WEEKEND

A once and future home

Eleonore Merza was born to a Jewish mother and Muslim father who was expelled from Kuneitra to Syria in 1967 but always considered himself a refugee from the Caucasus because of his family's roots there. Her doctoral work on two Circassian villages in Israel led to a historical, and emotional, journey.

Amira Hass

Merza. "One time at the airport they said to me, 'If your mother is Jewish, that means you're with us.' And on another occasion, 'Dad is a Muslim, Mom is a Jew, what do you choose?'"

Photos by Gil Eliahu

Extending a welcoming hand in a warm, inviting gesture, Eleonore Merza says: Please, come in. In another minute she might have asked: Who wants coffee and who wants tea? It was a moment that fused a reenacted past with an imagined future, next to a mound of basalt stones in the Golan Heights. Merza, 36, wants to build her house here, on the exact spot where her family's house once stood.

Mount Hermon glistens white to the north, extinct volcanoes dominate the west, Highway 98 runs between this site and the new school and the water tower. This is exactly the same view her father saw out of the window 50 or 55 years ago: a generous plain that stretches into the distance uninterrupted, with occasional hilly protrusions. Except that he knew the hills as Jabel esh-Sheikh, Jabel Abu Nada and Jabel Quneitra. Or Jabel Mansoura, named after his native village. Other than the new school and the water tower, all the buildings in Mansoura have been razed, including the old school building. Merza, with her dream of reviving the place, is the progenitor of additional, surprising points of confluence: between times, people, religions, adopted memories, geography, buildings.

On the day we visited Mansoura, one Saturday in late January, the echoes of explosions recalled the existence of the city of Quneitra and the horrific war that has been waged for the past five years across the border that is so close. One of Merza's aunts was killed in this war. Her father, Farouq, was in high school in Quneitra when the war broke out in 1967. Thus was he spared having to witness the expulsion of the 1,100 inhabitants of his village and of the Heights' 130,000 other residents from their homes. He was thus able to evade passing on that brutal memory to his daughter. When she grew up and started to ask direct questions about the past, she looked for but could not find other survivors from the village to tell her about their expulsion at the hands of the Israel Defense Forces.

Eleonore Merza is dreaming of or planning to return to the village of Mansoura in the Golan Heights, the object of her invented, concrete longings. Her father, though, clings to a very different ethos of return and yearning: to the Caucasus.

The Merzas are Circassians, members of the Abkhazi tribe, one of 12 tribes that spearheaded a struggle against the Russian empire and its craving for expansion: In the 1860s, after slaughtering about 1.5 million of them and conquering their country, Russia expelled about 90 percent of the remaining 1.5 million Circassians from the Caucasus. The Ottoman Empire welcomed them gladly; their reputation as courageous warriors preceded them. The Ottoman authorities dispersed them in their territory and sent them to settle frontier regions.

Merza's great-grandfather, Mamet Merzamwkhwo, was among the surviving refugees. In 1885, after spending a decade in the Ottoman-ruled Balkans, he and his family arrived in Mansoura, one of 12 Circassian villages that were established in the Golan Heights.

"To this day, the Circassians, including my father, say that their home is the Caucasus," Eleonore relates. She says she finds parallels between the discourse of *aliyah*, Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, and the Circassian discourse of returning to the Caucasus. Her father made a trip to that region two decades ago to search for his family's roots.

"The Circassians don't have a republic of their own," the daughter explains. "Stalin chopped up their territory among three republics. The trip was a big shock for my father. He had fantasies that are typical of people in exile. He always told me that there was no poverty among the Circassians, that there was solidarity, you didn't have to lock your door. But then he visited Maykop, the capital of the Republic of Adygea (where his family comes from). As he sat in a café, he saw a young man chase an old woman and steal her bag. That really jolted him." He was also stunned to see a large branch of McDonald's in the city. Still, he says that this is where wants to die: in the Caucasus.

