

# Private Libraries in Nablus Have a Bright Past and an Uncertain Future

By Lara Kanaan

In Nablus, there are a few steps that separate two places, brought together by geography and segregated by cultural values. The first place is el-Mansheya Park on Shuwaitra Street, in the western part of Nablus. The second is a store, which I encountered by chance, that sells men's clothing and antiques, located on the sidewalk, opposite of the municipal library.

The park has a rich history, starting from its establishment during the Ottoman era, continuing into the early twentieth century when it hosted the conferences of the Palestinian national movement, after which in 1960 it became the site of the first public library in Palestine, and ending at the present time when I met with its director, Professor Dhirar Touqan. In his office, behind his back, are clues of King Hussain's visit to its grand opening, during the administration of Ahmed Assrouri, then mayor of Nablus. The news clip, placed in a golden frame, demonstrates the importance of this event.

Only a few steps from the office lies a scrap shop full of used items. I entered it accidentally to find it selling all types of science books spread on the ground, on old shelves, and in open bags showing dust-filled volumes selling at a low price based on the size of the book

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and its history, regardless of its scientific value, or even the sentimental value held by its owner, to whom the establishment of the Municipal Library, located across the street, is attributed.

These books, with all the sorrow and sadness surrounding them, belonged to the library of Dr. Ahmed Assrouri, who had a great interest in preserving culture and science in Nablus, as well as in developing its water and electricity networks. The loss of the Assrouri library and the scattering of Dr. Assrouri's books prompted this author to investigate this sore topic.

Samer Khanfar, the owner of the scrap shop, cannot assess the sentimental value of Assrouri's books. For him, Assrouri was a respected man who owned a private library that contained many books on many scientific, literary, and historical subjects. Despite the fact that Khanfar was convinced that the collection contained old manuscripts worth a great deal of money and whose publication date surpassed a hundred years, he sold many of them to people looking for old books from the occupied territories of Palestine and



Figure 1. King Hussain with Professor Touqan at the library



Figure 2. The Nablus Public Library, Palestine's first public library

who had an interest in acquiring them for many reasons. Khanfar also sold part of the collection to the people of the city who were looking to get educated at a low price.

Khanfar purchased the entirety of Assrouri's library of more than 600 books for only 2,000 shekels (less than 600 dollars), hoping it contained ancient and precious books. It included treasures: There was the complete set of the British encyclopaedia, all volumes of the famous Sanhuri law books, including commentaries,<sup>1</sup> and the novels of Naguib Mahfouz and Ihsan Abdel Quddous<sup>2</sup>, along with international novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Zorba*. Moreover, we found autographed gift books, a book on the laws of the land in Palestine during the British Mandate, a famous book of songs in music and literature, in addition to books on history, geography, jurisprudence, and many medical books in foreign languages. We also found a rare report on the achievements of the Municipality of Nablus while Assrouri was mayor. All these books were scattered here and there awaiting their buyers like the many scraps that filled Khanfar's small shop. The library's devaluation breaks the heart.

Talking with the merchant Khanfar prompted me to search for other private libraries that may have been neglected and sold, leading me to Dawood Makkawi, who owns a library not far from Khanfar's shop. Makkawi told me of a classmate of his, an owner of a wood burning oven shop for Arabic bread, who witnessed the senseless destruction of books left in the inheritance of a man from a famous Nablus family who served as a member of its local municipal government. The books reached a baker who used them to fire his oven. Makkawi adds, "I found the books on the floor, with magazines and old important periodicals, donated by their owners to the baker to be used for fire. I took pity on the books and chose many of them to add to my personal home collection, due to their importance and their informational, scientific, and historical value."

Makkawi also told us about another library that belonged to an old Nablus scholar from Al-Yasmina neighborhood, Sheikh Ahmad Alhamash, who owned a rare collection of religious books in ancient Arabic and Turkish languages, written in Arabic letters. He told us how people neglected these books and stole many of the manuscripts, and how moths destroyed the rest and ruined knowledge that would

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<sup>1</sup> Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri (1895-1971 CE) was an eminent Egyptian legal scholar who greatly influenced the drafting of legal codes in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Kuwait. His multi-volume commentary on civil law, completed a year before his death, is still considered authoritative in many parts of the Arab world.

<sup>2</sup> Ihsan Abdel Quddous (1919 -1990 CE) was a well-known Egyptian writer and editor. Many of his novels were adapted into film.

certainly have been important to the people and their city. The pigeon who was living in Alhamash's abandoned house participated in the crime, emptying its filth on what remained. The same happened to the library of one of the founders of a trade union. He was a member of the Palestinian Communist Party who sold his inherited home, including a valuable library that was left wasting in cardboard boxes and that was not discovered until now.

Makkawi added that a son of one of the esteemed families in the city tragically ended his family's retention of the library that he inherited from the scientists and intellectuals of the family. After one of the universities refused to accept this library as a condition of his employment, he decided to sell it to the Hebrew University for tens of thousands of dollars. The library contained many rare manuscript documents of correspondence between members of his family and the Ottoman State.

