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GRAPEVINE

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN



ISRAEL AND Switzerland are small countries whose innovation is made possible by exceptional human resources. (Wikimedia Commons)

■ ASIDE FROM banking, punctuality, chocolate, the manufacture of time pieces, and yodeling, the Swiss are well-known for their dairy products, which may explain why just ahead of Swiss National Day this week, Ambassador **Jean-Daniel Ruch**, accompanied by representatives of the Israel Dairy Board visited the Shfayim Dairy Farm and the Jacob's Dairy Farm, made friends with the livestock and tasted what Ruch described as "delicious" local cheese. He also tasted the high-quality fresh milk.

As for celebrating Swiss National Day, Ruch did something different in comparison to receptions hosted by his colleagues. He invited guests to Wahat-al Salam, or Neve Shalom as it is known in Hebrew, the village in which Arabs and Jews, or Palestinians and Israelis, have proved that co-existence is not only possible, but desirable. Established in 1970 by Father Bruno Hussar, it is currently home to 70 families who comprise some 300 souls, and who hope to dou-

ble their number in the near future. The village is entirely free of racism and discrimination and its residents live in an aura of mutual respect, equality and partnership. Many of the residents hope to inspire others in the country and the region to follow their example and are engaged in projects dedicated to peace, reconciliation and justice.

One of them, **Mai Shbeta**, is the personification of everything that Neve Shalom stands for. She is not only a binational, but a tri-national in that her mother is the Israeli Jewish daughter of a Holocaust survivor and her father is a Palestinian. Thus she is both Jewish and Muslim, in addition to which she also holds Swiss citizenship. Her husband is Arab of mixed Muslim and Christian background.

A peace activist all her life, she is often asked whether she feels more Jewish than Muslim, more Israeli than Palestinian. It's a question she never came across while growing up in the village, which has a binational, bilingual primary school, but once she went to high school, and later to Bar-Ilan University, it was a question that was frequently put to her and one she doesn't answer. It's like being forced to choose between her mother and her father, she explained.

In the village people don't care about what nationality or religion anyone might have, she said, so long as that person is a decent human being. Over the years, the village has developed and continues to develop. When her parents arrived there 40 years ago, there was no water and no electricity. Today, it has not only water and electricity, but is a model for the rest of Israel and for close-by Palestinian villages. "Most of the second generation want to stay here and live here and create a family," she said, and expressed the wish that there would be other villages in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, just like hers.

Influential social activist **Samah Salaime**, who heads the educational institutions at Wahat al-Salam-Neveh Shalom, welcomed the guests

on her own behalf and on behalf of Mayor **Anwar Daoud** and spoke of the village's three educational institutions – the primary school, which was the first binational, bilingual school in Israel; the School for Peace, whose students are Israeli and Palestinian agents for change, and which boasts 60,000 alumni; and the Spiritual Center, which teaches the beliefs, literature, music and culture of different faiths, and provides space for students to worship, each in accordance with his or her own faith. With regard to the School for Peace, Salaime said that there is no project for shared culture that does not include graduates of the school.

The educational institutions of the village are supported by international friends groups in almost a dozen countries – including Switzerland.

One of the customs in Switzerland on its national day is for children to walk around with red Chinese lanterns on which there is a white cross – the national emblem of Switzerland, and the youngest children of the village were recruited for this purpose and looked absolutely adorable.

Representing the government at the event was Construction and Housing Minister **Yoav Gallant** who noted that Israel's connection with Switzerland goes back to August 1897, when Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel.

Ruch noted that there is still a strong connection between Basel and Israel because Swiss Friends of Wahat al-Salam Neve Shalom also started in Basel. Its founder and former president, Peter Dreyfus, passed away in May of this year at age 83.

Aside from the Basel connection, Ruch said that because both Israel and Switzerland are small countries with minimal natural resources, what they have in common is innovation made possible by exceptional human resources.

Given the current political furor in Israel, it would seem that Ruch deliberately planned the venue for his country's national day celebration as some kind of response to what is happening around him. He denied this, saying that the venue was planned a year ago. It's not the first time that he's departed from the diplomatic norm with regard to venues. Last year it was in Kiryat Ye'arim.