Jerusalem viewpoints

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs
Institute for Contemporary Affairs
Founded jointly with the Wechsler Family Foundation

No. 627 December 2019

Jerusalem's Tomb of the Kings: Did the French Hijack a Jewish Heritage Site?

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The gate of the Tomb of the Kings (*Tombeau des Rois*) in Jerusalem, under the title "Republic of France." (*Wikimedia*)

- **France owns four sites of religious significance in Jerusalem. One is the Tomb of the Kings, containing the tomb, hewn into the rock, of Queen Helena, originally from Kurdistan, who converted to Judaism and moved to Jerusalem around 30 CE. Also buried there are first century figures, Nicodemus Ben Gurion, a wealthy philanthropist, and his friend Kalba Savua, the rich father-in-law of Rabbi Akiva. The site is located about 800 meters north of Jerusalem's Old City walls.**

- **Bertha Pereire, a wealthy Jewish philanthropist, purchased the area of the tomb for 30,000 francs. In 1874, she gave her acquisition to the Jewish Consistoire Central de**

France, writing, "I have no other objective than the conservation of this ancient and respected monument.... It is a relic of my ancestors that I want to preserve from any further desecration."

- **After her death and that of her two sons, Bertha's cousin, Henry Pereire, curiously gave the Tomb of the Kings to France. But he was not Bertha's heir and had no right to give away such property without first offering it to the Consistoire as its legitimate owner. Nevertheless, the site was directly handed over to the French consul in Jerusalem in 1886.**

- **In 1997, French Consul Stanislas de Laboulaye allowed a Palestinian cultural society, Yabous, to hold a music festival there. In recent years, the Consul repeatedly permitted Yabous to use the site. In effect, the French hijacked a Jewish heritage site. The president of the Consistoire Central Israelite de France has questioned why a site under French sovereignty is forbidden to Jews and has argued that a concert performance is inappropriate for a holy site.**

- **The site, closed in 2010, was reopened on June 27, 2019, but with limited, reserved, and paid admission. The official French announcement reopening the Tomb was translated into Arabic, but not into Hebrew. It stated that the "Tomb of the Sultans" will be opened. Yet the tomb predates the nomination of the first Arab sultan by 11 centuries.**

France owns four sites of religious significance in Jerusalem.

The Roman Catholic Church of St. Anne was established by the Crusaders but was converted into a mosque after their defeat by Saladin (in 1187) and subsequently given by Sultan Abdulmecid I to Napoleon III in 1856. The building was restored and entrusted to the guardianship of the "White (robed) Fathers."

The Benedictine monastery in Abu Ghosh, an ancient Crusader fortress that also fell to the Ottoman Empire, was given to France in 1873. The Benedictine monks constructed a monastery on the site, which has been inhabited by monks and nuns since 1976, living in two separate communities, where services are held.

The Church of Pater Noster, built adjacent to Roman Emperor Constantine's Church of Eléona [olive grove in Greek] on the Mount of Olives, is much older and has a more turbulent history. The church was constructed by Helena, Constantine's mother, who converted to Christianity. A convent was added in 430, built above the cave[1] where Jesus, according to Catholic belief, taught the "Lord's Prayer," which includes large parts of the Jewish liturgy of Kaddish and the Eighteen Benedictions. The building was burned down by the Persians in 614 but was rebuilt before being destroyed by Arab invaders led by Caliph Omar in 638. In 807, Charlemagne gained the protection of Caliph Harun al-Rashid for Christian holy sites and the Benedictine monks remaining in Eléona. However, in 1009, the Caliph al-Hakim destroyed the shrine. The Crusaders built an oratory amid the ruins in 1106, and the church was rebuilt in 1152 by the Danish bishop of Viborg. In 1345, under the Mamlukes, it fell into disrepair. During the 19th century, the Latin patriarch in

Jerusalem lamented its loss. French Princess Heloise de la Tour d'Auvergne purchased six hectares of the site, and in 1868 she built a cloister. Then, in 1872, a Carmelite convent was constructed, and excavations were carried out there.[2] She gave the monastery to the French government two years later.

