



Architecture of Destruction, Dispossession, and Appropriation

by Ariella Azoulay




The ruined landscape visible in the photographs assembled here is the most compelling testimony to the fact that what occurred between November 1947 (after the Partition Plan) and March 1949 was not a war but rather policy, carried out by many and various means.¹ The policy readily evident in the photographs is one of destruction—the destruction of Palestinian society, habitat and landscape, together with the destruction of the delicate forms of cooperation that were gradually constructed, to different degrees of closeness, between Jews and Arabs from the nineteenth century to the end of the 1940s. The massive destruction shown in the photographs is not the result of a war for survival, of battles, of existential distress. This destruction was unnecessary, intentional, straightforward, systematic, utilitarian, harsh, alienated, premeditated, indifferent, and, in particular, intended to socialize the population to the new political regime.

From its inception until today, as the state of Israel continues to demolish Palestinian homes with a wave of its hand, this unnecessary destruction has been understood as a *legitimate means* in “special cases,” in a manner which conceals the fact that it is an end in itself. The reasons and justifications put forth to socialize the country’s Jewish citizens to view this destruction as a legitimate means were many and varied: the buildings were occupied by “terrorist cells,” they were on the verge of collapse, Palestinian construction does not meet modern standards, they were not hygienic, immigrants needed to be absorbed, Jews have different requirements than the locals, and there was the threat of refugees returning—the “infiltrators,” as the Palestinians expelled after May 1948 were called—if their homes are left standing. A few of these reasons, if offered off-handedly and in particular and limited cases, might seem to be to the point, but when they are repeated again and again they can only be direct expressions of power, violence, and racism. They were freely substituted for one another as needed, and the sum of them transformed the brutal, unnecessary destruction of people’s homes into an available tool that many were authorized to employ. In that sense, destruction was an excellent means of socialization for Jewish citizens whom

the regime wished to turn into collaborators with its actions, to make them accept the destruction and recognize its necessity.

Not only was the dispossession of the Palestinians from the landscape of their lives written on the surrounding desolation, but also a fundamental basis of the Jewish citizens’ habitus—wrapping the disaster that befell others in an array of justifications and arguments that made it bearable and, usually, seeming other than it was. In a few cases, Jewish citizens actively participated in the destruction, but they usually found themselves looking at mounds of what-once-had-been-homes. It was sometimes difficult to reconstruct the living room wall from the stones removed by schoolgirls sent to the “abandoned villages.” ( 36) The “abandoned” home in Ein Karem that was given ( 31) Elsewhere, existential needs were so urgent that questions about the destruction simply did not arise.

The massive destruction took place in a brightly illuminated arena, so it was impossible to deny or assign responsibility for it to others (as blame for the “refugees” was assigned to “Arab states”).

( 7,  24) The destruction required a new vocabulary from which its unbearable aspect had been removed, one that normalized it. Destruction and more destruction and more destruction, and as it continued the initial, hesitant questions were no longer asked, those that had no answers were forgotten, and as time went by it became part of a past there was no point in awakening. Thus the demolition of a house whose inhabitants had been expelled or who had fled no longer sent a chill down the spine and raised no moral quandary. The justification ceased to be a problem; destruction became part of the landscape. Everyone helped remove the rubble: kindergarten children, elementary and high school pupils, labourers and volunteers, all were enlisted to build the country. Clearing the rubble of demolished Arab homes simply became synonymous with building the land. ( 32)

1



Ayn Karim. Ein Karem. The official JNF caption: “Ein Karem Jerusalem—Kibbutz artists’ course in Ein Karem.” So many buildings in each village had been destroyed that the few which remained standing were now isolated jewels from the past which could be reset in what had become “new.” Since most of the country’s villages had been depopulated or destroyed, Ayn Karim, whose buildings were left standing, survived as a pearl from days gone by. So, despite the fact that Jews were already living in the homes of those who had been expelled, artists could come and paint in an authentic Arab village. In the 1970s, when I studied art in high school and we were asked to look at this landscape, it no longer signified an Arab village. We were asked to paint a view of Jerusalem, inspired by the Jewish artists who had done so before us.

