The *Naksa* in the Shadow of the *Nakba*

Ronni Shaked

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the personal stories of Muhammad Naji. He now resides in the village of Abu Gosh, west of Jerusalem. Muhammad Naji’s life events and memories extend throughout the most salient stages of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the *Nakba* and the *Naksa*, that include the Israeli occupation and the reality of everyday life of the Palestinians under Israeli control. Naji’s family, like 750,000 other Palestinians, turned into refugees as a result of the *Nakba*. Up to 1967, they had been living as refugees in the village of Imwas (Emmaus) in the Latrun Valley, west of Jerusalem. On the fifth day of the 1967 war, Israel drove the village population from their homes and lands. After the expulsion, Israeli forces demolished the village, and once again the family became refugees and escaped to Jordan. In the mid-1970s, Naji family members returned to the West Bank, and several years later, were

---

1 As with all interlocutors in this project, the name has been changed to protect the privacy of this generous individual in an environment that may perhaps not respond negatively to the hardship related, but where just the anxiety that there might be personal retributions would be hard to live with.
2 The 1948 Palestinian exodus occurred when the Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 war and was also known as the *Nakba*, literally ‘disaster,’ ‘catastrophe’ or ‘cataclysm.’
3 The 1967 war was also known as the *Naksa* ‘setback,’ an Arabic name for the defeat of the Arabs during the 1967 Six-Day War.
4 There are different estimates of the number of Palestinian refugees in 1948, for example: according to Walid Khalidi (1992: 582) there were 714,000–744,000 people, according to Janet L. Abu-Lughod (1971: 161) 770,000–780,000 and according to Benni Morris (2004: 240) 900,000.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2022-1959
approved for family reunion, returning to their village of Abu Gosh in Israeli territory, from which they had been expelled in 1948.

Muhammad Naji’s story, as related to the author of this article and to Hagar Salamon in an interview held in Hebrew at Naji’s home in Abu Gosh, is an inseparable part of the Palestinian odyssey, yet another patch in the fabric of individual stories that touch upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Nakba is the dominant and most formative experience of Palestinian society (Sagy, Adwan and Kaplan 2002). It was the worst disaster that had befallen this people and the trauma it created individually and socially engendered a collectivity that had not been palpable before. It is openly expressed as the “chosen trauma” of Palestinian society, leaving a scar that refuses to heal.

The 1967 trauma was very forceful: A military defeat, along with a moral, political and religious downfall, that was perceived by the Muslims as fatal strikes against an Arab-Muslim country and Muslim holy sites (Ma’oz 2019: 246). The defeat occurred at a time when the Palestinians were still deeply immersed in the posttraumatic processes of the Nakba, and had yet to digest and process this prior catastrophe. The Nakba overshadows every other event in Palestinian life; the Naksa increased the trauma of the Nakba and became an integral part of it.

Muhammad Naji is no different from other Palestinians who experienced the Naksa and whose lives are conducted in the shadow of the Nakba. Even though he succeeded in rehabilitating his economic existence, he feels insecure and sees his future threatened. The interview with him, conducted by two Jewish Israelis, was held after the interviewee had requested to consult with his family and close friends as to whether he should relate his life story. He was mostly advised not to give the interview. However, he made his own, final decision to share his story with us, despite the concern that it might bring him harm. His fear was twofold: Israelis might retaliate for the things he would say, and members of Palestinian society might perceive the interview as an act of treason and cooperation with the Jews. This is what Muhammad Naji said at the beginning of the interview [this and all following interview excerpts have been translated from Hebrew]:

So after I told you I would be willing to talk to you, I had some bad feelings and thoughts and I don’t know how to explain it [...] I was thinking that if I tell you something you don’t like, then it might hurt me, perhaps my story will be published, will pass on to the government, then I will be hurt. Do you know what people told me? That I must be nuts. I’m putting myself in a risky situation, many asked me if I wasn’t stupid. They warned me that it is a story

---

5 A “chosen trauma” is the mental representation of a historic event in which the group has suffered a catastrophic and traumatic defeat that includes loss of life and humiliation by the enemy; a chosen trauma has a crucial impact on the collective feeling of victimization. The chosen trauma is openly expressed, leaving an emotional scar that refuses to heal (Volkan 2004).

6 The quotes that appear in this chapter were taken from the interview held with Muhammad Naji unless noted otherwise.
about Jews, Arabs, politics and Palestinians. “If you say something good about the Jews, the Palestinians will call you a ‘Khayan’ [traitor], and if you go and say something good about the Palestinians, the Jews will say, wait, but you live among them [the Jews], you will get hurt.” Even my wife told me, “Why are you making them your business? Why get involved?”

Repression of the Naksa from the established collective narrative finds its equivalent in the silence of the individual. Many of the Palestinians whom we interviewed during our research process, admitted that they avoid recounting their experiences and memories from the Naksa period. If they do so, then only on rare occasions and to a limited family circle; even then, they share only a small part of their story. The specific nature of our study led to many stories being told fully for the first time, including that of Muhammad. During our interview with Muhammad Naji, we learned that he too had never shared his personal story with his family and avoided discussing his memories with his close friends. He admitted that only on rare occasions did he relate parts of his life story to his children, mostly when the memories are relevant to current events.

None of Muhammad’s family members were present during the interview. His wife remained in the kitchen, from which no cooking odors emerged, nor were there any sounds heard. At times she walked in and out of the guestroom where the interview was being held, and it may be assumed that she listened to what her husband was saying.

