

Canada Park: Canadian Complicity in a War Crime

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"Here is our house", says Ibrahim El-Sheikh, the 75-year-old mukhtar(village headman) of Imwas (Emmaus), pointing to the rubble of his homewhich stood there until June 1967, when Israel invaded and occupied Sinai, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights. Thousands of villagers, from Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba-my own hometown-still cry remembering their homes that stood there until Israel erased them from the face of The Holy Land, when they were systematically dynamited and bulldozed. In Beit Nuba alone, 18 old or disabled men, who were unable or unwilling to leave their homes instantly, were buried under the rubble.

No fighting took place in these villages when they were occupied in the early hours of June 6, 1967. The three villages were once part of what was called the Latrun salient. Over 10,000 people lived there; they had schools, mosques, agricultural land and many centuries of history. It was in Imwas (Emmaus) where Christians believe that Jesus Christ first appeared after the Crucifixion.

The destruction of these villages was witnessed and described by the Israeli journalist Amos Kenan, who was a reserve soldier in the occupying force in Beit Nuba. He gave this account to the Israeli newspaper Ha'Olam Hazeh, which was prohibited by the censor from publishing it. It was sent to all members of the Knesset, and to the Prime Minister and Defence minister, but no response was received.

"The unit commander told us that it had been decided to blow up three villages in our sector; they were Beit Nuba, Imwas and Yalu ... We were told to block the entrances of the villages and prevent inhabitants [from] returning The order was to shoot over their heads and tell them not to enter the village.

"Beit Nuba is built of fine quarry stones; some of the houses are magnificent. Every house is surrounded by an orchard, olive trees, apricots, vines and presses. They are well kept. Among the trees, there are carefully tended vegetable beds.

"At noon the first bulldozer arrived and pulled down the first house at the edge of the village. Within ten minutes the house was turned into rubble. The olive trees and cypresses were all uprooted. After the destruction of three houses, the first refugee column arrived from the direction of Ramallah. We did not fire in the air. There were old people who could hardly walk, murmuring old women, mothers carrying babies, small children. The children wept and asked for water. They all carried white flags. "We told them to go to Beit Sira. They told us they had been driven out. They had been wandering like this for four days, without food, some

dying on the road. They asked to return to their village ... Some had a goat, a lamb, a donkey or a camel. A father ground wheat by hand to feed his four children ... The children cried. Some of our soldiers started crying too.

We went to fetch the Arabs some water. We stopped a car with a major, two captains and a woman ... We asked the officers why these refugees were sent from one place to another and driven out of everywhere. They told us that this was good for them, they should go. 'Moreover', said the officers, 'what do we care about the Arabs anyway?' "

"We drove them out. They go on wandering like lost cattle. The weak die. Our unit was outraged. The refugees gnashed their teeth when they saw the bulldozers pull down the trees. None of us understood how Jews could behave like this. No one understood why these fellaheen [villagers] shouldn't be allowed to take blankets and some food.

"The chickens and doves were buried in the rubble. The fields were turned into wasteland in front of our eyes. The children who went crying on the road will be fedayeen [freedom fighters-I.Z.] in nineteen years, in the next round. Thus we have lost the victory." (From Israel Imperial News, March 1968.)

Uri Avneri, then a Knesset member, described the destruction of these villages as a definite war crime. This was carried out on the direct orders of Yitzhak Rabin, then Chief of Staff of Israel's armed forces. These acts are in direct violation of The Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949, to which Israel is a signatory. Article 53 of the convention states: "Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the state, or to other public authorities or social or cooperative organizations is prohibited".

It is now difficult to spot the ruins and the rubble. Today there stands on the spot the infamy called "Canada Park", with picnic areas for Israelis, built with Canadian tax-deductible dollars provided by the Canadian Jewish National Fund (JNF).

It was in 1973 that Bernard Bloomfield of Montreal, then President of the JNF of Canada, spearheaded a campaign among the Canadian Jewish community to raise \$15 million to establish Canada Park, so as to provide a picnic area accessible to Israelis from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

At the entrance of Canada Park, just off John Diefenbaker Parkway (opened by Diefenbaker himself in 1975), is a sign that reads: "Welcome to Canada Park in Ayalon Valley-a project of the Jewish National Fund of Canada."

The JNF, responsible for the upkeep of the park, has removed all signs of the villages and their inhabitants from the area. It would seem that

only the Canadian donors are worthy of being remembered; their names are engraved in the bronze plaques which cover an entire wall. Interestingly, these donors are not directly informed that the park is built on the site of the demolished villages. The Director of the American JNF stated that, "It is a delicate situation, and one cannot expect an institution [such as the Canadian JNF] which gathers money from abroad, to publicise the issue [of the demolition of these villages]." ("Canada Park: A Case Study," by Ehud Meltz and Michal Selah, Kol Hair, Aug. 31, 1984.)

The glossy guidebook, published by the JNF of Canada, has an entire page devoted to the history of the area, including the biblical, Roman, Crusader and British periods, but has no mention of these villages or their destruction. Another step in the obliteration of the villages from memory can be seen in their absence from Israeli maps.

As a new Canadian, my personal pain was compounded when I read on Dec. 4, 1978, in our local newspaper, The Halifax Herald, that Peter Herschorn, a prominent Halifax businessman and past chairman of the Atlantic branch of the JNF, was honored by the JNF for his humanitarian work and "choosing the right goodness" in his participation in the building of Canada Park. The Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, the Premier of N.S. and the Mayor of Halifax were in attendance and offered their greetings. I was mortified that political leaders in my new country, Canada, would consider the erection of recreation centres on the site of ruins of criminally demolished peaceful villages, illegally occupied, as a humanitarian act.

Canada continuously brags about its reputation for upholding the UN Charter, international law and human rights, yet allows its taxpayers' dollars to sponsor such a war crime. Over many years, I have written repeatedly-supported by some honourable politicians like Senator Heath Macquarrie and Mr. R.A. Corbett, MP-to successive Revenue Canada Ministers, expressing concern about this, and receiving only vague unhelpful answers.

Father Louis, who worked at the Latrun Franciscan Monastery for 40 years, said, "Every time I go by Canada Park, I still get angry. Why does the Canadian government allow it to be called Canada Park? It is built on the ruins of people's homes".

Every Canadian should be asking: why should our country's name be associated with this infamy?