

Appendix III

Folklore versus History: The Tantura Blood Libel

During the last decade of the 20th century, Israeli historiography went through a crisis period that was marred by a loss of scholastic focus. This regression was the product of mixing academic research with conjectures, fabrications and outright disinformation in the course of an ongoing debate between Zionist and post-Zionists historians and other academics.

To a large extent, these debates focused on the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. The loss of academic standards in the 1990s was epitomized by a scandal that surrounded one particular MA thesis submitted in 1998 to the Department of Middle East History at the University of Haifa by a graduate student, Teddy Katz. The thesis not only symbolized the ebb of the “golden age of post-Zionist thinking” in Israeli historiography that dominated the 1990s. The ramifications of the Katz Affair were far-reaching, beyond academic circles: Its “findings” that claimed that Israeli forces massacred over 200 innocent Arab villagers at Tantura, became a pillar of the Palestinian narrative, although approval of Katz’s thesis was withdrawn in May 2003, after the reliability of the work was compromised by evidence that the thesis contained grave flaws in the examination and application of source material.¹

In the spirit of recent trends in world historiography that blur the boundaries between history, anthropology and ethnography, Katz’s dissertation rested mainly on oral evidence. He interviewed Arab villagers and Israeli veterans, and used previous testimonies that Arab journalists had collected and published. However, the manner in which he assembled and used his oral sources was folkloristic rather than historical. The deficiencies were too numerous to recite and discuss here, but the principal flaws concerned uncritical use of the evidence: Katz did not compare the

testimonies with each other and with other sources. He did not examine them critically, nor did he verify the accessibility of the witnesses to the events they described, nor did he question their general credibility. Katz made no effort to reconcile the many contradictions in various stories he heard from his interlocutors. He simply cited the testimonies, often quoting them in a faulty manner that interlaced his own notes, impressions and thoughts with the witnesses' words.

Based on hearsay or, in the best case, village folklore, and ignoring evidence to the contrary, Katz asserted that in Tantura, a village on the Mediterranean coast, soldiers of the IDF *Alexandroni* brigade committed war crimes that caused the death of 200–250 villagers. The outstanding grade of 97 (out of 100) that his supervisor and the lecturers granted Katz's thesis, excludes the possibility that the work had not been read carefully and that failure to catch the flaws was an oversight. In essence, their unequivocal 'stamp of approval' makes the panel accomplices to a blood libel. However, the real inspiration for Katz's thesis was Dr. Ilan Pappé, whom the author warmly acknowledged in the opening of his work. While Pappé was not Katz's thesis advisor, he was Katz's mentor in many respects.

At this point, a brief description of what happened in Tantura on the night of 22–23 May 1948 is necessary.

A week after termination of the British mandate and the Arab armies' invasion of Palestine on 15 May 1948, the *Alexandroni* brigade occupied Tantura to cut off other Arab villages in the Carmel enclave from the coast and complete their encirclement. The surrounded villagers had no where to escape and the battle, as in Deir Yassin, took place with the civilian population still present. A few dozens Arabs were killed in the battle, as well as 14 Israeli soldiers.

A contemporary report described events in the village, including cases of plundering, almost as it occurred. Katz did not use the report itself, rather he relied on oral testimonies, crediting the author of this report, Yaacov Epstein — a resident of the adjacent colony Zichron Yaacov — with stopping an alleged massacre. Epstein, in his capacity as a member of the regional committee in charge of abandoned enemy's property, arrived in Tantura in the early morning hours, when the fighting ceased. His report cited talks he held upon his arrival with the interned village dignitaries and officers of the occupying troops, and detailed what he saw. The report reads:

I found the majority of men sitting in two rows face-to-face. The families — women and children — were concentrated on the shore opposite the village, awaiting their fate, and this was after a night of tough combat. I saw the commanding officer who asked me, as a local, to inspect the rows and see if there were any foreigners among the men. I walked between the rows

and did not identify any strangers. On that occasion I asked the commander what would be the fate of the men, and he said that they were prisoners of war and he would send them to a POW camp.