Muhammad Naji was born in 1952, four years after the Nakba. Like 750,000 other Palestinians, his family became refugees as an outcome of the 1948 war. They were expelled from the village of Abu Gosh during the Nakba, and wandered from place to place, aiming to return to their village and their land. They reached Ramallah in the course of their wanderings, and from there, came to the village of Imwas in the Latrun Valley, about thirty kilometers west of Jerusalem, where Abu Gosh residents owned land and agricultural plots. Muhammad Naji’s childhood and adoles- cent years, up to the 1967 war, were spent as a refugee in the village of Imwas.

I was born there, in Latrun, in Imwas. I went to school there, in Imwas. You know where Latrun junction is today? That’s where my school was, precisely that junction. There’s this pipe there, under these high planks – that’s from the school’s garden. And our house, where I was born and raised. I grew up there, in Imwas, but Imwas isn’t our real village.

Refugee families had found shelter in Imwas, as in other Palestinian villages in the West Bank. They were received as ‘guests’ – a status of temporary residents. A ‘refugee’ does not denote a social or economic status in Palestinian society, but rather a political status. Hence, the villagers treated them as ‘strangers,’ and the refugees themselves were careful to avoid any negative friction with the village members, such as arguments, fights or conflicts, knowing that their inferior social status would work to their disadvantage. The refugees’ isolationism as a separate group and their lack
of integration into the permanent Palestinian population forced disaffiliation upon them, and reinforced the individual and collective identity of the refugee, transforming the status of ‘refugee’ into an icon of memory (Shaked 2018: 124).

Since 1949, these refugees have received special aid from the United Nations’ Relief & Work Agency, specifically designated for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The major thrust of the aid provided is in the form of monthly food rations. The agency’s aid became a target of mockery among the villagers, as the food provided was considered poor folks’ food. The villagers ridiculed and teased the refugees, calling them “fava bean eaters,” and removed them from the social circles of the village community. Hardly any marriages were registered between refugees and the village’s permanent residents. Even the cemeteries were separated.

Between 1948 to 1967, the Jordanian royal family conducted a policy of Jordanization in the West Bank. At the core of this policy was the enforcement of the Hashemite hegemony over the Palestinians and an attempt to create a Jordanian identity via steps of de-Palestinization in order to ‘erase’ the Palestinian identity. Thus, the use of the word ‘Palestine,’ for example, was forbidden in official Jordanian documents. In its stead, the use of the phrase ‘West Bank’ was introduced. School textbooks also ignored the existence of the Palestinians almost totally (Gelber 2004: 262–263; Karsh 2003: 189–192; Procter-Ronen 2002).

This policy was challenged by the Palestinians with the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in May 1964 and the revival of Palestinian nationalism. The Palestine Liberation Organization applied a hostile policy towards the Jordanians among the Palestinians in the West Bank, forcing King Hussein to cope with the Palestinians via various means of supervision, including the educational network. However, the Palestinian schools were a hotbed for a resurging Palestinian nationalism. Palestinian teachers, most of whom were young, educated and from the Nakba generation, nurtured patriotic sentiments among their students’ and inculcated in them the hope of attaining the right of return, along with beliefs in the delegitimization of Israel. This was done outside the curricular framework, for instance, by learning patriotic songs and preaching the need for sacrifice for the national Palestinian struggle and the realization of the right of return. The world of the young generation was imbued, along with national education, with the delegitimization of Israel and Zionism, the hope for the destruction of Israel and the realization of the right of return. The opportunity to galvanize this atmosphere appeared with the outbreak of the 1967 war. Muhammad recalls:

We had classes all the time about how we are an occupied people, the Jews came and took our lands. We were taught in school that the Jews were coming from all corners of the world, they came and conquered this land, they took it, and they kicked its inhabitants out – meaning, they are the bad guys. The Jews dispersed the people of Palestine to all around the world, that in the future we would need to be

---

7 About UNWAW and its work, see https://www.unrwa.org/.
8 The Hashemite or House of Hashim are the royal family of Jordan; they have been ruling since 1921.
strong and be in the army and get our lands back. They taught us poems and songs, most of the lyrics are about victims, about the land being taken from us, about pain and suffering. Those are the songs we learned.

2 The Outbreak of the 1967 War – Palestinian Euphoria

From mid-May 1967, when the winds of war began to blow, euphoria overtook the Palestinian people, based on the hope of an Arab victory and the destruction of the state of Israel. The Palestinians waited anxiously and joyously for the outbreak of war. They placed their trust in the promises given by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to defeat Israel and return them to their homes, from which they were expelled in the Nakba.

This euphoria was further kindled via the Egyptian radio station, Sawt al-Arab, which at the time was the most popular station in the Arab world, particularly among the Palestinians.\(^9\) The most popular broadcaster of the radio was Ahamad Sa’id, who tended to use coarse, popular language and slogans. He played a major role in forming Palestinian public opinion in the period immediately prior to the 1967 war. These impassioned broadcasts greatly increased the Palestinians’ euphoria and the hope for a victory that would lead to correcting the injustices of the Nakba. As the eruption of war came closer, the Sawt al-Arab radio station intensified its impassioned broadcasts and Muhammad remembers the increased feelings of impending victory among the Palestinian population:

Whoo! […] People were dancing in the streets! They were waiting for the time that everyone could go back to his house and his land. Everyone was dancing in the streets and going to each other’s houses and saying “Turn on the radio. Let’s see what Abdel Nasser and Sa’id are saying […].”

Despite the limitations and prohibitions on listening to the Sawt al-Arab radio station by the Jordanian Authority, Muhammad recalls how the Palestinians listened punctiliously and enthusiastically to the station, and did so while keeping an eye open for any Jordanian policeman or soldier outside the house. According to Muhammad, during the broadcasts, the family would send one of the young boys out into the street who would signal to them if a policeman or soldier appeared.

