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978-0-521-19447-1 - Remembering Palestine in 1948: Beyond National Narratives

Efrat Ben-Ze'ev

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## Remembering Palestine in 1948

*Beyond National Narratives*

The war of 1948 in Palestine is a conflict whose history has been written primarily from the national point of view. This book asks what happens to these narratives when they arise out of the personal stories of those who were involved, stories that are still unfolding. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, an Israeli anthropologist, examines the memories of those who participated in and were affected by the events of 1948, and how these events have been mythologized over time. This is a three-way conversation between Palestinian villagers, Jewish-Israeli veterans, and British policemen who were stationed in Palestine on the eve of the war. Each has his or her story to tell. Across the years, these witnesses relived their past in private within family circles and tightly knit groups, through gatherings and pilgrimages to sites of villages and battles, or through naming and storytelling. Rarely have their stories been revealed to an outsider. As Dr. Ben-Ze'ev discovers, these small-scale truths, which were collected from people at the dusk of their lives and previously overshadowed by nationalized histories, shed new light on the Palestinian–Israel conflict, as it was then and as it has become.

Dr. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at the Ruppin Academic Center in Israel, and Research Fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her publications include, as co-editor, *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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# Remembering Palestine in 1948

## *Beyond National Narratives*

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Efrat Ben-Ze'ev

*Ruppin Academic Center, Israel*



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## Preface

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When I first began exploring the memories of Palestinian refugees in the mid-1990s, I did not think that it would lead to a long-term research project. At the time I was immersed in what was for me a new experience: exploring the Palestinians' viewpoint after having been raised as a secular, Zionist Jew in Israel. My choice to study three villages south of Haifa was not accidental. These three villages – Tirat Haifa,<sup>1</sup> 'Ein Hawd, and Ijzim – were located on the slopes of Mount Carmel, where I had worked during my army service as a tour guide for the Israeli Society for the Protection of Nature.<sup>2</sup> When I got to know their remains in the 1980s, these settlements consisted of a few old Arab houses, now populated by Jews, and sparse traces – trees, fences, graves; all very neglected. For me, researching Palestinian histories of these villages was a journey of rediscovery, one that allowed me to see the Arab landscape, alongside the Jewish one I had earlier been made to see. The post-Oslo accords and the peace agreement with Jordan made it fairly easy to make contact with those Palestinian refugees living in the occupied West Bank and Jordan.

My encounters with the refugees turned what was initially abstract knowledge into concrete life stories. My Palestinian interviewees were patient enough to tell me these stories in great detail. Theirs was not merely a tale of national disaster but also a painful description of villages and families disintegrating. Refugee memories surfaced through both words and objects, mementos of a lost way of life. I was served wild herbs, mushrooms, and fruit that were all the more significant because they were from the interviewee's village of origin. The Palestinian catastrophe became increasingly palpable to me through these stories, tastes, and objects.<sup>3</sup> The new understanding I gained was not only one of knowledge; it was a sense of who I was and who my people are.

At this point, my initial research seemed incomplete; I now wanted to study what loomed at its edges: the interface and overlap between the Palestinian and Israeli narratives. My own complacency in this history called for such attention. If some of my Palestinian acquaintances were bombed from the air, driven out of their hiding places, placed on trucks,

and abandoned at the newly created borders, who were the people, my people, behind these deeds? And, perhaps of equal importance, how did they live with their memories of these events? The answers were to be found at home, among the Israelis who were soldiers in 1948.

My next study was of a Jewish-Israeli Palmach unit, which had participated in the 1948 fighting.<sup>4</sup> This was triggered by my acquaintance with uprooted Palestinians and was, inevitably, an inquiry into the contested and nonheroic sides of 1948. My aim was to juxtapose the Palestinian and Israeli versions of this time, side by side. Through the discrepancies in these narratives, I hoped to explore the partiality of each historical rendering, each set of memories, their convergences and divergences.

By 2005 I felt that the picture needed to be broadened even further; another point of view seemed essential: that of the British Mandate and its agents. While writing my doctoral dissertation in Britain, I was struck by the easy availability of historical information on Palestine. Palestine mattered here, it seemed. Indeed, Britain ruled Palestine from 1917 until 1948 and played a decisive role in the crystallization of Palestine/Israel. The British Mandatory legacy, I felt, left a lasting mark on the land's inhabitants, not merely while Britain ruled but long after it had departed. I decided to incorporate British perspectives on Palestine, and chose to study two subjects: one was the memories of British police veterans who had been stationed in Palestine; the other was topographical maps of Mandate Palestine. While the police veterans' interviews uncovered the everyday British experience on the eve of 1948, the maps disclosed the British administrative scheme: the construction of the landscape and methods to control it.

This study, throughout, was very close to my heart; whether studying Palestinians or the British – and certainly when studying Israelis – it was anthropology at home. The theater of the events, with alternating spotlights, was familiar to me. Indeed, at times the research touched directly on my own family's history. For instance, when sifting through transcribed interviews of Hagannah members, I came across an interview with a woman who used to tour and map the Mediterranean coastal area.<sup>5</sup> She notes that she would hide her maps “under the sofa of a man named Zussman in Hadera.” Was there another Zussman in Hadera apart from my grandfather, I wondered? I had never heard this story before, nor had I even known that my grandfather was a member of the Hagannah. “Of course it was my father,” said my mother when I inquired. “Your grandfather was a member of the Hagannah and I remember the blue sofa this woman is talking about.” This book, I came to realize, is the outcome of my search into the dimly lit storage box underneath my grandparents’ blue sofa.