Two genocides

Merza is an anthropologist, and her doctoral dissertation, which she wrote (in French) at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, in Paris, is titled, "Neither Jews nor Arabs in Israel. Identity of a minority in a space of war and in dialectics of negotiations. Test case of the Circassians (Adygheans) of Kfar Kama and Reyhaniya" – a reference to the two Circassian villages in Israel. She knows from her fieldwork that the people in Kfar Kama lock their doors and that there are robberies there. "Although I was always told that the thieves were Bedouin, not us," she says.

Even before she embarked on her doctorate, about a decade ago, she knew the importance of hierarchy in the Circassian tradition. Before the expulsion from the Caucasus, there was intra-tribal hierarchy (princes, nobles, freeman and slaves, as a Circassian blogger, Nazir Karaf, who lives in Canada, writes).

"After the genocide and the expulsion," Merza relates, "when members of all the classes of the whole tribe were living together, with the same trauma, the hierarchy shifted to one existing between the tribes, with the criterion being the quality of the struggle [waged by each tribe] against the Russians and its duration."

From her father, she learned that they belong to the princely class – and, moreover, to a tribe that is high up in the intertribal hierarchy. "He was proud of having an aristocratic background," Merza admits. "That is part of his identity. He always told me that, because of my origins, I did not have the right to behave like just anyone."

It's not self-evident that her father would attach importance to his high social status, because he himself shattered traditional frameworks. After the expulsion from the Golan Heights, he lived in Syria, where he studied physics, went on to Algeria to continue his education, and from there proceeded to France, to visit a friend, on his way to the Soviet Union to pursue his physics studies.

Farouq Merza was a communist. On the one hand, he suggested to his daughter when she was young that she learn Russian because it's necessary to know the oppressor's language; but at the same time, he told her that the Soviets were not like the Russians. In Paris, at a meeting of a Communist Party cell, he met the love of his life, Chantal. Chantal's mother was from the Dayan family – Algerian Jews; her father was from the Christian, Alsace-based Karl family. The two communists – Muslim and Jew – married in Paris and had two children there, Eleonore and her brother, Alexandre-Indar.

"We always celebrated the bar mitzvahs of cousins on my mother's side, Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha with Dad's family, and Christmas like all the French people," she recalls with a smile. "It was natural. But there was always some sort of tension in the family, between those who were Zionist Jews and my parents."

Members of the Communist Party liked to cite them as proof that a Jew and a Muslim could live together.

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Eleonore's Jewish grandmother was born in Paris, but still spoke a North African dialect of Arabic. She was hidden in World War II, then joined the underground, where she met her future husband, a communist, who had escaped from a detention camp. Some of her family perished during the German occupation. Eleonore thus grew up in the shadow of two genocides: the one perpetrated by the Russians against the Circassians, and the one perpetrated by the Germans against the Jews.

"'It's not surprising that things are difficult for you,' my psychologist told me," Merza says.

A family 'cocktail'

Her family's diversity and "cocktail" of identities always seemed natural to her. "The first people who made me realize that there was something special about my story were the security people at Ben-Gurion Airport," she says. In April 2006 she came to Israel to begin the fieldwork on her anthropological study.

"The border control person in the airport looked at my father's name in my French passport and asked me, 'What kind of name is this?' I answered perfectly naturally, 'Farouq.' He said, 'In other words, an Arab.' I replied, 'Not an Arab, a Muslim.'

"I was taken to a different room and held there for a long time. Then I was taken to an office and again asked questions, names. Then they asked about my mother. It never occurred to me to say she was Jewish. I said she was French. Half-Alsatian, half-Algerian. 'So she's a Muslim,' they said. No, I said. 'Ah, then she's a Christian,' they went on. No, I replied. 'Then what is she?' A Jew, I replied. They told me there was a problem, because I didn't fit the categories.

