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## National Narratives of Suffering and Victimhood

### Methods and Ethics of Telling the Past as Personal Political History

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This chapter presents some preliminary thoughts on the possibility of telling the story of Israel-Palestine as a personal political history. By this I mean not only, but certainly also, my own coming to terms with my identity as a Jewish Israeli. More importantly, what I have in mind is the story of my generation of Israeli citizens, born between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, that is, the first generation of citizens of a newly created state. What interests me is this generation's relationship to the land, and it is in this sense that I speak of a personal political history and not of party-based political affiliation. What greatly complicates this story is the fact that while the new Jewish Israeli citizens were expected to normalize the state's existence by the very fact that they were born in it and thus, in a purely biological sense, became indigenous to it, the new Arab Israeli citizens of the same state, who had mostly been indigenous to the land for generations, were denormalized by becoming an ethnic minority on their own land ~~with~~—often with only limited civil rights. Since this generation is more or less the same age as the state itself, its personal story is in a certain sense the personal story of the state: a state whose most important personal characteristic is its alleged ability to “normalize Jewish existence” and by the same token its capacity to “denormalize” the native Arab population that remained on the land after the mass expulsion of the Palestinian majority in 1948.

Ultimately, then, what intrigues me is not the conventional yet highly contentious and competing political narratives but the manner in which Israeli Jews and Arabs born into the state have understood, articulated, and felt their link to their homeland—*homeland* in the simple sense of the land in which they

were born as the first citizens of a newly born state. This question, although it is clearly at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has never been addressed in this manner. Indeed the idea of writing a collective subjective history, particularly one that is split into at least two main personas, is generally uncommon, not least because it requires listening to the protagonists of the period yet avoiding an anecdotal oral history, that is, the narration of a generation's link to a place through its members' personal tales. In other words, this is a major challenge, yet one that is, to my mind, well worth taking on, precisely because at its core is neither contention nor argumentation but the need for empathetic understanding, without which history is nothing more than "one damn thing after another," a "dogma" about reconstructing the past against which as the great historian Arnold Toynbee famously warned in 1957.<sup>1</sup>

I came to Israel-Palestine from Eastern Europe and to Eastern Europe from Germany. This was also the path charted by Shmuel Yosef (Shai) Agnon (Czaczkas) in his creation myth of Buczacz, his and my mother's hometown. In Agnon's telling of it, his city was founded by a caravan of Jews, whose "pure hearts yearned to go to the Land of Israel" but who found themselves instead in a place of "endless forests, filled with birds and animals and beasts." There they encountered a band of "great and important noblemen," who were "so astonished by their wisdom and their well-spoken manner" that they invited the newcomers "to dwell with them." Having "recognized that the Jews were their blessing," the nobles assured them that "the whole land is wide open to you," allowing them to "dwell where you wish," not least because "there is no one in this land who knows how to trade goods." And so the Jews stayed, having realized that they had meanwhile "struck roots into the land, and built houses, and the nobility of the land liked and supported them, and the women were pregnant or with babies, and some had become exhausted and weak, and the elderly had aged a great deal and the journey would be hard for them." There they had "lacked for nothing in learning of the Torah and the knowledge of God and were secure in their wealth and honor and their faith and righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

Agnon himself, of course, did not come from Germany but was born in Buczacz; and he did not stay in Buczacz but rather went to live in Jaffa, then part of Ottoman Palestine, in 1908, as a twenty-one-year-old aspiring writer. Just four years later, however, he did go to Germany, staying there for twelve years that spanned World War I, his making as an author, the Balfour Declaration, and the beginning of the consolidation of a Jewish "national home" in what was, by the time he returned and settled down in Jerusalem, British Mandatory Palestine.<sup>3</sup> I too did not personally cross these geographies in the chronological order suggested above but rather did so in following the foci of my research. Born just six years after the establishment of the State of Israel, I am the only native son of

Kibbutz Ein Hachoshah in my family, although I have no recollections of my very early childhood there. My parents are now buried side by side in the kibbutz cemetery, an intimate place with many familiar names, what some people refer to as “a piece of old Eretz Israel.” Yet I am not the first “Sabra” in my family; my father, who subsequently insisted that he was not the “mythological Sabra,” was born in Petah Tikva (Mulabbis, Mlabbes, Um-Labbes) shortly after his parents arrived in Palestine from the poverty-stricken shtetl of Pyzdry, near the western Polish city of Kalisz. Upon his bar mitzvah in August 1939 my father received a greeting card from his grandfather; that was the last that anyone heard of the family there.<sup>4</sup>

