



THE FALL OF A GALILEAN VILLAGE DURING THE 1948 PALESTINE WAR: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

ELIAS SROUJI

This account by a Nazareth doctor describes what took place in Rama, a Galilee village, in the wake of Operation Hiram, Israel's last major offensive in northern Palestine during the 1948 war. The operation was launched on 29 October and lasted sixty hours, during which time the area of Galilee that had not already been conquered fell. At least eighteen villages were emptied of their inhabitants and subsequently destroyed: out of the area's estimated population of 50,000 to 60,000, only an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 persons remained in the new state after the fighting ended. Rama, which had surrendered to the Israeli forces without resistance, was one of the villages that was not destroyed, though part of its population was expelled. The rest of Galilee had already been conquered in April and May, prior to the declaration of the state, as well as in July.

IT WAS NOW mid-October 1948—five months since the declaration of the Israeli state, four months since we had left Nazareth for Beirut to get treatment for my ailing father, three months since our town had fallen to the Zionist forces. Although the fighting had not yet ended in Palestine, my family was becoming more and more anxious to return home, and my father was reminding me of my promise to get him back to Nazareth so he could die in his hometown. So the decision was made. After making some inquiries, we located a taxi driver from Nazareth, Fuad Nasrallah Zahr, who had somehow ended up in Beirut and who was willing to drive us as far as Rama, which had not yet been occupied. There we would find local drivers to take us to Deir Hanna, a village at the edge of the free area of Galilee. Just across from Deir Hanna was the village of Be'ineh at the eastern tip of the Battof Valley in the Israeli-occupied area. The plan was that under the veil of darkness we would cross the no-man's-land between Deir Hanna and Be'ineh on foot, hopefully with a local guide. Once in occupied Be'ineh, I was counting on one of my fellow doctors from Nazareth to pick us up and drive us back home.

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THE ATTEMPTED RETURN TO NAZARETH

It was the 25th of October when our two families set out for Rama, arriving early in the afternoon. We headed straight to the house of my Uncle Elias's friend Yusef 'Awad, known as Abu Salim. The family was very hospitable and tried to persuade us to postpone our return to Nazareth while waiting to see how the situation evolved. We did stay for a second day, during which we managed to send a messenger ahead to Nazareth to inform those at home that we were on our way. On the third day, we hired two cars to take us to Deir Hanna via the village of Mghar. At the outskirts of that village, we were stopped by a roadblock manned by men from the Arab Liberation Army, a volunteer force which had been organized by the Arab League in the early stages of the fighting to help defend Palestine from the Zionist onslaught. They suspected that we were going to cross the lines into the Israeli-occupied area and wanted to make sure we weren't carrying anything that could be of use to the enemy.

We reached Deir Hanna in early afternoon. To us the village appeared mysterious and even forbidding, and had it not been for the extreme kindness and generosity of our hosts—the Muallims, old family friends—it might have filled us with a kind of dread. Deir Hanna, which means "monastery of John," had been a fort of the Hospitalers of St. John of Malta during the Crusader period, and most of the village was built within the walls of the old fort. In fact, the fort's chapel was now the village mosque—most of Deir Hanna's inhabitants were Muslim, though there was also a Christian minority, all Greek Catholics. The head of the family—coincidentally, another "Abu Salim"—was one of the village's prominent Christian elders, and his son Salim was later ordained as a priest.

We were given the two rooms that made up the house's upper story, to which we retired that evening after having supper with the family downstairs. After we were settled in our room, there was a sudden knock at the door and Abu Salim, pale and agitated, rushed in with a young man who, judging from his attire, was with the Arab Liberation Army. Abu Salim was speaking angrily: "Here, look for yourself, you see what sort of people they are!" The stranger looked at us, mumbled something I couldn't make out, and left. Abu Salim ran after him, but returned soon afterwards to apologize and to assure us that everything was all right.

It was dark; we purposely had chosen a moonless night to make the crossing into Israeli-held territory. My father, meanwhile, was surveying the mountain just behind us and asked, visibly upset, "Is this what we are supposed to cross over to get to Bei'neh?" When he learned that it was, he murmured in a choked voice, "I won't be able to make it!"

We hardly slept that night, each of us with our own reasons to be anxious. The next morning, my father requested that a messenger be dispatched to Nazareth to tell my sister and uncle that they would have to manage the family's affairs as best they could, since we had to turn back to Beirut and had no idea when we would be able to make another try. Our gracious host promised to

see to it that the message got through and at the same time sent to Rama to fetch two cars to take us back to Lebanon. We left late that afternoon, and to our surprise there was no roadblock at Mghar. On arriving in Rama that same evening, we went directly to the 'Awads' house. My Uncle Elias and I planned to continue on to Beirut, while my parents opted to spend the night in Rama, again as the 'Awads' guests. Abu Salim tried to downplay the difficulties of reaching Nazareth and even proposed looking into alternate ways of crossing the demarcation line.