"During one of my trips someone from border control or field security at the airport told me, 'It would be better for you if you would only be a Muslim, because then we'd know what category to put you in.' One time I was asked at Ben-Gurion Airport if Mom and Dad were still speaking to each other. Another time they said to me, 'If your mother is Jewish, that means you're with us.' And on another occasion, 'Dad is a Muslim, Mom is a Jew, what do you choose?'

"The whole discussion was, 'Are you with us or with them?' I was astonished to discover that Israeli identity is built on that contradistinction. So I decided to change the subject of my doctoral dissertation – because of the binary approach I found, which is so different from the multiplicity of identities that I was born into."

Merza's initial plan had been to compare the features of collective identity in the Circassian diaspora in Syria, Jordan and Israel. But she was always drawn to Israel/Palestine, and even though her doctoral supervisor warned her not to get bogged down in that morass, she decided to focus on the two villages in Israel.

"The episode in the airport taught me that I also had to examine how the state creates its categories of citizenship. So, instead of focusing on the way the community creates its collective memory and citizenship, I also examined how the state goes about doing this."

In Israel, she naturally went to the Golan Heights. In contrast to the expulsion and the exile after Israel occupied that territory, the destruction, there was initially something abstract for her. "When you don't make an effort, you don't see many ruins," she says. "But of course I knew that the whole Golan had been emptied of its inhabitants in 1967, and that only the Druze remained."

She was unable to locate her ancestral village. "All the ruins are alike," she observes. Indeed, memorial plaques have never been erected by the Israeli authorities for the approximately 200 villages and other, smaller communities that had dotted the Golan Heights and were depopulated and destroyed by Israel in 1967.

The "new" school in Mansoura, built in 1965.

Arms of the dead

In 2011, Merza was in touch with Eitan Bronstein, one of the founders of Zochrot – a group of Israeli activists that seeks to expand awareness of the Nakba, and tries to introduce in the daily discourse notions of decolonization and the right of return. Merza asked for Bronstein's help. Together they located the razed village of Mansoura.

They discovered that its cemetery was almost intact, amid tall, dense trees. Some of the graves bore headstones with inscriptions in Arabic. Today the cemetery is surrounded by orchards of Kibbutz Merom Hagolan, which is built on Mansoura's lands.

As a boy, Merza's father thought the trees in the cemetery were like the arms of the dead, and was afraid to go there, especially in the dark, she says. According to family folklore, her great-grandfather Mamet, who, sensing that his end was near, wheeled around on his horse and bade his fellow villagers farewell. He then went to the cemetery, dug a grave and lay in it, until he died. The year was 1947.

Mamet had played an important part in the improvement of relations with the Druze, Merza relates. In 1894, a violent feud erupted between Mansoura and the nearby Druze village of Majdal Shams. Some Mansoura residents killed a few Druze, and the victims' brothers came to the village to exact revenge. A bloody battle was fought, after which the Circassians did not return the bodies of the Druze; they were buried in a mass grave. After that, hostile relations prevailed between the two villages.

Tayyasir Mar'i, a resident of Majdal Shams who is a friend of Merza and Bronstein, is familiar with this episode from other angles.

"There were no boundaries or quarrels between the Druze and the Circassians," he maintains. "It was the Bedouin who caused the problems. A few Druze from [the village of] Bukata were grinding wheat in the water mills at the Banias river. Bedouin dressed as Circassians killed three of them. Druze came and took revenge in Mansoura; they destroyed homes and expelled the villagers."

The Circassians, says Mar'i, complained to the Turkish authorities in Damascus, who dispatched soldiers, apparently together with Circassians, and destroyed Majdal Shams, Mar'i says. Although the local Druze leader apologized to the authorities and to the Circassians, the hostility between the two communities, which were separated by 12 kilometers, persisted.

Such was the situation until Mamet Merzam was injured in an accident when returning home from Palestine, sometime in the 1930s. Near Majdal Shams, he fell and was badly hurt. Despite the enmity between Mansoura and the Druze village, a resident of the latter, Sheikh Kenaz Abu Saleh found him and took him to his home, where his family looked after the injured man for three months, until he was recovered. The two families then signed a non-belligerency agreement.

