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Good Lentils Make Good Neighbors

In a two-room apartment on the outskirts of Cologne, Germany, lives a pensioner with no savings, who at this point has donated 400,000 euros to projects in Israel | How did Palestinian refugee Akram Jalil-Schwartz manage to collect such a sum? Well, majadra | Every euro that his bowls of lentils dishes bring in is used to support joint Jewish/Arab schools in Israel | Here he explains what caused him to invest everything in this project, how he adopted a family name with a Jewish feel, and why he brought German youth with him to Israel

Smadar Perry | Shaul Golan

Over about four and a half years, Akram Jalil-Schwartz has managed to save, collect, and donate 400,000 euros to various activities in Israel. And he continues to accumulate funds in his own unique way, to bring as donations on his next visit to Israel, a year from now. Did we say he ‘managed’ to donate? Because it wasn’t so simple The Ramle municipality and the Lod municipality did not try to help the tall 83-year-old man, who looks much younger than his age. “Problems arose,” he summarizes in a nutshell the less-than-enthusiastic response he received from the mayors’ bureaus. “Either they didn’t want to set up joint schools for Jews and Arabs, or they didn’t want to receive money from an Arab refugee. I came, heard, understood, and left, without making a disturbance.” After he built a church in Ramle, and donated money here and there to needy people in Israel and East Jerusalem, Akram Jalil found, entirely by chance, the Yad BeYad (Hand-in-Hand) organization, which operates mixed schools in Israel. He saw Jewish and Arab children together, was charmed, and decided that this was where he wanted to put his money.

When he left his relatives’ house in Ramle this week, to fly back to his home outside Cologne, he promised that the “next time, as always, I’ll bring everything that’s needed.”

“Before they issued my documents, the clerk said, ‘here is a serious proposal to help you become assimilated into our country,’ and she added the name Schwartz. I didn’t care, if it makes it easier for the Germans, they can call me Schwartz.”

**How much?**

"Everything I manage to save.”

He’s not interested in publicity or public relations. In fact, this is the first time his story is being published in Israel. He almost had to be forced by the organization to be interviewed. “I don’t need certificates of appreciation or for people to know my name,” he explains. “It’s enough for me what I do. I love to contribute; I teach my family to contribute because I believe it’s important. If everyone would do something for others, there would be true peace between us. It’s so clear to me, and I try to instill in others the idea of giving and contributing.”

He’s married to Helga, his second wife. She got caught up in his madness, and helps him collect the money in his extraordinary way. “Of course they tell me I’m crazy,” confirming what they tell him straight out here in Ramle, and hint to back in Cologne. “In Germany, they tell me with cool politeness, ‘you’re a bit strange’; in Israel they say it very clearly, in Hebrew and Arabic, ‘you’re really crazy.’ It doesn’t bother me. In any case, whoever hears about it has a hard time taking it in. Only my family members in Ramle, Jaffa, and Akko understand me properly. They conduct their lives among Jews and Arabs, among Christians like us and Muslims, and Jews, and their lives look just fine.”

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For 35 years he has been visiting once a year. “There’s always at least one wedding in the family, and I happily combine celebrations.” This time too he prepared for the wedding of his sister’s granddaughter, camped out in the house of one of his nephews in Ramle, and went out for trips to visit kindergartens and schools of the Hand-in-Hand organization. He visited nursery schools in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Nazareth. Interestingly enough, no particular girl or boy has captured Akram’s heart. Ostensibly alienated, he doesn’t even know the parents on the Jewish or Arab side, “but there are always numbers running around in my head. If I do good for 40 children in one kindergarten, these children have parents, and relatives, and neighbors; the rumor gets around.”

**About your activity?**

“Of course not! About the possibility of living together, Jews and Arabs, in one place”.

**I suppose you want to fast-forward and try to arrange Israel’s relations with the Arab world?**

“Absolutely not. Israel’s relations with the Arab world are complicated for all kinds of reasons. I understand exactly, and I don’t like what is happening. The Arab countries have problems with Israel, they don’t want the Jews and they don’t want the Israeli Arabs, and they have complicated issues within themselves. I don’t even dream of entering into the internal wars of the Arabs. And I have no solutions to offer.”

