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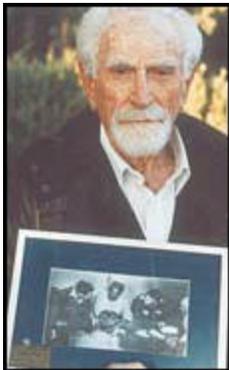
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'I'm 84 years old. If, 10 years from now it [the thesis] would be used in the work of some new historian, who would be around to question it.'
Benzion Frieden.
(Israel Sun)

Not just an academic battle

By Abigail Radoszkowicz

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(November 29) - When a group of War of Independence veterans found themselves accused of carrying out a massacre, they decided to fight one last struggle for historical truth.

On January 21, 2000, unsuspecting War of Independence veterans of the 33rd battalion of the Alexandroni Brigade opened the weekend edition of Ma'ariv and discovered they were being branded as war criminals.

A splashy five-page spread across the daily's magazine section reported that in the aftermath of the battle for the Arab village of Tantura, early on the morning of May 23, 1948, 200 Arab fighters who had given up their weapons and surrendered had been systematically slaughtered.

Journalist Amir Gilat based his scoop on a master's thesis submitted to Haifa University, "The Exodus of the Arabs from Villages at the Foot of Southern Mount Carmel."

The thesis, by Theodore (Teddy) Katz, was no small historiographic coup: until its revelations, no Palestinian source had ever pointed to a massacre at Tantura.

The 33rd battalion, created in the days just before the War of Independence, was made up mostly of young men and women age 17-25, who had grown up together in the Gush Dan area. The Alexandroni Brigade - named for the stream - took part in many of the bloodiest battles of the war, such as Kfar Kula, near Rosh Ha'ayin, which changed hands between them and the Arab Legion three times.

The old-timers now range in age from their late 70s to mid-80s, but they still don't shy away from a fight. Battalion commander during the operation - later commander of the entire Alexandroni brigade - Benzion (Bentz) Frieden recalls telling Gilat in a group confrontation, "On the one hand, you are a son of a bitch. But on the other hand, we have to thank you. If it weren't for you, we would never have known that this MA thesis was lying on the shelves of the university library. I'm 84 years old. If, 10 years from now, it would be used in the work of some new historian, who would be around to question it?"



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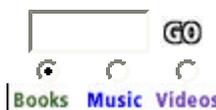
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It started as a sensational scoop, turned into a dramatic court case, and metamorphosed into the question of what constitutes history. The Tantura story is one of the more sensational examples of the scholastic fights now being fought as iconoclastic "new historians" re-examine a history of Israel and its creation they claim has been pruned to fit old Zionist myths,

But for the feisty Alexandroni vets, accused of committing war crimes, the issue is far from academic. After nearly a year of legal tussling, they won a major battle in their war for truth this week when Haifa University announced it was pulling Katz's thesis off the library shelves.

FRIEDEN recalls that when Katz questioned him for his thesis, "he didn't ask what were the forces, what were the plans, what was the formation. The first question he asked me was, 'Tell me about the massacre.'"

While he couldn't help Katz out with details about any purported massacre, there's not much of the 20th-century Zionist enterprise that Frieden hasn't experienced. Born in 1917 in Norfolk, Virginia, his traditional, European-born parents immigrated to Palestine three years later and set up a cigarette factory in Jerusalem's Musrara neighborhood, run only on Jewish labor. Frieden graduated from the Mikve Yisrael agricultural school in 1935, and two years later joined the fledgling Hagana, serving under the legendary pro-Zionist British military commander Orde Wingate.

"As an old-timer, in the underground from the age of 16, I was made commander of one of the Alexandroni Brigade's four 300-men battalions. During the war, I became head of the entire brigade, which by then had grown to five battalions," Frieden recalls.

The Alexandroni Brigade fought its main battles in the center of the country. They held off the Arab forces at Kfar Saba, and captured the village of Kakun, one of the Iraqi army's major bases there. "At one point we were transferred to the south, where we fought the Egyptians."

"On May 23, 1948, we were ordered to capture Tantura. The leaders of Zichron Ya'akov had tried to convince the village that they should be like Faradis [a nearby village that did not fight and remained unharmed].

