Traces of Violence and the (Im-)Possibility of Reaching Closure in Narration

Regina F. Bendix

1 Introduction

War is inherently violent. Buildings are destroyed, living beings are killed or wounded, the earth is devastated. Given this specter of annihilation, the fear of suffering alongside the hope to potentially be on the victorious side are intermeshed in the lead-up to a war. Memory stores this state of tension alongside the experience and outcome of war, but depending on an individual’s position in the subsequent decades, the narration of the personal experience of this briefest of wars will filter the ‘before’ through the lens of the unfolding ‘after.’

This article is historical in nature, a reflection on violence as remembered and reflected in interviews focused on what is best referred to as 1967, with the present inserting itself in the process of remembrance. The brief yet dramatic war of June 1967 altered a great deal in the political and everyday lives and landscapes of individuals born into one of the more than two groups in a Middle Eastern territory that has seen many changes in power over the past 150 years. However, May 2021 – the time of this writing – saw a renewed intensification of hostility between Israelis and

---

1 This paper was initially presented as a keynote in the international Folklore Fellows Summer School June 2021, organized by colleagues in Joensu, Finland, but held online. The theme of the summer school was “Traditions of Violence – Violence in Tradition,” hence the focus of the analysis presented here. I thank all colleagues and participants present for the event for their comments and suggestions, as well as Galit Hasan-Rokem and Hagar Salamon. The paper was substantially revised for this printed version to avoid repetitions with the present volume’s introduction.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2022-1968
Palestinians. It will be added to the long list of larger and smaller altercations and wars between Israel, the PLO and Hamas, with or without the support of additional parties. What is old in the tension of 2021 is the reluctant reaction of surrounding Arab states.² What is new is the hostility within the state of Israel between Arab- or Palestinian-Israeli citizens and Zionists – indicating that the ambiguous relationship between many Palestinians living within Israel’s borders and those living in the Westbank and Gaza is turning toward mutual support. What 2021 will come to mean likely clarifies only years after this book reaches publication. The political contours of the region will remain fragile.

Examining the personal narratives embedded in the interviews carried out for the project ‘1967 and after,’ and searching for traces of violence recalled, a further element emerged. Individuals who look back to 1967 with their lives and livelihoods seemingly intact, narrated their memories in episodes, sometimes even polished kernels, that indicate an integration of the war’s events. Others dwelled on moments of shock, on blow-by-blow accounts left without conclusion, on losses, anxieties, and injustices, on conspiracies and disappointments that – unbottled in narration – remain open-ended, lingering through the decades, and, as many interviews acknowledged, never really unfurled in oral narration. It is this spectrum of differences that I hope to illustrate and analyze in this contribution. Before I turn to this task, I will offer a few remarks on violence as discussed in (some) cultural scholarship. The most recent outbreak between Israel and Gaza in May 2021 has brought to the surface the long-term, structural violence in the region, particularly because Palestinians inside Israel’s borders stood up as well. With the tentative analyses shared here, I try to focus closely on the speaking and narrating as personal, experiential ramifications of the macro, albeit dynamic, structural situation.

2 When and What Is Violence? Narrating 1967

The 1993 Congress of the German Volkskunde Society was dedicated to the topic “Violence in Culture” and the conference proceedings cover the tough potential of ethnographic and cultural historical work in this realm (Brednich and Hartinger 1994).³ The many case studies in those two volumes confirm the presence of violence throughout history, as well as the recognition that the potential for violence is wired into human bodies (much as it is for love, thankfully). To what extent it is actualized is connected to the sociocultural or multispecies context into which we are enculturated. Play and ritual may offer opportunities for violence to manifest itself physically in culturally sanctioned or even celebrated form. However, there are few limits in language and in symbolic expressions to the assertion of what an

³ Of course, there is a plethora of relevant work on violence in cultural anthropology and beyond; e.g. Feldman (1991), Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois (2003).
Traces of Violence and the (Im-)Possibility of Reaching Closure in Narration

addresser may intend to be painful and an addressee may experience as violence – indeed, a great deal of literary and cinematographic narratives show in words and images dimensions of violence that surpass what most can imagine to be endurable. And, in these mediated realms, legal instruments generally lag behind in identifying and regulating what is felt to be transgressive in a violent manner.