CLEARING OUT RAMA

Before Uncle Elias and I were to set off for Beirut, the customary round of coffee was served. Hardly had we set down our cups when we heard an unusual noise overhead, and Salim, Mr. 'Awad's oldest son, burst into the house with the news that a plane was circling the village. He led us down a dim and narrow corridor to the family's storeroom, an old room with a traditional vaulted ceiling, unplastered walls, and small barred windows high on one side, probably for ventilation. We huddled together in the middle of the room, while Salim ordered in a stern voice, "Stay here while I go up on the roof to watch the plane, and if it comes towards us or drops anything, I will call through the window and you should lie down." He climbed up, and lying at the roof's edge, he dangled his head so that we could see his face through the opening near the top of the eastern wall. He called down that the plane was at the outskirts of the village and that we could relax, but none of us did. Suddenly, he shouted that we should take cover or lie down, but there was room only to squat. There was dead silence in the packed room, and we heard the whir of the engine overhead becoming louder and louder. Suddenly there was an ear-piercing explosion, and we braced ourselves for more of the same, but then Salim showed his face again and announced that the plane had disappeared over the mountain to the west. We found out later that the bomb had hit an abandoned old house in the very center of the village; luckily no one was hurt. It was a different story in Tarshiha, the village northwest of Rama that was the next target of the same sortie. There, about a hundred people had taken cover in a large structure next to the main road. It received a direct hit, and twenty-three people perished.

Our plans were ruined. There could be no more thought of going on to Lebanon that night, and we didn't know what to do. Fortunately, soon after the air raid my friend from medical school, 'Atallah Sheiban, who was now a practicing physician in Rama, came to the 'Awads to ask after us. He agreed that what had just happened was but a prelude to an invasion of the remaining part of Galilee, and that the wisest thing to do was to wait. He proposed that our family stay with him and that my uncle's family remain with the 'Awads.

The Sheiban house was a sturdy old vaulted structure with two large rooms on the upper floor and a basement that 'Atallah used as his clinic. All the rooms had wide windows set in walls so thick that cushions could be placed to make

window seats. These were well used that evening, for it was the very end of October, cool and clear. The windows commanded a good view to the west, with the road stretching straight ahead towards Majdelkrum and beyond to Acre. Throughout the evening and night there was an almost continuous line of all kinds of vehicles streaming east, their headlights not even dimmed. The Liberation Army was pulling out, either for higher ground or for Lebanese territory.

Early on the morning of the second day another plane showed up, this time to drop leaflets advising people to surrender and thus spare themselves harm and hardship. 'Atallah, who was one of the village's two doctors, went off to help coordinate the efforts of the village elders and religious leaders to get word to the advancing Zionist forces that the villagers were willing to accept the authority of the new state. Around noon, again from the windows of the Sheiban house, we watched the procession of local dignitaries, led by the Italian-born priest of the Latin parish, walking east holding large white banners that looked like bed sheets. Apparently the ground force was camped somewhere on the eastern outskirts of the village. When the priest and elders returned, they reported that everything had gone well. The officer in charge had assured them not to worry, that there would be no harm to property or people, and that everyone would soon be free to resume their usual daily activities. The commander asked that all weapons in the village be turned in at a special location designated for that purpose. Though the Liberation Army had never had any presence in Rama, individuals did own weapons of various kinds and makes.

The next morning, soon after breakfast, there was a violent knock on the door, and several Israeli army soldiers in battle dress entered from the outer courtyard. They went all through the house, searching every corner, closet, and cabinet. Then they ordered the women to remain inside and ordered us, the men, to follow them. On the way to wherever they were taking us, one of the soldiers, a husky thug, noticed my wristwatch and ordered me to hand it over. Then he made me give him my fountain pen. My ailing father and the eighty-year-old Abu 'Atallah were trying hard to keep up, but everybody's concern was where we were headed and for what purpose. We had already heard what had happened in Eilabun, a village that had been overrun two days earlier. The story—which turned out to be true—was that fifteen young men had been

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arbitrarily picked from the crowd and shot at close range in clusters of two or three in different parts of the village, apparently to make it look like they had been engaged in fighting.

We finally ended up in the eastern part of the village in a square surrounded by houses belonging to the Nakhle clan. It did not take us long to realize that all the men who had been rounded up were Christians and that there was no one from the village's other major community, the Druze. Everybody was frightened and bewildered, and there was whispering among the crowd. Suddenly there was a loud reverberating

noise, and we saw a cloud of dust rising high over the western edge of the village. It turned out that they had blown up the mansion of Elias Shukri, a rich villager who was away at the time. We later saw the piles of rubble, with parts of furniture and home appliances mixed in with the debris. People were puzzled because of the assurances that had been given the previous day. Once we were assembled, soldiers came out of Farid Nakhle's house, which apparently was being used as a temporary officers' outpost, and ordered us to squat down in rows; they took the time to make sure the rows were orderly. I squatted next to my father, and was worried about his physical ability to do so. 'Atallah was squatting next to his father immediately in front of us.