But my mother came from Buczacz, Agnon’s town, in 1935, with her parents and two younger brothers. Years later, when he traveled to London after receiving the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature, Agnon was hosted by my father, who was then cultural attaché to Her Majesty’s government. When my mother mentioned to him that she too came from Buczacz, he responded dismissively: “Nowadays everyone wants to be from Buczacz.” That was certainly not the case when my mother’s family also settled down in Petah Tikva, where she met my father. Both families were poor, and my father, whether because he wanted to escape his home or because he wanted to fight the Nazis, forged his birth certificate to make him appear two years older and joined the Jewish Brigade of the British Army. I doubt that he killed any Germans during his service in Italy, but he never forgot his encounter with the survivors of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> By 1948, after one semester at the Hebrew University, both my parents were in uniform, my mother in besieged Jerusalem and my father in the convoys trying to break through. She suffered malnutrition and lost a child; he was twice pronounced dead, erroneously. They lost many friends in the students’ companies that had been scratched together when the fighting broke out. I have no doubt that in that war my father did kill others as the commander of a machine-gun squad; and I know that later in life he was haunted by the crimes he saw fellow soldiers commit, and he described a few such instances in his writing.<sup>6</sup> I don’t think my mother killed anyone, but despite her small stature, she proudly carried a German Mauser, known in Israel as a Czech, one of the German Army rifles that were shipped off to Israel from Czechoslovakia as part of an arms deal. I still used one for sniper training in 1973; a little swastika was engraved on its steel breech.

My parents went back to the Hebrew University after the war, although they could no longer study at Mount Scopus since the Jordanian Legion had taken the eastern part of the city where the campus was located. When they completed their studies they went to the kibbutz as part of what Israeli socialists called at the time *hagshama*, or “remaking,” intended to transform individuals

into active contributors to the social collective and to facilitate the creation of a just society. Some of the children they taught there at the school were orphaned Holocaust survivors. They lasted only five years in the kibbutz, but that time coincided with my birth. I spent the first eighteen months of my life in a children's home; it was the rule in the kibbutz, although I do not think my mother liked this arrangement. At my father's funeral in the kibbutz, in December 2016, an elderly woman approached me. "You may not remember me," she said, "but I was your nanny when you were a baby." She remembered me as being cute, of course, and gave me a photograph from that time to prove it.

I went to Germany for the first time in 1979. I was twenty-four, almost exactly the same age as Agnon when he went there in 1912, but it was a very different country. For me, this was the beginning of a long journey, at whose core was a question that has remained with me to this day: What motivates young men, men not unlike myself at the time, to take part in mass crimes, such as those perpetrated by German troops on an unprecedented scale in World War II? I too had been a soldier and an officer. I don't think I ever killed anyone, although I fired in the direction of Syrian soldiers from too great a distance to be able to tell whether any were hit. I had been shot at and shelled, but the only serious injuries I sustained as a soldier happened in an entirely avoidable army training accident. Still, after four years in uniform, I knew something about being a young soldier. My driving question was, of course, directed just as much at myself and my generation ~~as anyone and was directed~~ as well as at the soldiers of 1948, such as my father, who were of the same age group as the younger cohorts of the German troops I subsequently studied. What makes young men—there were also women, but they were far fewer—commit atrocities? How do they perceive their actions and later remember them?

Coming to Germany was a challenge. There were still many elderly men with missing limbs on the streets and in the bars; I could overhear them speaking about their wartime experiences at the local pub. After I published my first book on the barbarization of warfare on the Eastern Front they would come and sit at the front rows of the lecture halls when I gave talks in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Some of them would insist, "Nothing like that ever happened in my unit. We were decent soldiers." Others would respond, "Maybe not in your unit, but certainly in mine." That was the mid-1980s. It took another decade for the so-called *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht Exhibition) on the crimes of the German Army in the East to begin making the rounds in the Federal Republic and Austria, garnering close to a million visitors over four years.<sup>8</sup> There were the same confrontations between those who denied the evidence and those who were appalled by it. A German member of parliament cried in public at the thought that her father might have been a war criminal simply by serving the fatherland.

By then Germans were quite ready to recognize that the Holocaust was a German crime committed by rather than simply in the name of the German people. But the extermination of the Jews, it was said, was perpetrated only by a few thousand Germans, mostly the Gestapo, SS, and other dregs of society. The armed forces were a different matter altogether: some twenty million Germans had gone through the ranks. Was it possible that the Wehrmacht was a criminal organization?<sup>9</sup> This assertion was and remains controversial in Germany—and, in fact, elsewhere. But if German soldiers were not to blame, who killed all those millions? Surely not just the sparsely staffed security services that allegedly committed crimes behind the backs of the decent fighting units.

People told themselves, and their families, different stories. Soldiers came back from the war with memories they did not divulge; the photos they had sent to their loved ones of wartime atrocities were safely stored away in attics and never seen again; the amateur movies they made were kept in drawers that were never opened. There were also letters, diaries, oral accounts, and, of course, those pub conversations among old comrades and family chats around the breakfast table that sounded very different from what people said publicly. Political correctness enabled Germany to develop a democratic culture; it also taught people to lie, hide, and obfuscate.<sup>10</sup> As we are learning now, it is a double-edged sword. Once people are allowed to say what they think, their words quickly turn into actions; but when they keep their thoughts to themselves, the repressed rage and resentment eventually boil over in unexpected ways. Men who had served in the Wehrmacht rarely talked to noncomrades about the war; when a few of them finally did talk as old men, they often remembered those years as the best time of their lives, when they were young, healthy, optimistic, and omnipotent. The crimes were not their doing or their fault, they argued; and in any case, they had only reacted to even worse crimes by the enemy, which were, moreover, committed first. No one was innocent, and in war terrible things happen. But they had been decent soldiers, believed in what they were doing, and were eventually deceived and betrayed, they said.

