

The Duke of Nablus

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THE NAME OF Munib al-Masri has recently come up as a possible candidate for Prime Minister of a Palestinian national unity government. Not being a member of either Fatah or Hamas, he is acceptable to both.

Al-Masri himself denies any such ambition. He says that he is too old (77), and that a younger generation of Palestinians should take over.

He also says that he is quite content with his present situation.

And so would you be.

THE WEST BANK city of Nablus nestles in the valley between two tall mountains, Ebal and Gerizim. Mount Gerizim is the more famous one, because it is sacred to the Samaritan people, who believe that God commanded the Israelites to build his temple there. For them, Jerusalem is just an upstart.

Mount Gerizim, 881 meters above sea level, towers 330 meters above the center of Nablus. It is mentioned many times in the Bible. There Jotham, the son of the judge Gideon, made his famous speech comparing politicians to the bramble, a good-for-nothing plant that bears no fruit, has no scent and provides no shade, which agreed to be the king of the trees after all the other trees declined the honor. Perhaps Munib al-Masri agrees with this lesson, which seems strangely relevant in many countries today.

If you walk along the main street of Nablus and raise your eyes to heaven, you see on the top of the mountain an imposing building with a dome. This is the home of al-Masri.

Well, "home" may be slight understatement. Actually, it is the most imposing private residence in Palestine and Israel, if not – as has been claimed – from Morocco to the border of India.

The al-Masri villa is an exact reproduction of Villa Capra, also known as La Rotonda, a unique architectural masterpiece some 60 km from Venice. When you stand in front of the building, you can't believe your eyes. Actually, you don't even know where the front is – because it has four "fronts", all with identical entrances, pillars and steps. When you enter through any one of them, you come to a wide circular foyer, from which all the rooms branch out. In the center stands an ancient Greek statue of Hercules. Over this three-floor-high central space towers the dome.

The marble for the floor and all the other building materials were brought from abroad. An Italian expert has joked that the Palestinian palace looks more like the original, and the Italian palazzo like a convincing copy.

That would have been more than enough. But it isn't.

All the rooms of the palace are crammed with works of art, collected by al-Masri over some 40 years. They are enough to fill an impressive museum. Paintings from renaissance masters to the moderns, fireplaces from Versailles, classic tables and

chairs from Spain, Tapestries from Flanders, chandeliers from Italy, and much, much more. Room after room.

Well, that should be more than enough. But it isn't.

When excavation work for the foundation started, three small ancient pottery sherds were discovered. The work was stopped and archeological diggings began. The results were staggering: a complete 4th century Byzantine monastery was uncovered. It stands there now with all its rooms, chapels and stables, surrounded by stout pillars on which the entire modern structure rests. One building on top of another.

Enough? Not nearly. The palace is surrounded by a huge estate, greenhouses, olive plantations, a pool and whatnot. But enough of that.

I MET al-Masri, a slim, tall gentleman, some twenty years ago, on one of my visits to Yasser Arafat in Tunis. Al-Masri belonged to the inner circle of the leader, and returned to Palestine with him.

Before that, he had served as a Jordanian cabinet minister and had been accused of helping Arafat and other Fatah leaders escape from Jordan during the bloody "Black September" of 1970.

Side by side with the masterpieces of art, the walls of the palace are covered with hundreds of photos of the owner with his American wife, his sons and daughters, and in the company of world figures. Among them, Yasser Arafat stands out. Al-Masri admires him.

Since that casual meeting in Tunis, I have followed his rare utterances. Every word he has said about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have come from me, and vice versa. Our ideas about the solution are very close.

Remarkably, he has remained a man of peace even after tragedy hit his family: on Naqba day, a few months ago, his grandson, who was studying at the American University in Beirut, joined the protesters who came south to the border fence. Israeli troops opened fire, the grandson was hit by a bullet – a prohibited dum-dum bullet, he says – which injured his spinal cord, liver and kidneys. The young man is now being treated in the US.