It was one of those Khamseen days, when dust-laden winds blow in from the eastern desert in spring and fall. Khamseen days come in clusters; there is no humidity and temperatures soar to more than one hundred degrees fahrenheit. It was already early afternoon when a short dark-skinned soldier, looking like a Yemeni, came down the steps of the Nakhle house. He strolled among the rows of men randomly picking people, yelling as he pointed to each, "You, get up!" Those designated were turned over to other soldiers and held separately. For some reason 'Atallah had brought along his stethoscope, which was showing in the side pocket of his jacket. So when the soldier got to him, he said, "You doctor, get up!" The Latin priest, fearing that something similar to the fate of the men of Eilabun was going to befall this group, hurried to the officers' quarters. As a cleric, he had a special permit. He asked that the physician be released so he could attend to a woman in labor.

When about forty men had been selected, the same Yemeni-looking soldier came out on the terrace of the Nakhle house, looked down at us all still squatting in neat rows, and addressed us in a commanding and insolent tone. "Our friends, the Druze, have been with us from the beginning, and everybody else is an enemy. By order of the great State of Israel you are to fetch whatever you can carry from your homes, and within an hour you will all be on your way north." There was immediate pandemonium, and then loud voices started asking, "Where do you want us to go? What happened to the assurances you gave us yesterday?" An off-handed, indifferent reply came back: "We know nothing about any assurances; we weren't even here yesterday!" Jamil Nakhle, a well-known notable of the village's Greek Catholic community, strode to the foot of the stone steps leading to the terrace where the officer stood—in fact, the terrace of his own nephew's house. In a loud and self-assured voice, he said to the Yemeni-looking officer: "I have a heart condition and my physician has ordered me not to exert myself in any way, and I need to stay in my home." Again, the reply was brisk and forceful, "Find yourself a horse or donkey and ride it to get out."

The din and confusion went on for some time. The soldiers who had been standing guard on the rooftops surrounding the square started firing into the air, frightening pigeons and other birds who flew off screeching. Just then 'Atallah reappeared, his stethoscope still showing in his side pocket, and came straight to me. "Elias" he said, "why don't we go in and talk to the officers? I have a

permit here to see them that the priest gave me so I could help the lady in labor.” “Fine, let’s go,” I said, and we pushed forward showing the permit to the guard at the foot of the stairs. We were allowed up to the house and ushered into the reception room, where we sat on the two chairs on either side of the door. One of the four Israelis in the room, whom we assumed to be officers even though there was nothing on their uniforms to indicate rank, asked ‘Atallah what he wanted. ‘Atallah said: “I know that the Druze community is remaining here and they will need a doctor. I have been the physician of many of them, I want to be allowed to stay.” The officer was quick to reply, “We have seen to that and there is a doctor that will take care of them. There is no need for you to stay.” At this point, ‘Atallah was ushered out of the room, and it was three days before I heard anything about him and his parents.

While ‘Atallah had been talking to the officer, I was furtively studying the officers and noticed how unexpectedly young they were; they must all have been around twenty. All four looked like Ashkenazis. They were seated at one side of the room, and across from them in another corner was a middle-aged man in traditional dress whom I took to be the *mukhtar* of the Druze.

After ‘Atallah left, one of the officers turned to me and asked what I wanted. I cleared my throat and said that I was a doctor from Nazareth, and that I had been with my family in Beirut seeking treatment for my father’s cancer of the larynx. I explained that we had been on our way back home when we got trapped here in Rama, and that our wish was to be allowed to proceed to Nazareth. With an insinuating smile, he asked, “How long did you serve with the Liberation Army?” I said that I never had. At that point, he told me to wait outside for instructions. After some minutes, which felt like an eternity, a polite, clean-shaven soldier came out and in a perfect English accent asked about my parents and relatives. I pointed them out in the square below. They looked haggard, surrounded by their suitcases and bundles. He then said that we could remain behind. I asked where we could stay, and about a written permit that I would need if asked. He scribbled a few words in Hebrew on a paper from a little notepad and gave it to me. Then, to my surprise, he said he would show us where we could stay until things cleared up. I told my family briefly what had happened, and we followed the soldier along a narrow dirt road to the basement of what turned out to be Jamil Nakhle’s house.