But some of the younger Arab men who had served as policemen in Haifa came back to their village when the British left, and forced the local elders not to give up."

Freiden says Tantura's location on the coast lent it strategic importance.

"One of the reasons it was decided to take over the village was to stop the smuggling of arms and food, and to make sure they didn't cut the main road from north to south, from Haifa to Tel Aviv. At one point, the coastal highway had been cut.

"It was quite a battle. We lost 14 members out of the battalion. Katz's claim about the massacre is wrong for the simple reason that early on, by 10 a.m., 99 percent of the villagers had been transported. We first gathered the fighting men in one area. The women and children were put in another, and we gave them water; most of them were transferred to Faradis. The men were transferred to the police yard in Zichron Ya'akov, and then to the Arab area in Netanya, Um Halid."

Katz, a 57-year-old kibbutznic and Meretz activist, points out that unlike the headline of the Ma'ariv article, his thesis never used the loaded word "massacre." But he does cite Arab survivors of the Tantura battle as claiming that Israeli fighters gunned down Arab prisoners, and Katz is adamant that that's exactly what happened.

"I am sure there was a massacre," he says, "even if I can't know, because I wasn't there."

After the Ma'ariv article appeared, the Alexandroni veterans asked for a chance to reply. They felt cheated by the newspaper's reply that the quotes allotted them - one-third of a one-page followup - was sufficient rejoinder. The core veterans organization then raised NIS 33,000 for an advertisement to respond to the charges.

At this point, attorney Giora Erdinast got into the picture, on a pro-bono basis. His mother was an Alexandroni Brigade veteran, and his father-in-law, Amatzia Amrami, had been wounded twice in the battle for Tantura. Amrami and seven other Tantura veterans sued Katz for a million shekels for libel. Erdinast got a court order forcing Katz to hand over the cassettes on which were recorded the oral testimonies that made up the bulk of

the evidence on which the thesis was based. Erdinast then hired a team of professional Arab translators to check the cassettes to see if they accorded with Katz's text.

The discrepancies they uncovered were presented by the prosecution at the district court trial that opened December 17, 2000. Two days later, Katz agreed to a compromise: the petitioners would drop their charges in exchange for an apology by him.

The declaration he signed was unambiguous: "Rechecking the evidence, I am certain beyond any doubt that there is no basis to the allegation that following the surrender of Tantura, there was any killing of its inhabitants, either by Alexandroni fighters or by any other [Israeli] force. I wish to clarify that what I wrote [in the thesis] seems to have been misunderstood, and that I never meant to imply that there had ever been a massacre in Tantura, nor do I now believe that there had ever been a massacre."

The court ordered Katz to pay for ads publicizing the apology in two daily newspapers.

TWELVE hours later, he retracted. Until this day, Katz can give no explanation for his initial agreement to sign the apology, other than to cite the debilitating mental effects of a stroke he suffered at the beginning of the year, after the Ma'ariv article appeared.

Prof. Yoav Gelber, head of the History Department of Haifa University, has emerged as the primary academic opponent of the kind of "new history" revisionism he sees embodied by what he calls "a scandal."

On the university's Web site, Gelber writes "Katz's attempt to go back on his commitment was apparently under the pressure of those who financed his defense. Of course they did not raise the money for him to apologize, but to fight the trial, and he let them down."

Katz, with his legal team now including prominent left-wing attorney Avigdor Feldman, asked that the trial continue. But the court ordered that the original compromise stand. Katz then appealed to the Supreme Court. Two weeks ago, it too ruled that the agreement be honored, and ordered Katz to pay court costs as well - otherwise he would be held in contempt of court. Katz

responded by calling a news conference to say he would never retract.

To force matters to a head, the petitioners themselves paid for ads which appeared last Thursday in Yediot Aharonot and Ha'aretz, displaying the original apology - including Katz's signature. Why did they extract Katz from his legal quagmire? Erdinast replies, "We're not interested in a trial 'on the merits,' the results of which would not be accepted in any case, coming from a 'Zionist' court. Instead, we're going to sue Katz for the cost of the ads."

