

PREFACE

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STORY

Since my childhood, I have been hearing the story of what happened in Majd al-Krum in 1948—first from my father, then from my mother and our relatives. The broad lines of the story were consistent, starting with the occupation of the village by Jews and the peaceful entry of a number of their soldiers from the western side of the village. But things turned upside down in a week, when other soldiers came from the east who tore down houses and killed young men in al-‘Ayn Square. Despite the huge shock caused by the massacre, most residents stayed in their homes and their village. But the events of the Nakba (catastrophe) in our village did not end there. The Israeli soldiers came back two months after the massacre, and this time they evicted hundreds of residents, including myself and my parents.

Each time I heard this story I tried to put together new details of what happened, including the alienation of displacement, and then the return to our house after more than two years as refugees living in ‘Ayn al-Hilwa camp in Lebanon. For a child, these tales ranked first after *A Thousand and One Nights*. But the tale of the calamity that befell Majd al-Krum remained a secret that had to be kept to oneself, so I spoke to no one outside our house about this, as my father had recommended.

In June 1984, I gathered the courage to publish an article in *Haaretz* which included a paragraph about my personal history and another on the events in Majd al-Krum during 1948.¹ The reaction was swift: aggressive attacks came from ordinary and “specialized” Jewish readers—effectively silencing my interest in researching the subject. This experience taught me that I was approaching the

flame whenever I tried to tell the general story of Palestinians and especially of those who stayed in Israel.

I had learned my lesson, and stayed away from these incendiary topics relating to the Nakba and its impact on Palestinians for several years, returning to the safe area of research on the history of Palestine under the Ottomans. During those years I completed my doctoral dissertation at Hebrew University and devoted the bulk of my activities and my time to family concerns and academic work. Thus, like most people, particularly those waging a struggle of survival, my priority was immediate daily life and other important issues were deferred.

What I had said about the massacre and the subsequent expulsion of the inhabitants of Majd al-Krum during the war had provoked readers' reactions and aroused their anger. Since my account of what had occurred in our village had relied on the stories told by my father and the eyewitness accounts of my relatives, the reaction was to deny emphatically the veracity of everything I had written. I had pointed out at the time that the article's scope did not permit relating the story of our village at any length—but I promised "the day will come when I will write it down in detail, in Hebrew no less!" That was not just a passing remark but a commitment made out of a sense of responsibility, and a decision that I have borne the consequences of for many long years and decades. I therefore feel a great sense of satisfaction that my book will now be available in English translation, in addition to the earlier versions that I wrote both in Arabic (2016) and Hebrew (2017).

It had been my conscious decision as a historian to keep away from the story of the Nakba and concentrate on the history of Palestine under the Ottomans. But I had been haunted since I first heard about the painful saga of 1948 a decade later, and was eventually encouraged to take on the responsibility of writing about that period. In the spring of 1958 I participated with childish glee along with my fourth grade classmates (and students of my elementary school in general) in the week-long festivities of the tenth anniversary of Independence Day.² I remember that I was proud to play two roles on the festival stage which the parents and guardians of the children were invited to watch. In the first role, accompanied by a band, I sang the festival anthem "My Country's Independence Day," most of the words of which I still remember. I also had a role in a drama presentation that the students staged for the parents. Until that day I did not doubt what we had been told in school about the history of Zionism and its success in establishing the state of Israel, whose tenth anniversary we were celebrating. Israel, according to that narrative, had succeeded in repelling "aggression" on the part of seven Arab states which attacked it in the hope of destroying it. We also learned that Israel, after its success in that war, grew stronger and continued to flourish every year.

I remember that the schoolchildren worked energetically and happily on the preparations for the week of festivities, which captured our interest in contrast to the boring educational material most of our teachers taught us. Following the

main festival day, I expected to hear tender words of praise from my father for the two roles I had played. When I broached the subject of the school festivities with him, I heard him say for the first time things that were unknown to me. I heard a narrative that contradicted what we had learned at school about “Independence Day” and its causes. At first hesitating to answer my question, my father said: “‘Independence Day’ is not a day for rejoicing, it is a disaster and a tragedy for Arabs in general and particularly for the people of our village. It is not a day of *istiqlal* (independence). What happened to us in 1948 was *istihlal* (occupation).”³

Presenting the story so that a child like myself could understand, my father told me what happened in our village in 1948. The story I heard was a sad and painful one, involving occupation and the killing and expulsion of villagers from their homes, quite the contrary of the Zionist narrative of victories and liberation. My father’s story lit my child’s imagination, and I strained to picture the sequence of events: the expulsion from the village, travel to places of refuge, and then our return to the village in the summer of 1951. The story of the return from ‘Ayn al-Hilwa camp in a fisherman’s boat to Shavei Tzion north of ‘Akka sounded like it had been taken from a Zionist drama.⁴ Out of all places in the country, the boat discharged its Arab refugee passengers in a Jewish village, the name of which (“Returnees of Zion”) bore great symbolic significance in the history of Israel.