In 1988, when the first intifada broke out, I was still liable to be called on for reserve service. I had been a founding member of Peace Now, before Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel, and I was enraged by Minister of Defense Yitzhak Rabin's call to "break the bones" of Palestinians throwing rocks at IDF soldiers. A postcard was circulating at the time relating the story of a Palestinian boy who had been thrown out of a moving border police jeep and killed. On the back of that postcard I wrote to Rabin that having researched the crimes of the German Army I was afraid that the IDF would be similarly brutalized. Astonishingly, Rabin wrote back, infuriated by the comparison I made. But perhaps it also rankled him into thinking that such comparisons were not entirely vacuous; he

had commanded elite forces in 1948, and knew full well, as did my father, how easily young men with guns can be made or choose of their own volition to do terrible things. But now the IDF was a far mightier organization, and Palestinians had only rocks.<sup>11</sup>

It was then, too, that the scholar Yehuda Elkana published a searing letter, warning that when we drum into young Israelis that the Holocaust should never happen again, we provide them with a license to see all threats as existential and to view all opponents as potential Nazis: and the only good Nazi, of course, is a dead Nazi. But this time it was the Jews who were armed to the teeth while the “Nazis” were Palestinian teenagers with slingshots.<sup>12</sup> Elkana, who had survived the Holocaust as a child, could get away with issuing this warning. But he could not prevent Israeli society from sliding down the slippery slope. Certainly my own curious exchange with Rabin could not. And as we know, the slope became much steeper after he was gunned down. By then I had already been living in the United States for several years, and I cried when the news of his death arrived, holding my baby daughter and thinking that now peace would have to wait for a new generation. I never quite came back, but I have also never entirely left.

In some ways, the question I had asked myself when I first went to Germany had been answered. What makes young men kill and murder? They are taught to believe that they are facing a dangerous enemy, one who had victimized them in the past and would do so again if given the chance. The Jews had betrayed Germany in 1918, stabbing the Imperial Army in the back, unseating the Kaiser, and bringing about the corrupt, degenerate, and Jew-ridden Weimar Republic. They had also taken over the Soviet Union and were pulling the strings of the plutocrats in London and Washington. Now it was their time to pay. If the Jews incited another world war, warned Adolf Hitler in 1939, they would be exterminated. And so they were. In this explanation, young German men did not see Jewish human beings but demonic figures that must be crushed out of existence. In genocide, one dehumanizes enemies before killing them; that makes the killing of another person easier and provides murder with moral sanction. In Heinrich Himmler’s words, precisely by being able to exterminate men, women, and children, his SS men had proven themselves to be decent, for they were strong enough to fulfill this unpleasant but world-historical task for the benefit of Aryan generations to come.<sup>13</sup>

But I was not entirely happy with this explanation. After all, half of the victims in the Holocaust were killed not in extermination camps but face-to-face; vast numbers were not transported in trains across Europe, but killed right where they lived, in their homes, streets, schools and hospitals, ~~and~~ cemeteries and parks, in full view of their friends, colleagues, and neighbors, by a single bullet to the back of the head, if they were lucky. This was not mechanical killing

and not anonymous genocide. How was this possible? What made men act in such a way, at times after they had first gotten to know their victims personally? And what about all those so-called bystanders, the men, women, and children who were looking on? What did they do, think, and remember?

And so I went east, from Germany to Eastern Europe. I sought out a town in which such killing had happened. There was no shortage of sites, of course, but I picked one about which I knew something; as I eventually found out, I actually knew very little. It was Agnon's hometown, and my mother's. In Buczacz ten thousand Jews were murdered, mostly between October 1942 and June 1943; half of them were deported to the extermination camp of Bełżec; half were shot in situ and remain to this day in mass graves surrounding the city. In trying to reconstruct these events I soon realized that it would not suffice to begin at the end, the moment at which the Germans marched in. The encounter between the perpetrator and the victim I had sought to understand was complicated by the fact that so many other people were involved, people who had lived side by side for generations, whose entire culture was rooted in four centuries of coexistence. And yet, during the Holocaust, a small contingent of twenty to thirty German and ethnic-German security police and SS men ~~who~~ killed as many as sixty thousand Jews in the Czortków-Buczacz area under their control. This gruesome undertaking could only be accomplished with such speed and efficiency thanks to massive cooperation from the local population, ranging from hundreds of militarized Ukrainian policemen to local German, Ukrainian, and Jewish police forces.<sup>14</sup>