PHOTOGRAPHER: WERNER BRAUN,
JNF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE, 1 JULY 1950

2



Salama. The village is already deserted and emptied of its inhabitants, who were expelled, and there is no one left to ask, “Who moved into my house?” No one will intrude on the picture-postcard scene of a desolate village, the background to a meditative portrait of an unobstructed view all the way to the horizon.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL
STATE ARCHIVE, PROBABLY LATE APRIL/
EARLY MAY 1948

3



Salama. 6,670 Moslems and 60 Christians lived in the village before it was captured. Ben Gurion arrived immediately after it fell; to emphasize that it had been emptied of Arabs he noted in his diary that, other than an old, blind Arab woman, he did not see a living soul there. How many other old women or men who could no longer see anything (or report what they saw) were still at that moment in the village, which was starting to look like a stage set ready for dismantling, its dilapidated buildings to be replaced by new construction? Soon they were also removed from their homes and their lands were swallowed up by the development of Tel Aviv.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL
STATE ARCHIVE, PROBABLY LATE APRIL/EARLY
MAY 1948

4



Salama. The Arab house with the arches, the hoe (the implement, but also the use of its Arabic term *turia*), the phonograph the soldiers removed from one of the houses, folk dances, including those of the Bedouin and the Arabs, the large clay storage jar (again, the implement, but also the Arabic term *jara*)—all these, chosen sparingly, combined with “their own western” culture, signify to them authenticity. Thus, the new urban textures they had a hand in creating on the ruins of the villages they had a hand in destroying will not appear hollow, but will possess historical depth. With the help of these attributes, the expropriated history will be transformed into a signifier of the past deprived of history.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVE, PROBABLY LATE APRIL/EARLY MAY 1948

5



Salama. Not a soul lives here. The Arabs have been expelled and Jews have not yet been permitted to move in. The place has been designated a closed military area because of fears of looting and uncontrolled expropriation of property by individuals, but, as the picture shows, large numbers of Jewish visitors streamed in to view the place that newspapers had for months described as a “village of murderers.” They were very surprised to find the same things they would expect to find in normal homes: a phonograph, records, newspapers, dolls and toys, pictures hanging on the walls, schoolbooks, cups of coffee, dough that had fermented and risen, attractive dishes, furniture and clothing. In order to ally any suspicion that these 800 houses were not simply dwellings for 6,730 people, but military outposts, the walls had “This courtyard was inspected by the N. bomb squad” written on them. When the bomb squad had finished, the civilians in charge of distributing the property “fairly” among Jews began their work, and wrote on buildings not slated for demolition, like the one at the left, “Jewish house.”

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVE, PROBABLY LATE APRIL/EARLY MAY 1948

6



Yafa/Yafo. This is what a ghetto looks like. Those imprisoned behind a fence smile and wave at people looking at them from outside, hoping this time to be rescued; among those on the other side are people for whom this sight seems natural or justified.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF "THE JAFFA ARAB COMMITTEE (AL-RATBA 'L RA'AYIT SHA'UN 'ARAB YAFA), 1949

7



Haifa. The destroyed city shown in the photograph recalls Dresden, bombed for three consecutive days until its buildings were in ruins, pulverized into stones that blocked the streets. Haifa, in a series of photographs (one of which is displayed here) also has that appearance. But this scene of destruction is inconsistent with descriptions of the battle for Haifa, and is the result of a political decision by a leadership determined to erase the Arab towns so that refugees expelled from them would have nowhere to return to and those who remained would feel like strangers. Many workers and many days were needed to clear the rubble left from the merciless destruction of 220 buildings in Haifa's old city. Jewish workers were not enough. They were joined by Arabs, most of them from Haifa, who came to work each morning from the newly created ghetto in Wadi Nisnas that had been established for them after they had been expelled from their homes. Isolated structures were seen as less threatening, which was how the Carmelite Monastery or the circular building in the centre was saved. When the new regime's institutions moved into these ancient buildings, they were able to impose, on those who accepted it, an authority that was at least partially based on some abstract ancient past.

PHOTOGRAPHER: JIM PRINGLE, ASSOCIATED PRESS, APRIL 1948

8



Yafa/Yafo. In the absence of any justification based on reasons of security or settlement, they talked about "safety"—the buildings were defined as slums and marked for demolition. The experience gained from dynamiting tens of thousands of buildings during the war created a body of new knowledge. The "Mishor Ltd." cooperative, established by demobilized soldiers, used explosives to demolish neighbourhoods and villages, saving, they claimed, dozens of man-days. The destruction of unique neighbourhood fabrics, like that in the picture, which tourists from all over the world drive on narrow, winding roads to see, was described by members of the cooperative as fulfilling "extremely important, constructive goals." After 18 mosques and entire city neighbourhoods were destroyed, it was a simple matter to seal Yafa's fate as an Arab town and annex it to Tel Aviv, for reasons like those stated by the Minister of the Interior: "Yafo played no role in world history, nor in the history of Israel; it has no ancient cultural remains from any period."

PHOTOGRAPHER: TEDDY BRAUNER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 OCTOBER 1949

9



Yaffa/Jaffa. Had these buildings been spared from destruction, Jewish artists would probably also have been placed in them, painting typical Jaffa cityscapes. Captions such as the one that accompanied this photograph, "A Moroccan immigrant is happy to move out of these dilapidated Jaffa neighbourhoods," prepared both the ground and the hearts for their demolition.