All of these sites are inherited properties from the Christian past and are not explicitly related to French culture.

One is from the Roman Empire, and the other two were built by French colonizers, according to current terminology. Nevertheless, a consular mass is held inside the Church of St. Anne every July 14th (Bastille Day). The French consul, who must be Catholic according to international agreements signed 150 years ago, never fails to invite a representative of the Palestinian Authority. Yet, no such invitation to Israeli officials appears on the consulate's website.



The Tomb of the Kings circa 1895 (Library of Congress)

The fourth French holy site has a fascinating, romantic history. This is the Tomb of the Kings or in French, "*Tombeau des Rois*," and the kings who rest there are Kurdish Jews.

It is the tomb, hewn into the rock, of Queen Helena of Adiabene and her son Izates II.[3] Helena, originally from Kurdistan, converted to Judaism and moved to Jerusalem around 30 CE, and she became a great philanthropist to the Temple and needy Jews.[4] Her son also converted to Judaism, independently from his mother. His palace, burned by the Romans when they took control of Jerusalem in 70 CE, was found in 2007 slightly south of the Temple Mount, within what was a Greek fortress captured by the Hasmoneans, the

Acra. Izates converted publicly when he ascended the Kurdish throne and was followed by many of his subjects.

Also buried there are First Century figures, Nicodemus Ben Gurion, a wealthy philanthropist, and his friend Kalba Savua, the rich father-in-law of Rabbi Akiva, who lived during the era of the destruction of the Second Temple. The site is located about 800 meters north of Jerusalem's Old City walls.

Flavius Josephus described the mausoleum, its dimensions, the 28-meter wall, its three pyramids (since disappeared), its monumental staircase, and a round stone above the door. The Greek geographer Pausanias (115-180) reported that "this door was only opened once a year like an automaton and was one of the wonders of the world."

When French Viscount Francois-Rene Chateaubriand visited the site in 1806, he was told that according to folk memory, it was the tomb of Kings David and Solomon and their descendants. According to legend, there was a hidden treasure desired by the greedy Ottoman governor of Jerusalem, who severely damaged the site (in 1847), searching for it.