The doing of violence, including and especially in war, is selective. Its reporting and remembering in narrative make up for a good part of written literature and film. Personal narrative is an essential means of concretizing, reframing and processing experiences of violence – provided they are being told. Overcoming trauma, Carl Lindahl and others would confirm, is tightly connected to naming the experience out loud (Lindahl and Foster 2017). In addition to the tendency to suppress memory of war (Joas and Knöbl 2008), there is also the fact that not all individuals process these experiences as traumatic. War may be a constant threat in some settings, generating emotional ‘fortitude’ and enhancing attitudinal practices focusing on personal strength and resistance, as one can argue, using Monique Scheer’s Bourdieuan approach to emotion (2012). Alternately, the constancy of war and its combined threat of violence, dispossession and displacement may also wear down such inner fortitude and make way for the kind of despair that no longer narrates.

There are sites and situations where violence done and violence experienced sit in the memory of everyone, but where no morally sanctioned single version of the historical textbook variety is available or even possible. It is generationally held onto, and new instantiations of that complex of anxiety and aggression accumulate from which violent agency is generated and/or felt. Indeed, this may ultimately be the case everywhere. However, the Middle East, with its three old, major religions and their attendant senses of entitlement, its political history, its streams of migrants, refugees and settlers, is undoubtedly a paradigmatic site for experiences and interpretations of violence.

The very fact that 1967, in the everyday life of the 2010s, was hardly talked about was a significant reason for the focus of the project reported on this volume. The project offered interview settings within which 1967’s force in the affected terrain could be narrated, in the expectation that this would be a productive if painful endeavor. Our goal was to carry out interviews with individuals born between roughly 1930 and 1960, focusing on Jerusalem and East Jerusalem initially and particularly, in the Palestinian case, expanding into the West Bank, Gaza and refugee camps in Jordan. The extent to which this plan could be realized methodologically and socio-politically is discussed more fully in the introduction. Overall, approximately 300 interviews were conducted; they are of highly different length and topical extent. The very difference in the interview corpus constitutes arguably an accurate

---

The experience was, to be precise, painful for the researchers who with every interview conducted or read in transcription gained more insight into the anxiety, pain and losses suffered. For many Jewish interviewees, the memories and their narration was joyful, however, tainted with acknowledgment of opportunities foregone. For many Palestinian interviewees, narrating the events renewed sorrow and a deep sense of injustice.
reflection of Israeli and Palestinian lifeworlds respectively, and of the possibilities of encounter and mutual revelation they afford.\(^5\)

The artist Ronit Agassi included dioramas of soldiers, lying in wait, ready to fight against aggression that might come from so many possible directions in her 2017 exhibit the *The New Tenant* (Fig. 1).\(^6\)

![Figure 1: Installation from Ronit Agassi’s exhibit “The New Tenant” (Jerusalem 2017), printed with the artist’s permission.](image)

The work is keenly associated in my mind with an informal dinner conversation in Jerusalem, where an Israeli anthropologist, now in his seventies, recalled how, as a young soldier, he was summoned to the front in June 1967, and how he was shaking on the way, finding himself sitting down and crying as he was sure he would die.\(^7\) But Agassi’s work, of course, is equally well associated with Palestinian sensibility, with the new tenant living on what used to be ‘their’ land. In 1967, most Palestinians did not even have weapons. One interviewee working in a municipal building in East

---

\(^5\) See Salamon and Bendix (2020) for a case study of one interviewee that illustrates the very complexity of what is possible to tell to whom and in what way.


\(^7\) Field diary, February 2019.
Jerusalem at the time recalls how anxious Palestinian civilians arrived at this Jordanian-run office: “We want weapons, we want weapons, we want to defend ourselves!” they demanded, and were told that the Jordanian army was in the process of achieving their liberation, clearing out the new tenant, so to speak.\(^8\) Neither of the two moments invoked is violent, yet both establish the anguish in individuals facing the potential of a violent death. What traces remain of such anguish, of witnessing and being embroiled in violence? To what extent are such experiences integrated into the personal past, to what extent do they hover?