PHOTOGRAPHER: TEDDY BRAUNER, NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION, 1 OCTOBER 1949

10



Saris. The caption of the photograph in the Palmach Archive reads, "Capture of Saris; sappers 'deal with' the houses." Linking the capture of Saris to "dealing with" the houses is part of a systematic effort to portray the destruction of Arab villages as a necessary consequence of the war, and to conceal the political reasons of state which motivated it. The "sappers" in the photograph do not appear to be "dealing with" the houses, but gather for a group portrait at some distance from them, against the backdrop of the village from which smoke still rises. Those who sent them to "deal" with the

houses included some who already saw that a new Jewish locality would arise on the ruins of the village, for whom the village and its homes and mosques represented “an important location from the security standpoint.” When this photograph was taken, the residents evacuated from Saris were waiting not far away, after having been taken from their homes as “the houses were cleared one by one,” and had become unwilling observers of their own disaster.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (ALBUM OF THE HAR'EL BRIGADE, FOURTH BATTALION. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY MEIR BAREKET), PROBABLY APRIL 1948

11



Salbit. The third soldier from the left puts his hands over his ears to muffle the sound of simultaneous explosions at a number of locations. He and the other “sappers” (*khablan* is how they are described in the original caption in the Palmach Archive, and that is what we have learned to call them, so that we do not get confused and forget they are not the same as terrorists, or *mekhabel*, Hebrew variations on the same word) are watching the success of their operation. This apocalyptic scene of burning villages and earthshaking explosions is also visible to the inhabitants of nearby villages. It complements the rumours soldiers whispered to some of their residents after the villages were captured but before the inhabitants were expelled, so they would leave on their own and the claim could be made that they had fled.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (ALBUM OF THE HAR'EL BRIGADE, FOURTH BATTALION), PROBABLY APRIL 1948

12



Bisan. Bedding that has not been brought back inside is still airing in the window. The house, like the rest of the city, has already been emptied of its inhabitants. The official caption that reads “Beit She’an abandoned” does not refer to what the photograph shows, but to the achievement that created a “valley that’s entirely Jewish.” The two women in the photograph do not give the lie to that description, for they are present as internal observers sharing the field of vision with the authors of the official caption which serves to display for us a town abandoned, rather than one whose inhabitants are to be returned, a town that no longer belongs to those who built it or who, until yesterday, lived there.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (ALBUM OF THE YIFTAH BRIGADE, THIRD BATTALION), NO DATE

13



Bir al-Sabi’e/Be’er Sheva. The actual capture of the town during what is officially described as a “war” was only the first in a series of non-military occupations that validated the army’s behaviour and played their part in expropriating the town from its residents. These began with the caption’s official wording that, in one version or other, was on everyone’s lips—“The town is empty of inhabitants”—until, a few days later, this building became the JNF House. The owners of the shops on the ground floor, like the owners of the apartments above, must have been among the 450,000 refugees who in the 1960s filled out property-claim forms for the UN Reconciliation Commission that prepared an estimate (published on 28 April 1968) of the value of “abandoned” Arab property. There is no need to mention that Israel rejected the document and ignored its implications.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (ALBUM OF THE HAR'EL BRIGADE, FOURTH BATTALION), JANUARY 1949

14



Yazur. Jewish immigrants sent to live in Yazur worked to transform it into Azur. The photograph shows two of them building a new house for themselves. Construction of new housing units, while others stood empty nearby (most had been demolished because they had been classified as failing to meet Jewish building standards), was part of the systematic effort to transform the landscape and destroy the characteristic form of the Arab localities so refugees would not be able to return, not only because of Israel’s refusal to let them back but because the country would no longer be the same as one they had left. Various activities were undertaken to completely transform the landscape—a confusing mixture of construction and destruction. There were concrete structures built by Arabs in Yazur prior to its destruction, before that material had become identified with the expansion of Jewish construction in the 1950s.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 20 JUNE 1949



'Aqir. The series of protests by the British and by MAPAM members against evacuating the village did not help the 3,000 inhabitants confronting those imposing the transfer policy on the complex set of relations between Jews and Arabs. Later protests by the Ministry of Minorities against moving immigrants into the village did not help either, and it was made ready for Jewish settlement. As part of the preparations for populating the village, the new settlers were required to remove piles of rubble that seemed to be part of the new settlement's inventory, and bore no indication they had once been people's homes. The language of the official caption is spotlessly clean: "New immigrants remove broken stones from the abandoned village of 'Aqir." "An abandoned village," its land covered with "broken stones," becomes yet another entry in the glossary of neighbourhoods. In those days the use of the term "abandoned" sometimes still preserved traces of the violent transformation required to turn an inhabited locality into one that is "abandoned": "The [military government] wishes to turn it into an abandoned place." It did not take long for "abandoned" to be used as an adjective describing the physical condition of buildings and environments.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 OCTOBER 1949