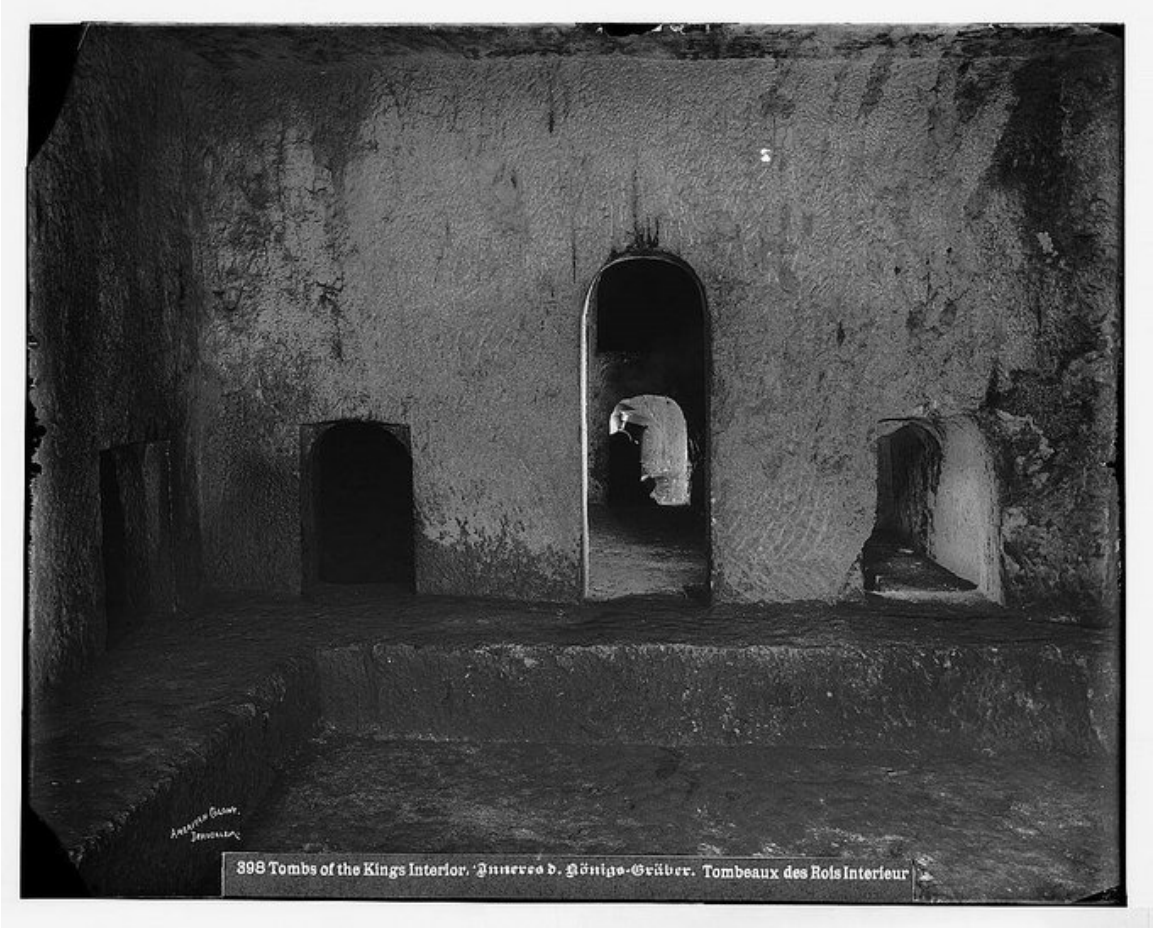
The Tomb of the Kings in 1898 visited by German Emperor Wilhelm II (*Library of Congress*)

Chateaubriand was shocked by the condition of the site, and, based on reading Josephus and Pausanias, he rejected the idea that this could have been the tomb of the kings of Judea.

Several years later, in 1851, Louis Felicien de Saulcy, a French artilleryman who became an archeologist, coin collector, and close associate of Napoleon III, visited the site and was

convinced that it was a mausoleum for the kings of Judea. At this time, Orientalism was very fashionable in Europe. For travelers, the wretched state of the country held an exotic charm that added excitement to their visits. During this era, there were several European consuls in Jerusalem. De Saulcy celebrated Christmas Eve with French Consul Paul-Émile Botta[5] before visiting the site.

He brought the remains of the sarcophagi he found back to the Louvre in France, and informed the *Academie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* of his findings. This led to 10 years of furious debate between archeologists before de Saulcy returned to the Middle East. In 1863, he obtained official authorization to carry out the first archeological digs on hallowed ground. The Turkish Sultan could not refuse his ally from the Crimean War (1853-1856), which was a consequence of a conflict between French Catholics and Russian Orthodox Christians over the protection of their holy places, particularly in Jerusalem. During de Saulcy's excavations, a secret funeral chamber was discovered containing a royal sarcophagus, the contents of which immediately disintegrated into dust, with the exception of a femur. The experts concluded that this gravesite belonged to Helena of Adiabene. However, the archeologist refused to admit this, insisting that since she was the wife of King Sedecias, he was very close to finding the tomb of the Biblical kings.



The excavations aroused disquiet among the Jews of Jerusalem, who felt they were a desecration of Jewish graves. The Turks ordered the digs to stop, but when the Caliph's messenger arrived in Jaffa, he saw the sarcophagi being shipped by sea to the Louvre.[6]

Rabbi Shmuel Salant, Jerusalem's Chief Rabbi, asked Rabbi Lazare Isidor, Chief Rabbi of France, to demand that the French government put an end to the desecration and to rebury the bones in the nearby Tomb of Shimon Hazaddik in Jerusalem. The Tomb of the Kings site was closed.