Meanwhile, on the academic front, Katz's thesis became a hot potato. The Alexandroni vets had demanded that it be disqualified and removed from the Haifa University library shelves. Following the trial, the university set up a committee, working together with Katz, to re-check the audio tapes of the interviews he conducted researching the thesis.

Haifa University Rector Aaron Ben-Ze'ev says he was hotly criticized by some of his peers for what they saw as an infringement of academic freedom. But, he adds, the committee's final report caused most of the critics to change their tune.

After six months of work, the committee had managed to review only a little more than one-fourth of Katz's tapes, mostly in Arabic, which bore direct relation to the question of whether any massacre took place. Yet even in that limited selection, 14 major discrepancies - in which the tapes didn't accord with the written text - came to light.

The report refrained from discussing whether Katz had falsified his findings, but noted the work failed both at the level of bringing the raw material to the judgment of the reader, and in organizing it according to strict criteria of categorization and review, even to the point of "not respecting the interviewee's testimony."

Katz's thesis adviser, and the thesis examiners, were found wanting. The same paper which had originally been given a grade of 97 was now in danger of not passing. The final judgment on that was left to the university's Council for Graduate Studies.

Its verdict was made public this past Monday. The thesis will be suspended for six months, during which time Katz can submit a corrected version. He is free to use both material already considered by the Council, and any new material he has come across since. Ben-Ze'ev ordered the thesis off the university library's bookshelf, and requested that other local universities take it off their shelves as well.

Asked why it took the prodding of the Alexandroni vets to force the university to check Katz's tapes, Ben-Ze'ev responds that "the assumption is that students don't lie."

Even after being alerted to the issues of the work's credibility, checking it proved difficult, as Katz had interviewed more people than is usual for a master's paper. And what about his negligent thesis adviser, Prof. Kais Firro?

"You have to remember that there is a difference between a liar and someone who did not catch the lie," says Ben-Ze'ev. "We tried to be more than fair with Teddy, because of the sensitivity of the issue and because we are dealing with an individual. It is certain that politically oriented figures are leading him, but we don't want him to suffer as a result."

AN UNREPENTANT Katz says he was not surprised by the university's suspension of his thesis this week.

"It was more political than academic, to satisfy the Alexandroni veterans and their representatives. I'm happy to correct the small errors and to enter in all the evidence from 1998 [when he submitted his work]. Since 2000, I've received much more testimony proving the massacre."

But the "political" runs both ways at Haifa University. Leading one side is a noted lecturer in the political science department, Dr. Ilan Papp*, arguably the most radical of the "new historians." Heading the other is his bitter opponent, Gelber.

Katz dedicated his thesis to Papp*: "my teacher and friend, who read - more than once - all the chapters of this work, pointed out significant issues, and helped immensely in making it what it is." The mentor returns the favor in his article reviewing the thesis and the scandal in

the Spring 2001 issue of The Journal of Palestine Studies.

"In writing his thesis, Katz was well aware of the 'murkiness' of the picture derived from the memories of participants and survivors so long after the traumatic events," writes Papp*. "But he was not interested in fine details; he wished to learn the overall picture, leaving behind, perhaps forever, certainties about exact chronology and names and precise numbers. He wished to learn the pain and suffering as it was experienced by people in the midst of war and to show the kaleidoscope of perspectives from the various testimonies... Still, if the trial resumes, the oral testimonies by Palestinians on the Nakba - like the testimonies of Jews on the Holocaust in the Eichmann and Demanuk[sic] trials - will have to be treated as a legitimate source, both in court and scholarly debate."

Here, in a nutshell, is all that Gelber finds most worrisome in the Tantura affair.

"Is historiography still a scholarly discipline with principles, research methods, rules of the allowed and the forbidden, as well as conventions of accepted and unaccepted interpretations? Or has post-modernism succeeded in bringing historiography back to the 18th century, when the writing of history was a literary genre dealing with the past, and in turning history into a conglomerate of narratives?"

While this debate is still raging in the halls of academia, at least the veterans of the Alexandroni brigade feel they have arrived at some measure of vindication.

"The fact that the university has come to its conclusion is satisfying to us," says Frieden, despite the fact that he is under no illusion the matter is closed. "I don't think it's over, because Katz and his backers want to keep this story burning on the fire. But's it okay, as long as in the end, we win."

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