Tabariyya/Tverya. 2,500 Arabs and 1,000 Jews lived in the old city of Tabariyya before it was destroyed (the total population of the town included 4,000 Arabs and 6,000 Jews). At first a small number of buildings were demolished "for security reasons" (even houses that belonged to Jews). The Jews who wanted to return to their homes were prevented from doing so with the excuse that their houses were unsafe. These houses, too, had suddenly become an obstacle to implementing the army's plan for transforming the face of the city. Generals do not like ancient towns in whose winding streets they find it hard to get a foothold. Very soon the ancient buildings were replaced by a broad avenue, around which

a new urban fabric developed, more transparent to the military gaze. The Jewish inhabitants of Tabariyya had from the beginning opposed the military operation, including the expulsions and demolitions, that had been imposed on them and carried out on their behalf as Jews. They, like the Arabs, had also been dispossessed, but unlike them, had been given in exchange homes belonging to Arabs in other neighbourhoods in the city.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVE, APRIL 1948



al-Majdal. The orders not to demolish holy sites was widely disseminated, but the fact that dozens of mosques were in fact destroyed indicates that their more important purpose was to publicize the message that Israel did not damage holy sites. Of 160 mosques found in the area that became part of the state of Israel, about 40 remained standing. "Our soldiers don't destroy mosques" became a kind of leitmotif in the purity-of-arms legend. In December 2008, the Israeli government was still considering (without deciding) whether to rehabilitate 18 of the mosques it had partially demolished in 1948 and then done nothing to preserve so their condition had further deteriorated. Although the al-Majdal mosque had been severely damaged and its dome was gone, its walls and their treasures were not damaged: the prayer niche to which the inscription refers ("While Zecharia visited her at the al-Mihrâb") and the *Minbar* (the small platform on which the imam stood to preach) were still there and could be rehabilitated.

PHOTOGRAPHER: FRANK, IDF AND DEFENSE ARCHIVE, 10 JUNE 1949



Saris. A martyrs' forest (a memorial to Jewish victims of the holocaust) stands today in place of the village of which the demolished house in the picture was once a part, but there is no longer any other indication that it ever existed. Inspired by those who sent them, the soldiers who "cleared" (as they said) the village from house to house saw a strategic site "important from the point of view of security and of settlement," rather than a village where people live. The justification for bombing the village in April 1948 was that otherwise its buildings would be turned into a "fortified position." Sitting for a photograph, their backs to one of the demolished buildings, the soldiers can enjoy their view of the other buildings they

destroyed, and point out to each other the marks they left on them and on the landscape.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (ALBUM OF THE HAR'EL BRIGADE, SIXTH BATTALION, PROVIDED BY DOV KEREN, C. GLICKSON), 1948

19



Bayt It'ab. The 626 residents of the village were expelled, and nothing remains of it but a ruin that was spared. What probably saved it from destruction was the belief that it is a Crusader structure, and the desire to preserve the "location's historical past." The vast amount of information the fighters collected about the villages during the 1940s allowed them to carry out "pinpoint" or "intelligent destruction," damaging only what was necessary. That is how 193 houses were carefully blown up, while this distinguished structure was preserved. Historians later argued over the attribution. Today, in any event, as it stands solitary on the hill, this ruin has already accumulated sufficient historical value even if it turns out to be "only" a native Palestinian house.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (HAR'EL BRIGADE ALBUM, OBTAINED FROM MEIR SHAMIR), 1948

20



al-Khisas. A few broken-down shacks and a few buildings were destroyed while the people living in them were still inside as an "act of reprisal" for the attack on a member of kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch, who died later from his wounds. It cost twelve dead including four children. Throwing grenades into a house in which a baby is crying (as reported by one of the participants), a person has to make a great effort to convince himself in the justice of "acts of reprisal." Shortly after the "reprisal," it was discovered that the attackers were not from al-Khisas. An improvised field tribunal does not need proof in order to do justice. Contradictory evidence sometimes strengthens its authority and encourages turning more hypotheses into facts: "It is very unfortunate that children are to be in this small military outpost and fall victim to this kind of attack" (senior member of the Haganah, a few days after the massacre). At a meeting with Ben Gurion, in response to criticism of the attack, Moshe Dayan and Yigal Alon formulated Israel's political strategy: "Expressing a desire for peace will be interpreted as weakness." Afraid to

be suspected of weakness, Israel continued attacking. When the fighters had completed their work, one of them took out a camera and documented the house; the photo in the archive still bears the initial caption: "A building blown up in an act of reprisal." In June 1949, the residents of al-Khisas, Qitiyya and al-Ja'una were expelled. In response to a question in the Knesset about the reasons for expelling the residents of these villages, who had "always been friendly," Ben Gurion replied: "Only the residents of Khisas deserve to be described in the terms used by the questioner...and even so, the headquarters of the northern command had sufficient military justification for transferring them."

