (Amn al-Watani) was fired. The military leadership launched an appeal on their Facebook group asking protesters in the name of national

security to turn in any stolen documents that were looted. These papers, military leaders said, contain highly confidential information pertaining to the government's battle against terrorism.

And the rest? And those reports about the dozens of years of spying on millions of citizens by an organization estimated to have deployed 100,000 agents and 200,000 informers, where did they go? "No one knows," sighs Sadat.

Al-Adel says that the afternoon before the protesters took over the building, witnesses saw trucks stationed in front, being loaded with sacks. "I think that is what sowed doubt and sparked the takeover," he said.

Pasting together shreds -- literally

But not all is lost. In Normannen Street, Ziehm points to a large plastic bag with thousands of pieces of shredded files. In 1990, the Berlin Archives inherited 15,000 of these bags of paper which employees labored to put back together by hand before manufacturing a machine especially designed for that purpose. Ninety miniscule pieces had to be put together to reconstitute a surface of paper the size of a post card.

In the weeks following the takeover of the security headquarters, Herbert Ziehm left for Cairo. At the El Sawy Cultural Center, he gave a lecture to an audience of pro-democracy Egyptians. "I told them that the priority should be locating the lost documents and securing them, then organizing control and access to the archives." One evening, upon returning to the hotel, an invitation from the Ministry of Interior was waiting for him. The director of information, Hani Abdul-Latif, met with Ziehm and questioned him about the machine that puts destroyed files back together again.

"The absence of rational management of these documents could hamper a democratic transition," Förster says. "First and foremost, how to find those who are guilty and judge or rehabilitate those who are suspected of wrongdoing?"

While Hosni Mubarak faces trial, a large part of the elite of the former regime is still in Egypt, going un-prosecuted. Military officers, politicians, businessmen – many of whom profited from the Mubarak regime, during which personal interest trumped that of the public.

"Not to mention the reports on the revolution are very compromising for the police, which bears responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of protesters," says Daniel Gerlach, the editor-in-chief of the German magazine Zenith and a specialist in the Middle East.

Egypt's secret police was known for using torture, kidnappings and assassinations. "These archives are also essential for historians to analyze the organization of power and its derivatives in Egypt as the study of the Stasi archives allowed us to understand how the totalitarian system of the ex-German Democratic Republic functioned," Gerlach said.

The Stasi exercised its force in psychological terror carried out by a network of surveillance tentacles. Its stunning efficiency rests in the pernicious idea of recruiting informants from a

target's friends, colleagues and even family members, resulting in an unsustainable atmosphere of paranoia and back-stabbing.

“Personally I am not for opening up the archives,” says Sadat, who failed in his bid for re-election to parliament in 2007, and whose brother spent one year in prison for having criticized the Egyptian military on television. “We have to create an independent entity to safeguard them. But Egyptians are less educated than people in Germany, and we are still too fragile to allow ourselves to add fuel to the fire.”

For Basil Al-Adel, a democracy cannot be built on forgetting. During the occupation of the intelligence headquarters, a colleague found a report on Al-Adel's former party, Al-Ghad. “He shouted to me – They're writing about you.” I opened the file and was shocked to find email exchanges between me and my wife. They were private, nothing to do with politics. Suddenly, I realized the size of this machine.

Basil Al-Adel hid the documents in a safe. He struggles to find the words: “Imagine... it is as though inside me something is broken, as if I will never feel any sort of privacy in my life gain.”

Upon returning to Cairo, Al-Adel says he will focus on creating, along with other victims, an association modeled on the Stasi Archives bureau in Berlin. And he wants to find the man who wrote the reports about him. “He wrote false statements about me, as if he took sadistic pleasure in thoroughly destroying me.”