Observing the social dynamic of local genocide reveals that everyone was engaged in one way or another. Some moved into freshly abandoned apartments; others carried away down blankets and pillows, pots, and pans; others still demolished the floors in search for hidden gold. Some hid Jews out of kindness; others took all their money and then denounced them; others still axed those they had sheltered just to get hold of their gold or furs, their cow or their horse. Whether they behaved cruelly or kindly, callously or indifferently, these people often knew each other by name; it was all quite familiar and intimate. After all, the inhabitants of this region had known each other long before the Germans arrived. Nor did the killing under German rule only involve the mass murder of Jews. Indeed, since the late nineteenth century the main struggle in Galicia, where Buczacz was located, had been between the politically dominant Roman Catholic Poles and the majority Greek Catholic Ukrainian population. Under Polish rule during the interwar period Ukrainian attempts to gain independence or at least autonomy were brutally suppressed by the authorities, leading in turn to the emergence of an increasingly violent underground dedicated to the creation of a Pole- and Jew-free independent Ukraine.

As German rule in the region began to disintegrate in late 1943, and as the number of Jews dwindled, the Ukrainian underground unleashed a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Polish population, massacring and burning down entire villages. The Poles fought back and similarly committed many atrocities, albeit on a smaller scale. This raging civil war was of little concern to the Germans but determined the postwar nature of the entire region. When the Soviets reoccupied Galicia in summer 1944, they brutally suppressed the Ukrainian insurgents and arranged a vast population exchange with the newly installed communist regime in Poland. By 1947 Buczacz and its surrounding area were purely Ukrainian.

There were many reasons for the extreme violence that characterized this period. But in the present context, what is especially important to understand is that over an extended period of time each group, Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians, had created its own narrative about its place in the region, its relations with the other groups, and its past and destiny. Crucially, especially since the rise of nationalism, each group saw itself as the victim of others, particularly of its neighbors, whose successes it often viewed as the cause of its own misfortunes. Narrating one's story did not necessarily entail animosity toward others, as we can see from Agnon's mythology of Buczacz. But once nationalism gave birth to the idea that the place belonged exclusively to one's own group, it became no longer possible to live with the stories of others: such competing narratives had to be eradicated along with their carriers, for without its story a group no longer had the historical validation and moral right to be what it was and to live where it lived. Thus the interwoven fabric of narratives that had made up the social whole frayed and disintegrated. As the Poles told it, they had arrived centuries earlier on a civilizing mission that brought culture to the ignorant peasants and that should have made them into Poles. The Ukrainians, for their part, perceived themselves as the indigenous population, once free but for several centuries colonized and exploited by the Polish lords and their Jewish lackeys; only the removal of these invaders and parasites would ensure Ukrainian liberation and independence. As for the Jews, while they made no national claim on the land and were seen by both Poles and Ukrainians as alien, they prided themselves on having brought trade and commerce to these regions, building cities and cultivating learning, enriching the lords and sustaining the peasants. In truth, despite the nationalizers' claims, before World War I it had often been difficult to distinguish between Poles and Ukrainians, whereas Jews were seen as a necessary if not always likable component of society. But as the walls between the groups grew ever higher, the stories they told about themselves became increasingly irreconcilable. Eventually, their internal exclusionary logic was sealed in blood.

These different narratives about Galicia are almost as irreconcilable today as they were at the time, although the conflict on the ground has receded into the distant past. But if we want to understand what had made it so vicious, we must reconstruct it as it had been told and seen by all those concerned. Conventionally this past is still narrated from a single perspective, thereby incorporating all the self-justification and acrimony that had fed the conflict in the first place. For this reason I have spent the last decade reconstructing the story of Buczacz from its origins to its annihilation as a multiethnic town, told as it was by the different groups that made up that society. I have also tried to evoke the individual voices of the town's people so as to reveal the multiple nuances, complexities, and contradictions contained in each of these narratives. My goal was not so much to point out what was accurate and what was false, although such narratives are always filled with self-praise, distortions, and denials, as well as empathy, compassion, and love. Rather, I sought to reconstruct those very perceptions that motivated people to act as they did at the time and that still mold present-day memory and historiography. Listening to the stories people tell can also inform us about what actually happened, especially when no other documentation of these events exists. Most importantly, people's voices tell a history that is always missing from official documentation, namely, how people experienced events rather than how officials translated them into bureaucratic reports. First-person accounts are by their very nature subjective, and they may contain much that is biased or inaccurate. But that does not make them any less true for the historical actors at the time; in that sense, these stories constitute an essential component of the historical record just as much as the neatly signed and dated orders and reports conventionally used by historians.<sup>15</sup>