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE (YIFTACH BRIGADE ALBUM, PROVIDED BY YISRAEL RASHTIK), 18 DECEMBER 1947

21



Bayt Mahsir. This village had 2,784 inhabitants living in 654 houses. Almost all the village buildings were destroyed "immediately following its capture," according to the official caption, and the few that remained standing were incorporated as jewels from the past in the new plan for the Jewish settlement of Beit Meir. The expelled villagers have lived since then in refugee camps outside of Israel. Their dispossession from their homes began a few years before they were expelled when, in the guise of lovers out for a stroll, or classes on nature walks, members of the Haganah went around openly with cameras (and sometimes with concealed cameras), collecting information and photographing the village's buildings and residents. Their homes were transformed into strongholds "having strategic and tactical topographical and political significance."

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (HAR'EL BRIGADE ALBUM, PROVIDED BY DUDU SHENI), MAY 1948

22



Tel Aviv. Scouts who took the Haganah's training courses learned many skills, each of which was linked to an item whose explicit purpose was to generate information: a camera (photography), compass (navigation), ruler (diagrams and cross-sections), pencil (preparing maps) or binoculars (field-craft). But all these tools notwithstanding, any one of which could have indicated their profession, they chose something else for the class photograph—the *kaffiyeh*—which was central to their being, existentially. Though they used it as camouflage, it served them even more importantly as a way to "know the enemy" and draw close to him. Excitement shows on their faces and each tries to find the right expression.

The *kaffiyehs* they are wearing connect them to the image of the Arab that fired their imagination, simultaneously an authentic local figure and a potential enemy. The photograph presents what is almost a primer to the variety of textiles and the ways of wrapping them around the head, as if it were intended as a guide—who wears which cloth, in what fashion, when it should be worn. As they work their way into the Arabs' lives in order to prepare the “village files,” they will display their expertise in wearing *kaffiyehs* and making coffee. That will help them get friendly with the Arabs and collect personal information about the inhabitants and their lives—“how they go back and forth to work,” “political opponents,” “ethnic groups,” “titles and nicknames.”

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. HAGANAH HISTORICAL ARCHIVE, 1944

23



Salama. The fact that this photograph was taken in order to prepare a “village file” (prepared by the Haganah containing social, geographic and strategic information on each Arab village) explains why the photographer “failed” to centre the subject in the frame, and “failed” to focus correctly. A souvenir snapshot from a trip camouflages the fact that the photographer is really interested in the main street running through the village, how the village space is organized, how people move through it. Photography was studied together with camouflage in the Haganah scouts' course, and could provide valuable topographical information that would be used “when the day arrives.” The slight deflection of the camera away from the subject, to the main street, might not be noticeable to the untrained eye. A few years later, the information collected in Salama's village file helped capture the village and expel its residents.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. HAGANAH HISTORICAL ARCHIVE, 1945

24



Bayt Natif. Most buildings were not blown up haphazardly. Each demolition had its own justification, one that allowed ordinary people to destroy the homes of others without this being too much of a problem for them. In the absence of such justifications, it is likely that at least some of the soldiers who were part of these actions would not have participated in them. The justification was not always “justice.” From the moment the Palestinian house lost its right to exist in and of itself, and was perceived only in relation to Israeli needs, a phrase like “expanding the transportation corridor to Jerusalem” was enough to eliminate any doubt regarding demolitions. Each explosion and each destruction

required redrawing the map. And so, little by little, over the course of almost two years, a new map was created, reflecting not only a change in land ownership but a total transformation of the face of the country.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE (HAR'EL BRIGADE ALBUM), NO DATE

25



Bir al-Sabi'e. Veteran residents, the people who gave the order to blow up buildings in Bir al-Sabi'e and elsewhere in the country, are the same ones who later chose their own homes from among the few they hadn't destroyed, later to be valorized as “ancient.” Intimate familiarity with them will lead some of these residents to develop an interest in architectural preservation and in later years even sue in the High Court of Justice to prevent the demolition of buildings “dating from the Ottoman period,” and organize guided tours of these neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, these precious houses will never be described as “Palestinian.”

