

Towards a Common Archive

Video Testimonies of Zionist Fighters in 1948

Curator: Eyal Sivan

Scientific Curator: Prof. Ilan Pappé

نحو أرشيف مشترك

شهادات مصورة لمقاتلين صهيونيين في عام ١٩٤٨

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COMMON
ARCHIVE
PALESTINE 1948

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A media exhibition in collaboration between the NGO Zochrot and the ongoing research project "A Common Archive, 1948 Palestine" by Filmmaker Eyal Sivan (School of Arts and Digital Industries, University of East London) and Historian Professor Ilan Pappe (European Centre for Palestine Studies, University of Exeter), supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The project is based on a collection of video interviews of Zionist fighters conducted by Ronit Chacham and Eyal Sivan in 2005-2006, on the Common Archive Paradigm for conflict resolution paradigm (CAP) developed by Dan Dolberger and Eyal Sivan in 2007 at the Matrix East research Lab (MERL) - University of East London, and on Zochrot's experience in popularizing within the Jewish Israeli society the discourse on the Nakba and the return of Palestinian refugees.

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The Nakba as Narrated by Its Perpetrators

"We shot, expelled, looted, and demolished"

Or: "They fled because they were afraid

we'd do to them what they'd been planning

to do to us"

Eyal Sivan, curator

Many people living here harbor some kind of guilt feeling they do not want to vent or articulate. And they do not want this thing to be exposed to rationality and to the light of the sun. This guilt feeling does its best to be repressed, hidden and covered by all sorts of taboos having to do with national security and all that. This is complete nonsense - there's absolutely no danger.

S. Yizhar¹

Many of them have been interviewed and documented countless times in the past, whether for research, propaganda, mass media or archival purposes. Some of them have written memoirs, poetry or prose describing and inspired by "those times". Others have studied the period as a profession or hobby. Formal and family archives are full of their tales. They are active in commemorative and educational associations, and many have become experts and professional witnesses.

Even in their twilight years, as octogenarians, they continue narrating, answering questions, bearing witness. At times as victims (or defenders), and at times as heroes (or experts), and often as both rolled into one. As victims and heroes they have been questioned and as such interviewed and documented; Heroes and Victims – witnesses in the metaphoric world of collective memory. Most of them have never been asked nor found it necessary to express themselves

or testify as witnesses of destruction, as active participants in the catastrophe of others, as perpetrators of the Nakba.

Enlisted men or commanders, for the large majority of the Zionist fighters of 1947-1949 (and for most of their interviewers as well), the war that tore the land apart in those years was far from being perceived as a catastrophe, disaster or defeat. On the contrary, to them it was simply a great victory – the War of Independence par excellence. Their personal ambition was clear: to be with everyone, just like everybody else, and the call "Jewish State" rang in their ears like a magic spell. For all of them, these were the days of their youth.

Only few of them, and rarely at that, managed to overcome their interviewers' embarrassment and redirect the flow of words, interrupt their comrades' wartime legends and dared to tell the truth, to point out the elephant in the room and expose the lies, the denials and half-truths. Implicitly or explic-



itly, orally or in writing, they described their own part in the civil and military activities designed to facilitate, as it were, the fled of the Palestinian people and make sure they never return. In still rarer cases, they talked about activities in which they participated directly and which led to the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and to the destruction of hundreds of villages and dozens of towns – their acts of expulsion, looting, destruction and massacre. In a word – the Nakba.

In the wide variety of mediums and practices where their testimonies appear, only rarely do they tell us something truly new. Most of their stories have already been narrated by their victims, the refugee survivors of 1948. The fighters' stories do indeed breathe life into the revisionist readings of so-called "New Israeli Historians" in state documents and give meaning to the vague formulae used by the latter. But the true significance of such testimonies (when not collected in order to la-

bel the witness morally or legally) lies in the description of the acts themselves from the point of view of the narrator-qua-actor, of the perpetrator. Randomly, whether consciously or subconsciously, the victimizer's descriptions of both the landscape and the atrocities committed within it support and complement the evidence provided by human survivors and silent ruins. His stories challenge active efforts to make us forget and deny, and fill in the gaps in the archived memory of the oppressed with precious puzzle pieces stored in the back of the oppressor's memory.

