

After the Decision of the Supreme Court

On 24 December 2000, following the district court's decision in the Katz's trial, I wrote to the President, Rector and Dean of Advanced Studies of the University of Haifa, demanding the university take action on this case and suggesting the suspension of Katz's thesis without denying him the MA degree (See: <http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/00-12-24gelber-hayut.doc>).

Both the legal and the academic processes have now reached an apparent climax. Reading several recent postings to ACADEMIA, however, one might get the impression that either Teddy Katz and his mentor Ilan Pappé have won their case in court, in the academe and among the public, or they were undergoing a gross injustice. Since the opposite of both contentions is true, I would like to put the record straight by making a few comments before this issue is hopefully closed:

The Legal Outcome

1. The legal decision in this case was not on a matter of procedure. It emanated from the falsifications, distortions and ignorance that had been revealed during Katz's testimony and cross-examination. These revelations led to his voluntary withdrawal from the charges that he had made and to his yet unfulfilled public apology.
2. The rest of the proceedings concerned the issue of Katz's attempt to go back on his commitment, apparently under pressure of those who financed his defence. Of course, they did not raise the money for him to apologize, but to fight the *Nakba* trial, and he let them down. (See: <http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/01-01-28gelber-giladi.doc>).
3. It is true that the court decision did not concern the question whether there was a massacre in Tantura or not. It only confirmed Katz's own retreat from his allegations of a massacre after he himself admitted that they do not hold water.

Written and Oral Sources

4. Contrary to recent assertions by Pappé and Firro, the historiographic-methodological issue in this case has not been a decision between oral and written evidence. The issue has been the irresponsible, unprofessional and negligent way in which they have handled oral evidence and documentary material alike, and the tampering with both testimonies and documents.
5. A committee appointed by the university, consisting of experts on Middle Eastern history and the Arabic language, has exposed several instances of this juggling around with the oral testimonies and there is no need to repeat them here. However, there is one point that deserves further reference: The comparison in generalizing terms between "Jewish" and "Arab" testimonies, or between "Villagers testimonies" to IDF reports and other documents.
6. Deciding in advance what is the value of a testimony on the basis of the witness' origin is plain propaganda and has nothing to do with historical research. Nonetheless, Pappé blatantly asserts that Tantura villagers' stories

should be accepted as conveying the true picture more than the Alexandroni fighters' version or contemporary reports should be believed. One can hardly think of a more unscientific statement. There are plenty of contradictions and inconsistencies among the villagers' stories, so how can they be accepted *en bloque*? A serious historian should consider each document or testimony, oral or written, Jewish or Arab, not according to whom it belongs but on its own merits — the time distance from the events, the consistency or lack of it within the evidence, its compatibility with other sources, the witness' access to what he tells and various others. Had Katz worked properly, some testimonies of the villagers might have provided plenty of significant material, as several Arab testimonies on Deir Yassin proved to be more reliable than that of Meir Pa'il or those of other partisan Jewish sources. Given the way Katz acted, these testimonies worth much less — not because the villagers of Tantura are “bad” or unreliable witnesses, but because Katz — guided by his mentors — made a lousy job while interviewing them.

The Holocaust and the *Nakba*

7. By claiming that the testimonies of Arab refugees should be accepted as the stories of Jewish Holocaust survivors had been accepted, Pappé attempts a comparative paradigm that put the Holocaust and the *Nakba* on the same level. The generalizations on both sides of this equation are as unwarranted as the former comparison. Not all stories of Holocaust survivors are trustworthy just as not all testimonies of Arab witnesses are fiction. Each testimony should be analyzed separately to establish its value as a historical source. Yet, by this assertion Pappé implies that the Palestinians should be compensated for the *Nakba* — politically and financially — as the Jews were compensated for the Holocaust. This perverse comparison is particularly irritating and spreads a strong odor of Holocaust denial. There can be no comparison between the Holocaust and an inter-communal civil war — fought mutually by two armed adversaries that occasionally perpetrated atrocities against each other. Later, this encounter developed into a regular war between a single Jewish state and an invading Arab coalition that instead of rescuing the Palestinians doubled their calamity. I would be the last to deny the Palestinians' sufferings throughout the war and in its wake. However, *à la guerre comme la guerre*, and this was a war they should not have started in the first place. The Palestinians have only themselves and their Arab allies to blame for its consequences. No one would say it of the European Jews in 1933-45.

Historiography or Folklore?

8. In a letter criticizing the findings of the university's committee, Prof. Firro elaborated on the theoretical basis of oral history. Pappé, too, maintains that oral history has changed historiography and expanded its scope. Having read six or seven of their authorities on oral history (Portelli, Vanissa, Allen and Montell among others), I found that none of these authorities relates to oral history in the framework of historiography. Vanissa studied African pre-colonial history and dealt with oral traditions, which are far from being identical with oral testimonies. The others relate to oral history in the framework of anthropology, folklore, folk tales and literature, psychology,

ethnography etc. They hardly mention the word historiography, and they use the word “history” in the sense of “story”, told orally. If these are Prof. Firro’s authorities, I wonder what is he doing in the department of Middle Eastern History instead of running the program for creative writing or the university’s archives of folk tales. Of course, oral history may be useful to historians as well, particularly in studying illiterate societies or small, undocumented units. However, historians ask different question and their use of oral evidence requires different principles than those guiding anthropologists, psychologists or ethnographers who use this method. Handling this material by historians — particularly when there is lack of supporting or contradicting evidence from other sources — requires prudence and responsibility that were totally absent in Katz’s thesis.