Since finishing the palazzo, al-Masri occupies himself with his many philanthropies, especially supporting the universities of Nablus, East Jerusalem and Beirut, and his wide-flung businesses. But he remains a passionately political person.

He named the palace "Palestine House" and maintains that his main purpose in building it there was saving the area for the Palestinian people. By building on top of the mountain, he prevented the establishment of an Israeli settlement there. Nablus is already surrounded by a cluster of settlements – some of them belonging to the most extreme neo-fascist tendencies. In one of them resides the rabbi whose book advocates the killing of non-Jewish children in certain circumstances. From these

settlements come the Jewish pogromists who regularly set fire to surrounding mosques. Talk about a villa in the jungle!

THE AL-MASRI family is one of the most distinguished in the country. Though the name means “the Egyptian”, the family comes originally from the Hejaz, in what is today Saudi Arabia. For centuries, the family has lived in Hebron and Jerusalem and then, for the last two centuries, in Nablus. (Nablus is the Arabic version of Neapolis, the town founded by the Emperor Vespasian some 1940 years ago, after he destroyed the nearby Jewish town of Sichem or Shechem.)

If this were England, Munib al-Masri would be a lord, if not the Duke of Nablus.

My first contact with the family came a few days after the 1967 war. At the time, few people believed that Israel could hold on to the newly occupied territories for more than a few weeks. The general preference was to return the West Bank to the Jordanian king. In the Knesset, I tried to convince the government to enable the Palestinians, instead, to set up a state of their own.

For that purpose, I made the rounds of the local Palestinian leaders, mostly the heads of the great families. One of them was Hikmet al-Masri, Munib’s uncle. I put to all of them in confidence the same question: if you had the choice of returning to Jordan or establishing a Palestinian state, which would you prefer? Their unanimous answer: Palestine, of course.

During a Knesset session, I advertised this fact, which was furiously denied by the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan. In the ensuing debate, this time with the Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol, I said that Dayan was consciously lying. Eshkol defended his minister heatedly, but being the person he was, the next day he sent me one of his chief advisors to ask what evidence I had. The protocol of this conversation, made by the advisor, stated: “There is no difference between deputy Avnery’s information and my own. However, he agrees with me that no Palestinian state without East Jerusalem is possible. Since the Government of Israel has decided to annex East Jerusalem, deputy Avnery’s proposal is impossible to realize.”

When I recounted this to Munib al-Masri last week, he shook his head sadly.

HOW IS it, he asked me, that the Israelis know nothing about the Palestinians, while the Palestinians know so much about the Israelis?

The fact cannot be denied. Israeli schoolchildren learn practically nothing about the people with whom our existence is intertwined. Nothing about Islam, nothing about the Koran, nothing about the glories of Arab history.

Many years ago, in a Knesset debate on education, I put forward the idea that every pupil in Israel learn not only the history of his people – the Jewish or the Arab, respectively – but also the history of the country from ancient days to the present, Canaanites, Israelites, Samaritans, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, Turks, Palestinians, British, Israelis, as a way to see what unites us. For some reason, this amused the Minister of Education so much that from then on he called me “the Mameluke”.

As it is, when a young Israeli joins the army at 18, he “knows” only that Islam is a barbaric, anti-Semitic religion, and that the Arabs want to kill him for no reason at all.

Perhaps that is natural. An oppressed people has a great incentive to know about the occupier, but the occupier has no incentive to study the occupied beyond the realm of military intelligence. The more so since an occupier tends to regard the occupied as an inferior race, in order to justify the occupation to the world and to himself.

Every conflict engenders mistrust, prejudice, stereotypes, hatred, demonization. When it goes on for generations, like this one, all these are multiplied. To make peace, they have to be overcome. That’s why people like Munib al-Masri are so important. I wish that every Israeli could meet Palestinians like him.

I also hope he becomes Palestinian Prime Minister, presiding over a cabinet of national reconciliation between the Palestinian factions, ultimately leading to the reconciliation between our two peoples.