The royal sarcophagi, looted from the Tomb of the Kings and displayed in the Louvre in Paris (*Wikimedia*)

A Site Dedicated to the Science and Veneration of the Children of Israel

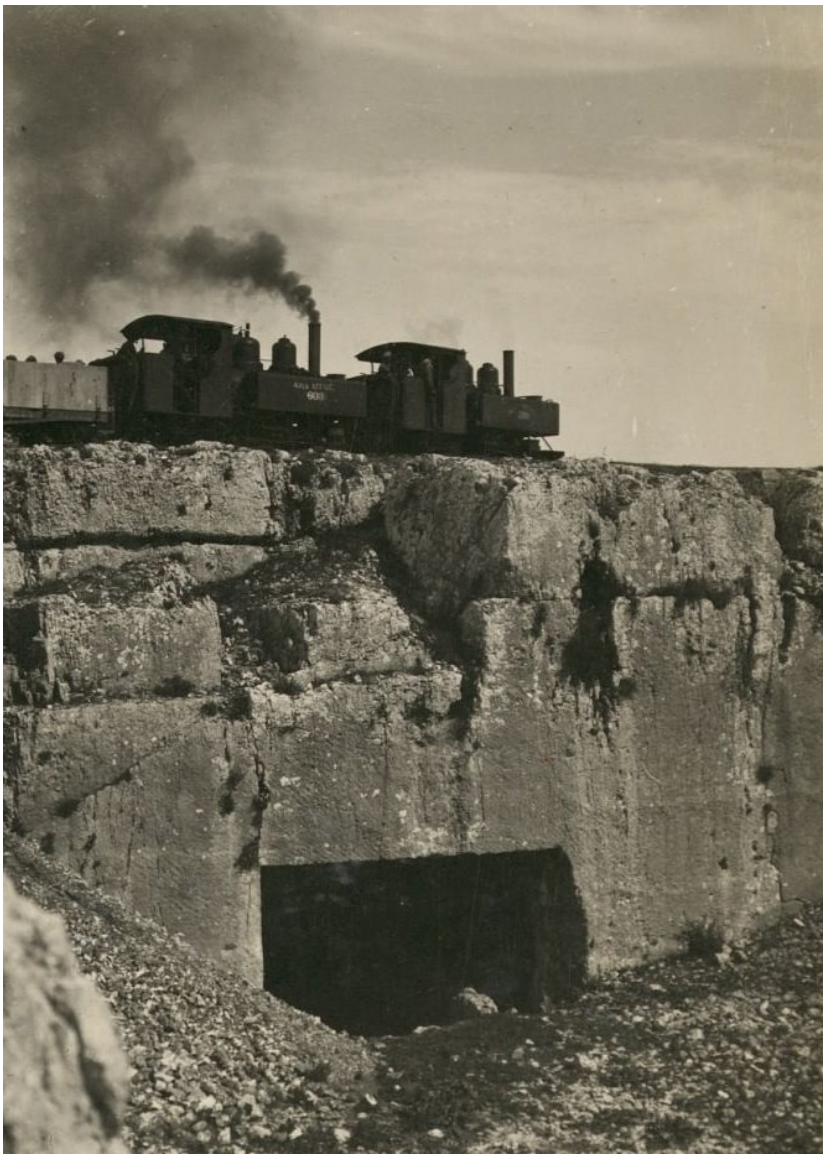
Rabbi Lazar Isidor convinced Bertha Pereire, a wealthy Jewish philanthropist, to purchase the mausoleum. As Ottoman law prohibited Jews from buying the land, she approached Salvatore Patrimonio, the French consul in Jerusalem, to obtain the area of the tomb for 30,000 francs.

In 1874, she gave her acquisition to the Jewish *Consistoire Central de France*. She wrote: "I, the undersigned, Bertha Amelie Bertrand Pereire, hereby declare that when making over the acquisition of the land on which the 'Tomb of the Kings' is found in Jerusalem, I have no other objective than the conservation of this ancient and respected monument… It is a relic of my ancestors that I want to preserve from any further desecration of the Tomb of the Kings."