Following this decade-long detour, I have now resumed my journey, retracing Agnon's and my mother's footsteps as they traveled from their hometown to Palestine. My own homecoming is as incomplete as any other: living mostly in the United States, I return to a home as familiar as the landscape of my childhood and as foreign as Ithaca is to Odysseus at the end of his travels. Indeed, it is precisely this notion of an impossible yet inevitable return that guides my path from Buczacz to Israel: the return to a land where I was born and raised, a land that my ancestors had confidently claimed to be their own even as they landed on its shores at the end of long journeys from sites that had been their homes for generations, return to a land colonized and radically transformed, yet to which attachment, deeply rooted in conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable narratives, is both intense and filled with contradictions. Methodologically, applying the tools of inquiry I had used in studying Buczacz may help provide greater empathy for this attachment to place by groups that otherwise appear to have nothing in common but their rivalry over land. But in another, personal sense,

for me the connection between Buczacz and Israel is encapsulated in Agnon's, my mother's, and my own journey there, making for a biographical, emotional, and chronological link that cannot be broken or denied. In other words, such first-person history is intensely personal both for its author and for the protagonists, Jews and Arabs alike, telling their own individual tales of belonging, longing, and loss.

In comparing Jewish Zionist accounts of the return to the Land of Israel since the late nineteenth century to the increasingly vibrant and rich literature on pre-1948 Arab society in Palestine, the Nakba, exile, and Palestinian nationalism, one cannot avoid a distinct sense of reading about two entirely separate universes. This was precisely how I felt when reading about Buczacz from the point of view, for instance, of Agnon, who told its story as a Jewish town, and from that of Sadok Barącz, a Roman Catholic monk of Armenian origins, who wrote its history as a Polish outpost of civilization on the edge of Turkish, Tatar, and Cossack barbarism.<sup>16</sup> These two tales are as impossible to reconcile as those of Jews depicting their settlement of the Land of Israel and those of Palestinians writing about the Jewish colonization of Palestine. Moral righteousness, historical justice, fate and destiny, and, most of all, suffering and victimhood proliferate on both sides to such a degree that one would expect there never to be room for dialogue.

And yet, as it turns out, dialogue is not only necessary and possible; it is, in fact, spontaneous and natural. That does not mean that it lacks a violent potential. The intimacy of recognition and violence, familiarity and hostility, so transparent in such cases as Eastern Europe (or Rwanda, Bosnia, and numerous other sites of communal violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide), is part and parcel of the Israel-Palestine conundrum. But it is also such because the stories people tell, irreconcilable as they are, concern the same place and follow a similar emotional and narrative trajectory. At their core, they are about an impossible and unbreakable link. This does not mean that they can be either merged or reconciled; indeed, the core of their existence is differentiation from the other. But by removing ourselves from the dispute, yet at the same time not detaching ourselves from the passions it evokes, we should be able to interchangeably empathize with one story or the other. Here the author's personal story should make room for the personal narratives of others, suspending one's own tale but never relinquishing the sensibility of subjectivity. The point then is not to confront one narrative with another but to tell them side by side, episode by episode, and person by person, thereby facilitating identification with their human core. This should not merely entail recognition that "we have our stories, and they have theirs." Rather, it should enable us to see the world through the eyes of others, to imagine ourselves in their shoes, even as we cannot accept or fully

integrate the narrative context within which their experiences transpired: because most of these individual stories, like all human stories, are about people not unlike ourselves and about the quest for a home that we all share.<sup>17</sup>

What I propose, then, is a “personal political history” of Israel-Palestine, with a particular focus on what links the generation of Jews and Arabs born into the new state, into their homeland, between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. My task, as I see it, is to excavate the manner in which this generation, to which I belong, formed a link to a place that had come into existence as a political entity just before it was born. In a certain sense, this has to do with the realization that everything my generation took for granted could just as easily have never existed, or might have been radically different, and that what appears to be natural and self-evident, therefore, is mere coincidence, luck, or the result of a concerted effort that might have failed. Yet once the state was there, it acted and was perceived as if it could have only been that way, creating a consciousness, a state of being, among all those exposed to it that cannot be ignored or denied, albeit having a radically different impact on its citizens depending on where they stood and how they were viewed by the state.

There is a profound asymmetry to this tale, one that should not merely be acknowledged but must also be integrated into this personal political history by the bringing in of voices of those on both sides of the divide. This is the obvious asymmetry in the conditions of Jews and Palestinians. Its components are easily identified: Palestinians were the majority indigenous population in the land until 1948, while the vast majority of Jews arrived from Europe, and later the Middle East and North Africa, as settlers. The war of 1948, seen by Jews as the “War of Independence” and by Palestinians as the Nakba, or catastrophe, led to the expulsion of over two-thirds of the Palestinians from what became the State of Israel and transformed those who remained there into a minority. Moreover, the vastly superior strength of the Jewish state is exerted not only against this minority of Arab citizens but is also overwhelmingly greater than that of the rest of the Palestinian Diaspora. Whereas the Palestinians never gained a state and mostly lost their land, the Jews established a state and erased hundreds of emptied villages. For the Zionists, the State of Israel was an “answer” to the Holocaust; for Palestinians that very “answer” implied a negation of their existence as a people, a mass expulsion, and an ongoing repression and existence as a stateless people. All this must be recognized openly and clearly.<sup>18</sup>