How to read a Document

9. This absence is true not only in the use of oral evidence. It is also prominent in the handling of documentary evidence. In his article “The Tantura Case in Israel: The Katz Research and Trial”, published last spring in the *Journal of Palestine Studies* of Beirut, Pappe claimed that after Katz had completed his thesis, four documents “were extracted” from the IDF archives that corroborate his findings — namely, prove the allegation that a massacre took place in Tantura. The dramatic wording may hint at a commando raid on the archives. Checking this assertion with the archives’ director, I have learned that neither Pappe nor Katz had worked in the IDF archives. Furthermore, on the basis of Pappe’s references in his article the archivists could not trace any of these documents.
10. Prof. Benny Morris had given these documents to Katz after the latter completed the thesis and the scandal broke out. Katz even did not know how to write down a simple reference to an archival document, and Pappe copied his errors. Morris confirms that there was nothing in these documents to corroborate the allegation of massacre. Hence, Pappe’s selective quotations from these documents allegedly “proving” a massacre were a deceit.
11. Pappe mistakenly identified chief-of-staff Dori who was ill at the time (June 1948) and did not play any role, as the writer of one of these documents. The writer of this letter was Zvi Ayalon, who signed in the name of the COS using his old codename “Bo’az”. The minor difference is indeed irrelevant to the Tantura affair, but it is relevant to Pappe’s competence (or, better, incompetence) in reading and analyzing documents.

A second error was less innocent: Pappe interpreted the word sabotage (*Khabala*), mentioned in the document, as massacre (*Tevakh*). This is something that the present Hebrew language, all the more so 1948’s Hebrew, would not accept. None of these documents mentions, refers, relates or hints at a massacre that allegedly had been perpetrated in Tantura.

The significance of proper chronology

12. In his article, Pappe claims further that another document that Katz had not included in his thesis contains a “graphic description” of the massacre. The document, according to Pappe, is the memoirs of a Palestinian writer who tells the story of Marwan al-Yikhia, whom Pappe describes as “a survivor who

arrived in Haifa after the massacre and conveyed to the writer [of the book] what he had seen with his own eyes.”

13. Pappe gives a reference to a book written by Sheikh Nimr al-Khatib, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and a prominent figure in Arab Haifa. The book appeared in Damascus in the early 1950s, and a shortened version was published in Hebrew in 1955 in a collection of Arab memoirs on the war by the name of *Be'Einey Oyev* (“In the Enemy’s Eyes). Marwan’s story was not translated at the time. Pappe’s reference to this book should have refuted a central argument raised against Katz — that no one had ever mentioned a massacre in Tantura until he came forward with his allegations. Apparently — the winning card. But...
14. Given the factual and chronological framework, this story sounds and reads quite unreliable, and certainly it cannot be taken as direct evidence. Nimr al-Khatib — who according to Pappe interviewed the survivor from Tantura in Haifa late in May 1948 — was severely wounded in an attempt on his life (*Sikul Memukad*) three months earlier, in February 1948, and spent the rest of the war period in a hospital in Beirut. Arab Haifa was occupied on 22 April — a month before the conquest of Tantura. Al-Khatib was not in Haifa at the time and could not have interviewed the survivor in the time and place specified by Pappe. The whole story might have been cooked later for propaganda purposes, as al-Khatib did in other parts of his book. Being no more than hearsay, this tale by itself neither proves nor refutes anything. It casts, however, additional light on Pappe’s competence as a researcher and on the weight of his “findings”.

Peers, Comrades and Credibility

15. Some voices on the various lists have recently suggested a “judgment by peers” as means to decide Pappe’s claim that a massacre took place in Tantura. Pappe has already been subjected to this judgment. Those who have made the proposition should be careful to avoid confusing “peers” with “comrades”.
16. A recent example of Pappe’s credibility in using sources on another issue has been given in the exchange of messages between Pappe on the one hand and Profs. Bar’am and Navon on the other hand. After Pappe had put forward the nonsense of 5,000 children dying daily in Iraq as a result of American war crimes. This exchange showed the quality of his sources and his capability of selecting and using them and needs little elaboration or none at all.
17. Having honestly gained this record of professional competence — in substantial as well as trivial matters — Pappe covers on his charlatanism by complaints of imaginary persecution, by screams for international protection from colleagues who ostensibly try to shut him up and by nasty verbal hooliganism against his critics. From one who is starring on every stage from TV to the “the paper for people who think themselves”, expressing himself on any issue whether he knows something about it or not, and from one who has been involved in every scandal at his university defying its regulations and norms — this complaint sounds peculiar, to say the least. The academic community as well as the general public should take his arguments in the Katz affair as well as his personal testimonies on other matters not with a grain — but with a mountain of salt.

What would have happened if a scandal like the Katz's thesis had taken place in other scientific field? If major discrepancies had been found between the experiment and the scientist's published conclusions — all the more so if a professional committee had found that the researcher had falsified results — his academic colleagues would have unanimously condemned him as charlatan and expelled him from their ranks. In the Tantura case, however, Israeli historians have been divided: some maintain that this has been an unprecedented disgrace, and others retort — despite all the evidence to the contrary (accessible on Dani Censor's monumental index of Katz directory) — that this is a new zenith of scholarship. To restore the status of Israeli historiography, we should primarily determine what historical scholarship is and what it has in common with other types of knowledge. Furthermore, we should shape the specific criteria by which we decide whether a historical work qualifies as a *bona fide* piece of knowledge — or as a piece of propaganda and historical fiction.