Arab witnesses said that Epstein's arrival on the scene saved them and their families. After the battle, the men were taken to the police fortress in Zichron Yaacov and thence to a temporary POW cage in the village Um Khalid near Netanya. The old men, women and children went to the neighbouring Arab village Furaydis, which had surrendered a few days earlier and whose residents were allowed to remain in their homes. Epstein explained the background of their removal from Tantura:

I asked the commanding officer what will happen to the families that were waiting on the shore. He replied . . . that they will stay in the village . . . I then approached him again and told him: Look, many soldiers were killed last night and if they [the families] will stay in the hamlet together with soldiers who had lost their friends in the battle, acts of revenge may occur. Under the circumstances, I would suggest removing them [the families] from the site . . . I am ready to take them to Furaydis if I could get a vehicle for this purpose. The commander didn't hesitate much . . . and I got his permission.²

Tantura was the first village that was occupied with its population mostly remaining on the spot, after statehood was declared and the invasion began. On that day, the State of Israel was merely a week old, and there were no regulations, or prior experience for that matter, in handling a situation such as this. Because the families of Tantura that arrived in Furaydis were not prisoners of war, it was unclear which authority should be responsible for them. The food that they had brought from Tantura to Furaydis ran out within a few days. The Minister of Minority Affairs, Bechor Shitrit, asked Ben-Gurion for instructions: Should the residents of Tantura be permitted to remain in Furaydis or should they be handed over to the Iraqi Expeditionary Force in Samaria? Should they be allowed to stay, Shitrit demanded a budget to support them. He also mentioned that any decision would serve as a precedent for similar cases in the future. In his letter to Ben-Gurion, Shitrit mentioned 500 refugees in Furaydis. This information was fragmentary and inaccurate; the real number was more than double.³ Ben-Gurion's answer, if he bothered to reply, has not been found, but most residents of Tantura did not remain in Furaydis.

According to Epstein's report, the dignitaries of Tantura asked him immediately after the occupation, before they went to Furaydis, to allow them to go to Tulkarm beyond the Iraqi front line. When they were in Furaydis they asked to return to their village, and if this were impossible — to cross the lines into Arab-held territory with the assistance of the Red Cross. The dignitaries of Furaydis joined in the request, claiming that their

village could not support the guests at its own expense. On 18 June, representatives of the Red Cross arrived in Furaydis accompanied by Jewish liaison officers, and transferred the village's 1,086 former residents out of Jewish-held territory, handing the convoy over to the Iraqi army in Wadi Ara. The Iraqis subsequently accommodated the refugees in Tulkarm.⁴

The young men of Tantura were dispersed to several POW camps. After their families settled in Tulkarm, many were released on condition that they would join their families there. Prisoners whose families remained in Furaydis were released a few months later. Most went to Furaydis and remained, settling permanently in the village. Many of those residents who went to Tulkarm, drifted about after the war ultimately ending up in Syria where they and/or their descendants live in al-Yarmuk refugee camp or in al-Qabun near Damascus.⁵

Katz alleged that in the course of taking the village, and in a massacre that took place the following morning, 200–250 residents of the village were killed. None of the contemporary sources corroborate this grave allegation. Apart from one dubious source, the claim that a massacre took place in Tantura did not appear in Palestinian narratives of the war until Katz wrote his thesis. Epstein's report shows that no massacre occurred in the village after the night battle. The refugees from Tantura did not complain about a massacre or mass killings to the Red Cross or to the Iraqi officers who took charge of them. A few refugees went on from Tulkarm to Ramallah. On 22 June, Radio Ramallah broadcasted the story of "an Arab woman who escaped from Tantura". The woman told listeners that the Jews had raped Arab women, demolished houses and destroyed the village. She said nothing about killings or a massacre. Azmi Nashashibi, the radio station's director, would surely have included a massacre in his propaganda broadcasts, had a massacre taken place.⁶