But precisely for this reason, writing a personal political history of Israeli Jews and Palestinians can both acknowledge this asymmetry and address it not merely as a confrontation of narratives but also as vastly different yet always related stories of attachment to the land, its peoples and cultures, sights and nature, histories and myths. To be sure, many historians, not least those more

nationally oriented or rigorously empirical, disdain oral history and personal perspective and would have little time for first-person history. But just as in the reconstruction of the history of the Holocaust, testimony has come to play an increasingly important role, so too in the context of Israel-Palestine one need not waste much time on the critics of oral history. For both Palestinians and Jews, but especially for the former, it is their stories, personal and collective, that form an inextricable part of their link to the land. To be sure, pre-1948 Palestinian society had a well-educated and articulate intelligentsia; and, in the wake of the Nakba, efforts were made to collect oral testimonies and documentation of the event. But the high rate of illiteracy among pre-1948 Palestinians and the absence of a state that would create an official documentary record of its own past greatly hampered these efforts. For that reason, historians who refuse to listen to these stories get their history wrong even if their facts are reliable, for facts speak less for themselves than people do.<sup>19</sup>

The State of Israel was only six years old when I came into the world. It was in its infancy when we were children; in its youth when we were teenagers; expanding and flexing its strength and capacities when we were young men and women; and growing less agile, heavier, more affluent, and less innocent as we moved into ever more advanced stages of middle age. We, Jews and Arabs, experienced it in many different ways, but it was our natural defining circumstance; it provided schoolteachers and policemen, judges and politicians, the media and the military. It also created the framework for the deep divides in understanding—of what was taken for granted and what was entirely unthinkable.

As a young Jewish Israeli I took the very connection to the land as a given: I spoke Hebrew, was a citizen, and internalized a view of the land as having been always somehow my own, long before the establishment of the state. I also viewed Jewish life outside of Israel as a distant, somewhat unpleasant, collective but in no way personal memory, an abnormality corrected in the nick of time by Zionism, as exemplified by my own birth into a state of my own in my own land. My first encounter with anti-Semitism came when I was living as a twelve-year-old in London. I was taught to see certain aspects of that land as they really were and others as they had been or should still be. I lived next to “abandoned” Palestinian villages, first near Jamousin and later near Sheikh Muwanis, and never once thought as a child what the ruins of the buildings or the sabra (*sabr*) fences of tall cactuses meant.<sup>20</sup> My classmates and I would raid those sabras with long sticks, to which we tied empty food cans, so as to reach the sweet prickly fruits they produced, and then ate them with relish despite the tiny thorns that would always prick out tongues and lips. We were “Sabras,” and these were our forbidden fruits, yet we had no idea what stories they could tell. The overgrown Muslim cemetery nearby was more forbidding,

as all cemeteries are to children. But it was all the more daunting because it was different and alien, and no one ever explained why it was there. After all, we were the natural inhabitants of the place, even though it had become ours only a few years before we were born. In fact, some of us, such as my classmates in Ramat Aviv, which spread out just below the hill of Sheikh Muwanis, were actually born in Poland and only came there when the anti-Semitic, purportedly anti-Zionist communist regime of Władysław Gomułka had expelled them. Others, those who now lived in the “abandoned” structures on that hill, had come from North Africa and had been housed in this “abandoned property” because Mizrahi Jews were not on the list of priority candidates for the ostensibly modern housing provided to Ashkenazim.

It is this naturalness, this sense of what belongs and what does not, the tactile relationship to land, and the internalized imagery that transformed Israeli Jews into literally the first native generation, which interests me. Simultaneously, this same historical process transformed the Palestinians who remained in the new state into a minority in their own land, a contradiction in terms of Muslim and Christian Arabs in the Jewish State, not quite normal and yet, despite all denials and obfuscations, known as the original inhabitants of the land, those who had always, so to speak, been there. Their far more numerous expelled brethren became the first generation of exile; they, those who remained, were the first Arab citizens of a Jewish, ethnonational state, which never quite knew what to do with them and never really accepted them. Instead, the Jewish state initially subjected the majority of its Arab citizens to almost two decades of martial law and has systematically discriminated against them, with the clear intention of marginalizing this population and at times barely concealing the desire to induce it to leave the country altogether.

I had not previously thought of myself as “the first man,” in the sense of Albert Camus’s reflections on his childhood in Algeria, which, for not completely different reasons, remained unpublished until long after his tragic death in 1960, since at a time when the war in France’s annexed territory was raging, recalling it as his homeland hardly fit the rhetoric of decolonization adopted by most of his fellow intellectuals.<sup>21</sup> The first man, in the sense that I ascribe to it here, is the first born into a new state and thus the first to take it for granted. He is the first in the sense of being not a Zionist, since Zionism is an ideology and not a state of being, but the product of Zionism, a native, an indigenous inhabitant who cannot think of himself as an alien, a foreigner, and a colonizer: in other words, an involuntary symbol of the success of an ideology and an improbable movement that created within merely a few decades an entirely new nation, even as vast parts of that very same nation, conceived very differently by another new nation and its murderous regime, was annihilated.