Apart for their documents kept in official archives, however, rare are the public venues and practices where the perpetrators are able to make their voice heard. The absence of a methodical practice devoted to archiving their perspective on that disaster constitutes a blind spot at the core of Israeli historiography.

As in other historic situations that have not benefitted from a transitional justice process and perhaps never will, ►

no thorough, systematic work has hitherto been undertaken to collect oral testimonies of Nakba perpetrators. Again, many of them have testified in the past, but not as the executors of the ethnical cleansing in Palestine. Their story has not been allowed to challenge the official narrative of the powers that be. They kept silent and in doing so, became active accomplices in the structuring of memory/forgetfulness involving the repression of Nakba atrocities in Israel and worldwide, of the face of the country that was and the story of its disfigurement.

This yawning gap in the country's history attests not only to the perpetrators' silence but also to the dereliction of their (would-be) interviewers' historiographic and political duty. Thus, they too are accomplices in the victimizer's silence and silencing.

Almost every soldier from 1948 can recall some "unpleasantness", some local event which "was beyond the pale", or an "unethical act" which raised moral qualms. And perhaps unintentionally, the systematic and dominant presence of such "exceptions" (expulsion, looting, destruction and massacre) along the timeline of most testimonies and in the entire relevant geographical space blurs the boundaries between the supposed exception and the actual rule or system.

Any reference to these purportedly exceptional incidents immediately extracts from all witnesses – whether former Haganah regulars, members of the Palmach special forces, or members of the right-wing undergrounds (the Et-

zel (Irgun) and Lehi (Stern Gang)) – the regimes of justification which smudge all differences and minimize, as they see it, the severity of their actions and the weight of their testimony. They often seek to emphasize that they "acted not out of hatred", almost automatically shooting the mantras "I had no choice", "the worse of two evils", "it was either him or me", and of course the ubiquitous "they fled because they were afraid we'd do to them what they'd been planning

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to do to us". The evident semantic collectivity leaves little room for doubt as to the effectiveness of the "educational officer" (more commonly, "political commissar", or politruk after the revered Soviet model) who accompanied each unit in structuring the memory, the regime of justification, the very language – shaping the language of the victim-turned-hero, the selected images of collective,

national memory, and the privileged characters of (fiction) cinema.

From its earliest days, (documentary) film practice tended, when dealing with historic events in general and with the crimes of power in particular, to position the oppressed, the subaltern, the marginalized and the disadvantaged – the victim – as a witness, and delegate testimonial status to his words and physical presence. As in the world of collective memory, the “hero”s testimony

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is not completely absent from the screen and documentary practice. However, following the monumental documentary projects starting in the late 20th century, chiefly the collection of testimonies by Holocaust survivors and victims of the national disasters in such countries as Ruanda, Argentina, South Africa and the former Yugoslavia – as well as the extensive use of visual documentation by international human rights organization – the equation of witness=victim

became fixated across all schools of documentary and archival practice, as well as in the public mind.

In fact, documentary cinema designates the role of *memorious* to the “victim”, and treats his or her testimony as well as body as a valid, living record. Thus, documentary practice becomes powerfully drawn to documenting the survivors and intimately tied to the work of memory/evidence. Thus, paradoxically, both the burden or recalling and the duty of bearing witness are carried by the oppressed.

Just as the voice of the perpetrator (as well as the bystander) are absent from the imagined world of collective memory, just as the victimizer’s character is not intuitively identified with that of the witness, so are his images largely absent from the screen in general, and documentaries in particular. This means that unlike the massive amount of victim testimonies, only rarely are those who followed orders, the perpetrators, asked to share their stories orally in front of the camera.

The power and some would say the magic of (fiction) cinema lie in its ability to reconstruct on the screen and in the present that which no longer exists or has yet to exist. Out of some 2000 fiction (and documentary) films by Israeli-Jewish filmmakers since 1948, only few were dedicated to the circumstances that had brought about the Nakba. Israeli cinematography is characterized by a general historical amnesia which is particularly evident when it comes to representing the foundational event of ►



Testimony by Palmach Fighters, 2012

Isrealiness. Indeed, according to a renowned Israeli film critic, “Despite having been the most decisive event in the nation’s history, the War of Independence was far from popular when it came to filmmaking”.²

