

Commemorating Al Nakba

Wednesday, 15 May 2013

Today, on May 15, we commemorate Al Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. We know that Al Nakba did not start and did not end in 1948. We know that Zionist troops carried out numerous massacres and atrocities against the Palestinian people, including (a so far unknown number of) cases of rape as a weapon of war.

Following, we re-post the harrowing story of a Bedouin girl who was captured by a platoon of Israeli soldiers on August 12, 1949, which was published by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz on October 29, 2003 when the case came to light via the testimonies of the rapists – shielded by the safe distance of years :

'I saw fit to remove her from the world'

Newly revealed documents obtained by Ha'aretz tell the long-hidden story of what Ben-Gurion described as a 'horrific atrocity': In August 1949 an IDF unit caught a Bedouin girl, held her captive in a Negev outpost, gang-raped her, executed her at the order of the platoon commander and buried her in a shallow grave in the desert. Twenty soldiers who took part in the episode, including the platoon commander, were court-martialed and sent to prison.

There was a particularly festive atmosphere at the Nirim outpost on August 12, 1949, the eve of Shabbat. A week of dusty patrols and pursuits of infiltrators in the sands of the western Negev desert was at an end, and the commander of the hilltop site, Second Lieutenant Moshe, gave the order to make the preparations for a party. The tables in the large tent that was used as a mess hall were arranged in rows, sweets of various kinds were laid out on them and even a bit of wine was poured, though not enough to get drunk on. At exactly 8 P.M. the soldiers took their places and platoon commander Moshe recited the blessing over the wine. He then gave a Zionist pep talk, reiterating the importance of the unit's mission and the troops' contribution to the infant state. At the order of his deputy, Sergeant Michael, Private Yehuda read from the Bible. When he finished the soldiers burst into song, told jokes, ate and drank. A merry time was had by all.

Shortly before the end of the party, at about 9:30, the platoon commander asked for quiet. He got up and, with a smile on his face, reminded the soldiers about the Bedouin girl they had caught earlier that day during a patrol in their sector. They had brought her to the outpost and she was now locked up in one of the huts. Platoon commander Moshe said he was putting forward two options for a vote. The first was that the Bedouin girl would become the outpost's kitchen worker; the second was for the soldiers to have their way with her. The proposals got an enthusiastic reception. A melee ensued. The soldiers raised their hands and the second option was accepted by majority vote. "We want to f***," the soldiers chanted. The commander decided on the order: Squad A on day one, Squad B on day two and Squad C on day three. The driver, Corporal Shaul, asked jokingly, "And what about the drivers? Are they orphans?" The platoon commander replied that they were part of the staff squad, together with the sergeant, the squad commanders, the cooks, the medic and he himself, of course. He added a threat - if any of the soldiers touch the girl "the tommy [tommy gun] will talk." The soldiers took this as a warning not to violate the order the commander had decreed.

The party ended, the soldiers went off to their tents. The officer ordered the platoon sergeant to bring a folding bed to the tent they shared and to place the Bedouin girl on it. Sergeant Michael did as he was told, entered the tent, closed the flap and shut off the lantern.

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Yehuda (his full name, as well as the names of others who were interviewed for this article, are in the possession of Haâ€™aretz) was one of the soldiers serving in the outpost in August 1949. He is now a 74-year-old pensioner who lives in the north. He accepts the description of the group as a "rabble": "I was then 20 years old," he says. "I ran away from the Turkish Army to Palestine and immediately enlisted. I remember that all the members of our battalion were new immigrants. Everyone was from a different country: Algeria, Hungary, Romania, Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco. We didn't know Hebrew, we communicated between us by sign language. We did our basic training at the Dead Sea. We were taught how to hold a rifle in a mess hall at Sodom. Then we were sent to the outpost, where we did patrols or trained in the trenches and practiced rushing to our positions."

Yehuda remembers the night of the party, but claims that he was then on guard duty and that he heard the story about the vote and what happened afterward only as a rumor. Together with 17 members of the platoon he was court-martialed for "negligence in preventing a crime." He was sentenced to four years in prison; his term was cut in half by the appeals court.

Yitzhak, who is the same age as Yehuda and now lives in the center, received the same punishment. He, too, had arrived in Israel a few months before the summer of 1949, and he did not know Hebrew. Today he is retired and has health problems. "I remember being in the Negev but I can't even remember the name of the unit. I had just arrived in the country, I looked like a boy, I did a lot of guard duty. I had forgotten about that whole affair, I don't remember a thing, I haven't thought about it for maybe 50 years. The only reason I was tried was that I was in the outpost when it happened. Beyond that I don't remember a thing and I have nothing to say. Was I angry at those who did it? What would it help me to be angry?"

