

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.

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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-

the witnesses' standpoint as perpetrators rather than victims, and their clear statement – I did it – often voiced with barely concealed pride. Alternatively, they insist or even beg not to share this or that detail, fascinatingly evoking the enormity of the horror.

It is perhaps no accident that these video testimonies are coming to light only now, more than six decades after the events they narrate. The distance of time probably makes it easier for the witnesses to share. Some may want to shed the burden of truth, now that comrades in arms that have already passed away would not feel betrayed.

The audiovisual medium plays a decisive role in the testimony, and this is keenly appreciated by both witnesses and viewers. Amnon Neuman's testimony, for example, recorded during a public hearing held at Zochrot, was published more than two years ago in text form. It is only after being uploaded in video format, however, that it attracted broad public attention, with more than 25,000 views.

The power of video is also evident in reactions by children or grandchildren asked to tell what they've heard about the Nakba from relatives or others. Remarkably, some who'd already published such material have refused to document their testimonies in front of the camera, in fear of offending living family members "who've been there". The selection of testimonies by the second and third generations also presented in the exhibition demonstrates, among other things, that many of us have a histori-

cally invaluable story to tell about the Nakba, which is important to narrate so as not to continue collaborating with its denial.

The audiovisual exhibition *Towards a Common Archive* offers a glimpse at a much larger project of establishing a common archive. This archive cross-references victim and perpetrator witnesses to the atrocities involved in the uprooting and expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians who were made into refugees in order to enable the establishment of a Jewish State.

The exhibition features more than 30 video testimonies by Zionist fighters filmed especially for this project, edited clips from documentaries with such testimonies, Nakba representations from feature films which constitute testimonies in their own right, as well as second- and third-generation testimonies. The exhibition also features a demo screening of the *Common Archive – Palestine 1948* website which presents Palestinian and Zionist testimonies side by side. ■

over and over in order to believe. Similar discussions are repeated in dozens of testimonies by Zionist fighters who took part in the Nakba, and can be cross-referenced with testimonies by Palestinian survivors narrating the story of their expulsion and refugeehood ever since.

Collecting testimonies both from the victims and from the victimizers and learning about the past as they narrate it is essential to exposing the history of the atrocities of the regime established in 1948, a regime which survives to this day. These oral testimonies are of the utmost importance to promoting proc-

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esses leading to resolution, as we have learned from the experience of Truth and Conciliation Committees active in various conflict areas around the world.

Zochrot has been active for more than a decade in promoting the acknowledgment and accountability of Jewish Israeli society for the ongoing crimes of the Nakba, and for realizing the refugees' Right of Return. Although the Nakba has become a commonly used term in Israeli discourse of late, it is usually treated as a bygone, a regrettable event for which the Israelis are only partly responsible at

best. Realizing that the Nakba discourse is not about the past, but about the present, and even more so the future is difficult and complex for most Jews living here. Coping with the events of 1948 requires them to come to terms not only with the wrongs of the past, but to also with the wrongs of the present, whose end is not in sight. Coping with these injustices, exposing them, acknowledging and taking true responsibility for them are all essential for any reconciliation between the two nations.

As Israeli Jews subjected to the regime established in 1948, most of us cannot but treat "our" fighters' testimonies differently. It is harder for us to dismiss them, to say "this can't be". These witnesses, who could be our grandfathers, awaken an almost instinctive sense of identification within us. It is perhaps shocking to admit it, but truthfully, had we been there with them, many of us would have joined them in ethnically cleansing Israel. In our belief, only such identification can launch our voyage of decolonization. We Israeli Jews believe that this impressive collection of perpetrator testimonies – only handful of which are presented in this exhibition – holds the potential for identity change for those of us who find it difficult to believe that the conflict that has raged over our lifetime had begun with the deportation of most of the country's Palestinian inhabitants – if not sooner.

These fighters tell little that is unknown. The great majority of the atrocities have been documented in the past. What is new about these testimonies is