The story of our village in 1948, especially the details of the deportation of our family and our living in the diaspora, lodged itself in my memory. Suddenly new information about our village and my family were added to my memory, things which had not registered before in my memory and I did not know—children’s early memories being transient. However, after my father told the story again and again, the events took root in my memory and became part of my personal and familial identity. Images of our life in the camp, the return by sea, and other events ran through my imagination. I then heard the story several times from my siblings, who were increasing in number and whose interest in the details grew with each retelling. At the same time, celebrations of “Independence Day” continued at school with no mention of the calamitous events of 1948. In this way, I grew up in the late 1950s with two narratives of the events of 1948—the creation of the state of Israel, and the Nakba which befell the Palestinian people.

I understood from the stories of my father and my relatives that the soldiers who had occupied our village were not on the defensive in a confrontation with “powerful enemies.” The army unit that entered Majd al-Krum from the direction of the village of al-Birwa (subsequently Ahyahud) respected the terms of the surrender agreement and did no harm to the inhabitants. However, other soldiers came from the east one week after the surrender and they perpetrated acts of cold-blooded murder in al-‘Ayn Square. I also learned from my father and relatives that the massacre in the village was not the only one of its kind; it was not unique, as similar massacres took place in ‘Ilabun and other villages in the Galilee. When the soldiers returned two months or so after the massacre, they told the men of

the village to assemble so that a “search and identify” operation could be carried out. During this operation, the soldiers did not kill any of the inhabitants, but they expelled hundreds of them in trucks to Wadi ‘Ara.⁵ From there, those of us who were being deported had to continue the way on foot to Nablus and Jenin where they joined tens of thousands of refugees.

We remained for a few months in the vicinity of Nablus, where many of the refugees coming from the Galilee passed, before continuing on our way to southern Lebanon. We went with them from Nablus to Transjordan, and from there to Syria and then Lebanon. The roads were difficult but the journey ended safely when refugees from the village reached ‘Ayn al-Hilwa camp near Sidon. My uncle and other inhabitants of the Galilee had arrived there before us. We remained in the camp until my father took a firm decision to return to our village. During the two years of exile my father “infiltrated” into Israel alone to visit his mother, making the difficult journey on foot. My grandmother and aunts kept him hidden during his visits and gave him some money which they had saved. When we made our way back by sea in the summer of 1951, my mother was pregnant with my brother Muhammad, which was a factor in the decision to return by night and by sea from the port of Sidon, rather than overland, which was the route most returnees took.

I learned from the stories told by my relatives about the 1948 war and its aftermath that the first person to be executed in our village by the army was Abu Ma’yuf, the husband of my grandmother, whom the villagers called “al-Ja’uniyya” after her village, al-Ja’una, which later became Rosh Pina. My grandmother did not live in our house, but in a room which we called *al-khushe* next to my uncle Ahmad’s house. In contrast to the willingness of my father to talk time and again about the massacre and the story of our expulsion from the village, all of my attempts to get my grandmother to talk about what happened were unsuccessful. It appears that she preferred not to delve into those memories, which were an open wound she tried to conceal and forget. On the few occasions when I asked her directly about the events of 1948 and her experiences that year, she tried to distract me by offering me sweets or biscuits. On other occasions she encouraged me to climb a fig tree and eat its fruit. From conversations with my family and relatives, however, I was able to piece together the details which my grandmother kept hidden.

For example, I heard from one of my aunts that a Jewish family had taken up residence in the area of my grandmother’s family, and that their son, Mano Friedman, had been treated like a member of my grandmother’s family. I also learned that my grandmother, Zahra, had moved from al-Ja’una to Majd al-Krum at the end of the First World War after she married my grandfather, Salim al-Hajj Krayyim.⁶ My grandmother had lived with him for only ten years when he died, leaving her with three small children. The life of a young widow bringing up young children with no support from her family was not easy, nor was it customary in village life. So one year after the death of Salim al-Hajj Krayyim, “al-Ja’uniyya” married one of his relatives, Abu Ma’yuf. In 1948 Zahra was in her early fifties. She felt the presence of

a new threat to her family and her home. My aunt says that Zahra sought out her old neighbor, Mano Friedman, whom she considered to be her milk-brother, and asked him for a letter that would protect her household from the “Jewish army.”