With limited international support, Israel on June 5, 1967, initiated the war with a surprise dawn attack on the Egyptian air force, still on the ground. Four hundred planes were destroyed. The ground forces of the Arab League, thus, lost the air cover in one strike before they had properly advanced. Israelis then had air supremacy, the Arab league states were forced to withdraw their barely advanced tanks and soldiers, and the war ended within just six days, with Israel gaining a great deal of land. While “Six-Day War” is the name used among Israelis, Palestinians call it Naksa – the ‘Setback’, in its sound and meaning indicating that it was bad but not as bad as the Nakba of 1948. The physical violence toward bodies in terms of deaths suffered was limited.\(^9\) The emotional intensity, however, was enormous. Within our research team we identified fear and euphoria as the two prominent emotions shared across the population, with fear changing from the Jewish to the Palestinian side within a few days, and the Palestinian prewar euphoria switching to the Israeli population. The fortification separating Jordanian East from West Jerusalem was torn apart and a path to the Western Wall, a highly prominent Jewish holy site, was broadened by pulling down Palestinian homes nestled close to it but a few days after the war.\(^10\) Access to the Western Wall was an event and outcome of this war that nearly all interviewees on the Israeli side recalled; here is just one example from a woman who experienced it as a child:

I remember it was the evening of the Shavu’ot holiday, wasn’t it? Yes, […] I remember […] people singing, they had to wait there, there were so many people going up, you had to wait, but nobody complained, nobody pushed. Everybody was singing, it was wonderful, even now I get goosebumps when I remember it. Yeah, that was a very, very moving event.\(^11\)

For many Palestinians, the return of fear was coupled with disappointment, even fatalism as it became clear that they would not be liberated. The immediate fear of atrocities of the type suffered in 1948 made way for a sense of multiple losses, multiple abandonments. An economic symbiosis between Israelis and Palestinians arose,

---

\(^8\) Z.Z., interviewed by Screen Abumeizer in February 2020.

\(^9\) There were fewer than one thousand killed on the Israeli side, fewer than 20,000 killed on the side of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq combined. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six-Day_War (accessed June 1, 2021).

\(^10\) Cf. Salamon in this volume.

and the latter experienced some new opportunities and access to modern infrastructures that had been lacking during the Jordanian administration. The Israeli euphoria lasted longer, as they, in some ways, broke out of a quite homogeneous and drab economic situation and encountered, for the first time since 1948, the colorful liveliness of Arab markets and villages and were able to visit historic sites from which they had been cut off. Some Jewish interviewees recall a feeling of possibility, embracing the Other, so to speak, reaching across the divide and building a state with equality for all, but the euphoric moment passed, and the next war loomed around the corner. “We should have” and “why didn’t we” is what a good number of Israelis stated, knowing now how much hardship the failure to act, back then, has brought.

The prewar situation in spring 1967 was full of expectations of impending violence: the aggressors and vindicators promised the annihilation of Israel, the Israelis prepared to fight – better to die oneself than to be driven away. Those are acts and sentiments of the moment, experienced bodily and supported by the kinds of rhythms and movements that permit human beings to fight and kill. Within the many efforts to grasp and theorize violence, the micro-sociological analysis of violence championed, for instance, by Randall Collins (2008), would confine itself to those very moments, preferably capturing them on video and treating them as concluded when the video ends. Drawing on a little noted article by Georg Simmel entitled “On the Problem of Historical Time” (2003), sociologist Wolfgang Knöbl (2019) has shown the limitations of such a micro-perspective. The immediate context as much as the emerging historical context as time begins to unfold are missing if one zooms close to individual acts, such as the soldier raising his gun, the expression on his face and the child finding cover before the bullet hits the car.

But while such acts, feelings and experiences of war may not enter grand historical or sociological narratives in the manner Paul Ricoeur outlined, they do figure within personal narratives. They do so, perhaps, even more poignantly, when war events have not been told repeatedly, when they are too recent or brought no resolution that can be assessed with any kind of neutrality. Those moments emerge as snapshots, perhaps recalled because an interviewer triggered them, and they may dangle loosely, with little or no effort to fully interpret and rationalize them. In contrast to the verbal artistry of Story, Performance, and Event elaborated on by Richard


13 Tsafi Sebba, a colleague working in Haifa, wrote to me after I gave the presentation this paper is based on. She inquired to what extent the present – i.e. 2016 to 2018 – “infiltrated” the narratives in the interviews about 1967. In an email from June 10, 2021, she explained her inquiry as follows: “I asked how feelings and thoughts originating in the Israeli present infiltrated memories of the war because I remembered that Dov Noy wrote that the Israeli Folktale Archives absorbed much more conflict stories between 1967-1973 than in other periods, and these weren’t stories about Israel but about Jewish life in Yemen, Iraq, Poland and more. It was probably easier to tell and to listen to such memories than to speak about the unsolved and never-ending war between Israel and its neighbors.” In other words, the distant past surfaced more strongly during a period of a lot of conflict in the present. It is an inquiry that would be worthwhile pursuing to establish to what extent past conflicts are a memory and narrative resource in making it through a given present.
Bauman (1986) about men playing pranks on each other, the shades of violence entailed in war memories can reach jaggedly into the flow of narration, left for the listener to interpret, to be made light of or to stand in accusation. They are, however, different depending on the outcome of the war for the narrator, very likely also different depending on the social station and prior opportunity to verbalize the war experience, and different, furthermore, in terms of the dialogic situation present in an interview.14