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On Tuesday, August 9, the platoon organized itself at the outpost. The soldiers soon got used to the ways of the new commander. Second Lieutenant Moshe turned out to be a strict disciplinarian who demanded order and obedience. The soldiers had to dress properly and shave every day. Anyone who violated the orders was hauled before Moshe. The soldiers were apparently somewhat in awe of him. The next day the company commander, Captain Uri, visited the platoon. The first couple of days passed uneventfully. Until the morning of Friday, August 12.

At about 9 A.M. that day, Second Lieutenant Moshe set out on a patrol in the southwestern section of the sector, in a vehicle known as a "command car." With him were two squad commanders, Corporal David and Corporal Gideon, and three soldiers: privates Moshe, Yehuda and Aziz. The driver was Corporal Shaul. All the men were armed.

On the way they came across an Arab who was holding an English rifle. When the Arab spotted them he threw down the rifle and started to run up the dune. One of the soldiers opened fire at him with a submachine gun. The Arab was hit and died on the spot. His rifle was taken as booty.

A short time later, the patrol encountered three Arabs - two men and a girl. There are different versions regarding the girl's age. According to some accounts she was a young girl aged between 10 and 15; others say she was between 15 and 20. Platoon commander Moshe ordered the soldiers to seize the Arabs and search them. The soldiers found nothing. Officer Moshe then ordered the soldiers to bring the girl into the vehicle. Her shouts and screams were to no avail. Once she was inside the vehicle the soldiers scared off the two Arabs by shooting in the air. On the way back to the outpost they came across a herd of camels grazing. Officer Moshe ordered the soldiers to shoot the animals. Six camels were shot dead; their carcasses were left to rot in the field.

After the girl calmed down a bit, the soldiers exchanged a few words with her - especially Corporal David. They also talked among themselves, and the word "f***able" came up in the conversation. The patrol returned to the outpost in the afternoon. At about the same time, another vehicle also arrived at the outpost: the battalion commander, Yehuda Drexler, was paying a visit. He was accompanied by Captain Mordechai (Motke) Ben Porat, operations officer of the Negev Region. Ben Porat eventually reached the rank of brigadier general in the Armored Corps and after his retirement from the army served as chairman of the National Parks Authority.

At the outpost, the soldiers removed the girl from the vehicle. Officer Moshe ordered that she be taken to the unused hut and a guard placed at the door. Private Avraham was designated the guard. Drexler, who noticed a certain commotion around the girl, asked what she was doing there. Officer Moshe replied that on the patrol he had encountered her and her husband, who was armed with a rifle. He told Drexler that they had killed the husband and taken the girl prisoner in order to interrogate her about the location of her tribe. Drexler authorized her interrogation but ordered that afterward she be taken back to the place where she had been seized, and released. He also asked platoon commander Moshe to ensure that the soldiers did not abuse her. Drexler and Ben Porat spent about two hours at the outpost, had lunch and left.

Shortly after their departure, Officer Moshe went out on another patrol, this time in the northern sector, in the direction of the new location of the kibbutz. After he had left, the platoon sergeant, Michael, removed the girl from the hut and pulled off the traditional garment she was wearing. He then made her stand, completely naked, under the water pipe that the soldiers used as a shower, then soaped her and rinsed her off. The pipe was outside and everyone at the outpost was able to witness the spectacle.

After the shower was over, Sergeant Michael burned the girl's dress and dressed her in a purple jersey and a pair of khaki shorts. Now looking like a regular Palmach commando, she was taken back to the hut and placed under the guard of Private Avraham. In short order a group of soldiers gathered around the hut. They milled around the guard and demanded that he let them go inside. At first he refused, but finally relented. In fact, he was the first to go in. He spent about five minutes in the hut and emerged buttoning up his trousers. He was followed by Private Albert, who was also in the hut for about five minutes, and then Private Liba.

Liba was still in the hut when platoon commander Moshe returned from the patrol. A few soldiers shouted a warning to Liba, who ran out of the hut and disappeared. Officer Moshe apparently understood what had happened, conducted a quick debriefing, and afterward, in the dining room, was heard to say that "three soldiers raped the Arab girl." He ordered her to be brought to the staff hut. The squad commanders, Corporal David and Corporal Gideon, were present in the hut. Officer Moshe took note of the girl's new apparel but said nothing. She told him, in Arabic, that the soldiers "played with her." It was obvious to Moshe what she meant. Corporal Gideon, who would be one of the main prosecution witnesses in the trial, testified that after the girl told Officer Moshe what she told him, he said to the others that she must be washed so she would be clean for f***ing. Gideon, who lives in Givatayim and works as a tour guide, declined to be interviewed for this article.

