Why Israel has silenced the 1948 story of Nazareth’s survival

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A rarely told story of the 1948 war that founded Israel concerns Nazareth’s survival. It is the only Palestinian city in what is today Israel that was not ethnically cleansed during the year-long fighting. Other cities, such as Jaffa, Lydd, Ramleh, Haifa and Acre, now have small Palestinian populations that mostly live in ghetto-like conditions in what have become Jewish cities. Still others, like Tiberias and Safad, have no Palestinians left in them at all.

Nazareth was not only an anomaly; it was a mistake. It was supposed to be cleared of its Palestinian population, just like those other Palestinian cities now in Israel. Much to Israel’s regret, it has become an unofficial capital for Israel’s 1.6 million Palestinian citizens, a fifth of the Israeli population.

The reason for Nazareth’s survival are the actions of one individual. Ben Dunkelman, a Canadian Jew who was the commander of the Israeli army’s Seventh Armoured Brigade, disobeyed orders to expel Nazareth’s residents.

Dunkelman’s role has been largely obscured in the historical record – and for good reason. Israel would prefer that observers make an unjustified assumption: that “Christian” Nazareth survived, unlike other Palestinian cities, because its leaders were less militant or because they preferred to surrender. Dunkelman’s story proves that was not the case.

It is therefore a welcome development that a major Canadian newspaper, the Toronto Star, has revisited Dunkelman’s role in Nazareth, even if its reporter, Mitch Potter, has contributed in his own way to the mythologising of Dunkelman in an article [headlined](http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/12/20/the-toronto-man-who-saved-nazareth.html): “The Toronto man who saved Nazareth”.

### Excised memories

It is worth bearing in mind, when we consider the attacks on Palestinian cities in 1948, how sensitive these matters were for Israel. Both Dunkelman and another commander, Yitzhak Rabin, who would later become a prime minister, wrote memoirs that included their experiences of the 1948 war.

Under pressure from the Israeli military authorities, both excised from their accounts the sections they had written dealing with the attacks on the Palestinian cities they were responsible for attacking. That was because those accounts were the proof, long denied by Israel and its supporters, that the Israeli leadership had intended and carried out the ethnic cleansing of most of the Palestinian population during 1948.

Some 750,000 Palestinians – out of 900,000 living inside the borders of what was to become the new Jewish state – were forced out and refused the right to return. In fact, the expulsion rate was far higher than the ostensible 80 per cent figure. Under pressure from the Vatican, Israel allowed many Christian refugees back; it did a land swap with Jordan in 1949 that brought more than 30,000 Palestinians into the new state; and many Palestinian refugees managed to sneak back to surviving communities like Nazareth and blend in with the local population in preparation for what they hoped would be their return to their villages.

Rabin led the attack on the Palestinian cities of Lydd and Ramleh, near Tel Aviv and today the mostly Jewish cities of Lod and Ramla. According to the missing section of his autobiography, later [publicised](http://www.ifamericansknew.org/history/ref-rabin.html) in the New York Times, Rabin asked David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, what to do with the 50,000 inhabitants of Lydd and Ramleh. Rabin recounted: “Ben Gurion waved his hand in a gesture that said: ‘Drive them out!’” Rabin did exactly that, after a terrible massacre of hundreds of residents who were sheltering in a local mosque.

Ben Gurion, as the Israeli historian of the period Ilan Pappe has noted in his book The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, was careful not to leave a paper trail showing that he had ordered the expulsion of Palestinians. Instead, Israel would promote the myth that the Palestinian population had been ordered by neighbouring Arab leaders to flee.

### Relieved of command

We do not know if Dunkelman had a similar meeting with Ben Gurion. What we do know, and the Star’s account confirms, is that it had been made clear to Dunkelman that he was supposed to expel the inhabitants of Nazareth. Dunkelman disobeyed, and allowed the city to surrender. He was relieved of his command in Nazareth a day later.

- See more at: http://mondoweiss.net/2016/01/silenced-nazareths-survival/#sthash.WeypjVKg.dpuf