In July 1948, a few weeks *after* their arrival in Tulkarm, the refugees from Tantura began to spread rumours about the mass murder of women and children that supposedly had taken place in their village during the occupation. (Two women were, indeed, killed during the battle, apparently owing to mistaken identification). Considering the time lapse, probably the objective was to engender sympathy for their plight, since the refugees' presence had by now become a burden for the impoverished indigenous population of the small town.⁷

Nimr al-Hatib related to the alleged massacre in his book on the *Nakba*. Al-Khatib was neither an eyewitness, nor a journalist or historian. He was a political activist, leader of the militant Muslim Brethren in Haifa. In February 1948 he was severely wounded in an attempt on his life by a Jewish PALMACH hit squad disguised as Arabs. He was evacuated to a hospital in Beirut and later transferred to Damascus. After the war he published a book in which he assembled stories of

refugees, among them one by a native of Tantura, Marwan al-Yihya who told him:

On the night of 22–23 May the Jews attacked from three directions and came by boats from the sea. We fought in the streets and in the houses. In the morning there were bodies everywhere. I shall never forget that day all my life. The Jews concentrated all women and children where they threw the bodies of their husbands, fathers and brothers. They meant to intimidate them but they remained calm. They [the Jews] massed the men in another place, divided them into groups and shot them to death. When the women heard the shooting they asked the Jewish guard what was happening and he replied: “We take revenge for our soldiers who were killed”. One officer selected forty men and led them to the village square. They were taken aside in groups of four. The Jews shot one and told the other three to carry his body to a big pit. Then they shot another one and the other two were to throw his body into the pit and so on.⁸

This description is incompatible with all other descriptions of the battle, including the later testimonies collected by Katz. Marwan al-Yihya arrived in Damascus in the fall of 1949 or the beginning of 1950. From his description of events in Tantura it is unclear whether he was an eyewitness of the events that he described or whether he personally heard the conversations that al-Hatib cited. From various clues in the text it appears that he heard these stories later — second-hand, either in a POW camp or after his release. Al-Khatib published several concocted horror stories that he heard from refugees that arrived in Beirut and Damascus, such as an imaginary story about hundreds of refugees from Haifa who drowned in Haifa Bay while attempting to flee to Acre. Marwan’s story is just another one of these fictitious tales.

Arif al-Arif, the author of the first Palestinian comprehensive history of the war and from several perspectives the most trustworthy one, writes that 88 Arabs were killed in Tantura: 85 combatants and three women. Al-Arif mentioned only nine names, and did not relate to any massacre. He described a heroic battle to repel the attack on the village that failed owing to the enormous superiority of Jewish forces.⁹

Another member of the al-Yihya clan described the occupation of the village in detail in a book published in Damascus in 1998. The author, Yihya Mahmud al-Yihya was older and better educated than other natives of Tantura who testified on wartime events in their village. In his book, he describes several atrocities — slaughter of inhabitants that took place in the course of the battle such as the above-mentioned killing of two women. Nonetheless, he did not mention or even imply that there had been any massacre. Quite the opposite, he repeatedly used the term “battle” when he referred to the occupation of his village. At the end of his narrative, al-Yihya appended a list of the combatants and non-combatants who were killed in the defence of their village. He listed 52

names and ten more of “elders and dignitaries” that died later, in Tulkarm and on their way to Syria. Al-Yihya also listed the names of those who were wounded in the battle and recovered.¹⁰

The Tantura refugees’ stories about the alleged atrocities that had been committed in their village were taken with no more than a pinch of salt by their fellow Palestinians. For fifty years, Tantura was not admitted to the Palestinian pantheon of massacres alongside Deir Yassin, Duwayma, Saliha, Sufsuf, Abu Shusha, Lydda and other villages where Palestinians claimed that atrocities had taken place. In stark contrast, recent Palestinian references to Tantura as a massacre – not a battle, derive exclusively from Katz.