In those days, we couldn’t even turn on the radio […], then we would keep – if for example a policeman or a soldier would come in, then my father or uncle would turn off the radio, change the channel. So the soldier or policeman wouldn’t hear that we’re listening to the Sawt al-Arab radio station. Because we were afraid. It was very scary.

\(^9\) For more details about the Sawt al-Arab radio station, see Boyd (1993).
When war broke out, the Palestinians’ euphoria increased greatly. Ahamad Sa’id enthusiastically broadcast fictitious victories of the Egyptian army and the destruction of Israeli planes and tanks. “The enemy’s planes are dropping like flies,” he said. The Palestinian listeners believed these broadcasts, filled with pathos and enthusiasm:

Ahamad Sa’id was saying, “Umm Kulthum [the famous Egyptian national singer] is with you; we are going to throw the Jews into the sea; blessed are the fish, we are sending them food – the Jews; now is the time to raise our flag on the shores of Tel Aviv!!” […]

The Palestinians trusted Ahamad Sa’id and the Egyptian radio’s reportage of dozens of Israeli planes claimed to have been shot down. The purported ‘news’ led to cries of joy and waves of happiness.

In our interview, Muhammad Najid did not hesitate to criticize the Arabs who had believed these false broadcast reports, especially those that bragged about the downing of hundreds of Israeli planes. He remarked cynically:

I’m talking about Arabs, not Jews. First they said 23 airplanes, then 38, then 100, 200, they were talking maybe about 3000 airplanes and that was on the first day!! And here I am thinking, 60 years later – how stupid these people were and how they [the radio] broadcast such things [he smiles and laughs].

The arrival of the Egyptian commando forces in the West Bank was received with enthusiasm and joy. The commando soldiers who passed through the village roads on their way to the battlefield were received with honor and admiration as the liberators of Palestine. The villagers were eager to help the troops that passed through their villages. The soldiers’ requests to fill their canteens with water were met with enthusiasm and the youngsters who took part in this simple activity felt that they were helping the war effort against Israel.

On June 5, this was Sunday – there were 600-750 Egyptian soldiers who came from Egypt and were being taken to Imwas. So they came and stopped by our house, and one of their officers asked my father for water. I went, I brought a canteen, I took it to fill it, and the second man said, “Me, too!” To tell you the truth I was pleased. They wanted to free Palestine; they wanted to return us to Abu Ghosh. I was happy like the entire world is happy, they would bring us back our family. I had never seen my uncle. I had never seen my grandmother. It’s like a broken family, the family doesn’t exist.

The Egyptians had set up a field hospital in the center of Imwas in one of the empty houses. The villagers volunteered to help with food, water, sweets, blankets and clothing. The refugees among the Palestinians were the most ecstatic; they imagined the commando soldiers as the spearhead that would lead to the destruction of Israel and make possible a return to their villages from which they were expelled in the Nakba.
There is very little testimony regarding the arrival of the Egyptian commando soldiers in the West Bank, and to the Latrun area specifically. Israeli military historiography briefly mentions three commando companies of the Egyptian army that arrived in the Ramallah area, whose mission was to occupy Lod airport. General Uzi Narkiss (Narkiss 1975: 161) relates that the commando soldiers were exposed on June 6, after having attacked an Israeli army administrative vehicle. They were surrounded, and were forced to surrender after the field in which they were hiding had been burnt. The following morning, three Egyptian commando soldiers were caught on Israeli territory, about fifteen kilometers from Latrun. It was assumed that they had lost their way. Several commandos were captured in Imwas.

As opposed to the enthusiastic welcome given to the Egyptian soldiers, the Palestinians on the West Bank did not care for the Jordanian army, to say the least. They treated its forces with suspicion and distrust. Moreover, they blamed the Jordanian army for deserting the battlefield and the Palestinians, as they had done in 1948.

Jordanian forces had been deployed in Imwas, which was considered a strategic junction. However, on the night of June 4, 1967, prior even to the outbreak of war, Jordanian army trucks arrived at the village and evacuated the soldiers, leaving the protection of the village in the hands of a dozen National Guardsmen who were not trained, and who had only light weaponry. Muhammad Naji commented sarcastically and asked rhetorically, “Is that what will help against the Israeli army?” This move was perceived as a betrayal of the Arab war effort, as an abandonment of the Palestinians to the mercy of the Israeli army, and even as part of a conspiracy by King Hussein to cooperate with Israel and enable the Israeli army to occupy the West Bank. Muhammad Naji recalls that his mother saw one of the volunteers of the National Guard. She knew his parents, and she convinced him not to fight: “The Jews are already at the Jordanian Bridge, here, we can already see their buses, it will be just like what happened in ‘48, go throw away your gun and change clothes and go be with your parents. They need you.”

Muhammad Naji felt proud of the village Mukhtar, who dared to throw accusations in the face of the senior Jordanian officer who was in the village then, claiming that this was treason against the Palestinian people and that King Hussein was abandoning them to the Israeli army, just as his grandfather, King Abdullah, had done during the Nakba.

Suddenly army cars showed up, the soldiers began climbing into these trucks, and left the village. When the Mukhtar saw the soldiers leave, he started cursing at the head officer. “You’re doing the same thing to us as you did in ‘48, you’re leaving the rest of the Palestinians to the Jews, why are you taking our children to be killed?! And these Egyptians who came here, thousands of kilometers away, you left them and you’re running away?” The officer said, “

---

10 Mukhtar (Arabic) is the head of a village. Mukhtars are usually selected by some consensual or participatory method.
had orders.” The officer was furious at the Mukhtar, and said, “If you say another word I’ll shoot you.” The Mukhtar answered, “I am not scared of you!”