After her death and that of her two sons, Emile and Ernes, Henry Pereire curiously gave the Tomb of the Kings to France. He was not Bertha's grandson but her cousin. The vice-president of the Southern Railway Company was therefore not Bertha's heir and had no right to give away such property without first offering it to the Consistoire as its legitimate owner. One may question the motivations (or the pressures he may have been subjected to) of Henry Pereire, son of Jacob Emile and the vice-president of the Southern Railway Company.

France also profited from an oversight by Consul Patrimonio, who had neglected to carry out the process of transferring the title deeds for the site to Berthe Pereire. In the contract signed on January 20, 1886, by Henry Pereire, one paragraph clearly states, “The French government commits that in the future, no changes will be made to the actual purpose of this monument.” However, Ottoman law was not recognized as a legal entity, and the site was directly handed over in 1886 to the French consul in Jerusalem, Charles Ledoulx, who installed a large copper sign at the site of “the Tomb of the Kings of Judea.” The Pereire brothers had put up a different sign, dedicating the shrine to “the science and the veneration of the true Children of Israel.”

The dispute ceased, and the Jews of Jerusalem took on the custom of going to the site to pray on Passover and Chanukah at the graves of the three revered Jewish figures buried there. As usual, an admission fee was charged for these visits, and written authorization from the consulate was required.



The Tomb of the Kings under a train on its way to Ramallah. A narrow-gauge rail line had been built by the Turks. (*Library of Congress*)

In 1948, the newly independent Israel lost control of the eastern half of Jerusalem, where the Jews had formed a large majority of the population over the previous centuries. The Jews who lived there were expelled by Jordan, which annexed Samaria, Judea, and east Jerusalem. The Kings' burial site, "dedicated to the science and veneration of the Children of Israel," was still under French control and was forbidden to the Jews. No one visited the Tomb of the Kings. Although Israel regained control over the city after the Six-Day War, visits to the site took place in spite of security dangers in the area. Again, authorization from and admission payments to the consulate were required.

In 1997, French Consul Stanislas de Laboulaye allowed a Palestinian cultural society, *Yabous*, to hold a music festival there.[7]

Is that the way to protect a Jewish holy site from desecration – by holding a Palestinian-French concert there?!

France took possession of the mausoleum in 1886 but did not stick to the contract "that in the future, no changes will be made to the actual purpose of this monument." In recent years, the Consul repeatedly permitted *Yabous* to use the site, while for the rest of the year, access was mostly forbidden apart from a few pilgrims or tourists with written permission from the consulate.