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE (YITZHAK SADEH ALBUM, RECEIVED FROM YORAM SADEH), NO DATE

26



Bir al-Sabi'e. Many accounts of Bir al-Sabi'e's capture describe plunder and looting. Ben Gurion and the Custodian of Absentee Property were among those criticizing looting of homes. But everyone was silent about the systematic plunder of land and buildings. Imagine the urban landscape shown here, dating to the beginning of the twentieth century, preserved and transformed into the ancient centre of a cosmopolitan, multicultural Be'er Sheva.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. PALMACH PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE (NEGEV BRIGADE ALBUM), 1948



Bir al-Sabi'e. Military occupation was not enough to turn Bir al-Sabi'e, which was to have been included in the Arab state, into a Jewish town. Civil occupation was also necessary. Beginning in October 1948, after extensive areas had been captured in military operations in the south and in the north, feverish discussions were held regarding the appropriate procedure for taking over Arab land. These discussions occurred in various committees established for that purpose—the Transfer Committee headed by Yosef Weitz, the Ministerial Committee for Abandoned Property, the Committee for Distributing Lands, the JNF—as well in conversations and discussions between the Prime Minister and his associates. The solution eventually found, after many revisions, was for the state to “legally” sell the “abandoned” lands to the JNF as part of a “development plan” so that the rights of the original owners would allegedly be preserved. In May 1949, when Israel was

accepted as a member of the United Nations, the hairsplitting ceased, and all the territory which was “held” became part of the sovereign state of Israel. It was now important to quickly get the buildings ready for new Jewish immigrants. During the early years, the state used DDT to fumigate both the bodies of Jewish immigrants from North Africa so they would not transmit disease, and the walls of the Arab houses before the Jewish immigrants moved in. If the boy has already learned Hebrew and knows how to ask what the man holding the large, noisy apparatus is doing, the proud reply would certainly be that he is preparing a lovely, disease-free home for him.

PHOTOGRAPHER NOT IDENTIFIED. GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 JUNE 1949



Bir al-Sabi'e. Something of the excitement one feels in moving into a new house comes through in this photograph: the belongings scattered about, the pictures and other evidence that the new occupants are making it their home. Something on the order of, “Here, we’ve only just arrived in this desolate town and we’re already overcoming all the difficulties, improvising ladders out of barrels, and even establishing a local labour exchange to provide welfare services to the new residents.” It was only natural to locate government offices in the old buildings in order to give the new regime an appearance. The clerk places the sign on the outer window ledge, which seems to him as if it had been constructed for that purpose. One day someone might tell him, or his superiors, that it is totally absurd for the sign to conceal the build-

ing’s beautiful arch. The sign will be moved elsewhere, and everyone will be amazed at the handsome structure. But they will forget how beautiful it is when someone asks them about Palestinian culture before 1948, and reply, “No, no, most of the people here were primitive *fellahin*.” And, of course, no one knew the name of any of the Palestinian architects who designed the various buildings, in different styles, that existed here, of which only a few traces remain.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 30 APRIL 1949



Umm al-Zinat. You can see a new settlement, Elyakim, springing up *de novo* beyond the sign. If you look at the piles of earth along the road, you can see that they are mixed with the rubble of Umm al-Zinat’s 209 houses, crushed into bits after their 1,470 residents were expelled. Beginning in the 1930s, the JNF’s Names Committee took steps to Hebraize the country’s map, with Ben Gurion’s enthusiastic support: “Just as we refuse to recognize Arab political ownership of the land, we also refuse to recognize their cultural patrimony, or their place names.” Had it been solely up to the Committee, Arab names would have been completely erased from the lexicon: “Since the places referred to no longer exist, the names of these places are also to be eliminated.” But how could the history of the “War of Independence” be written if the names of villages in which the soldiers fought were completely erased? How will new immigrants find their way when old-timers, a significant part of whose lives were connected to a detailed knowledge of Arab Palestine, still referred to the villages by their original Arab names? In 1950, Yemenite immigrants, who a year earlier had settled on the lands of Umm al-Zinat, could erect a sign at the entrance to the village on which both names appeared. Since 1952, thanks to an intensive “informational and educational” campaign, the Hebraizing project had been successful and the new names took root. Signs that bore Arabic names were removed. Old-timers would pronounce the Hebraized names of certain locations as if they were in Arabic in order to identify themselves as natives (for example, “Zakkariya” rather than “Zecharya”).