Because while my mother and her parents and two younger brothers came from Buczacz in 1935, thereby enabling my own eventual birth into the state that she and my father fought for and many of their friends died for, the rest of my extended family was murdered; and while I know by now more than any living soul about the genocide in my mother's hometown, I still know practically nothing about how my own family was butchered and perhaps should be grateful for having never found out.

But mine is also the generation of Palestinians born in the wake of the catastrophe, at times still in their own villages and towns, but far more often as "internal refugees" in other villages and towns to which they were displaced. They were born after an entire people had been removed from its land, born as remnants but hardly as liberated survivors, since their childhood and youth were spent under Israeli military rule and the iron fist of the Israeli authorities razed the emptied villages that had been their parents' native, natural, self-evident environment. This was a generation born into material and psychological devastation all the more profound because for so long it was pushed into the margins, stranded within a state that denied what had happened to its people, villages, communities, and families. It was a generation reduced to the status of second class citizens, not only because of a whole slate of discriminatory laws, rules, and practices but also because the generation's culture was publicly denigrated, its language relegated to minority status, its links to its own homeland denaturalized and cast into doubt, its history defamed and distorted, its schooling limited, and its dignity as a people, a civilization, and a culture thrown to the dust and trampled.

Perhaps what is most striking, then, when we contemplate this generational aspect of creating a new normality, is that just as Zionism strove to "normalize" Jewish existence and viewed the Diaspora as an abnormal condition, the State of Israel denormalized Arab existence in its own land; indeed, it made its very *raison d'être* the denial of Palestinian indigeneity. And thus a young generation of Palestinians was born into a condition entirely unlike that of their parents, uprooted from their land even though they remained in it. In such sites as Ein Hod, once the Arabic village of Ein Hawd, an Israeli "artist colony" was created, where I spent some happy weeks with my sister and parents as a child, enjoying the "Oriental" structures in which we lived and the bucolic settings of the Carmel Mount. The "colony" was both alien and our own—the Orient was what we were and what we had taken over; we were coming into our own and we were being naturalized as sunbaked, athletic, confident new Jews. That the village had once been populated by Arabs was not unknown and yet was somehow irrelevant, something that happened before we were born, and we had naturalized the place by our very existence. We were the prickly and sweet fruits of

Zionism's triumph. The Arabs were over the hilltop, crouching in their wretched villages, humiliated, perhaps plotting to kill us: alien, shadowy apparitions that came to be linked in the mind not to the original inhabitants of the land but to all those others that had always plotted to extinguish Jewish existence but would now never be able to accomplish their goal because we were in our own land and armed to the teeth.

How is one to write this story of a generation, of Jews and Arabs living side-by-side and, as it were, on separate planets? In the last few years, there has been a spate of new research on Jews and Arabs in Israel-Palestine.<sup>22</sup> But my own interest is in the internalized understanding of a link to a place. Some of the greatest critics (a small minority) of Israeli state policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians, people described as "extreme leftists" in the current political rhetoric, belong to my generation. I remember us calling out to Prime Minister Golda Meir when she visited my high school, Tichon Hadash, in 1972: "What about the Palestinian people?" And I recall her answer, speaking in her distinctive American accent as an immigrant from Milwaukee born in Kiev: "There is no Palestinian people. I am a Palestinian; I lived in Mandatory Palestine and have the ID to prove it." The following year, in the war that should not have happened, some of those who had called out were killed or maimed. And yet many of these same friends, now in their sixties and more critical of Israeli government policies than ever before, cannot conceive of living anywhere but in Israel, and feel at home, to the extent that it is possible anywhere in our world, only there, and are foreigners everywhere else.

Albert Camus had written on being at home in a land that was, by that time, engaged in a bloody war of decolonization. He had been a member of the *Résistance*; his father was killed in World War I shortly after he set foot for the first time on French soil. Yet Camus's sense of homeland, of childhood smells and tastes and sounds, was not to be found in Paris but in his hometown of Dréan in French Algeria. His book would not have been understood for what it was at the time of his death in 1960. It could be read with compassion and admiration only when it was published thirty-five years later, when all of that had become history, albeit a history that keeps returning with the growing xenophobia that is gripping Europe today. But essentially what he wrote then still remains deeply controversial: for how can we conceive of two opposing powerful links to the same land?

Poles still wax sentimental about the *kresy*, that eastern borderland that had been their zone of expansion and symbolizes a moment of greatness that can only be experienced nostalgically, as one travels through regions filled with decaying castles and manor houses of days gone by. Members of my generation in Germany will tell stories, when prompted in intimate surroundings, about

the lost lands of their ancestors in the east, from which millions of Germans were expelled in the wake of World War II. But in Israel-Palestine, despite the expulsion of the lion's share of the Palestinian population and the massive effort by the Jewish state to normalize its existence by erasing all traces of what had been before, the remaining Palestinians have clung to their land, reclaimed their identity, and stubbornly proclaimed their hold on the soil and the stones, the hills and the groves. They are a constant irritant to the nationalizing Jewish state, unremittingly challenging its very claim to be the natural, eternal, and exclusive indigenous owner of the land.