3 Poignancy – With and Without Closure

In order to offer a sense of the material that the project generated, I start by presenting two personal stories as told during a project about the impact of 1967 in personal lives.

And praise be to Allah. The war was a blink of an eye. We were in [one world] and we came to it in another world, we woke up at 8 o’clock on Monday and saw tanks – God is my witness – tanks standing at the building of what they called the general governor [instead of calling him mayor, this title is used in the Gaza Strip according to the Egyptian system]. We saw tanks and heavy machines in the heart of Rafah. [...] The people, out of happiness and pleasure, went to the tanks with food, drinks, sweets, thinking that the Arab armies had reached Rafah. But unfortunately, after scrutinizing [them] and the soldiers refusing to talk to anyone, even after the people offered them food and drink, and they didn’t get down from their tanks, finally one of the Beer al-Sabe people – God praise him – said to the people: “I swear to God those flocks they are not Arabs! They are Jews, they are not talking and they don’t look like Arabs!” People left the site and realized that Jews had reached the heart of Gaza.

[...]

Praise God, the thing was amazing and contrary to what people imagined, and what they were convinced of, people had had a hope in victory, the disaster was very great for the people, people were amazed and afraid of the consequences.15

A.M., a male Palestinian refugee who was eleven in 1967, captures this very turn from elation at an imminently expected victory, to the realization that a new disaster

---

14 Vera Becker interviewed young, internationally situated Palestinians for her BA Thesis (here in Göttingen) while working as my assistant in this project. There were a number of young interviewees who expressed anger and frustration at their parents precisely for not narrating anything about 1967. One of the reasons given was shame – for having “lost” and for having stayed within Israel as marginalized Arab-Israeli.

was striking his people. S.G. was a young Israeli mother at the time and encapsulated the change in mood, from fear to subsequent humor and elation in two stories:

Let’s see, oh my stories about the Six-Day War. Can I tell it now? The sad story was, when the, when the war broke out, my son, my older son was in first-second grade, I don’t remember, third […] anyhow, they sent the children home, and on the way home they began shooting, towards Emek Hamazleva, where we had artillery. And somebody pulled him into their shelter and then they called […]

Interviewer: Strangers?

Yeah, yeah. But they saw him, a child running on the street and they pulled him in the shelter and they called me to tell me where he was so I wouldn’t worry, and then when it got quiet, they sent him home. I didn’t realize what a traumatic experience it had been for him until a few days later we were out walking, and he said: “You see that store over there with the hallway? If they start shooting do you think you could run there?” In other words, he was constantly looking for a shelter. That was the sad story. The funny story is, we used our bathroom as the shelter, because it had only a small window high up, and so I put filled sand bags in the street and put them on the window. And they had advised people to fill your bathtubs with water in case, you know in those days they had the water tanks on the roof, in case your tank gets hit, you’ll still have water. So we’re sitting there, my husband was not home, I and some of the children were there and everybody that was in the building came down to our shelter in the bathroom, and even people on the street, when they were caught in the fire, they came up and went in. So it was quite crowded. And my son, who was about six years old, was sitting on the edge of the bathtub because there was no room elsewhere, and he fell in the bathtub with the water in it. I said that was our only war casualty (laughing). That’s the funny story.16

“Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators,” wrote Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995). He continued, “in vernacular use, story means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened’” (1995: 2). The two events reported by S.G. have been shaped, by her own definition, into “stories.” That which has happened has been given generic contours and appears to have been told and retold, encapsulating aspects of the 1967 war and, thus, making it part of personal history embedded in the greater history of Israeli-Palestinian struggles. In narrativizing the affective depth of fear of violence and uncertainty that both her sons and she experienced in the moment, she has achieved a palpable distance to that war. In emplacing it in personal biography and national history, she has seemingly conquered “what happened” and

