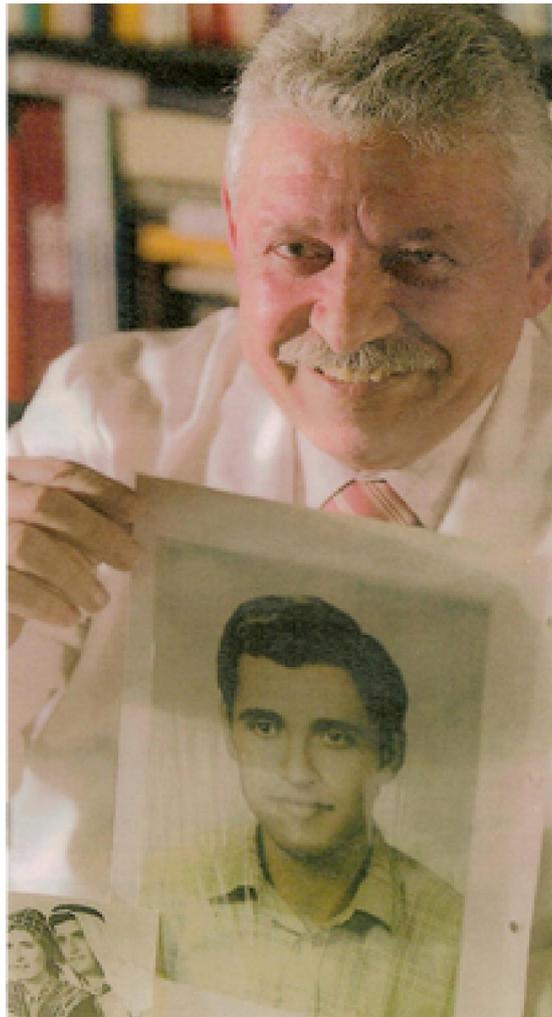


THE OTHER SIDE OF...

DR. WAFIK AL-WATTAR

He arrived from Syria at 20 years old knowing only one word in Spanish and today he is a prestigious urologist. TEXT: L. RUFFINI PHOTO R. DOMÈNECH



“I wanted to travel. I was born in Beirut but I grew up in the city of Homs, in Syria. My father was a driver and could not read, but he strove hard so that his seven children could study. When I finished secondary school, I went to work in a refinery to earn money. Have I told you already? I wanted to travel.”

To get to know other cultures, have new experiences...

And to study medicine. I had always been keen to treat people. In my neighbourhood, they knew that if somebody was hurt, they could go to Wafik's house.

But you were just a child!

Well, I had a small first-aid box with some cotton, alcohol and mercurochrome – things like that. I treated minor wounds.

Was there no alcohol in other houses?

Yes, but I read a lot. I went to the library and devoured medical books. I summarised chapters on surgery, anaesthesia etc. The more I read, the more I knew, and this excited me. I was very curious.

You certainly were!

Whenever a relative, however remote, became ill, I went to visit them in the hospital to see how the doctors and nurses worked. I also paid attention to the plants my grandmother used to treat herself. I noted everything down.

Please, go on.

Then I learned German and I was given a grant to study Medicine in Munich.

Great! You had done it!

But it wasn't to be. The Six-Day War broke out and Germany broke off relations with the Arab world. They refused me a visa.

...

I wanted to go to another country and escape from there to Germany, but my family dissuaded me. In the meantime, a friend who had gone to Granada wrote and told me he was really enjoying it, that the people were very kind.

And you decided to come. Even without a grant?

Yes, but a lot of people helped me – my father, my brothers and sisters, my uncles and aunts...even some of our neighbours!

I can't imagine my neighbours delving into their pockets for me...

Well, this is a trait of Arab culture. We think of ourselves as a large family and we help each other any way we can.

You were finally able to travel.

Yes, I embarked on a Turkish ship and arrived in Barcelona after a voyage of eight days. I only knew one word of Spanish.

"Hello?"

No, "medicine!"

That's something, at least.

Well, I could speak English and German.

Those wouldn't be much use to you...

I also got down to learning Spanish.

Yes, I can tell.

I had no choice. I wanted to enrol at a university, and to pass the entrance examination I needed to have a command of the language.

You managed it.

Yes, after seven months and a few failures I gained a place in Medicine. 300 people applied and 25 passed. And I was one of them!

What did you live on in the meantime?

I taught German classes, distributed advertising, washed dishes, I worked as a labourer in a ceramics factory, as a waiter ...

You must have been keen to study...

My classmates were amazed at my notes, because I took down everything! Of course, it was the yearning, the aspiration. "I have to study in order to pass".

Where did you live?

In private houses. I would call them, tell them my story and they would offer me a cheap room.

That would be unthinkable today.

The situation was very different. We Arabs came to study for a degree. And in those days, it was the Spanish who emigrated to find for work.

There are those who think that incomers are going to take the bread from their mouths.

But we need each other. Catalonia would not have progressed so much without the labour force that came from the South. Immigration has to be controlled, yes, especially from the countries of origin. But let's not forget that borders are a human invention. What changes? The colour, the language...? Yes, we are all God's children.

Talking of God...

Religion is something we inherit from our families. I am a Muslim because my parents were. My son, who is now 20, chose not to be baptised or anything like that and I respect him for it, because the most important thing is how he behaves.

Ethics above beliefs.

I believe in the boomerang effect. If you do good, you are rewarded. If you do wrong, you are punished.

Nowadays many atrocities are committed in the name of religion.

There are fanatics everywhere who call themselves religious but they separate religion from ethics....

Or rather, they combine them to justify their actions, don't you think?

It's absurd. No religion has ever encouraged wrong-doing! They all talk about doing good.

And don't you think these conflicts are caused, not by beliefs, but by economic differences between some regions and others?

Of course. The Arab counties are the richest in the world because they have oil. But who benefits from this? Very few people. And who manipulates it?

Other countries.

The abuse and monopoly of wealth turns people into extremists. Because everyone wants to survive.

AN ANTI-CANCER CARD

>> He came with the idea of studying Medicine and then returning, but it seems he had a change of plans, because his adventure has now lasted almost four decades. An important reason for this was certainly Carmen, the nurse he fell in love with over 20 years ago and who is now his wife. Wafik Al-Wattar (Beirut, 1948) says that he chose urology because "it embraces a lot of disciplines, such as surgery, sexology, andrology etc." Today many of the people who go to the consultancy "suffer in silence", because he specialises in erectile dysfunctions and the treatment of haemorrhoids, which he can dispatch in 15 minutes. He is concerned about prostate cancer; therefore he has created a record card of urological tests to make his patients aware that, as with women, they should have annual checks. "Prevention is the cure".

Photo caption: Dr. Al-Wattar, who has a consultancy in Terrassa, shows pictures from his youth.