In Imwas, there was hope that the Egyptian commando soldiers, who were deployed throughout the fields close to the Israeli border, would be the protectors of the villagers and lead the military operation to victory. However, this slight hope died as well.

After midnight, we started to see lights on the horizon. There were illuminating bombs that turned night into day, and they stayed bright for at least a quarter of an hour. If you had a coin and you threw it between people, you could find it from that light. Sounds of explosives were heard. The Egyptians who came from far away knew nothing about the area, and the Israeli soldiers started to kill the Egyptians. From 750, there were 100 left.

In the morning, it became clear to the villagers around the area that the Egyptian commando forces had been defeated in battle. Failure on the battlefield was not blamed on Abdel Nasser’s soldiers, but rather on the collaborators with Israel. This conspiracy theory was once again revived. Villagers related how the commando soldiers had been led by a guide from the nearby village of Beit Nuba, who was none other than an Israeli agent, “a collaborator with the Jews who was given money by them,” who had abandoned the Egyptian soldiers in the field and then escaped.

3 The Occupation of the Latrun Valley and the Village of Imwas

On the night of June 6 to 7, sounds of shooting and explosions were heard in the village of Imwas. These were the sounds of battle between the Israeli soldiers and the Egyptian commando forces. The sounds of battle immediately raised the trauma of the Nakba. The automatic reaction was to escape, as quickly as possible.

[My mother] woke us up and told us to put on underwear – 2 to 3 pairs each, and 2 to 3 pairs of pants, and 2 to 3 shirts and summer clothes, and we yelled, “Why are you doing this?” And she answered that the Jews might win like they did in ’48, and “maybe we don’t know where they’ll throw us, so to make sure you will have clothes, if the top layer is destroyed or gets messy, you’ll take off the top layer and have the bottom layer!” That’s what she finally told us […] You understand why she did that?

---

11 At this point in the story, Muhammad Naji burst out laughing, clearly laughter resulting from embarrassment; it made it easier for him to present the conspiracy theory and excuse the defeat of the Egyptian soldiers.
The occupation of Imwas, like all the other villages in the West Bank, was accomplished without battle. The Jordanian army forces that were stationed in the village had retreated during the night even before the Israeli forces arrived. National Guardsmen – a small armed force made up of the village inhabitants – understood that they were powerless to engage in battle. They took off their uniforms and hid their weapons. The Israeli army entered the village without encountering any resistance.

We saw that the Jews were coming near [...], buses were coming, buses, not tanks and not jeeps, buses of Jewish soldiers came into the center of the village and started to let soldiers off. The bus waited by the side and the soldiers got off. And spread out [...].

The Palestinian population was obedient. The Israeli soldiers passed between the houses, knocked on the gates or doors, and spoke one short sentence, “Go to the Mukhtar’s house.” Muhammed’s frightened parents sent him to open the door. Facing him was a young Israeli soldier, with a helmet on his head and a rifle in his hand. This was Muhammed’s first encounter with an Israeli soldier, the first time he faced a Jew whom he had learned in school to consider a demonic figure. “He was 20 years old, maybe 19, young. My heart jumped, and I wanted to run away and be back with my mother and father.”

There was no need to explain the instructions “Go to the Mukhtar’s house” to the villagers. With automatic obedience, they left their homes and went to the nearby square close to the Mukhtar’s house. The village residents – men, women and children, the young and the elderly – all stood together in the square. “We were all assembled there. Those of us who arrived saw almost the whole village there.” An Israeli military jeep stood at the corner; inside sat three or four Israeli soldiers and an officer. One of the soldiers spoke through the jeep’s megaphone and ordered: “Go to your King Hussein, this is the way!” and pointed down the road heading east. From the square began the march of hundreds of villagers towards the road leading to Ramallah. Some of them were holding white flags, others were carrying parcels, and many others had nothing at all. They marched in silence along the side of the asphalt road in one long line.

According to a document, apparently from the Israeli Defense Forces, the village of Imwas was occupied on the night of June 5 to 6:

Squads from the Egyptian Commando Battalion continued to operate in the area for three days. During the searches, a few Egyptians commandos were killed or captured. One of the Egyptian commandos was wounded inside the village of Emmaus. The residents of the village were ordered to evacuate the village. They did it unopposed. The order to destroy the village houses was approved by the political echelon.\(^\text{12}\)

4 The Expulsion

The march to Ramallah began at 8 a.m., a distance of 33 kilometers. Many women were wearing plastic sandals and were forced to remove their head coverings and use them to protect their babies from the sun. They did not have any food or water. Israeli soldiers posted at the crossroads gave out conflicting instructions, and, from time to time, the marchers were forced to leave the main road and march through fields or olive groves. Muhammad recalls:

We started to walk. My mother was wearing plastic shoes. It was a hot day. You could see the vapors from the tar on the road. People were sweating. The walking was difficult. Along the roadside, there were thorns. We reached a village, on the way, there was no water! But I remember there was water for the goats and the cattle, dirty water, full of garbage. I remember clearly how my father put his hand in the water, moved the dirt aside, and gave my little sister water, at the time she was maybe two and a half years old. Today she's over 50 years old. Nowadays, when we begin to tell the story, she starts to get angry at our father for giving her that water. [Laughs and continues the story with a big chuckle]. He said to her, “What, you think I'm the Strauss Corporation [a large food and beverage plant], I can make a popsicle and give it to you?” [Muhammad is so amused that he begins to repeat the story]

When the line of marchers reached a well near one of the villages, a fight broke out. Who would be the first to drink? One villager took out a knife and threatened his friends. In some places, the villagers were forced to drink filthy water from a water trough. Even the babies were given this filthy water to drink. Muhammad’s mother, who was carrying his baby sister, stopped near a water trough, took off her head covering and used the fabric as a filter for the filthy water, which she then gave the baby to drink. This is a well-known story in the Najj household. Many years later, after the family had returned to the village of Abu Gosh, Muhammad and his brothers would tease their sister and retell the story of the filthy water she had drunk on the forced march of expulsion from their village. “Till today she is angry about having drunk water meant for cattle, and blames this event for all her troubles and difficulties.”