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Some 70 years later, when Farouq Merza heard about his daughter's intention to visit Majdal Shams, he gave her a letter of greeting to Abu Saleh's family. Mar'i, who is the director of the organization Golan: For the Development of Arab Villages, connected Merza with Sheikh abu Saleh's grandson, who was familiar with this piece of family history.

'Proust's madeleines'

In the meantime, Bronstein and Merza became a couple, and decided together to track down the site of her ancestral home. Everything would have been a lot simpler if her father, Farouq, who lives in France, had accompanied them and simply pointed to a tree, a bend in the road, a feature in the landscape that he remembers from his childhood. But he is a Syrian and is denied entry to Israel. Nor would he come even if he could: The pain is too strong.

From memory, however, he drew his daughter a scheme of Mansoura and its buildings: the old school, the new school, the mosque, the house of the *mukhtar* (headman).

It then turned out that Survey of Israel, the mapping department of the Housing and Construction Ministry, has an aerial photograph of Mansoura that was taken by the Israeli air force on February 14, 1969. It shows that less than two years after the expulsion of its residents, the village's buildings were still standing. A 1971 aerial photo, however shows only ruins: Israel apparently razed the village to the ground at the end of 1969.

Merza and Bronstein showed Farouq the aerial photograph, and he immediately pointed to the location of his house. After comparing it with a Google Earth map, they located the site of the house, on August 30, 2015. They filmed the landscape, and immediately sent the clip to Farouq. They had found the right place, he said, moved and excited – "which is not typical of Circassians," his daughter Eleonore says now.

She can't quite say what is Circassian about her. "Actually, the Jew and the Muslim were always stronger sides in my identity," she explains, adding, "And left-ism. And feminism." Her father is upset that despite the upbringing he gave her, she is not really Circassian: Circassians are restrained, they don't betray emotions the way she does.

Of all the diverse landscapes that figure in the history of Merza's family's cocktail, why did she choose to identify most with the Golan Heights and the demolished village? Her explanation is simple. Until the age of 5 she lived in Amman. Her physicist father and her engineer uncle developed solar energy systems there, in the wake of their father, who already in the 1950s and '60s had developed wind turbines to produce electricity in Mansoura. She attended a French school there, but lived among the Circassian community, including many relatives.

When Merza first visited Israel in 2006, she stayed in Jerusalem's colorful Nahlaot neighborhood and wandered about in the alleys of the Old City. She discovered that she felt at home – with Druze in the Golan, Palestinians, migrants from Africa and Mizrahim (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent). The aromas of cardamom and coffee, she says, "were for me Proust's madeleines."

Her friends in France – activists in pro-Palestinian groups and supporters of BDS – were dumbfounded. They were even angry when she eventually settled down in Israel. For her, too, this was an unexpected twist in the plot of her life. Had she not met Bronstein, she would undoubtedly have returned to France, after completing the back-and-forth travels demanded by her research.

Today the couple lives on Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. Merza refused to accept the privileged status of a new immigrant – as a Jew – a condition which, as far as she is concerned, only emphasizes the de jure inferiority of the Palestinians in Israel. She has the status of a resident who is married to a citizen, but is aware of the fact that this arrangement would be denied to Palestinians. Thus, like it or not, she is enjoying the fact of her Jewishness and the status it accords her.

It's not the destruction itself but the fact of the expulsion and the subsequent void that has drawn her to Mansoura. In addition, the fact that her father is prevented from visiting and from seeing the place that was his home, strengthens the sense of mission to uncover more about the place.

The attraction to her "Golan side," she explains, is related to the debt she feels to memory "in a country where so many memories are erased. If I don't do what I am doing, evoking the memory of Mansoura, revealing it, I have no reason to stay here."