A similar shocking ending also came to the library of Sheikh Assafarini, one of the most important Hanbali scholars<sup>3</sup> in the city of Nablus during the 18th century CE (twelfth AH<sup>4</sup>). Sheikh Youssef Alouzbuki, the secretary-general of manuscripts at the al-Aqsa mosque, told me that the library was filled with rare manuscripts of Hanbali scholars and sold to the Ashatti family in Damascus. But part of the Ashatti library, including the Assafarini library, disappeared for a hundred years, to be later discovered in the Princeton University catalog in the Avraham Yahuda section, a collection of Arabic and Islamic manuscripts. The collection settled in the late 1960s at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in accordance with a Jewish will.

The above-mentioned stories have prompted many graduate students and researchers to visit the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to access documents and sources that might enrich their research. One example cited by Makkawi was a researcher who was studying the 1936 strike,<sup>5</sup> and who obtained from the University a complete set of data issued by the revolutionary factions. In many ways, the Hebrew University, which is aware of the importance of Palestinian books and libraries, has relied on staff who specialized in collecting books published in the West Bank, and at times has relied on Palestinians.

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<sup>3</sup> The Hanbali school is one of the four traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It is named for its founder, the Iraqi jurist and theologian Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855 CE).

<sup>4</sup> "AH" is an abbreviation for "Anno Hegirae"—or the Year of the Hegira. According to the Western dating system, that was in 622 CE.

<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to the general strike throughout Palestine against British rule and Zionist settlement. It began in Nablus in April 1936 CE and continued until October of that year.

Some library owners, fearing the loss of their books, were driven to include a specific paragraph in their wills to bequeath them to someone in the family. One such case was the historian Ihsan Innimr (1905-1985 CE) who wrote about 50 books, of which 34 were published in his lifetime. The most important of these was his reference book on Nablus, *History of Jabal Nablus and Bilqaa*. At the end of his life, Innimr asked that the rest of his books be published, that not a single book leave his personal library, which contained more than a thousand books, and that the library should become the private property of his only daughter Khadija. I met Khadija at her house in the historic Qasr Innimr (Tiger Palace), where she showed me the contents of the library, which she maintains and cares for, but which she prevents researchers from using.

The heirs of many libraries also sought to preserve their relatives' libraries by donating them to public libraries—including, for example, the Nablus Public Library and the Annajah University Library, which stored the collections in a dedicated area. Visitors to the Nablus Public Library will notice in the archives section on the second floor the donated private collections, such as the libraries of Kadri Toukan,<sup>6</sup> the historian Ibrahim al-Tani, Dr. Mahmoud Attallah,<sup>7</sup> and Dr. Shaukat Zeid Al-Kilani (1920-2002),



Figure 3. Some of Assrouri's books were purchased by Khanfar, the owner of a scrap shop.

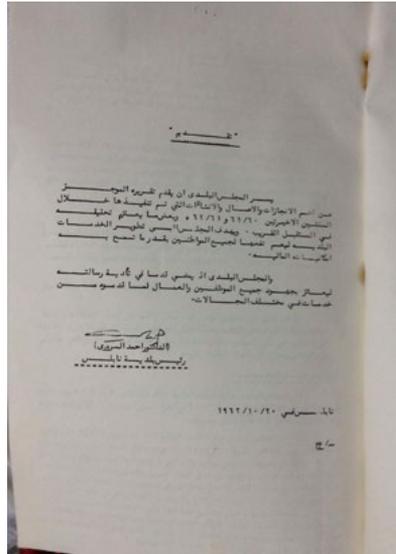


Figure 4. Rare report of the Nablus Municipality

<sup>6</sup> Kadri Toukan (1910-1971 CE) born in Nablus, was a high school principal, member of the Jordanian Parliament, and in the 1960s was appointed foreign minister of Jordan.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Mahmoud Attallah (1953-2002 CE) was the chief historian of An-Najah

the first member of the Board of Trustees of Annajah University and its president for two years.

It is also worth mentioning here that some Palestinian families have given their personal libraries to the University of Jordan. One example has been the Zatir family, which donated the library of Adel Zu'aiter, the Palestinian historian, translator, and author from Nablus.<sup>8</sup> According to Adel Zu'aiter's daughter Dr. Nayla Zu'aiter, a lecturer at the National University, part of his library was given to the University of Jordan and part to the Nablus Municipal Library after its establishment.

Zuhair Aldebaï, the head of the cultural centers in the municipality of Nablus discusses the end of the generation that cared for libraries and books. He says, "One assumes that an entity, regardless of what governs it, be it the municipality of Nablus or the Ministry of Culture, should record the number of private libraries (at home) so that, at a minimum, there's a document of their existence. Unfortunately, to-date, this has not been done."

Journals of travelers who have visited Nablus contain praise of its scientists, historians, and scholars. Many of them enhanced their knowledge and benefited from the city's libraries and its valued manuscripts. What is most frightening these days is the growing indifference of the library heirs; for them, books are monetized inheritance, and a burden, as they say. Nablus is losing its cultural and scientific history, wisdom, and knowledge.

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National University in Nablus.

<sup>8</sup> Adel Zu'aiter (1897-1957 CE) is best known for his translation of numerous works from French into Arabic.