PHOTOGRAPHER: TEDDY BRAUNER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1950



al-Yahudiyya. When these immigrants registered at the local branch of the Workers' Party of Eretz Yisrael (MAPAI), they probably had not yet become aware that the country's workers' movement had been completely transformed from one based on class and concerned with workers throughout the world ("Unite!") into a national movement that dispossessed most of the country's Arab farmers and workers from their lands and their jobs. Nor did the veteran Jewish members of MAPAI consider this transformation—"from a class to a nation," as Ben Gurion memorably characterized it in 1947—nor what transpired in its aftermath and in its name (the dispossession of the Arabs from their land and the expropriation of their property and their means of production) to be a watershed moment, a shock, or a betrayal of the original idea. The many moralizing arguments that accompanied this crime, always focusing on issues that were marginal to the main criminal act, served to legitimize it and made it part of the local socialist discourse. How could the new immigrants have even noticed anything if the previous signs, which must have been written in Arabic, had already been removed from the lintels of the buildings, and no trace of them remained? A new sign, smaller than its predecessor, replaced them, announcing the socialist future and even expressing concern for the welfare of the new immigrants.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BENO ROTHENBERG, ISRAEL STATE ARCHIVE. PHOTO TAKEN AROUND THE TIME THAT PEOPLE MOVED IN



Ayn Karim. Not knowing the local language, children by their side, with large suitcases and blankets tied in bundles indicating that this is not their first stop in Israel, these new immigrants wait to receive the housing they have been promised by the Jewish Agency, which encouraged them to come and handled their immigration. A long, burdensome process, uncertainty about their future here, the children's complaints, thirst, harsh sunlight, urgent questions like how will they earn a living, what will they eat. They were not aware of the reservations that were expressed (and

rejected immediately) about the decision to allocate houses to them in Ayn Karim. Their present distress, the result of their immigration and their having to make their way in the new country, certainly left them no time to wonder for themselves at gaps in the story they had been told regarding the partially furnished homes (much of the furniture had already been looted or distributed in an organized and "legal" manner) they were moving into. While waiting to be taught how to work the plots of land adjoining their houses, so they could also participate in the general effort to increase Jerusalem's food supply, they will enjoy the abundant fruit growing in the surrounding orchards. They and the other families who came with them will move into 150 of the 555 houses in Ayn Karim whose inhabitants had been expelled, houses which the army did not destroy, unlike its usual practice. Two new settlements were established on the village's lands: Beit Zayit and Even Sappir.

PHOTOGRAPHER: HUGO MENDELSON, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 5 JANUARY 1949



Rantiya/Rinat'ya. From the time the state of Israel was established until the end of 1949, approximately 200,000 immigrants arrived, and they had to be housed. The hairsplitting over how to legalize using the "abandoned" or "emptied" Arab houses was overtaken by the need to deal with urgent practical issues related to the immediate settlement of immigrants and their inclusion in the labour force. The photograph shows a busy construction site in Rinat'ya, a *moshav* whose previous Arab name was Hebraized by slightly altering its pronunciation. Rubble from the destruction of most of the Arab village houses is mixed together with new building materials, allowing the new immigrants from Morocco to build their homes with their own hands as well as participate in the new economic order in which both they and the state make their living from property that does not belong to them. A few of the buildings were originally Arab (they were given new concrete roofs). Most are new, with one or two walls constructed of local building stones that could still be used after the Arab houses were demolished.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 NOVEMBER 1949



Tarshiha. The official caption describes the villages in which the immigrants settled as "abandoned," as if this was a characteristic they possessed rather than the result of policy. But in the case of Tarshiha, there is an additional reason why the description is incorrect: some of Tarshiha's residents were still living there when the state brought immigrants from Romania to move into their homes.

Testimony from local residents describes how the Arab inhabitants were removed from their homes, gathered together in one area, and forbidden to leave it while their homes were given to the Jewish immigrants. The new immigrants benefited not only from the houses but also from the commercial infrastructure that included carpentry shops, iron-working establishments, and garages serving the inhabitants of the entire area from Akko to Safed. The new workers could now dress up to celebrate May 1st, the workers' holiday, while the Arabs remained subordinated to military rule that imposed severe restrictions on their lives. Eventually, when the immigrants left Tarshiha and sold their houses, Arabs would be allowed to buy them.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 MAY 1949

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Tarshiha. Tarshiha's few remaining Arabs were gathered in a closed area and placed under military rule. Most of their homes were given to Jewish immigrants. When they were allowed to move around in public they could read, in their own language, that they lived in "A socialist society, today, in Israel—Toward peace." In some towns the Arabs were even allowed to carry signs themselves on the workers' holiday, demanding equality for all workers.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 MAY 1949

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al-Makr. The number of inhabitants in al-Makr, Judayda, Sha'ab, Wadi al-Hamam and 'Akbara even increased because of the presence of internal refugees who found temporary shelter there. The state built new housing units for these refugees, like those shown in the picture, in order to settle them in villages not their own. The refugees wanted to return to their homes, but their return implied a threat: the possibility that the clock might be turned back, if only slightly. To prevent their dream from being realized they were required to sign a document in which they relinquished any future claim to return to their villages. On the left are some of the dozens of houses a private entrepreneur constructed for the state to house refugee families who were permitted to live in them only if they came to an "arrangement." Resettling the internal refugees in villages other than their own was part of a general policy.