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The search for memories, often long stored away, was not a lone journey. Many joined in – first by giving out hints to these shadowy pasts, then by a willingness to lighten up the cracks – talking about the unspoken, taking me on trips and giving life to buried remains, touching on what has often been left out. I have long waited to express my gratitude to them in print. I treasure my interviewees' generosity of heart and thank them for having transformed my understanding of the world. However, I have chosen to use pseudonyms.<sup>6</sup> The only ones to be named are those interviewees who have agreed to be in the book's illustrations, and I am very grateful for that: Mahmoud and Rasmiya Abu Rashed, Zeid, the late Salma, Khalil, and Su'ad Sheikh Qassem Darawshe. I wish to thank those who were my special guides and friends: Mohammad and Safia Abu al-Heija and their family, Dr. Mohammad and Shifa Abu Rashed, Prof. Afif Abdul Rahman and his family, and Omar Abu Rashed, whose exceptional personality and untimely death have left a painful void.

Alok Bhalla, Inger Marie Okkenhaug, Michael Riordon, and Elia Zureik generously agreed to read the full manuscript, all donating their rare expertise. I am thankful for their different perspectives, which opened my eyes to the limitations and leanings of this work. The following teachers, colleagues, and friends have been kind by reading chapters of this work and contributing their insights: Eyal Ben-Ari, Marcus Banks, Mark Baus, Hillel Cohen, Paul Dresch, Jackie Feldman, Sari Hanafi, Mahmoud Issa, Wendy James, Samer al-Karanshawi, Asher Kaufman, Larry Lerner, Edna Lomsky-Feder, Eugen Rogan, Rehav Rubin, Avraham Sela, Emmanuel Sivan, and Vered Vintzky-Seroussi. I am exceptionally thankful to Peter Collier. Certainly, none of these colleagues should be held responsible for the outcome. I am also grateful for the help of Rachel Back, Majed Hamra, Eldad Haruvi, Yusri Hazran, Itamar Radai, Tamar Sofer, Pnina Uzan, and Yahav Zohar with language and other matters. Julia Boecker, Ari Barbalat, and Gal Oron were much more than research assistants. I am also most grateful for the opportunity to work with Mary Starkey, a rare copy editor.

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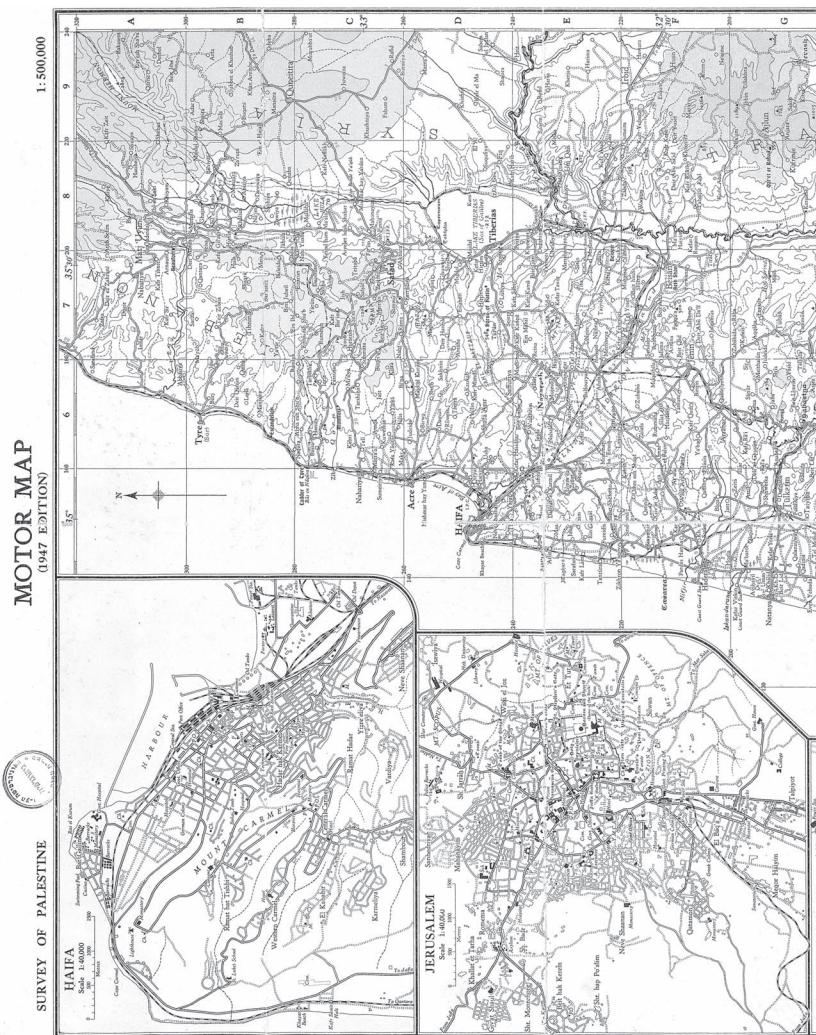
Archivists and librarians have often done beyond what is expected, and I would like to mention with appreciation Rachel Kangisser of the Map Library at the Hebrew University, Amnon Ben-Aryeh of the Truman Library at the Hebrew University, Debbie Usher of the Middle East Centre Archive at Oxford, and Peter Barber and Andrew Cook of the British Library Map Collection.

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This book would not have been written, and this is not a cliché, if it had not been for Jay Winter, who for many years has showed me the beauty of memory, history, and much more. I thank Jay for having read and commented on the full manuscript many times, and I cherish the gift of having such an inspiring teacher and friend.



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Map of Palestine prior to 1948