The representations of the war, the country before its destruction and the Nakba are closely interrelated. And just as it is impossible to represent the downfall of a culture whose very existence is denied, it is impossible to imagine the landscape of the country prior to its destruction without invoking the memory of that calamity. Thus, as long as the destruction is denied, cinema cannot represent that which has not been destroyed. Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s words about the local political discourse in general are also relevant to Israeli cinema; in other words, the 1948 War, the Nakba and the refugee crisis are “the issues not filmed here”. This is also the huge denial on which Israeli cinema and particularly documentary films are founded, which is accordingly a source of constant anxi-

ety.³ As argued by Prof. Raz-Krakotzkin, the memory of the land that was and its demise are perceived in the Israeli-Jewish collective consciousness as an existential threat. Thus, “The memory of the Nakba, the memory of Palestinian destruction, is the Israeli nightmare, and any reference to it immediately brings to mind Jaffa, Haifa, a-Lydd and Ramle – the Arab towns whose destruction was part and parcel of the establishment of the State of Israel, turning them into scenes of apocalypse”.⁴

The abandonment of any attempt to reconstruct that history and the repression of the prewar landscape and of the Nakba attest to the mindset of Israeli-Jewish narrative cinema since 1948. The new insights and perspectives on those events provided by the “new” academic historians seem to have been largely ignored by Israeli cinema. Such a response to the rich treasure of new narratives testifies not only to the distance of the academic world from the collective state of mind, but more importantly, to the avoidance of Israeli filmmaking of any

radical academic, intellectual and artistic discourse.

In the years following the First Lebanon War in 1982 and as part of the emergence of the “post-Zionist” narrative, Israeli cinema was swept by the so-called “Palestinian wave”, and its new-found preoccupation with the conflict was manifested by the appearance of the Arab on the silver screen.⁵ Although this was the “return of the repressed”,⁶ but it is on this background of awakened interest in broad aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the lack of films

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about the 1948 War and Nakba that is even more painfully evident in Israeli-Jewish cinematography.⁷ This is partly due to the ideological subordination of Israeli cinematography to the perspective of the so-called Peace Camp and to the fact that, as Prof. Ella Shohat puts it, “the more they deal with the Palestinian Question in depth, the films focus on the situation and moral qualms of the Israeli ‘doves’.”⁸ Indeed, even now that

the Palestinian term Nakba has been adopted in the Hebrew lexicon and become (particularly thanks to the notorious “Nakba Law”) a commonly used term throughout the political spectrum, local cinema continue to ignore, by and large, the rich historical material and new narrative offered to it as factual and inspirational sources. The notable exceptions are few documentaries which have challenged the national narrative.⁹

A reading into the very few feature films that are related to the period in question seems to confirm the insights of historian Marc Ferro, who suggested that when it comes to historical writing, when they attempt to represent the past, filmmakers tend to blindly adopt the dominant national or oppositional ideology. Therefore, their films are no more than reproductions of historical visions created by others. Only rarely do directors offer original and global interpretations of history that are not reconstructions of the hegemonic conceptualization in a way that truly contributes to our understanding of past phenomena and how they relate to the present”.¹⁰ Conversely, the fundamental issue raised by fellow historian Pierre Sorlin regarding historical films is that at the end of the day they are all fictional, and despite being based on historical evidence, they reconstruct in a completely imaginary way most of what they represent. Nevertheless, regarding certain specific historical events, several films are compatible with expert historical narratives. Therefore, Sorlin suggests that just as in reading texts written by ▶



Testimony by Palmach Fighter, 2012

historians, films must be analyzed not in reference to what we know and understand as we watch them, but in reference to the historical understanding at the time of their creation. In general, however, we must always keep in mind that history as viewed on the screen is no more than cinematographic fiction.¹¹

In the case of 1948, the fiction is also the hegemonic Zionist narrative. In films about that time, and the preceding years, the country is depicted using the fiction also used by the dominant ideology: it is empty, and its ostensible desert wilderness is used to represent the pre-statehood landscape as depopulated. In addition for being a classic Orientalistic icon, the desert also fits the Zionist slogan of “making the wilderness bloom” and Jewish-British author Israel Zangwill’s motto, “A land without a people for a people without a land”. However, precisely that use of the desert trope to represent the country may also be seen as a repressed articulation of its denied destruction. In her article on the question of space and the representation

of boundary in Palestinian and Israeli cinema, Dorit Na’aman maintains that “contemporary Israeli cinema (particularly narrative cinema) often avoids localizing itself in an identifiable space”.¹² Indeed, in those movies where the plot takes place in the years prior to 1948 or during the war, it is easy to see that the country’s landscape is generally filled with ruined villages, as if these were an integral part of it already by the early 20th century, long before its actual destruction. Thus the abandoned farming terraces, thorn-crowned sheik’s tomb, and crumbling buildings become part of the natural lay of the land rather than the outcome of the very war the film seeks to represent.