The march continued for twelve hours, till the evening. “It was very difficult. And I can’t explain it, because a mind can’t grasp how difficult it was,” whispered Muhammad. The hungry, tired and frightened marchers reached the Old City of Ramallah, where they noticed groups of villagers that had either been expelled or fled from their homes, all gathering at the doors of one of the monasteries. They stood behind them, waiting for their turn to enter, but a monk standing in the doorway refused to give them entry.

[...] The monks came out and said, “We have no place here, go to your Muhammad – go be with him” [go to your Mosque, find refuge with your
Prophet Muhammad]. Some people from Imwas grabbed the monks and said, “In this situation there is no Jesus, no Muhammad” and began to beat up the monks, we were so upset, our brains stopped working. [...] So the monks went over to the side, and people came into the convent, maybe four to five thousand people.

The villagers who had fled or were expelled had no patience left. They cursed the monk, pushed him aside and broke into the monastery, taking up residence in one of the school rooms. They slept on the floors, some even on the students’ desks. At night, they suffered from the cold weather. There was water in the monastery, but the bathrooms were unable to accommodate the thousands who had found shelter there. Many people relieved themselves in the monastery’s courtyard. In the morning, the men left to search for food. Muhammad’s father came back with a carton of cucumbers, and his uncle brought a carton of tomatoes which was stolen from the vegetable stalls at the wholesalers’ market. The hunger was difficult to bear; an old man went and found a few pita breads, and fights broke out over a small pita or a rotten cucumber.

During the first days after the war, Israel was surprised by the successful occupation of the West Bank, and decided to try to bring Palestinian life back to normal. One of the first decisions taken by the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, regarding the Palestinian population was to allow the villagers who had fled to return to their homes. Perhaps Moshe Dayan’s decision was also the result of lessons learned from the Nakba – to prevent the shame that Israel had expelled the Palestinians from their homes and villages. Four days after the war had ended, Israeli army vehicles drove through the streets of the Palestinian cities. The occupiers called, through a loud-speaker, on all those who had fled to return to their homes.

Thousands of expelled villagers who were staying at the monastery in Ramallah, started on their way back to their homes, amongst them the villagers expelled from Imwas. The march on foot back to Imwas took longer. The villagers were tired and crushed. This time, as they were walking back, there were many gestures of solidarity and help from people through whose villages the marchers passed, providing them with food, water, clothing and shelter for the night.

When the expelled villagers of the three villages of the Latrun Valley neared their homes, they were stopped at a military checkpoint, and were informed that they could not continue to their villages and must turn back to Ramallah.13

13 Amos Kenan, an Israeli journalist who at the time was serving on reserve duty at the checkpoint in Latrun Valley, was shocked when he saw the deportation of the residents and the demolition of the villages. Right after the war, he wrote an article in the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth, in which he described in detail the line of marchers who were not allowed to return to their homes: “[...] there were old people there who could barely walk, old women who were muttering, infants in their mothers’ arms, small children. The children were crying and begging for water. [...] Some of our soldiers burst into tears. [...] The children who walked along the road, crying bitterly, will be the Fedayeen (terrorists) in another 19 years, the next time around. That is how, on that day, we lost the victory.” (Amos Kenan, Yedioth Ahronot, June 20, 1967, translated by the author).
Soldiers, who stopped us on the way, said, “You can’t go any further. Not to Imwas and not to Bayt Nuba.” My mother was furious and started cursing — the Arabs, religion, what not, my mother went insane. People told her, “You’re being an infidel,” and she said to them, “How am I an infidel, what religion?” In short, Mother was crazy. She lost her mind because she had such a hard time with that trip. I told you, she had plastic sandals on, and in that heat, her legs were totally burnt.

Following the expulsion of the villagers, an order was given by Israeli army headquarters to begin destroying the houses in the village. This was an act of revenge and payback for the disgrace of the 1948 war — when soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces had been unsuccessful several times in conquering these villages. According to Palestinian statistics, nearly 3200 houses and structures were destroyed in the three villages of Imwas, Beit Nuba and Yalu. According to the same statistics, 17 villagers were killed during the occupation of Imwas and the expulsion of its residents, at least half of them while their houses were being destroyed. These were not casualties of war activities but vengeful killings of citizens who were unarmed.

The residents of Emmaus, including the Naji family, did not witness the exploding of their homes. They were in Ramallah while the bulldozers were destroying the village. When they tried to return to the villages a few days after the war ended, as quoted above from Muhammad’s interview, they were stopped at an Israeli checkpoint on the way to the village and did not see the ruins of their homes. However, there are some testimonies of the destruction.