16 S.G: female Israeli, ca. 75, interviewed by Yiftah Levin in July 2018.
can historicize it with relative ease. A.M., the Palestinian refugee cited first, offers a near poetic frame: “The war was a blink of an eye. We were in [one world] and we came to it in another world.” What he tells in between, however, is a sequence of images that, in their snapshot nature, evoke the shock of recognition: it is not the liberators who have come, it is the enemy. This unexpected turnaround was for many Palestinian narrators, children or youths at the time, also the first time that they had actually seen an Israeli. Many had fled with their mothers to caves near their villages, and felt even more vulnerable away from their houses, confronting tanks and soldiers. Their mothers sternly instructed them not to accept the sweets those Yabuds [Jews] offered. This, too, is a motif in many interviews, guiding the interpretive direction given to the story, with mothers being reported as saying, “They try to win you over!” or simply “Don’t trust!”

In searching for traces of violence in our corpus of interviews, I venture the claim that many of our Palestinian interlocutors were caught far more in “what happened” than in “what is said to have happened.” In some cases, the narration is ever so slightly reminiscent of how Renato Rosaldo (1984/2004) explained the layered nature of Ilongot hunters’ narration, repeating the seemingly same sequence, but adding a further aspect in the process. Thus M., interviewed at the age of 72 in a refugee camp near Ramallah, dwells on the twin daughters she gave birth to prematurely, just days before the war began, alternating with decision-making, stretches of flight and separation. She hid with her family in a cave, though she had had strong reservations to go, given the newborn babies. She was unable to breastfeed for fear, she says, and both of the babies died before the families returned to their home.17

Other Palestinians invoke events blow-by-blow, not necessarily in the temporal sequence in which they occurred. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from an interview with S.Z.A.S., a 67-year-old refugee at the time of the interview, who was 17 in 1967:

They were firing everywhere. My mom was doing the laundry at home. She told me to go to my uncle’s house, as the shelling might be less in that area. They were living in the downtown but, we lived in the northern area and our house was made of bricks. We arrived there; there were about 40–50 families. We stayed in the concrete room. There was another room above us, then a bomb from the northern area struck it. Shrapnel fell on us. They kept hitting until one o’clock in the afternoon, I had a Hatta with me. When the firing was over, I put all the bread in the Hatta, I put it on my shoulders. People walked towards Tubal area, east of Qalqilya. We left behind us 150 dead. M.’s family did something similar to the civil defense, they carried the dead bodies personally. I held 6 bodies who were [names all the names]. We removed their

17 M.E., aged 72 at the time of the interview, interviewed by an NGO working on behalf of Aziz Haidar, in the summer of 2018. Later on, the interviewer writes that M.E. is referred to honorably as “the mother of Palestine” in the refugee camp, and even considered as a martyr because she lost her twins in ’67 and because of her support for her sons who fought/fight for liberation and have been imprisoned and fallen severely ill in jail.
bodies from the streets but others [were left] on the streets until we came back from Nablus. We put blankets on them and put them on a truck and buried them. These corpses stayed in the streets for 27 days.  

S.Z.A.S. strings together images and brief explanatory detours almost without catching a breath, we hear the firing, we sense the concrete room and then the bomb, and feel the shrapnel falling, there are people walking, fleeing, there are the dead one tries to honor by taking them with one, and we as listeners are left with corpses that proved too numerous to all be taken along. The sensory violence of the attack is interwoven with small everyday details initially, then makes way for an accounting of flight and return, streams of people being sent hither and thither. At the end of his narration, the interviewer says: “How do you feel, when you remember these days?” and Sameer answers “I feel I was in a movie that never happened.”

Shrapnel also figured in the interview with B.L., an Israeli woman in her 90s at the time of the interview. But in her presentation, objects resulting from the war’s violence appear as collectanea, integrated into daily life. She reports first on how women preparing for a reception at the synagogue were shot at: “They were shooting at us. Probably a sniper. And that made a hole in the tablecloth. Now that type of cloth, she kept, and she used it when my younger son [celebrated] bar mitzvah.”

She then turns to the first day of the Six-Day War, recalling details of that day’s arrangements:

Anyway, Monday morning came along [...]. I turned on the radio, it’s 8 o’clock in the morning, and the war had started. I called my friends immediately, they were on their way to their car, they were going to Tel Aviv, so that was changed. And at 8 o’clock it had already started. Then we decided to go to the shelter, our neighbors [...] And I left the shelter for a while because somebody had to make a call and just then my husband calls me and he says, “Don’t worry, we just shot 104 airplanes. Out of commission, in Egypt.”