PHOTOGRAPHER: FRITZ COHEN, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 10 MARCH 1950

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"Abandoned Arab village." When a village is completely transformed, and its population replaced by others, it loses its unique characteristics and its name and can be more easily represented as an "abandoned Arab village." Youths were mobilized to complete the job, to advance the enterprise and bring about progress. The picture shows young girls, "Gadna" members, clearing "the rubble of an Arab village" (created, as it were, by natural forces), so that immigrants to Israel could be absorbed.

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, CENTRAL ZIONIST ARCHIVE, SEPTEMBER 1949

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Suhmata. The 1,200 inhabitants expelled from the village left behind 200 homes, a mosque, a church, modern olive presses, schools, two pools, flour mills, and a cemetery. Most of the North African Jewish immigrants who arrived in the village were housed at the foot of the hill, where a tent city had been erected for them. Within a year all the village buildings had been demolished, and Tzurriel and Khosen were established on its ruins. The time has come to designate the entire village, with its 200 unique buildings—walls made of flint, roofed with oak planks covered by a layer of plaster that was refreshed each year—as an historical preservation site. As Israeli preservation methods based on rehabilitating damaged structures are not appropriate for completely destroyed structures, the Japanese approach would be adopted: preservation not only of buildings as objects, but also the skills—or "intangible cultural properties"—that were needed to construct it. Since some of Suhmata's former inhabitants are still living, including those who are internal refugees, now may be their last opportunity to teach others these skills, so they can be used to construct a similar village on the nearby hills for themselves, their descendants, and others. The 60 years that have passed since those expelled wrote to the state institutions have not at all blunted the validity of their demand and the obligation to grant it: "We hereby request you to give us a place to live, return us to our homes and enable us to work our lands."

PHOTOGRAPHER: ZOLTAN KLUGER, GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, 1 JUNE 1949

Intangible cultural properties

Many tangible Palestinian cultural properties in what became the State of Israel were destroyed. Most of the beautiful Palestinian villages (some of them can still be seen in photographs) had been blown up, destroyed, wiped off the face of the earth. In a “state of all its citizens,” this tremendous loss might not be completely irreversible. The architectural structures are lost, but what the Japanese preservation law terms “intangible cultural properties” still exist and can be restored through practice.

This distinction between the tangible and the intangible in relation to cultural properties designates as worthy of preservation not only objects but also special skills: what is called “living treasure.” Structures, no matter how unique, can always be rebuilt, their architectural design and construction materials recreated—that is, if the skills required to rebuild them still exist. Japanese preservation efforts are, therefore, also devoted to transmitting the construction expertise used to erect the buildings that were destroyed. Indeed, the Japanese might demolish in order to rebuild; thus the skills are preserved. In Israel, where destruction is already a *fait accompli*, and where most of the skills and techniques can be found today only among the refugees—the living keepers of this knowledge—the adoption of this approach to preservation might mark the beginning of a process of reparation and recompense for the refugees’ loss of their place in their world. Not from the perspective of restoring lost physical objects, but instead from that of restoring the conditions for renewing a space where the promise of a viable future might be renewed for the entire governed population.

The passage of time has made some buildings and groups of buildings worthy of preservation. These may be individual structures or entire villages. The past cannot be restored. Nor can the villages be brought back as they once were. We can only demand a different kind of participation and cooperation across space and time. Cooperation and participation not only in the present, using what exists, that which violence has created, but also with the past, or at least by presenting the past in order to create the possibility for a different kind of participation and cooperation in the future. The Palestinian multi-layered presence here, which was violently erased, should be restored—refugees, homes, mosques, churches,

olive presses, enterprises, partnerships, urban fabric, and language. Not a nostalgic, impossible return that restores everything to its original location, but returning a former rich presence to today’s uni-dimensional national landscape. Human skills, which built the shared world in which we necessarily live, are never simply technical skills. Those that are needed even more, though some may disappear or be replaced, are often skills relating to the manner in which people become citizens, find their place in the world, and develop ways of cooperating with each other. Many of the refugees who were dispersed in all directions are still alive. They have preserved the knowledge and skills required to recreate many of the Palestinian architectural styles, to situate them as facts in the Judaized space whose continued development will have to take them into consideration. This could be still another claim, one of many to be submitted to history’s tribunal—a joint civil action by Palestinians, refugees, their descendants, and Israelis of Jewish descent who cannot conceive of continuing to live in Israel without rectifying the crime their parents committed.✕

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Bios

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