About a month after the war, the French Catholic weekly magazine, Temoignage Christian, published sections from the diary of a nun named Marie-Therese, who had visited the area of Latrun immediately after the war’s end. The diaries were only made available to the Israeli public in 2010. She wrote:

Here is what the Israelis don’t want us to see. Three villages that were destroyed systematically with dynamite and bulldozers. Alone, in deathlike silence, the donkeys walk around amidst the ruins. Here and there, a crushed piece of furniture or a torn pillow peak out from the clumps of plaster, stones and cement. Israeli tractors from nearby kibbutzim are quick to plow the Arab’s lands.

This clearly supports the testimonial of Israeli writer and journalist Amos Kenan cited above.

The Israeli photographer Yosef Hochman from Kibbutz Harel, close to the Latrun Valley, documented the expulsion and the houses’ demolition with his camera, but he kept these photos hidden away for ten years, as he says, “out of self-
censorship.” The first photo exhibit of the destruction of the village homes was launched in Jerusalem in 1978, but after only a few days, the exhibit was closed as the photos had been intentionally damaged, most probably by right-wing activists. The exhibit was opened once again in 2009 in the Kibbutz Gallery in Tel-Aviv.

5 Escape to Jordan

As soon as the real results of the war – Israel’s victory – spread, memories of the Nakba reinforced the Palestinians’ existential fears and anxieties, and thoughts of escaping and fleeing almost automatically arose. This was one of the reasons that led nearly a quarter of a million Palestinians from the West Bank to abandon their homes and escape to the East Bank to the Jordanian Kingdom. This journey of flight on foot, filled with suffering, created an immediate associative connection between the Nakba and the Naksa.

The Naji family, similar to many other helpless Palestinians, escaped to Jordan, where Muhammad’s two older brothers had been living for years. With the little money they had, they paid a truck driver to take them. The truck was crowded with dozens of others who had fled. It brought them close to the Jordan River, where many other trucks were parked, from which men, women and children were quick to jump out, some of them carrying their parcels, and all began marching towards the broken remains of the Allenby bridge that had been bombed during the war. It, too, was very crowded. Everyone had to step very carefully, choosing their footing amongst the broken iron pieces. It was an obstacle course, like a challenging juggling act:

The bridge was broken. There was a tree in the river, up and down, and up, like planks so people could go down and up. There were people coming from Amman to greet their families, and there were people from the West Bank who were going there. And there were soldiers standing on the side – if they saw something that wasn’t ok, they started shouting, starting to scare people, starting to get involved.

Delegates of the Red Cross who were at the bridge also helped the Palestinians to cross. They carefully registered the new refugees. When these reached Amman, among them the Naji family, they were registered once more by the Red Cross in the list of Palestinians who wanted to return to their homes in Palestine. The new refugees in Amman resided with their relatives, who themselves were refugees from the war of 1948. The Naji family lived with Muhammad’s older brother. One of his brothers joined the Fatah movement, and went to live in one of its training camps.

---

18 Ibid.
19 Researching Israeli newspapers reveals that there is hardly any mention of the destruction of the villages. These events had no impact on public opinion to demand a rectification of the injustice.
Another brother was captured by the Jordanian authorities and forced to be a recruit in the army. Muhammad remembers this difficult period for his family, his role in supporting the family and the eventual return to Abu Ghosh:

Nobody helped us. We had to pay house rent, water and electricity bill, expenses we didn’t pay at Imwas. We had a hard life, we had no money. My mother demanded that I go to work in order to support the family. I was young, just 15 years old, and I wanted to continue my studies. In Imwas, I was a successful student, and now, instead of going to school, I had to work. I found a job as an assistant doing whitewashing. In 1971, I was approved a license from the Israelis to visit my family in Abu Ghosh. As soon as I arrived, I started working with my uncle. After three months, when the license expired, I returned to Jordan and there I continued to work. Fortunately, after a year, we received a family reunification certificate, and returned to Abu Ghosh.

6 Between Remembrance and Deliberate Forgetting: Imwas as a Test Case

Remembrance and – no less so – forgetting are existential and fundamental characteristics of the conflict. Remembrance and forgetting are not detached from one another, insofar as building a memory is simultaneously a deliberate act of erasing the traces of events that the memory-builders wish to obliterate (Gillis 1994; Zerubavel, 1995: 8–9). The harsh experience of Muhammad’s family and many other Palestinians from Imwas finds confirmation – in a different manner of historical assessment and justification – on the Israeli side.

The village of Imwas [Emmaus] is one of the oldest villages in the Holy Land. The village lies on the eastern outskirts of the Latrun Valley, on the main road between the plains and Jerusalem. Control of the Latrun Valley guaranteed free passage to Jerusalem, which explains its strategic importance. According to the United Nations Partition Plan, ratified by the UN on October 29, 1947, the Latrun Valley was included in the area designated as part of the Arab state. However, due to its strategic importance, David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, instructed the army to occupy the Valley. For him, Latrun was of crucial importance in the fate of Jerusalem, which was under Arab blockade in 1948.

In Israel’s collective memory, the battles of Latrun in 1948 are marked as a scathing military failure. The Israeli armed forces led five unsuccessful military attempts to occupy the valley. A total of 168 Israeli soldiers were killed in the battle, and, at war’s end, the Latrun Valley remained in the hands of Jordan. Benny Morris claims that the failure of the battles in Latrun in 1948 was engraved in Israeli collective memory as one of the traumatic failures in the history of the Israeli Defense Forces (Morris 2003: 217). Therefore, conquest of the villages of the Latrun Valley in 1967
had a great symbolic significance for the Israelis (Segev 2005: 375). However, during the 1967 war, the police station and surrounding villages were occupied within several hours without any war effort, and without any losses on the Israeli side. Immediately after the battles, General Uzi Narkiss, who commanded this military campaign, stated: “We have settled an old score from 1948.” In his book, Narkiss emphasized that “we shall never give back again the Latrun valley – which was a thorn in our side in 1948” (Narkiss 1975: 194).