Interviewer: He already knew it?

He was a journalist. [...] So I didn’t believe him! I thought he was joking. He says, “No it’s true. You can tell them that they can quiet down.” [...] So I told the people in the shelter and we all felt much better. But I still have shrapnel here. I have some. Did you ever see shrapnel?

---

18 Interview with S.Z.A.S., interviewed in Ramallah by an NGO on behalf of Aziz Haidar in October 2017. I have not found a translation for what a “Hatta” is – I assume it is a basket to carry goods to and from a market.
19 Interview with S.Z.A.S., interviewed in Ramallah by an NGO on behalf of Aziz Haidar in October 2017. Although S.Z.A.S. says that when people ask him to talk about these experiences, he tells them, the sense of the narration is one that is more reminiscent of a first time “stringing together” the events, as I observed with earthquake stories (Bendix 1990), where consciousness finds a logical sequence as the event is recalled. The film metaphor appears in many interviews in the entire corpus, it is not exclusive to Palestinian recollection.
20 Interview with B.L., interviewed by Hagar Salamon in May 2017.
Traces of Violence and the (Im-)Possibility of Reaching Closure in Narration

It fell in our garden, and it went in our neighbor’s house, right through the refrigerator. And also, in the shelter, it fell between two people.

B.L. then rummages in the room and finds the piece of shrapnel to show the interviewer; the 1967 war memento is weighed in the hand, and she points to shrapnel’s potentially lethal nature as it penetrates the body. Then the interview turns seamlessly to first visits after the war in Jerusalem’s Old City. While she is not downplaying the tension and confusion, there is a pragmatism in her recollection, and we understand that it is facilitated by having had trustworthy information early on regarding the incapacitation of enemy planes. Israel won the Six-Day War, life went on, children celebrated life cycle rituals, a weapon’s potential devastation transformed into a shrapnel souvenir.

There is also a set of Israeli interviewees who regard the Six-Day War as a sequence of miracles rewarding Jewish people for the firmness of their belief. But there are many other Israeli interviewees who convey memories suffused with a deep pragmatism. Encounters with violence accumulate, built on a long history of Jewish suffering, yet, shored up by a resolve to stay, build, endure, and yes, also enjoy a life and a livelihood that is protected by a very strong army to which many Israelis, male and female alike, give several years in training. While 1967 was a big game changer, it was followed by the War of Attrition, followed, in turn, by the Yom Kippur War, further military altercations, intifadas, each of these events being named and absorbed into biography and history, with the piece of shrapnel, the occasional bullet as objects of memory of wars and violence overcome.

The ultimate result of violence, death, was experienced differently as well. There are interviews with Israelis who lost a son, a father, a brother in this war and emerged scarred and shaken. Central to their recollection is often the afront of the bodies of the deceased being buried in haste, without proper rites. It often took weeks or months for a reburial to take place. Yet, even here, within the context of a victory, the bereaved individuals found ways to honor their lost ones and achieve if not

21 Cf. the interview with M.S., interviewed by Hagar Salamon on Sept. 1, 2017. M.S. argues for keeping the land, because giving it back is only rewarded with hate; she sees the miraculous component of 1967, she emphasizes the inner strength of the Jewish people, their leadership skills – and sees those lacking in the enemy whom she sees enculturated into constant hate. M.S. narrates in her interview how a neighbor couple lost both of their sons in 1967 and never recovered from the severity of this loss. M.S. had wanted to celebrate, the mother wanted to wait for news from her sons, and a few days later heard that they were dead.

22 The argument outlined here could be sharpened by offering further detail from personal narratives of different positionalities. The reader is referred, for example, to the paper by Yiftah Levin in this volume whose interviewees of strong Jewish belief offer narrative interpretations of 1967 of a near teleological nature. Some Israelis who lived through 1948 up to the present bring a different capacity to narratively encircle episodes of violence in their biography and the country’s history; younger Israelis, by contrast, respond to the present with far more fear; in particular, the knife intifada for some holds horror that is hard to conquer.