Numbers are particularly significant in the case of Tantura because they provide the ultimate refutation of the massacre allegation. Katz argued that “according to all sources, there were 1,700 residents in Tantura.” Yet, he did not give reference to any statistical source, and apparently “all sources” was the average of various figures that were mentioned by his witnesses. According to the “List of Arab Villages in Palestine” of October 1947, whose data was taken from the last and unfinished mandatory villages’ survey of 1945/6, Tantura’s population numbered 1,490 people.¹¹ Several witnesses said that not all the residents were in the village when it was occupied, however there might have been there a few people from adjacent villages, particularly Casarea, who found refuge in Tantura.

According to the Red Cross report, 1,086 refugees from Tantura were handed over through the organization to the Iraqis. An Israeli report from October 1948 mentions 170 refugees from Tantura who remained in Furaydis. Approximately 200 men were sent to the POW camps. According to all testimonies but one, there were no “foreigners” or “Syrians”, namely ALA combatants. If one deducts the circa 1,450 (1086+170+200±) from the number of the original population according to the mandatory survey, the remainder is about 50 killed, a number compatible with Mahmud al-Yihya’s list. Excluding the two women who were mistakenly killed in the midst of battle, where are the people ‘lined up with their face to the wall’ as alleged by the second al-Yihya clan member, Marwan al-Yihya? The bottom line is that Katz, by inflating the original population of the village to 1,700 made up 200 people who never actually existed, then ‘finished them off’ — on paper, at least.

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Katz’s thesis might have remained buried on the library shelf, had it not been discovered by a sharp-eyed journalist who published its main arguments and conclusions in *Ma’ariv* two years later.¹² The “scoop” in the Hebrew daily in early 2000, was a forerunner to a long series of interviews that Katz gave various media channels — mainly Arab, in which he

described his findings. Katz boasted that he had exposed “the most important massacre of the War of Independence, bloodier even than Deir Yassin.” In his interviews he gave different numbers of victims of “his” massacre, fluctuating between 78 and 280. Arab propaganda hastened to make use of the new revelation. Arab MKs demanded a judicial investigation of the “war crimes”, and the accusations were debated on radio and TV, in Israel and abroad.¹³

A group of *Alexandroni* veterans complained to the University of Haifa charging that Katz’s thesis had been approved without examining the credibility of his findings in depth and without considering the severity of his charges, their significance and ramifications. The veterans claimed that Katz had distorted what they had told him in interviews, had used their testimonies out of context and had even quoted them, using words or phrases they had not uttered. Against all standards of academic transparency, Katz refused to show his informants the transcripts of their own testimonies or allow them to review his taped interviews with them. The veterans asked University authorities to order a re-examination of the thesis and to suspend it, pending completion of the inspection. University authorities refused, dodging the veterans’ appeal by claiming that a review would constitute unwarranted interference in the Department’s autonomy. Ignored by the University, the veterans sued Katz for libel.

Defending Katz became a “holy cause” for a coalition of Palestinian institutions and pro-Palestinian activists, and post-modernists and post-Zionists in the media and academe. The most prominent and vociferous was Pappé who as Katz’s mentor felt (rightly so) that his own credibility hung in the balance. Unfortunately, rather than bring evidence to support the quality of Katz’s scholarship and persuading that his conclusions were reached in good faith, “expert affidavits” on Katz’s behalf sought to discredit and silence the critics as “Nakba deniers” (to establish parity with Holocaust deniers) and tried to turn a legal proceedings against an individual for libel into a show trial with Israel in the docket. In a last ditch attempt to bar any evidence of academic misconduct, Pappé claimed that “considerably broad leeway” between the content of verbatim tapes and the way informants’ words are presented — interpreted is perfectly valid, even vital to historical research.¹⁴ The trial, however, was not about conflicting narratives of what happened in 1948, but rather whether Katz had acted in good faith in 1998 or willfully defamed the plaintiffs by twisting their and the Arab witnesses’ testimonies to accuse them of war crimes. The Bench ruled that the tapes should be examined. On close inspection fundamental differences that were dubious, if not false and deceiving emerged between the sources Katz referred to as authorities, and the portrayal of events he described.¹⁵ After one day of cross-examination, Katz retracted his allegations and in a judgment agreed upon by the

two sides as a compromise, Katz promised to issue a public apology in the press, then — under pressure from his supporters he backtracked — refusing to admit his error. However, his appeal to cancel the judgment was rejected by both the district court and the Israel Supreme Court.