On the sixth day of the 1967 war, Israeli bulldozers destroyed the houses of the three Latrun Valley villages – Imwas, Beit Nuba and Yalu. From the Israeli point of view, it was part of the revenge for the humiliation suffered by the Israelis in 1948.

The destruction of Arab villages as part of changing the landscape, and as part of the process of erasing memories of the past and building a new narrative are an inseparable part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hundreds of Palestinian villages were deserted during the Nakba. Most of them were erased from the landscape, either through physical demolition or by planting forests over the villages’ ruins. Jewish settlements were built on some of sites of the destroyed villages, and the Arab village names were changed to new, Hebrew names. In most villages, some remnants remained, such as a cemetery, or sections of walls or structures, bearing witness that different lives were once lived in these places. Noga Kadman claims that Judaizing the Holy Land, which constitutes a basic value in Zionist nationalism, and shaping Israel’s domain, including the erasure of empty Arab villages from the landscape, are part of the formation of a selective collective memory that emphasizes the past Jewish history of the land and relegates hundreds of years of Arab existence to the sidelines (Kadman 2008: 40–41).

Regarding the destruction of the villages, there has been a collision between ‘re-membrance’ and ‘deliberate forgetting’ since June 1967. This struggle is maintained between the State of Israel, its institutions, that actively effect deliberate forgetting and building a new narrative in the region, and the Palestinian people and their civilian institutions, struggling to return to their villages and homes. In the Latrun villages, this creates an interface between the Nakba and the Naksa. Imwas refugees are an integral part of the Naksa refugees, and their struggle has merged with the Nakba refugee struggle, with both of them demanding the right of return.

7 Deliberate Forgetting

How was this deliberate forgetting implemented? In December 1969, Israel built a settlement on the ruins of the village of Beit Nuba – one of the three villages that were destroyed. The agricultural lands of the three Palestinian villages were transferred to the hands of Israeli farmers. The new agricultural landscape does not resemble the Palestinian Arab agricultural landscape.

In the early 1970s, Israeli authorities planted a forest on the ruins of Imwas, and created a public park that offers leisure facilities. The forest was planted by the Jewish National Fund, and the park was built with a donation from Canadian Jewry. At first it was called “Canada Park.” However, after the donors discovered that it had been built on the ruins of Arab villages, the name was changed to “Ayalon Park.” Most of the signs put up in the park’s vicinity use the name “Ayalon-Canada Park.”

Many signs are posted throughout the park, yet, not one of them mentions its Palestinian past, or the names of the villages upon whose ruins the park was built – except for one sign that was once posted, following a Supreme Court decision in 2004, which mentioned the name of the village. This sign remained in place for several weeks, but was then vandalized by Israeli hikers, and today nothing remains of it.

The Israeli establishment kept the story of the conquest of the three villages, the expulsion of their inhabitants and the destruction of their homes hidden from the media. The events did not appear in war albums, textbooks, travel guidebooks and official cultural output. The new maps published by Israel’s Measurements Department do not include the names of the villages, nor does the interior park map signify or indicate any mention of Imwas. The Israeli establishment succeeded in ‘erasing’ the story. Today, the great majority of the Jewish population in Israel is totally unaware that the relics of villages that were destroyed in 1967 lie under the Ayalon-Canada Park.

8 Memory

The village Imwas that was destroyed in 1967 was ‘privileged’ to be included in the Palestinian collective memory and was added to the list of those villages destroyed during the Nakba. This was due to the great similarity of the expulsion of the villagers and the destruction of their homes to what was done in 1948 to hundreds of other villages. And, just as the memory of the Nakba villages is perpetuated (Shaked 2018: 130–135), so, too, the memory of the village Imwas is upheld: Pictures of the village were collected from the Jordanian Mandate period and up to the sight of the forest, underneath which lie the village remains. A video was produced and distributed via YouTube\(^\text{21}\), describing the village in 1967 prior to its destruction, along with photos of the destruction of the homes and describing the remnants of the village. Maps of the village, as seen before 1967, were redrawn.\(^\text{22}\) The refugees return to the village in a ‘visiting tour.’\(^\text{23}\) In 2012, following rumors that Israel intends to pay

---


\(^{23}\) https://www.arab48.com/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9/2019/02/24/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%
compensation to the expelled villagers, the refugees of Imwas signed a pledge to a “Treaty of Honor.” It states that they are committed to cling to their right to return to their village and their home: “We won’t agree to receive any compensation against our right to return to our home.” In June 2017, the fiftieth anniversary of the destruction of the villages of Latrun, the refugees of the villages set out on a demonstration march in Amman, the capital city of Jordan, demanding to return to their homes. Thus, the internet site “palestineremembered” that deals with the mapping, description and detailing of every one of the villages destroyed in 1948, for example, devotes a special internet page to Imwas. The explanation regarding the site can be read: “This was the continuation of the ethnic cleansing that began in 1948.”

The expelled Imwas villagers opened a website account on Facebook and established an non-governmental organization to preserve the memory of the village. This organization also has an internet site, where details about the village’s history are posted, along with photos. At least two of the villagers opened a blog on the internet under the name “Imwas.” The blog carries historic descriptions of the village from the Canaanite Period to the present, photographs of the village, and a list of the names of the villagers who were killed both in the 1948 war and the 1967 war. The internet site became a lieu de mémoire and a virtual meeting-place for the villagers from the destroyed village, and they became a “Memorial Community” (Nora 1989) that preserves the local identity and cultivates the yearning to return to the destroyed village.