Resolving this century-long conundrum by condemning the other side as illegitimate, alien, violent, fanatical, and contemptible may very well lead to one more attempt to radically change the status quo, resulting in yet another generation that will perceive a newly created state of affairs as normal and what had been before as no longer relevant. I recall a Ukrainian intellectual saying to me in the mid-1990s that there was little reason for melancholy at the site of the few material remnants of the once proud Jewish communities of Eastern Galicia, now Western Ukraine. After all, she said, this is what happened to many other civilizations, such as ancient Greece and Rome, which left only ruins behind. To be sure, my own grandparents had come from Galicia; but for my interlocutor, the absence of Jews had been normalized.<sup>23</sup>

There are, as we know, those who would like to accomplish normalization through annihilation in Israel-Palestine too. But for many more on both sides normality does not include the other, whether they are seen as alien, Nazi-like anti-Semites or as foreign settler colonizers operating at the behest of the West. Yet there is another kind of normalization which includes accepting our neighbors' internalized view of the world: understanding, for instance, that for a generation such as my own, living in that place, despite all the catastrophes that led to our being there, was experienced as part of our making and that no other existence (and I exclude myself, since once one leaves, one never entirely comes back home) is normal. That seeing the world through another's eyes does not mean accepting all the ills and evils of history and does not preclude rebelling against injustice and oppression, loss and mourning. But it does imply that one's own success must not always come at the price of another's failure, and that one's sense of victimization does not necessitate victimizing others in return. Indeed, it implies that a sense of victimhood and suffering, just as much as that of belonging and ownership, can be shared by those who have experienced the former and cannot give up the latter, precisely because of the pain, personal and collective, they have endured for so long.

To be sure, mine is not a political project.<sup>24</sup> In the political sphere, which is not the subject of this essay yet deserves consideration elsewhere, what is

called for is a process of decolonization, whereby Israelis will not only have to be removed from occupied lands but must also be liberated from the occupier mentality deeply lodged in their psyche, while Palestinians will not only be liberated from Israeli oppression but also from the mentality of the colonized. But the current undertaking, which is still very much in its formative phase, entails listening to those who tell their stories. The goal, as I noted at the opening of this chapter, is not an oral history or the collection of testimonies and memoirs, although those too are valuable. Instead, by talking with members of that first generation, Palestinians and Jews, I hope to gain a better understanding of their evolving relationship to the place where they were born.<sup>25</sup> What I seek to grasp is this generation's personal political history, that of its own making rather than of any party politics or affiliation, in a land that has been rapidly changing and yet remains the same, where past catastrophes have receded into history yet overshadow the present more than ever before. I want to hear the voices of this generation while they can still be heard. For ultimately I believe that if we listen to each other, we may actually learn something about ourselves. And that may be the first step toward a new politics.

#### NOTES

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6. Hanoch Bartov, *Mi-tom 'ad tom* (Or Yehuda: Kineret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2003), 165–166.
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11. See, for example, Amira Hass, “Broken Bones and Broken Hopes: When Palestinians Are Asked About Yitzhak Rabin, They Remember a Man Who Ordered Israeli Soldiers to Break Their Arms and Legs,” *Haaretz*, November 4, 2005, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/broken-bones-and-broken-hopes-1.173283>.
12. Yehuda Elkana, “Bizhut ha-~~shekhina~~” [In praise of forgetting], *Haaretz*, March 2, 1988, 3.
13. Omer Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108–111.
14. For sources of the discussion in this and the following paragraphs, see Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).
15. Omer Bartov, “Wartime Lies and Other Testimonies: Jewish-Christian Relations in Buczacz, 1939–44,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (August 2011): 486–511.
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22. For an attempt to tackle what is the heart of the matter, see Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, “Deliberating the Holocaust and the Nakba: Disruptive Empathy and Binationalism in Israel/Palestine,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 1 (2014): 77–99. Other suggestive studies include, for example, Hannah Hever, “‘The Two Gaze Directly Into One Another’s Face’: Avot Yeshurun Between the Nakba and the Shoah—An Israeli Perspective,” in “History and Responsibility: Hebrew Literature Facing 1948,” special issue, *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 153–163; Yair Auron, *Israeli Identities: Jews and Arabs Facing the Self and the Other*, trans. Jeremy Forman (New York: Berghahn, 2012); Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir, eds., *Struggle*

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23. Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
  24. Omer Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 771–816.
  25. This does not preclude other generations, of course; but as I have tried to explain, I am especially interested in how a first generation forms a sense of identity under new circumstances, which it then will obviously transmit to later generations. This is especially pertinent in this case because this is a generation born immediately after the catastrophes of the Holocaust and the Nakba, and into a society still in the process of coming to terms with these events. The remnants of the past were still fresh, whether in the shape of Holocaust survivors or of destroyed villages and expellees.