*Inroads through Food*

Akram’s answer lies in giant decorated bowls meant for use at large events: municipal celebrations, weddings, post-birth ceremonies, parties for high school graduates. Akram-Schwartz – that’s how they know him, by the last name he was given in Germany, a name with a Jewish ring to it – comes with volunteer helpers, the bowls, the tablecloths, and the Arab menu. Always majadra. They charge into the kitchen, cook, set the tables, the guests lick their fingers, and the rest is history.

“I don’t need a lot,” explains the pensioner, “my life has always been modest. They pay me for preparing a large meal, and I take only a small amount of the payment for myself, for the raw materials. Sometimes, the customer adds 100 or 200 euros, as a donation to my project in Israel, and I add it to the money I contribute to Hand-in-Hand. For example, at a wedding party that I arranged last month, the parents on both sides decided to donate 200 euros. I added that to the package that I’m bringing. The rumor has spread, and about 20% of the annual amount comes from donations from German citizens who’ve heard about my project.”

Akram’s life story may offer insight as to how he ended up at this point. He was born in 1936 to an Orthodox Christian family in Ramle, six brothers and sisters. His mother died when he was seven, and he was sent to study in Nazareth, “and about three years later, we started to learn how to cook.” Four years later, he moved to Bethlehem, and when he was 15, it was decided that he would run away to Lebanon, as part of a group of 14 children under the tutelage of the principal of the Christian school. The children, the principal, and the priest Daoud Haddad crossed the border in a truck loaded with furniture and set themselves up in Beirut in the priest’s brother’s house. Two weeks later, they moved to a Palestinian refugee camp.

“Despite what people may think about refugee camps, I actually have very good memories of that period,” says Akram, with a twinkle in his eye. “In the morning we would gather around the principal and study, in the afternoon, we were busy with cleaning and errands, then we were engaged in cooking until the early evening, and then we went out to play, ate again, and went to sleep.”

Once or twice a year, Akram would travel from Beirut, via Syria and Jordan, to Bethlehem, to see his father and brothers and sisters. “From my time in Lebanon, I have on the whole pleasant memories. I was surrounded by friends, and the Lebanese didn’t interfere. It was just strange for me to spend so much time without my family. I missed them, but I learned how to get along.”

At 17, the priest asked him, So now what? “And I told him right away that I wanted to study engineering,” he says. Akram boarded a plane and landed in Germany. “The German principal of the school in Bethlehem recommended me, and a special department at the UN intervened on my behalf and helped me get authorization to live in Germany.” The UN also helped him send very brief letters to his family in Israel, which was not a trivial matter at the time: “Only 36 words per letter. I went to study electrical engineering, was accepted for work at an AEG factory, and later on, at Siemens. I enjoyed it very much, and in my free time, I cooked for myself and my friends.”

In 1965, after living in Germany for 20 years, he received a passport for the first time. Until that point, he had held refugee status. Armed with the exit documents and a new passport, he started to make visits to his family in Ramle. The German interior ministry decided to convince Akram Jalil to take on the additional name, Schwartz. “It was difficult for them to pronounce my Arabic name,” he twists his face as he tries to imitate a German accent. “Before they issued my documents, the clerk said, ‘I have a serious suggestion that’ll help you become assimilated here.’ With my consent, she tacked the name Schwartz onto my name, and that’s how I’m known in Germany to this day.”

**Who chose that Jewish-sounding name for you?**

“The clerk did, and I didn’t mind. After all, I need to get along with the Germans and live with them. If it’s easier for them to call me Schwartz, it doesn’t bother me. My family in Ramle continued calling me Akram Jalil. Schwartz is only for Germany.”

*Cross of Parsley*

In the midst of his academic studies and beginning to work, he married hist first wife and had a daughter, Janet, now 49; “but the marriage didn’t last.” Twenty-five years ago, he moved in with Helga, who is divorced and the mother of a daughter, and they live in an apartment building 20 kilometers from Cologne. “Just imagine, I live in a two-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor, with no elevator. Every time a large container of yogurt or sacks of rice and lentils arrive, I go down to bring up the goods to our small apartment.”