9 The Clash between Remembrance and Forgetting

The dynamics of remembrance and forgetting are an inseparable part of ethnic-national conflicts, especially in conflicts in which two nations each perceive a defined territory as theirs. In such cases, the dynamics lead to a clash between remembrance and forgetting. Such a clash is one of the accelerators that perpetuate the conflict; it contributes to the empowerment of social beliefs in the delegitimization of the opponent, and serves to thicken feelings of anger, hatred and revenge, which then lead to violence.

The clash between remembrance and forgetting is built into every conflict, and is increased in many different situations of everyday life. One such situation, in
which the clash is characterized by very strong emotions, is during the physical presence of both conflicting sides in a specific place where memory clashes with deliberate forgetting. Memory, of course, is a very important factor in struggle, and the interconnectedness between collective memory and political struggle is strongly evident in Palestinian society.

In 1971, Muhammad Naji, who was then living in Jordan, received a permit to visit Israel. When he arrived in Israel, he went to visit Imwas. “Imwas was our first home,” he admitted. “I saw the destroyed homes, noticed the young saplings that had been planted on the village land. Nothing, there was nothing there. Small seedlings. I cried and went back,” he told us.

Since the Naji family returned from Jordan to Abu Ghosh, they would occasionally visit the village of Imwas. Muhammad recalls that when his parents and grandparents were still alive and the family planned to spend time together, he and his brothers preferred to travel to the seashore, to Haifa or Acre, but the older generation always chose to go to Imwas, to have a picnic under the olive trees. “For me to really enjoy myself, is to be under the trees in Imwas,” the mother would say.

Once, the family went to picnic on Imwas land. A young Jewish man, a friend of Muhammad’s brother, joined them.

We reached the village ruins and sat down close to where our home had been up to 1967. As we were eating, this Jewish lad began explaining about the place. “This is Canada Park. It was built with donations on land that was empty.” My mother listened to the conversation, she became very angry and said to my brother, “Translate what he’s saying.” My brother tried to evade this, “I’ll translate for you what he said when we get home,” he answered. Mother insisted. “Translate it for me now. I heard something, understood some of it and it’s not right. Translate it for me.” My father intervened and said to her, “We came here to have a good time, let it go.” Mother was furious. “No way, I want to know what that Jewish lad said.” My brother then translated and said that the Jewish lad had said, “This is Canada Park.” Mother exploded. “Absolutely not, that’s a lie. This isn’t Canada Park, it is Imwas. I gave birth to fourteen children here. Come, I’ll show you where my house was, the cemetery where some of my children are buried. There are cemeteries here, we lived here. How does Canada come and build a park here, over Muslim cemeteries?” she said angrily, then explained. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, the truth has to be told. That’s it, we’re done. Let’s go back to our home in Abu Ghosh,” she said. That Jew was terrified. My brother turned yellow, then black, yellow-black, he was very embarrassed.

An additional emotional turmoil, relevant to the clash between remembrance and forgetting that relates to Imwas, is presented in this story: In 2014, Muhammad Naji took part in a guided tour for the members of the Abu Gosh Community Club to northern Israel. The guide was Jewish. When the bus passed by close to the Imwas, the guide explained that the scenic views were those of Canada Park. The guide’s
explanation regarding Canada Park caused Muhammad great emotional turmoil. He called out loudly to the guide, “Stop,” and then demanded the guide “tell the truth about this place.” Muhammad Naji showed emotional distress when he related this story during our interview. His tone was raised, he spoke more quickly and waved his arms.

I jumped off the bus. Wait!! Alarmed. “What’s with you?!?” I said, “Tell people the truth! Either you’re lying or you don’t know. If you don’t know, give me the microphone.” He said to me, “What’s wrong, what did I do to you?” I said, “You have it wrong. Why are you lying to these people?” And I said to the group on the bus, “This is Imwas […]. I was born here. And my mother gave birth to me here in 1952, and I went to school here where the road intersection is, and those pinecones are from the school grounds!” [His tone is agitated and forceful]. The guide was alarmed, then he said, “I didn’t know […]” So I said to him: “Then you will learn! Ask, don’t lie to people!” He said to me, “That’s what we were taught.” I told him, “So they are liars. Why are you telling them things that aren’t true?”

10 Epilogue

I toured the Ayalon-Canada Park in April 2019. It was filled with many visitors, youngsters and tourists. Hiking through the forest and along the paths of the park could not erase the vestiges of the Arab village. Many remnants of houses are still spread out throughout the area. Fences, terraces and olive trees remind one of the Arab village landscapes. In random conversations that I held with visitors at the park, there was only one person out of more than a dozen with whom I spoke who said that based on the ruins he saw around him, he assumed this was a Palestinian village that was demolished in the 1948 war. Clearly, the actions taken to deliberately erase the village of Imwas from memory are effective – hardly any Israelis know the story of the expulsion of the village inhabitants and the destruction of their village in the 1967 war.

On the other hand, the Palestinian refugees of Imwas, such as Muhammad Naji, are living their Naksa. They are deeply immersed in the memory of the village, of their own house, they are still smelling the land, want to drink from Imwas spring water, and dream of rebuilding their homes which were demolished in 1967.

Muhammad Naji lives in Abu Ghosh today but insists: “Imwas is my first home, I want to return there.”
References


NOTE 25: “Treaty of Honor.” It states that they are committed to cling to their right to return to their village and their home: “We won’t agree to receive any compensation against our right to return to our home.”