

Philip Mansel - Levantine Dilemmas

Review of Michael Vatikiotis Lives between the Lines: a Journey in search of the lost Levant

Even by the standards of the Levant, Michael Vatikiotis comes from unusually varied backgrounds. Hydra, Crete, Alexandria, Livorno and Wimbledon are among his ancestors' birth places. One great-great-uncle Luigi Piattoli was architect of the magnificent Okelle Monferrato on what used to be called the Place Mohammed Ali in Alexandria.

One originality of this book, compared to other recent Levantine memoirs (*Sipping from the Nile*, *Farewell Alexandria*, *The Man in the Sharkskin Suit* and many more), lies in its accounts of lesser known Levantine ports, such as Port Said and Haifa. Vatikiotis's grandparents Lidia Sornaga and Richard Mumford met at a tea dance in the Grand Hotel de la Poste, Port Said, before moving to Cairo. His Greek grand-parents lived in Mosul Lane, Haifa, then considered the least intolerant city in Palestine. Having helped wind up the British mandate bureaucracy, they left in 1954 for Athens – 'a city they did not know, in a country they had never lived in, yet as Greeks they belonged to'. There they continued to speak Arabic as well as Greek (many relations married Arabs), and to look through the Palestine railway time tables which Jerasimous Vatikiotis had helped compile. The Vatikiotis family (maps and family trees would have been useful) is a reminder that Palestine once attracted, for reasons of business or religion, Greeks as well as Jews and Arabs. Now, despite Jerusalem's Orthodox shrines and Patriarchate, there are fewer than 150 Greeks in Palestine. The 'Law of Return', however, has allowed many Russian Orthodox Christians to move to Israel.

The Italian Jewish Sornagas arrived in Egypt around 1860, finding it 'first a life-raft, then a cornucopia'. They created the Sornaga Ceramics and Brick Factory, which became famous for tiles, 'porcelain fittings' and 'blue bricks'. Feeling a 'jolt of emotion, a physical connection' to his family history, Michael Vatikiotis has returned, like many displaced descendants, to visit his grandparents' former villas and businesses in Egypt. Like the Grand Hotel de la Poste in Port Said, they are now much changed. Before 1952, he suggests, challenging the nationalist narrative, some foreign-owned businesses were better run and less 'grasping' towards local people, than some Egyptian-run businesses today.

Michael Vatikiotis now lives in Singapore, where he is a 'private mediator and diplomat' for the 'Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue', 'a Geneva based private foundation that facilitates dialogue to resolve armed conflicts'. He believes he has a composite, hybrid character, 'Greek yet semi-detached from Greece'; 'from the East, yet not of it'.

'I identify with the conflict [between Arabs and Israelis] which is part of my heritage...my Levantine blood yearns for peaceful compromise, however unlikely it seems'. He also misses the food and the people.

Another originality in Michael Vatikiotis's 'journey in search of the lost Levant' is his account of his father, the historian P. J. Vatikiotis. He was a professor at SOAS in London, admired for books on modern Egypt and Nasser (whom he had considered incorrupt, until he learnt of a 'Fund for the Defence of the Revolution' in a Swiss bank). Despite or because of his mixed background, P. J. Vatikiotis was more of an insider, both in England and the Levant, than he cared to admit. Having grown up in Palestine and Egypt, after his move to Britain he led a double life, deflating nationalist claims in his lectures, but advising the Palestinian leader Wadie Haddad, a friend from school in Haifa, in his spare time.

P. J. Vatikiotis considered many Palestinian leaders of such low calibre that they needed no enemies. 'He had no faith that Israel wanted a political settlement, as he had no doubt that Arab states had not the slightest intention of accepting the state of Israel' [a score on which recent exchanges of ambassadors, like the treaties of President Sadat and King Hussein, have proved him wrong]. His 'complex Levantine character' made him desire the role of intermediary. Behind the façade of detachment, as with Bernard Lewis, C. M. Woodhouse and other historians, was a secretive political operator, driven by personal loyalties.

This human and fascinating insider view of Levantine families in the mid twentieth century takes dilemmas of identity, nationality and religion seriously, yet perhaps Levantine dilemmas were neither so inevitable, nor so disruptive, as some Levantines imagine. Minorities survive in other countries such as Morocco, Iran, Indonesia and

Singapore. Perhaps their disappearance from the Levant was due to the particular venom of the post-1918 conflicts between Greeks and Turks, Israelis and Palestinians, and to the particularly aggressive nationalism policies of Mustafa Kemal and Nasser, rather than to intrinsic incompatibilities.

Feelings of displacement, hybridity, alienation, mixing not mingling, moreover, are not limited to people with mixed backgrounds. Many 100 per cent English, French, Turks or Greeks, for personal, class or regional reasons, may also share such feelings. They too can feel in a country but not of it, inhabited by a committee rather than one principal character, as their marriages and migrations often confirm. Many people prefer foreigners and other countries to 'the mind numbing normality' of their own, to quote Vatikiotis's description of his childhood in Pinner.

People of single nationalities, moreover, may share similar fates, as well as similar attitudes, to Levantines. For national governments often turn from penalising minorities to punishing majorities. As an Armenian in Turkey prophesied to a Kurd: 'we are the breakfast, you will be the lunch.' Many Muslim Turks, Egyptians and Syrians now leave their countries, if they find a way to do so, feeling no less sorrow and alienation than the minorities which preceded them.

Mixed identities, however, can be as irrepressible as nationalism. London, Paris and Singapore are now almost as diverse, with what Michael Vatikiotis calls 'a social interface for fluid and productive minglings', as Alexandria or Haifa once were. Hybrid individuals, perhaps fortified by their Levantine backgrounds, can flourish in, or lead, some national states, as the careers of Edmond Balladur (born in Smyrna), Nicolas Sarkozy (a grandfather from Salonica), and Boris Johnson (a great-grandfather from Istanbul), to name only a few politicians, suggest. Levantines have also flourished in other fields, as the life of P. J. Vatikiotis confirms. Mustafa Kemal himself came from Salonica, the most mixed city in the Ottoman Empire, and owed much to foreign friends and cultures. However hard national states try to suppress them, mixed cities and multiple identities reappear. New Levants replace the old.

Philip Mansel is a trustee of the Levantine Heritage Foundation (www.levantineheritage.com) and author of a history of modern Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean* (2010). His latest book is *King of the World: the life of Louis XIV* (2019).