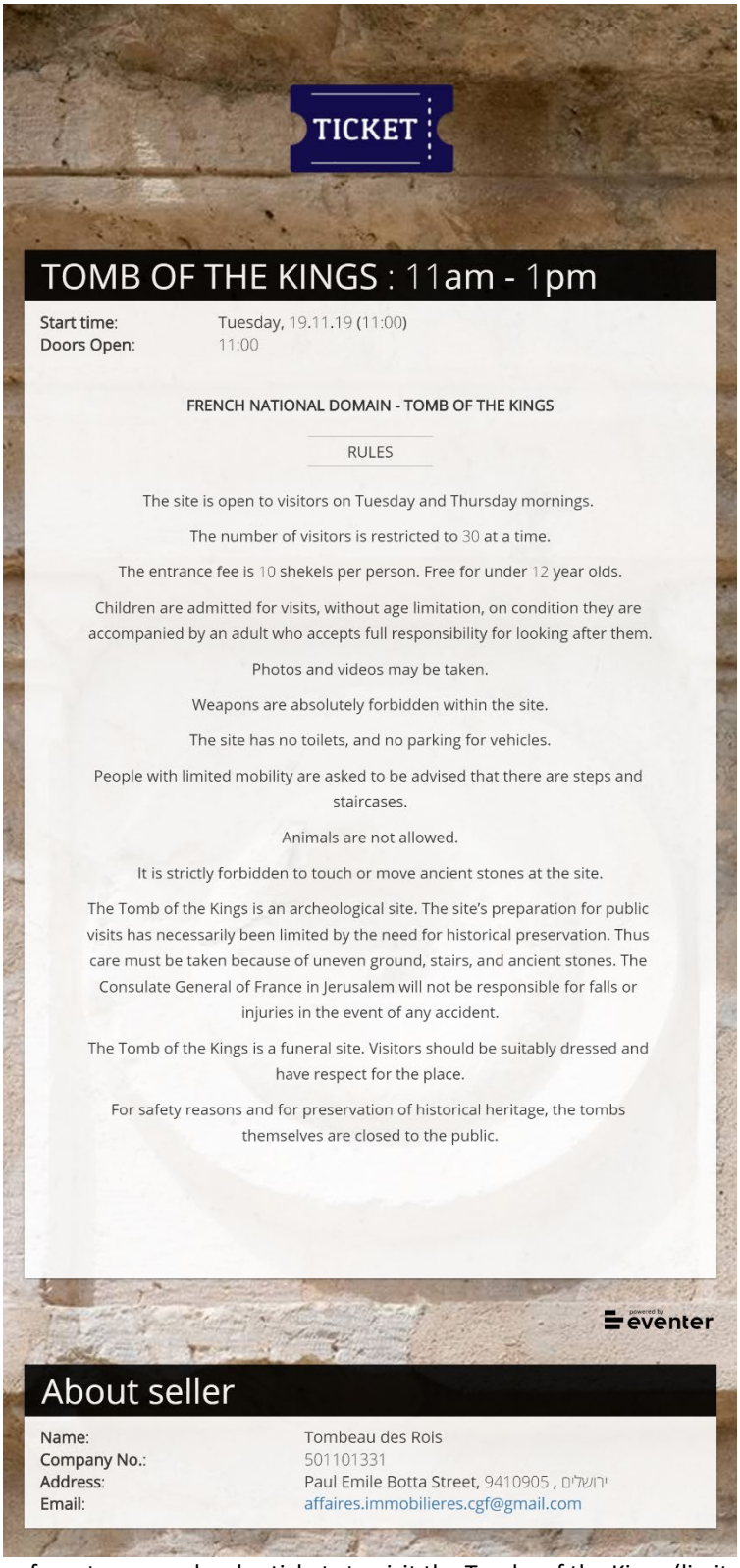
According to Palestinian sources, "all performances of the Jerusalem Festival of Arabic Music of 1997 were held at the Tombs of the Kings, a great historical site, under French jurisdiction, with a seating capacity of 800. In contrast to the first festival of Arabic music, this was not confined to artists from Palestine. They came from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and also from Palestine." The report continued, "This festival succeeded in developing burgeoning cultural links between Palestine and the rest of the Arab world."[8]

The French hijacked the Jewish Heritage site. Aren't the Jews and the Kurds the two nations that France has betrayed the most? Therefore, when it comes to the tomb of a Kurdish Jewish queen, the tension is particularly high. Time is supposed to calm the passions. The site was closed in 2010, supposedly for renovation work. It was reopened on June 27, 2019, but again with limited, reserved, and paid admission ordered online.

The president of the Israelite Consistoire Central de France questioned why a site under French sovereignty is forbidden to Jews. The will of those who acquired it should be respected, but he argued that a concert performance is inappropriate for a holy site. Haim Berkovits, (who represents the Consistoire and is in charge of the case) has inquired why Christian sites that are also considered as French territories in Jerusalem are managed by Christians, but a Jewish site such as the Tomb of the Kings can't be managed by Jews.

Israel's Antiquities Authorities have attempted to calm things down, saying, "Our duty is to ensure that no one desecrates this site. We ask France to open the site as soon as possible, but to introduce the limits set by Yuval Baruch, the chief archeologist in Jerusalem, who seeks to preserve the historical character of the site rather than the holy aspect. When this occurs," he explained, "the archeological aspect is always lost."