Under the new circumstances, the University of Haifa appointed a committee of experts on Arabic and Middle Eastern history to re-examine the thesis against the interview tapes. The investigatory team found many examples of negligence, distortion, falsification and disregard for inconvenient evidence.¹⁶ Consequently, the university decided to disqualify the thesis, but allowed Katz to submit a revised version within six months. The revision failed to pass muster and was roundly criticized. In view of the readers' reports, on May 15, 2003 the university decided to disqualify the revised version, as well.¹⁷

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This should have set the historic record straight as to the so-called Tantura massacre, but invalidation of Katz's "findings" was not the end of the affair: Insisting that a massacre nevertheless had taken place in Tantura, Pappé launched a worldwide campaign to boycott his own university — the University of Haifa, then all Israeli universities — for "political persecution" and abridgement of academic freedom. Thus he attempted to divert attention away from the genuine significance of the Katz Affair for academe: research standards and deliberate falsification.¹⁸ Katz's official thesis supervisor and the Chair of his department sought to defend their names by suggesting that any study undergoing such close scrutiny would reveal defects — a groundless generalization that taints all historical research and all historians instead of acknowledging that there had been a gross breach of good judgment and using the embarrassing fiasco as a learning experience.¹⁹

The Katz Affair has become part of the ongoing debate in Israel about academic freedom and its limits: All academics value and defend their freedom to choose topics of research and teaching, to publish the findings of their research — whether popular or not, and to express opinion that derives from these findings. While it might seem self-evident that such license does not extend to falsifying source material, and/or disregarding reliable evidence or rephrasing testimony in order to prove a thesis or pursue a non-academic agenda, seeking respectability under the umbrella of oral history studies, Pappé simply "rewrites the rules" of scholastic inquiry to dodge criticism. He conveniently dismisses traditional documentary evidence and research standards shared by "old" and "new" historians of the war claiming both are biased . . . and heralds Katz's work as "a new analytical framework" for the study of the *Nakba*.²⁰ Fortunately, few Israeli historians 'buy into' this notion, and the Katz Affair seems to have been a watershed event that has begun to put Israeli

historiography back on track, at least for more serious scholars. The controversy surrounding Katz's thesis and its ultimate disqualification, marked a turning of the tide as the post-Zionists' hold over Israeli historiography wanes, replaced by a much-needed return to differentiation between personal views and research, knowledge and opinion, and separation of history from folklore.

- 34 Yavne daily bulletin, 10 April 1948, IDFA, and Yavne special report, 12 April 1948, HA 105/31.
- 35 A survey of the Arab press, 13 April 1948, IDFA 4944/49/504; The Haganah's statement about Deir Yassin, 12 April 1948, ISA P/573/1; The Jewish Agency letter to king Abdullah, 12 April 1948 and Samir al-Rifa'i's reply of the same date, CZA, S 25/5634. Cf. also Kirkbride to Bevin, 16 April 1948, PRO, FO 816/117.