**Even today, at your age?**

“Of course. I have no problem picking up the sacks and bringing them upstairs. If I decide to baby myself, there are always young people who help me.”

All in all, I have to say, you’ve made big donations thanks to the majadra. Other people make contributions after they’ve made money for themselves. “So what?” he protests, “I don’t need much, those donations make me happy. And I’ll tell you a secret from my private kitchen: in every large bowl of cooked food – eggplant, couscous, beef, or chicken – I always add a green cross. Sometimes it’s a cross of chopped parsley, sometimes hot green pepper, or onion. It’s not just ornamentation, it’s a blessing. You know, I prepare food first of all for the eyes, and the color green has become my trademark: an Arab, a Christian, who sees and experiences the situation, and wants to make peace.”

Daoud, Akram’s sister’s grandson, tells me how they wander back and forth between the stores in Ramle. “He passes between the stalls, sees the prices, compares, and buys the cheapest.”

**Why?**

“Because he allocates the difference between the highest and lowest prices for donation,” says Daoud. “That’s how he accumulates the money. You see, he’s not a rich man.” The truth is, I tell Daoud, I’ve never heard of anyone like him. And he smiles, “I’ve also never heard of anyone like Akram, but we’ve learned so much from him about brotherly love and good neighborly relations. Look, here in Ramle, the building next to us is a Yemenite synagogue. Next to it are the new tall buildings where Jews live, and we all live on Moshe Rabbeinu [Moses] Street. I can assure you that we have excellent relations between us. The Arabs don’t bother the Jews, and vice versa.”

After visits to Jaffa, Kfar Kara, and Haifa, Akram traveled to Jericho, and made stops in Ramallah and East Jerusalem. “In Hebron, I contributed to an old-age home,” he says. “To visits to the West Bank I brought chess sets, sewing machines, and everything I could collect in Germany. But most of my attention goes to Arabs and Jews in Israel. It’s important to me that they get to know each other from an early age.

In Germany, they’ve dubbed him “the peace chef,” awarded him honorary degrees, and he has brought with him, with the permission of the families in Germany, a delegation of young people; seven high school girls and three boys who helped him cook, on a voluntary basis, cared for children in kindergartens and at the joint schools, and “learned an important lesson in coexistence,” he explains. “Because of the Holocaust, it is very important especially for young Germans to travel to Israel to see that it is possible to live differently, that the Jews should be respected.”

The Hand-in-Hand organization operates six joint schools and eight joint kindergartens for Jews and Arabs, using a unique arrangement: each school or kindergarten class has two teachers or counselors, one Arab and one Jewish, who deliver the lessons in both languages. The funding is shared by the Ministry of Education and the donors. Akram Schwartz is the most important person hidden among them. We sit in the dim apartment in Ramle around a long, narrow dining table. Akram tells me that he has not taken care of his own finances for his old age. “I have no major savings in the bank.”

**Who will help you?**

“There are a lot of people that I have done big favors for, and I hope they’ll remember me. If not, I’ll walk my final road inconspicuously, with a completely clear conscience.”

Akram’s Majadra

**Ingredients for four portions**

1 cup lentils

1 cup long-grain rice or coarse bulgur

4 cups water

500 grams onion, sliced into rings

½ teaspoon pepper

½ teaspoon cumin

1 tablespoon meat stock

**For serving**

3 containers yogurt / 500 grams chopped tomatoes /

300 grams tzatziki

**Preparation**

Rinse the lentils and soak them overnight in 4 cups of water. (You can shorten the time and soak the lentils for two hours in warm water.)

Place the lentils in a pot, add salt, pepper, cumin, meat stock, and bring to a boil. After about 10 minutes, add the rice or bulgur, and mix well. Cover the pot and return to a boil. Lower the flame and cook for another 20 minutes, without stirring.

In a frying pan, fry the onion until crispy. Place the rice and lentils in a dish, arrange the crispy onions on top, and serve with yogurt, tzatziki, or tomato salad.

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