When Israeli soldiers came to my grandmother’s house, she gave them Mano Friedman’s letter. This did not prevent a new tragedy, as Abu Ma’yuf was the first to be executed in al-‘Ayn Square, after they blew up his house in front of his own eyes. My grandmother and her children were not harmed on that day on which some villagers were killed and a number of houses in the village were torn down. There were many opinions as to what Mano Friedman’s letter may have contained. Some accused him of complicity in the disaster that befell the family, whereas others thought that the letter might have prevented a bigger potential tragedy, such as expulsion along with the hundreds who were exiled. At any rate, Mano Friedman’s name became an item of information that stayed in my memory about the 1948 war. These bits of information somewhat softened the image of Jews: there were those who carried out the massacre and then expelled many villagers, but alongside them were “good Jews” who had helped the people and saved some of them from certain death or expulsion.

The tragedies that befell my grandmother Zahra did not begin or end with the killing of her husband and the demolition of her family home in front of her children. Her youngest son Samih, the dearest to her heart, had been killed in a bomb explosion earlier in 1948. Then Zahra al-Ja’uniyya had prevailed on her entire family to leave al-Ja’una—and most went to Syria. Finally, in January 1949, more than two months after the massacre in al-‘Ayn Square, the expulsion of the Majd al-Krum population began, and our family was included. My father and uncle and some of my aunts became refugees in Lebanon. By 1949 my grandmother had lost many members of her family and her loved ones. Although she was able to remain in the village, disaster had befallen her from all sides.

The historical literature on the Nakba usually focuses on the death of men and their sacrifices and sufferings in the diaspora. That literature has far too little to say about the tragedies of women, especially their sacrifices as mothers and wives who lived with loss and bore the responsibility of supporting their families. The case of my grandmother Zahra is an example of a woman who lost her husband and her home, and who emerged from the ruins to take responsibility for those of her family who had survived.

US AND THE JEWS

Until 1958, as I recall, I thought of Jews as a tribe whose members I did not encounter in my daily life. Children growing up in a Galilee village did not meet Jews in their towns and cities until the age of ten. Even Jews who worked for the military government at the police station of the British Mandate east of the village were far removed from the daily activities of people of my generation. None of that

hindered my ability to imagine a picture of the Jewish soldiers carrying out the massacre in our village in 1948, and then chasing away hundreds of villagers to the other side of the border. I understood from the stories I heard at that time that Jews did not like Arabs and that was why they expelled them from the country and tried to prevent them from returning to Palestine. Despite the fact that these stories portrayed us as victims of acts of savagery, the other side did not always consist of evildoers who grasped every opportunity to hurt Arabs. The stories included the names of “good Jews” who played a role in helping the villagers and preventing their continued killing and expulsion.

One of those “good” Jews was Haim Orbach, who arrived at the village at the time of the massacre at al-‘Ayn Square. He intervened to stop the killing. I heard that Orbach was a friend of Abu Sa‘id, one of our relatives, because both had worked at the British army camp near ‘Akka. When he arrived in Majd al-Krum, he intervened immediately and stopped the killing of innocent residents.⁷ Orbach’s arrival coincided with that of Shafiq Abu ‘Abdu, who had come to visit some of his relatives who had sought refuge in Majd al-Krum. I learned that this Abu ‘Abdu had crossed over to the other camp and fought alongside the Jews in the 1948 war. He too played a role in stopping the massacre. Abu ‘Abdu’s personality and his role in the war muddled the division into two warring camps, with Arabs and Jews on opposite sides in the conflict. I had heard that Abu ‘Abdu was married to a Jew, so some of his children became Jews and fought in the Israeli army.⁸ In spite of that, I did not sense in the conversations of the grownups that they felt hatred towards him; rather, they seemed to be grateful for his role in stopping the massacre.

The first Jews that I met in my childhood years were from Kiryat Motzkin and Kiryat Bialik near Haifa. At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, I accompanied my father on his trips there to sell figs. After a season or two of helping my father, I started to go by myself, carrying a basket or two. Selling figs in the months of summer vacation opened my eyes to a new and different world. I learned many things in those months that were not part of our school curriculum. I found out, for instance, that most Jews lived in apartments in shared buildings, and that the streets in their towns were wide and clean and shaded by trees. Most of the customers for my figs were housewives. I was happy not to have to deal with Jewish men and youth who, in my eyes, represented the “evil Jews.” I can still remember an incident or two when I was taken aback seeing a young man in military uniform come out of a building or onto a street, the blood freezing in my veins until he put some distance between us.