At about 5 P.M., the platoon commander ordered Private Moshe, who was a barber by profession, to give the girl a haircut. That was done in the presence of the commander and the sergeant. Her hair, which had spilled down to her shoulders, was cut short and washed with kerosene. Again she was placed under the pipe, naked, before the scrutinizing eyes of the officer and the sergeant. Afterward she was dressed in the same jersey and shorts and sent back to the hut.

Then came the party, after which Officer Moshe and Sergeant Michael closeted themselves with the girl in their tent. After about half an hour, Officer Moshe ordered her taken out of the tent, because "there is a stink coming off her." Sergeant Michael called Private David and the two of them removed the bed from the tent, with the girl lying on it in a state of unconsciousness. They carried the bed to the entrance of the hut. Michael placed the girl on the floor, went to get water and poured the water on her. He then carried her in his arms into the hut. Corporal David accompanied him.

At about 6 A.M. the next day, Private Eliahu was on guard duty and saw the girl leaving the hut. He asked her where she was going and she told him, weeping, that she wanted to see the officer. Private Eliahu showed her the way to Officer Moshe's tent. She complained to him that the soldiers had "played with her." He threatened to kill her and sent her back to the hut. A short time later, while shaving at the water pipe, Sergeant Michael asked the platoon commander what to do with her. Officer Moshe ordered him to execute the girl.

Michael ordered Corporal David to have two soldiers get shovels and accompany him. Michael and David removed the girl from the hut and had her get into the patrol vehicle. Just before the vehicle left the outpost, one of the soldiers shouted that he wanted back the short pants the girl was wearing. Officer Moshe ordered her to be stripped and the pants returned to the soldier. She now wore only the jersey, her lower body exposed.

The vehicle set out, driven by Corporal Shaul. Also in the vehicle were Sergeant Michael, Corporal David, the medic, and the two soldiers who were to be the gravediggers, Privates Eliahu and Shimon, with their shovels. They drove about 500 meters from the outpost. The driver, Shaul, stayed in the vehicle, while the others, with the girl, moved off a little way into the dunes. Privates Eliahu and Shimon set about digging a grave. When the girl saw what they were doing, she screamed and started to run. She ran about six meters before Sergeant Michael aimed his tommy gun at her and fired one bullet. The bullet struck the right side of her head and blood began to pour out. She fell on the spot and did not move again. The two soldiers went on digging.

Sergeant Michael went back to the vehicle. Pale and trembling, he laid down his weapon and said to Shaul, "I didn't believe I could do something like that." Shaul said that maybe the bullet didn't kill her and that she was liable to lie in torment for a few hours, buried alive. He asked Michael to do him a personal mercy by going back to the girl and shooting her a few more times, to ascertain that she was dead. The sergeant did not manage to carry out that mission. Corporal David came over, took the tommy gun and fired a few bullets into the girl's body. The pit the privates dug wasn't very deep, only about 30 centimeters. They placed the body in the pit, covered it over with sand and returned to the outpost.

That afternoon the company commander, Captain Uri, visited the outpost. Not finding Second Lieutenant Moshe at the site, he left the written operation order that Moshe had requested with the platoon sergeant. Officer Moshe was then on his way to Be'er Sheva. It was Saturday night and he was on his way to see a movie. At the movie theater he met the battalion commander, Drexler. Drexler asked whether the Bedouin girl had been taken back to the place where she was found. Officer Moshe said she hadn't: "They killed her," he said, "it was a shame to waste the gas." Drexler said nothing but the next day ordered the company commander to go to the outpost and find out exactly what happened there.

Even before he received the order, Captain Uri, who had heard rumors about the events at the outpost, asked Officer Moshe for a report about what had happened with the Arab girl. Moshe ordered Sergeant Michael to draw up the report in his handwriting. When the report was completed, Officer Moshe signed it and sent it to the company commander. The following is the report, dated August 15, 1949:

"Nirim Outpost. To: Company Commander. From: Commander, Nirim Outpost.

Re: Report on the captive

In my patrol on 12.8.49 I encountered Arabs in the territory under my command, one of them armed. I killed the armed Arab on the spot and took his weapon. I took the Arab female captive. On the first night the soldiers abused her and the next day I saw fit to remove her from the world.

Signed: Moshe, second lieutenant."