In those few movies, these references are subordinated to a preliminary discussion of the Holocaust. In Israeli sociopolitical dialectics, the horrors of the Holocaust are often exploited as a regime of justification. The use of the memory of the Holocaust as a precondition for discussing the Nakba structures oblivion in the guise of remembrance



and actually constitutes a “Memory of Forgetfulness”.¹³ Israeli cinema also follows this practice, referring to and representing the Holocaust in a way that serves as a dual regime of justification. On the one hand, the customary usage, that is, minimize, belittle and justify the Palestinian disaster and Zionist violence and on the other, act as an obligatory starting point, a precondition and even a permit to invoke the Nakba.

Only in the rarest of cases do those two cataclysms cohabitate the screen without the recent memory of Jewish suffering overshadowing, diminishing or justifying Palestinian suffering. Already in the seminal drama *Khirbet Khizeh* adapted from S. Yizhar’s classic eponymous book (Ram Levi, 1978), the expulsion of Palestinian villagers and Jewish memory are inseparable in the Zionist soldier’s tormented conscience: “What have we committed here today? We the Jews have expelled others into exile... I sought to discover among all those if there was but a single gloomy but blazing Jeremiah, who was forging

a rage within his heart, choking a plea unto the ancient almighty from the train of diaspora”.

The very juxtaposition of Holocaust and Nakba tend to make one feel uncomfortable, shocked, and outraged and to lead to accusations of Holocaust banalization and denial. Some protest, and other go so far as to ostracize whoever dares compare the “incomparable”.¹⁴ But this analogic act of memory as put into words by author and fighter S. Yizhar already in 1949 is also clearly evident in the filmed testimonies of Zionist fighters.

Holocaust Survivor and Palmach fighter Binyamin Eshet, for one, describes in his testimony¹⁵ the caravan of Palestinian refugees leaving a-Lydd (Lod) in July 1948: “Walking with kids in their arms, pulling wagons, wagons with horses, this was... Now I didn’t realize this [at the time] – I had been in Europe, in 46 Europe was a lot like this. [...] I wasn’t aware of the fact that these were people turning into refugees”. And later: “It traumatized me. To see your



Testimony by Palmach Fighter, 2012

grandfather and then see all that when you still have memories from the Holocaust”.

Retired army general Elad Peled, who used to be a company commander in the Palmach's Third Battalion, testifies¹⁶ that upon seeing the refugee caravan, Yudka Helman, Yiftah Brigade's Educational Officer and former Zionist youth movement leader in Poland, confided in him as follows: “Elad, I have seen these scenes in Poland when the Germans were deporting people from the towns”.

The above quotes are taken from the initial testimonies by fighters in 1947-1949 collected throughout Israel together with Ronit Chacham (who has located the interviewees and prepared the historical backgrounds). Most of the 30 first interviewees are Palmach veterans, particularly of Yiftah Brigade's Third “Valley” Battalion under Yigal Allon's command, who operated on all fronts. The rest are veterans of other Haganah, Palmach, Etzel and Lehi units.

The inspiration for this project of collecting testimonies by Zionist fight-

ers and cross-referencing them with testimonies by Palestinian refugees as part of the **Common Archive – Palestine 1948** and the exhibition “Towards a Common Archive” was provided by two testimonies filmed by Michel Khalifi and the author for our film “Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel” (2004). One was the testimony of a Palestinian barber from A-Lydd (Lod) who witnessed the massacre committed by the Palmach at the Dahamsh Mosque and the exiling of his neighbors. The other was the testimony of a Yiftah Brigade fighter who participated in the expulsion and flight of Palestinians from the Eastern Galilee during ‘Operation Broom’ in the days leading up to the declaration of statehood. The desire to find and hear the perpetrators of Lod massacre, and the simplicity, nay the generosity in which that fighter gave witness urged us to make the maximum out of the huge treasure stored in the perpetrators’ memories. Some thirty additional witnesses, all Haganah and Palmach veterans, were documented over

the past year with the kind help of Erez Miller and constitute the raw material for founding the archival project.

