

Dr. Gabriel Moriah (May 1921- May 2004)

As with many of Gabriel (Gaby) Kalish's generation, nothing could have predicted the serendipitous events that would impact his life. Born in 1921 in Frankfurt, Gaby was the only son of an Orthodox family. His father was a chemist and his mother a seamstress. His parents immigrated to the US during the late 1920s, only to return to Germany due to the Great Depression. In 1936, on the way back from a Shabbat service at his shul, his father was attacked and beaten severely by a gang of Nazis. A week later, Gaby's father left for Sweden. After threatening his parents that he would take a bicycle and ride all the way to Palestine, Gaby was sent there with Aliyat Hano'ar. He was first placed in the care of an Orthodox family in Mea Shearim. After being treated poorly by them, he found himself giving up his belief in God, and relocated to a youth center in the north of Israel.

During his early twenties he moved to Kibbutz Na'an, leading a herd of sheep and goats through the fields of the kibbutz. Before the 1948 War of Independence, he began studying at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at The Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus, where he met Hadassa Yaacobi, a nursing student at the hospital there. In that year he was part of the liaison team between the headquarters of the Haganah in Jerusalem and the British Army that was stationed there. When the war broke out, he served with the Moriah Brigade that fought at the eastern front of Jerusalem around the area of Yemin Moshe.

After the war he joined the Israeli delegation for the ceasefire talks with Egypt that took place in Rhodes. In 1950 he married Hadassa, and soon after their two sons were born. Gabriel supported the family by working for Israel's Foreign Ministry, and later for The Hebrew

University of Jerusalem. While employed at the Foreign Ministry, he changed his name from Kalish to Moriah, after the name of his brigade. (This was the policy that then-prime minister David Ben-Gurion implemented for civil service employees – their names had to be Hebrew ones.)

At the end of that decade, he completed his BA and MA at The Hebrew University, writing a thesis on the Bedouin who lived around the southern part of the Judean desert, in the area that later became Arad. He wrote about their culture and their medicinal herbal remedies, which were mainly administered by elder women of the tribe. In 1961, he moved his family to London for three years, where he wrote his PhD on Islamic mysticism; it was awarded the highest honors. His motto, which he carried throughout those years, was that although Hitler had delayed his education, he would not determine the outcome of it. Gaby was an enthusiastic reader in search of knowledge, being proficient in seven languages. At the end of his career, he became a major scholar in Islamic art. The three years that he spent in London writing his PhD gave him a good insight into British culture and manners.

The first time Dr. Gabriel Moriah met Ms. Vera Salomons was around the middle of 1964, on the terrace of the King David Hotel. For the ten years previous to their meeting, Ms. Salomons had a dream: to build an institute that would house an Islamic art museum, which would also be a Center for Middle Eastern scholars who would study and conduct their research there. The institute would also be the site of a senior citizens' home for academics, mainly from The Hebrew University. During those years she tried, with no success, to convince bureaucratic authorities of the need for an Islamic Museum of Art, independent from the Israel Museum that was being built at the same time. Ms. Salomons came from a wealthy, Jewish aristocratic

family; her great-uncle was the first Jewish mayor of London. She was an individualist with a mind of her own. In Dr. Moriah, she found a kindred spirit: they were both fearless and dreamers.

Dr. Moriah and Ms. Salomons made a pact that was based on the understanding that the ultimate decision about this institution would be in the hands of Vera, but she would trust Dr. Moriah to carry out her vision and fulfill her dreams. The mid-Sixties were a difficult period in Israel; it was a time of a severe recession that impacted the building industry. Yet, with Dr. Moriah's perseverance and care, they managed to accomplish the goal that she had envisioned ten years earlier.

At the outset of this undertaking, Dr. Moriah started with a small team of only two people (himself and a secretary) in a small apartment on Jerusalem's Harlap Street, where he tirelessly worked on assembling the different components of the future exhibit. Indeed, during the first ten years prior to the opening of the museum, Dr. Moriah had a lot of work ahead of him: to establish the collection; and to find the architects, engineers, electrical architects, building company and cases for the exhibit – all at the highest level seen in Israel at that point.

Dr. Moriah, together with Prof. Richard Ettinghausen, assembled a jewel of a collection of Islamic art. Vera also wanted the Museum for Islamic Art to house her family's clock collection – one of the best in the world – and a huge library of Islamic culture. Dr. Moriah researched and found a factory in Germany that created some of the most beautiful vitrines to house the collection, and also used one of the best electrical architects to light the exhibit. To ready the

museum for its opening, he assembled a team that would handle the everyday life of the institution: guards, secretaries, watchmaker, librarian, photographer and others.

The opening of the museum, which was scheduled shortly after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, was a sensitive period in the relationship between Israelis and Arabs. The Museum for Islamic Art was conceived and run by Jews; it always showed a tremendous sensitivity, opening its doors willingly and lovingly to Israeli Arabs of all ages.

The Museum for Islamic Art opened in 1974, soon after the Yom Kippur War. Friends from all over the world gathered for the grand opening. There was a deep feeling of accomplishment and of fulfillment of a dream. During the following twenty years, Dr. Moriah headed the museum with love and care, second to none. He would wake up thinking about it and went to sleep dreaming about it. The day-to-day running of the institute had both challenges and accomplishments: bringing exhibitions, developing international relationships with other institutions that had interest in the subject, running new exhibitions and maintaining the collection, while at the same time dealing with the administrative challenges.

Under Dr. Gabriel Moriah's leadership, the museum achieved official recognition by the State of Israel. He worked tirelessly, together with its Board of Directors, to take the museum to the next stage after Ms. Vera Salomons' death. During the decades that the Museum of Islamic Art was under the direction of Dr. Gabriel Moriah, it became a world-recognized and most respected institution.