23 Cf. the paper by Bosmat Ibi Hardy in this volume, as well as the interview with M.S., see next footnote.
closure, then at least social acknowledgment of their loss. Palestinians were, for the most part, not themselves actively engaged in the war and were, under Jordanian rule, officially not allowed to have weapons. But especially male interviewees remember starkly the encounter with dead bodies, particularly of Jordanian soldiers during the war and in the ensuing weeks. A.R. describes how there were Jordanian bunkers near his home at the time. As the war started

I heard the Jordanian shooting from the house above me […]. One day after the war, when it ended, I went up. I saw them dead over there, the soldiers, a few, and they had an Uzi without bullets. An Uzi without bullets! What is it? Is this a war?  

The shock of the discovery has been surpassed, over time, with the anger that those meant to free Palestine were so poorly equipped. Y.O. recalls how some mass graves near his school were made with bulldozers, in part because the bodies were not always complete and identifiable. He went with his older sister to the site, planting flowers and coming back to water them regularly. Another memory stands out grimly for him: “I remember the day we found one soldier, […] with his gun in his hand; we tried to carry him. This is after I think twenty days. His hand, we took his hand. It was a fearful thing.” A.R., Y.O. and other interviewees are not talking about family members who died, but instead of soldiers from the Arab League, most often Jordanians who had perhaps been stationed there as part of the kingdom of Jordan’s occupying force or who had been deployed as part of troops meant to be victorious on behalf of Palestine. Now, their corpses were left behind, with no one there to bury them other than Palestinians. If there is a fierce sense of entitlement to bury one’s people in the Israeli bereavement narratives, the images of unknown war dead sitting in Palestinian interviewees’ memory are jarring. Within but a few days of the hope of liberation through the combined forces of Arab countries, the violence of war left behind the ghastliness of bodies maimed and unclaimed.

The Palestinian remembrance is, thus, characterized by indeterminacy and a sense of the unfinished. There are interviewees recalling in oral history manner details of the Israelis taking the village of Qalqelya, one of the few places damaged heavily and ransacked in 1967; there are narrations of young men witnessing the advance and withdrawal of Jordanian soldiers and tanks, and there are analyses for why the Arab League crumbled, in part suffused with conspiracy narratives. However, while Palestinian interviewees also recall poignant images, the narration, not surprisingly, reflects the difficulty of achieving the kind of biographical-national
ordering and sense-making, and the capacity to find closure more evident in the personal narratives of Jewish interlocutors. The memories remain open and often venture back and forth between what happened during the Naksa and recollections of a simple, peaceful, near bucolic pre-1967 Palestinian village life.

We were owners of lands, which were planted with wheat, barley, and all the vegetables and fruits. I used to plant fenugreek and make out of it a drink, which could cure 40 diseases. However, these days no one cares about this plant.30

We were very tired, we used to go to the harvest on foot. During the harvest, we used to sleep in the caves and sometimes in the field. We also used to make yogurt. It was a tiring process. My mother-in-law was kind, we respected her, when the family became bigger, one woman used to stay with my mother-in-law to help her with the food and housework. [...] The relationships among people were beautiful, and the families were like one united family. People used to help each other. There was no gossips. Life was about working, but it was beautiful. [...] Even consolation was better, people used to cry and feel the sorrow of losing a person. People used to respect and support each other.31

As a folklorist/cultural anthropologist, I am, of course, more than familiar with the tropes associated with the good old days, the times of hard but honest work before modernity struck. However, many of these passages are not disguising hardship, strife among relatives or husbands who had left for work elsewhere. But it was a life in the context of social and economic arrangements that were familiar, and that had an amount of predictability to them. With scattered family networks within and outside Israel, and with a deep economic uncertainty, there is no horizon of certitude against which a past war can be integrated into some kind of biographical certainty. While there are also many passages in Palestinian narratives invoking the excitement of witnessing modern amenities for the first time, especially among men who were young adults in 1967, recalling the bucolic nature of pre-Naksa days also contains an awareness of the violence done to familiar ways of life, both by the Nakba and the Naksa. Many Palestinian men had already worked abroad before 1967, leaving their wives to raise the children while earning money abroad. With the occupation, work opportunities opened in Israel.

Ward Awad, a Palestinian MA student at the Hebrew University participating in the analysis of our interview materials, argues that these non-story passages dwelling on agriculture and livestock, year cycle events and simplicity constitute a verbal evocation of the split identity that particularly Palestinian refugees suffer who have left and lost their land in 1948. He cites Ibrahim, an interviewee who began his story

30 Cf. note 25.
31 Cf. note 25.
with “Palestine was removed, and the name ‘refugee’ remained.” The individual experience of violence unfolds into the structural violence of the occupation.