Effortlessly and randomly, already during the first filming period we managed to document a Third Battalion fighter who witnessed the Dahamsh Mosque Massacre. During the second period in summer 2012, again at random, we documented the fighter who shot the anti-tank ("PIAT") shell into the mosque

The use of the memory of the Holocaust as a precondition for discussing the Nakba structures oblivion in the guise of remembrance and actually constitutes a "Memory for Forgetfulness"

where hundreds of civilians took shelter at the time. The a-Lydd barber's testimony, the scene from Route 181, the testimony by the Holocaust survivor who took part in capturing the town and the testimony of the PIAT operator from Kibbutz Degania represent two contradictory perspectives (at least), but they are far from conflicting with each other.

On the contrary, they complement each other to tell a single, shared story.

Thus, sometimes despite himself, the interviewed witness turns from a character borrowed from the world of memory and cinema into a human being, an ordinary person, deprived of any imagined moral and humane superiority.

The perpetrators' testimonies, narrative representations in commercial cinema and documentary testimonies of the Nakba and its perpetrators created by their offspring of the second and third generation – all these are presented here together as elements for the establishment of a common archive. At the opening ceremony of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Nobel Prize for Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared the necessity of such an archive in those words: "We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past; to lay the ghosts of that past so that they may not return to haunt us. That it may thereby contribute to the healing of a traumatized and wounded nation".¹⁸ ■

1. Israeli author S. Yizhar in a televised interview with Dan Semama, on Channel 1's Mabat evening news, February 1978. [Hebrew]
2. Shnitzer, Meir, 1994. Israeli Cinema, Kineret, Tel Aviv. [Hebrew]
3. Raz-Krakovitzkin, Amnon, 2002. "Between Brit Shalom and the Temple: The dialectics of redemption and messianism following Gershom Shalom", Theory and Criticism, 20 (Spring). [Hebrew]

4. Ibid. p. 103.
5. E. g., Daniel Wachsmann's *Hamsin* (Eastern Wind) (1982); Jad Ne'eman's *Fellow Travelers* (1983); Uri Barbash's *Beyond the Walls* (1985); Nissim Dayan's *On a Narrow Bridge* (1985); Rafi Bukai's *Avanti Popolo* (1986); and Shimon Dotan's *The Smile of the Lamb* (1986).
6. Shohat Ella, 2005, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Library of Modern Middle East Studies, p. 235.
7. In the 1980s, two feature films dealt with wartime events, but not with the Nakba: Amos Gutman's *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* (1987) and Gideon Ganani's *Crossfire* (1989).
8. Shohat, Ella, 2005.
9. E. g., Benny Brunner's *Al-Nakba* (1997); Avi Mograbi's *Happy Birthday Mr. Mograbi* (1999); Ra'anan Alexandro-bich's *The Inner Tour* (2001); Rachel-Leah Jones's *500 Dunam on the Moon* (2002); Dalia Karpel's *The Diaries of Yosef Nachmani*; and Anat Even's *Mikdamot/Preliminaries* (2006).
10. Ferro, Marc, 1993 (1977), *Cinéma et Histoire*, Folio Histoire, Paris.
11. Sorlin, Pierre, 2005, quoted in *History on Film/Film on History*, Robert A. Rosenstone, Pearson Education, Harlow (UK).
12. Na'aman, Dorit, 2001. "Notes on liminality in Israeli and Palestinian cinema", *Theory and Criticism* 18 (Spring). [Hebrew], p. 217
13. Adapted from the title of one of Mahmoud Darwish's books (*Memory for Forgetfulness*, Shoken, Tel Aviv). [Hebrew]
14. Note that mantras such as "there's no comparison" betray an inner contradiction since they are essentially founded on the very comparative act they seek to forestall.
15. Binyamin Eshet (Feingold), Yiftah Brigade fighter, in a filmed interview conducted at his home in Kibbutz Palmachim by Ronit Chacham and Eyal Sivan, August 2005.
16. Elad Peled, Yiftah Brigade fighter, in a film interview conducted at his home in Jerusalem by Ronit Chacham and Eyal Sivan, August 2005.
17. Cited in David Beresford, "The theater of pain and catharsis", *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 1996.