Appendix III *Folklore versus History: The Tantura Blood Libel*

- 1 Teddy Katz, 'The Exit of Arabs from Villages in Carmel Foothills in 1948' an MA thesis submitted to the Department of Middle East History at the University of Haifa, March 1998. Though the University withdrew the thesis' approval and removed it from the library, it can be read on the personal website of Professor of Electronic and Computer Engineering Dan Censor, at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/>>.
- 2 Notes on the occupation of Tantura (no date, but from end of may or early June 1948), Zichron Yaacov archives, Epstein's file. Cf. also the testimonies of several Arab witnesses who relate to Epstein's arrival and cation in the village, on the website <<http://www.palestineremembered.com/Haifa/al-Tantura>>.
- 3 Shitrit to Ben-Gurion, 31 May 1948, ISA C/307/48; Tene/A daily bulletin, 9 June 1948, HA 105/147. Cf. also Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York 1987.
- 4 Epstein's report, 21 June 1948, Zichron Yaacov archives, Epstein's file. Cf. also: ICRC, *The International Red Cross in Palestine*, Geneve, July 1948, p. 12.
- 5 Hilel Cohen, *The Present Absentees: The Palestinian Refugees in Israel Since 1948* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2000, p. 37; Yihya Mahmud al-Yihya, *Al-Tantura* (Arabic), Damascus 1998.
- 6 Epstein to the Ministry of Minorities Affairs, 21 June 1948, Zichron Yaacov archives, Epstein's file. The handing over was reported on the same day by the Arab radio station in Ramallah and the BBC Near East radio. Cf. the surveys 'Palestine in the Arab Broadcasts', 21–22 June 1948, IDFA 4944/49/504.
- 7 Shimshon Mashbatz's report to Shitirt on moods in Tulkarm, 22 July 1948, IDFA 2384/49/10, and intelligence report on the Iraqi troops in the Tulkarm area, 13 August 1948, IDFA 1041/49/3.
- 8 Nimr al-Hatib, *The Nakba of Filastin* (Arabic), Damascus 1951.
- 9 Arif al-Arif, *The Nakba of Filastin*, Kufr Qar'a 1989, Vol. VI, p. 109 (the book's six volumes were first published in Sayda, Lebanon, between the years 1956 and 1962).
- 10 Yihya Mahmud al-Yihya, *Al-Tantura* (Arabic), pp. 117–26. The list of killed and wounded, *ibid.* pp. 143–6.
- 11 *List of the Arab Villages in Palestine* (Hebrew), October 1947, p. 17.
- 12 Amir Gilat, "Hatevach bTantura," *Ma'ariv* weekend magazine, 21 January

2000, and a follow-up, *ibid.* 4 February 2000, They are accessible also at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/00-01-21katz-gilat-maariv.pdf>> and <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/00-02-04gilat-maariv-tantura.pdf>>.

- 13 For the reactions of the Arab MKs, cf. <www.arabia.com>, 23 January 2000; Graham Usher, 'Born in Sin', *Al-Aharam Weekly*, no. 466, 2 February 2000.
- 14 See Ilan Pappé, "Affidavit" August 9, 2000, at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/00-08-09pappe-affidavit-district.pdf>>.
- 15 Protocol of the Tel Aviv district court meeting TA 001686/00, 13 December 2000, pp. 10–15 and 17–21, archived at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/>>.
- 16 All the legal documents, committees' reports and press articles, letters to the editor etc. as well as the arguments on various internet forums and email networks, and more relevant material on the Tantura affair can be read on the website <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/>>.
- 17 The revised thesis and the (anonymous) readers' reports are accessible on Dan Censor's website.
- 18 For a brief discussion of the attempt to divest Israeli academia, see "The University of Haifa Response to the AUT Decision," April 24, 2005, at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/05-04-25haifa-univ-response-AUT-english.doc>>.
- 19 For the arguments of Katz's advocates, Cf. Prof. Avner Gil'adi (the Department's Chair) in *Haaretz*, 5 January 2001; Letter to the university committee from Kais Firro (Katz's thesis advisor), archived at <<http://www.ee.bgu.ac.il/~censor/katz-directory/>> and Ilan Pappé, 'The Tantura Case in Israel: Katz Research and Trial', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXX (spring 2001), pp. 19–39.
- 20 Ilan Pappé, 'The Katz Affair and Tantura', *Teoria U-Bikoret*, 20 (spring 2002), p. 204.