Interacting directly and closely with the women who bought my figs reinforced what I had learned from the stories of 1948: that not all Jews were evil. Most of the women’s interest was confined to the quality and price of the figs, but some of them expressed interest in my age and education, which elevated them in my opinion. Those whom I appreciated the most were those who offered me a cold glass of juice. This simple human gesture made me shower them with compliments, such

as “generous” and “merciful mothers.” The experience of selling figs led to the blurring of a polarized view of us and them. I learned to differentiate between the “evil Jews” who killed Arabs and expelled them from their country and “good Jews” who did not hate Arabs and did not dream of harming them.

While my familiarity with Jews increased in those days, I had no occasion to meet Palestinian refugees who had been expelled from their homeland. I tried to imagine the life of a refugee such as my uncle and his family, who were living in ‘Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp. Many a time I tried to imagine my family continuing to live in that camp, had my father not taken us back to Majd al-Krum. I formed a strong conviction that despite the hardships of life in our village, we were lucky to have escaped the humiliation of life as refugees and to have returned to live in our home and on our soil. I did not need to meet my uncle’s family and refugees like them in south Lebanon to appreciate the difficulties of life in the diaspora. Many refugees from Sha’b, al-Birwa, al-Damun, and other villages in the Galilee took up residence in Majd al-Krum itself. Some of those refugees were our neighbors, and their sons, our classmates. It was no secret that their material circumstances and their social status were lower than the people of the village, because they did not own houses or land like the others.

BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY

The story of Majd al-Krum is a good example of the suffering of the Palestinians who fell victim to the policies of killing and expulsion, some of whom managed to return to their homes. The stories of these people and others like them in the Galilee are not recorded in Israeli historical literature. Even those who stayed feared to tell their stories for various reasons. The Palestinians in Israel did not have universities or research institutions that could tackle these and other important issues. The few who attended Israeli universities and tried to study the events of the Nakba usually did so with great caution. I myself returned to study and write about these issues only in 1998 when I told the story of our expulsion, life in refugee camps, and return to the village for an article on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba. I credit the great poet, the late Mahmoud Darwish, for encouraging me to write and publish it in *al-Karmel* magazine after hearing me tell the story.⁹

I have to admit that I approached this research with a mixture of joy, fear, and trepidation. It is not easy to write about this complicated and painful subject and then publish it for all to see. In this case, the chronicler has the responsibility to search for the truth in a tragic, complex, and very highly sensitive story. The history of the 1948 war and its ramifications is still an open wound. But this wound is very familiar to the author, since it concerns not only his people but his close relatives as well. Opening old wounds may hurt the victims, and will disturb those Jews who will see the telling of the stories as an unfair accusation.

The burden of personal and familial memories poses a danger also to the work of the historian who intends to search for the pure truth. Nevertheless, the professional researcher who is aware of the shortcomings of memory relies on it with the required caution, turning it into a real asset. Intimate personal memories (as the great historian Eric Hobsbawm has taught us) permit us to present a distinctive picture based on sources and knowledge which are difficult for other researchers to depict.

The stories of Palestinians who remained in Israel after the Nakba occupy a grey area between the private and the personal, and between the public and the historical. I therefore decided to share my personal and family history with the reader, in the form of memories that are an important source for making heard the voices and the point of view of those who have been silenced. Traumatic and tragic events persist in the memory for decades, as is well known. They constitute a rich and important source for describing the past in detail and accurately. On many occasions the victims of those tragic experiences choose not to speak and not to share their buried secrets with others. However, those who do choose to speak add personal and human perspectives which are missing from collective nationalist narratives, archival documents, and the memoirs of victors.

Following the war of 1948, Israel succeeded in marketing its narrative of the war's events to its citizens and to the outside world, including the circumstances of the "flight" of the Palestinian refugees. Israel's leaders had their own important reasons for propagating that story, and many Jewish researchers and their supporters collaborated in it. Those who perpetrated atrocities and war crimes themselves participated in weaving that tale even though they knew the truth. Those who had committed disgraceful acts against innocent civilians or had given orders to carry them out pretended to forget their role. As for the victims, they were in no position to forget what had happened to them, even if they were obliged to suppress their memories and not to divulge them for a period of time. When they did speak out, they were able to recall those events accurately, including intimate and painful details.

One of the eyewitnesses to the events of the Majd al-Krum massacre of 1948 was prepared, in our last meeting, to divulge a detail that others had been ashamed to talk about. In response to a question about the feelings of fear and shock that spread when the men were executed in al-'Ayn Square, he asked:

What do you think? Many men did it in their pants, and the bad smell began to spread. All we wanted was for the horror show we were seeing to end as quickly as possible. The slow pace of the executions, one every half hour, doubled the fear that it would be our turn next. Furthermore, the stench that was becoming pervasive undermined our morale. Men who had been squatting for hours did not dare move or speak out of fear of the soldiers' rifles. So we sat like that for hours at al-'Ayn Square until Haim Orbach and Shafiq Abu 'Abdu came. They seemed to us like angels who had descended from heaven to end the torment.