Almost without exception, Palestinian interviews interweave 1967, the Naksa, with the Nakba of 1948. Whether experienced by the narrator or absorbed as part of family history, the 1948 refugee fate of one’s own family or fellow villagers offers the rational for how one was acting in 1967. There were those who left, driven by the memories of massacres suffered in 1948 and rumors of new massacres occurring. There were others who were not about to suffer the fate of those who had lost home and land and remained refugees since 1948. Z.Z., the oldest of three brothers, remembers how his middle brother tried to persuade him to leave the country. He put all of Z.Z.’s clothes in a bag in order to convince him to leave with him:

He tried to put pressure on me, took my clothes with him, but I did not intend to leave, I told him, “My clothes will benefit you, take them and put them on.” He stood in the street for three hours and when he despaired that I would not go with him, he went home, returned the bag and stayed with us. Me and my father, our position was very clear, either we die here in our house or we live in our house, the idea of emigration was not negotiable to us.

The family home and the family land appear as a near nonnegotiable component for finding peace – that is what guided many Palestinians through the Naksa, 1967. Better to suffer violence or death than to become a refugee like those ‘48ers, the Palestinians who fled and were unable to return. Compared to 1948, 1967 held little in actual physical violence toward the civilian Palestinian population. There was deep humiliation and desecration, particularly in how teenage boys and grown men were treated until the new division of power was sorted (Salamon and Bendix 2020). But it is the loss of familial land and homes that remains processed, in everyday stories, as the greatest violence of all. The only picture hanging in a tailor’s small shop in the Old City is one of his ancestral land; an aging activist for the abandoned village of Lifta, tears up as he gestures to the valley behind where the family’s olive trees grew and where now Jewish settlements and streets have taken over. The one source of deep dissatisfaction registered in an interview with M.S., a well-off Palestinian of Bedouin background, is that his land is not his ancestral land: “My body is here, my heart is with my land.” While he has been given an equal amount of land to what he lost in the aftermath of 1967, he aspires to get his own land back – twenty

---

32 See Ward Awad’s contribution in this volume
33 In addition to Ward Awad’s paper, the contributions by Sereen Abumeizer and by Salwa Abed address these connections.
34 The following paraphrase and quote are from Sereen Abumeizer’s interview with Z.Z. in February 2020.
35 Interview with Y.O., conducted by me with Sarah Abu Arafe, February 2018.
36 Interview with Mh.S., interviewed in Jericho by Hagar Salamon, Ronni Shaked and me in February 2017.
kilometers downriver. He dreams of his land at least once a week and in his dream, his father who had to be buried elsewhere, is on the land.

4 Conclusion

Land, the rights associated with dwelling on this land, and the way individuals connect with land is the crux of the matter, not just in this conflict. The violence committed to get it back as much as to keep it or to enlarge it, settlement by settlement, are central to the everyday sensibilities of many individuals inhabiting this troubled piece of the earth. Land left behind in fleeing from aggression is also deeply part of Jewish memory and in rare moments of peaceful debate, aged Palestinians and aged Jews from Russia, Ukraine, Germany, but also Morocco or Ethiopia could come to acknowledge that their losses are comparable. Our interview questions focused on memories of events during and in the aftermath of the Six-Day War or the Naksa. We asked more about the perception of change than the memory of violence, not least in the hope of recovering some of the sense of opportunity that was there in the months after the first half of June 1967.

What I learned from combing through the materials with a view toward “how does violence experienced translate into narrative?” is the impact of the presence or absence of safety and certainty on the narrative contours that emerge, and the role of longevity and the perspective this proffers on fear and danger. Were one to continue working in the project of the trilateral configuration we have experimented with, a focus on land and individuals’ sentiments toward it might be a direction to steer toward more calm. During my stays in Israel/Palestine as a supporting researcher in this project, I often had to think of Keith Basso’s wonderful study *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), and imagined what wisdom would look and feel like in these Middle Eastern lands, without barbed wire, grim walls, safety cordons and deserted planes used for bombing and shooting practices. What it would mean to turn it from what Anna Tsing would call a “blasted landscape” (2015) to one that could breathe with the centuries of experience woven into it. It would be a goal to work toward.

---

37 Fieldnotes on Y.O. (see note 31) reporting on an exchange between him and an old Jewish man claiming a house in Lifta.
References