France is bothered that the site is in east Jerusalem, forgetting that the sharing plan accompanying UN Resolution 181 was not legally binding and was rejected by the Arabs. Talking about Palestinian Jerusalem ignores its traditional position as an international city.



The online form to pay and order tickets to visit the Tombs of the Kings (limited to 3).[9]

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During their meeting in the Élysée Palace in early 2019, President Macron asked President Rivlin about French sovereignty over the site. Macron's own rhetoric suggests the Tomb would be a French colony within Palestinian territory, while at the same time he condemns Israeli settlements.

The site recently reopened. After ten years of renovations, visitors must receive written authorization from the consulate and a fee.

Is the French Consulate also rewriting history? The official French announcement reopening the Tomb was translated into Arabic, but not into Hebrew. The invitation, directed at an Arab audience, stated that the "Tomb of the Sultans" will be opened. Without a doubt, this was no innocent mistake. For the general culture of French diplomats, the translation of "king" into Arabic is not "sultan," especially as the tomb predates the nomination of the first Arab sultan by 11 centuries.[10]

* * *

Dr. Richard Rossin, an orthopedic surgeon, is also a French writer and editorialist who wrote for French publications such as *Libération, Le Monde, Le Figaro, Médiapart*, and *Huffington Post*. He has authored several books. Dr. Rossin is a Fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and resides today in Israel.

In the 1970s, he served as the Secretary General of "*Doctors Without Borders*" and later co-founded the *"Committee For the Vietnamese Boat People"* and *"Doctors of the World."* He participated in numerous missions, including to Poland, the South China Sea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Darfour. He also served as an advisor to the president of the *Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM)*.

Rossin is a former vice-president of the *European Academy of Geopolitics* and took part in the production of several publications in the French geopolitical revue *Outre-terre.* He also contributed to "*The Rules of the Game*" led by the French writer and philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy.

Amb. Freddy Eytan, a former Foreign Ministry senior advisor who served in Israel's embassies in Paris and Brussels, was Israel's first Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. He was also the spokesman of the Israeli delegation in the peace process with the Palestinians. Since 2007, he heads the Israel-Europe Project at the Jerusalem Center, which focuses on analyzing Israeli relations with the countries of Europe and seeks to develop ties and avenues of bilateral cooperation. He is also the director of Le Cape, the Jerusalem Center website in French. Amb. Eytan has written 20 books about the Israeli-Arab conflict and the policy of France in the Middle East, including *La Poudriere (The Powder Keg)* and *Le double jeu (the Double Game)*. He has also published biographies of Shimon Peres, Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, and a book, *The 18 Who Built Israel*.

* * *

Notes

[1] Rediscovered in 1911.

[2] With the assistance of Clermont-Ganneau, translator for the French consulate, who translated the monument in the Louvre to Mesha, a Moabite King from the 19th century BCE, which gives an account of his revolt against King Yoram (son of Achav), who ruled over Israel. Clermont-Ganneau also discovered in 1871 the Soreg inscription, which was on a balustrade from Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, warning strangers against entering the Sanctuary enclosure. This could not be acquired by the Louvre and is today in the Istanbul Archeological Museum.

[3] There are 31 graves. King Monobaz is interred with his mother and brother.

[4] She gave many gifts to the Temple and dealt with a famine in Jerusalem by sending ships to Alexandria and Cyprus to provide grain and dried figs to the starving population.

[5] An archeologist famous for discovering Khorsabad, on the banks of the Tigris. This was part of the Palace of Sargon II, which was believed to be among the ruins of Nineveh.

[6] Where they still remain in the vaults.

[7] Named after a Jebusite city situated a kilometer further south.

[8] https://pij.org/articles/917/the-jerusalem-palestinian-festival-fining-the-cultural-vacuum

[9] https://www.eventer.co.il/gq7v3?lang=EN_en

[10] Title of Muslim leader, from the era of the Seljuk empire (11th century) given by the Caliph to those that he awarded effective power.

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