Some details of the atrocities perpetrated in the Galilee, the killing, expulsion, and maltreatment of the population, will not be easy for readers to absorb or digest.

I chose to present the personal and very human accounts of some eyewitnesses without revealing their names or identities for reasons that are not difficult to understand. Eyewitnesses with whom I spoke more than once sometimes felt comfortable in sharing with me details and secrets which distressed them and which they had not had an opportunity to reveal to anyone. One woman, who had been barely a teenager, not much more than ten years of age in 1948, said that seeing her family's home demolished before her eyes caused her to wet her bed at night like little children do. At the end of the war she was nearing the age of twelve and she was terrified that this condition might endure. The family was occupied with this new problem, which went on for more than a year. The mother's greatest worry was: what if a would-be bridegroom were to ask for her daughter's hand in marriage while she still suffered from this problem? This is just one example of how the trauma of killings, the demolition of houses, expulsions, and maltreatment affected the population, young and old. These aftereffects are an open wound and reading the statements of some eyewitnesses is very difficult and unforgettable.

We know that the myths of origin and birth are hard to dismantle. It is not easy to convince ardent believers to rethink their convictions by putting new facts before them. However, most readers today are not ardent believers in the myths of 1948. Now that Arab and Israeli researchers have discredited some of these myths, perhaps the task of the researcher will be easier. This author hopes that the discomfort that this book causes to Zionist and pro-Zionist readers will drive them to seek out the truth in a quest for knowledge. The stories of the Nakba of the Palestinians, particularly those who remained in Israel, are "present but absent," like the situation of the refugees who were displaced within Israel. Without the stories of the Palestinians, particularly the stories of those who remained in what became Israel in 1948, dialogue between the two sides of the conflict will remain a dialogue of the deaf.

This book is first and foremost a history of a generation of Palestinians who remained in their estranged homeland after the Nakba and who bore the brunt of some of the events that took place: women like my grandmother Zahra who had to surmount the trauma and mourning and only one year later went to work washing the clothes and cleaning the houses of Jews in Haifa. My research tells the stories of many "ordinary" people who remained in their homes despite the massacres and the expulsions. Some of them initially became refugees, but returned to their homes with their families despite the many difficulties and dangers they encountered on the rough roads of return. They came back in order to bring up their children in their homeland after they had tasted the insults and the shame of displacement and dispersal. This generation of mothers and fathers was not defeatist.¹⁰ Rather, they experienced the struggle for survival, and used the wisdom

and spirit from having feet planted firmly on the ground; they could bend with the wind during the storm, let it pass, and then rise from the ruins and build a new life for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren.

The authors of *The Stand-Tall Generation* were accurate when they said that the capacity of the Palestinians who remained after the Nakba to conduct “effective political action was limited.”¹¹ In the years following the stupefying shock and while living under military rule, it was difficult to expect much from the remnants of a fate-stricken people. In the struggle for survival, people give up on other struggles that are likely doomed to fail in favor of what is possible and necessary: life, the home, and the family. Once these are guaranteed, it is the turn of earning a living, the children’s education, and their upbringing. The generation of those who stayed after the Nakba fought to be able to continue to live in their homes and their homeland, having witnessed with their own eyes the national and human disaster that had overtaken them. Those who stayed in Israel after 1948 were not a submissive generation who bowed their heads, nor were they a generation of great heroes. For the most part, they were a generation who succeeded in the struggle for survival.

When I promised myself in June 1984 to write the story of the Nakba, I knew that my father would not live to read it. Indeed, cancer did not allow him much time; he died two years later. During the last seven years that I have worked on this research project, my mother became the repository of the family’s memory of alienation. I set aside time during my frequent visits to the village to talk to her of events that took her back in her imagination to the days of her youth. I could see the positive effect of our “historical” discussions; they would take her mind off illness and weakness of the body, and she would relive beautiful moments in her memory which she would relate to her children and grandchildren. She and others like her among the generation of the Nakba and its consequences for the Palestinian people feel happy when they find ears to listen to their stories. This book chronicles the tale of the sons and daughters of the generation who stayed, who were contemporaries of the Nakba and its consequences, who endured and provided a better life for the generations to come. I dedicate this book to my mother and the members of her generation, those who died and those who are still alive.¹²