He led us into a storeroom lined with shelves on three walls loaded with big glass jars filled with *labneh* in olive oil, enough for the whole year. There were also plenty of rattan stools and an inside door leading to an adjacent room. The soldier arranged the stools in a circle, saw to it that we were seated, and told me in an apologetic tone that we should all give whatever we had of value to my mother for safekeeping, adding that some in the army felt free to take spoils and snatch people’s property. I said: “It’s too late for me; my watch and pen are already gone. Anyway, thank you for the advice.” He wished us luck and told us to leave whenever we felt the time was right, and that we could go stay in any of the many vacant houses in the village.

Soon after the soldier had left, a young lady in black came into the room followed by three children and a sickly old lady. She turned out to be the sister of the nurse in my clinic in Nazareth and the wife of 'Atweh Hanna, who worked at the post office in our town. He had probably sent his family to Rama, where they were from. She suggested that we would be better off staying with the Sisters of the Rosary, who had a house and a school next to the Latin Church in the village, and took me outside to point out the way.

Meanwhile the gunfire was continuing, clearly intended to get people moving. We saw families holding their children and lugging big bags, some supporting old parents. Sobbing loudly, they passed in front of the Nakhle houses. Joining the main road leading up the steep slope of the mountain on which their village was built, they were setting off on a "trail of tears" towards the Lebanese border. The most heartrending sight was the cats and dogs, barking and carrying on, trying to follow their masters. I heard a man shout to his dog: "Go back! At least you can stay!"

The sun was setting. The shooting had died down, and we agreed that we would do as my nurse's sister had suggested. Just as we were setting out, a husky, thuggish-looking soldier, a rifle on his shoulder, came into the room and purposely knocked all the glass jars full of *labneh* off the shelves to the ground. As we walked toward the convent we could hear the shattering of glass, mingling with the sounds of barking and mewing of the animals still running back and forth between the square and the main road up the mountain. Night was falling, and the racket combined with the heavy feel of the deserted village made me sick at heart.

AT THE CONVENT

I was carrying two suitcases, and the young girls also had bags. My uncle, too, was carrying a big suitcase as we walked up the steps to the convent. At the edge of the esplanade in front of the one-story structure were three nuns and the Latin priest who had pulled 'Atallah from the group of detained men earlier that day. When I reached the top step, the priest told me in a low, apologetic voice that he had been ordered by the officer not to take anybody in, not even from his own parish. I told him that we were from Nazareth and had a permit to stay behind. He was not convinced. He was afraid to disobey the orders of the occupiers. I asked him how, in that case, he had been able to take in the old lady squatting at the edge of the terrace, and he said she was the mother of Mgr. Ne'meh Sima'n, the Latin patriarchal vicar in Amman. My father was sick, and we could not bring ourselves to move into any of the houses people had been forced to abandon, much less houses belonging to friends, knowing that they were thirsty, hungry, and suffering somewhere out in the wild. So at that point I simply picked up my suitcases and walked past the priest toward the open door of the convent. One of the nuns intervened and assured him that the sisters would take responsibility for our presence and would see to it that we were given proper accommodations. Another nun,

who turned out to be the mother superior, voiced agreement, and we ended up spending fifteen memorable days there.

By the following morning, the priest, Father Michel De Maria, had become reconciled to our presence. He appeared to be in his early thirties and had come from Italy to the Latin Patriarchal Seminary in Jerusalem when he was an adolescent; he spoke Arabic well. Rama was his first assignment after being

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ordained to serve in village parishes, and his preoccupation with the fate of his expelled parishioners colored his whole conversation. This was even more the case after we watched soldiers driving through the village with truckloads of looted goods, singing provocative songs and shouting insulting slogans.

Soon after midday on the day following our arrival at the convent, an Israeli officer, with dark skin and curly black hair, probably an Oriental Jew, came and asked to

see Father Michel in private. An hour later, the priest returned and whispered to me that the man was the military intelligence officer who had been in charge of operations the day Rama's residents had been forced to leave. The big news was that the army would close its eyes to the return of those Rama inhabitants who had not yet crossed into Lebanon. The officer, whose nom de guerre was "Kouti," suggested that it might be a good idea for the priest to send messengers along the road to inform people of this development. Father Michel was smiling again and immediately ran out to dispatch messengers.

Before the end of the day, a number of families had returned, including 'Atallah and his parents, and we learned what had happened. The families with small children or old people had had to go slowly and had run out of water soon after climbing the steep road north of Rama. They had not yet reached Lebanon by nightfall, and spent the night in fields near the village of Bqei'a. Along the road they had been passed by a number of UN supervision teams, but because of the difficulty communicating, most of these team members apparently believed that the villagers were fleeing the fighting. One team, however, understood that they had been forcibly expelled. This must have been the reason for Kouti's visit and the order to allow villagers to return.

Meanwhile, we had developed excellent relations with the convent. My uncle had some cash with him, and from the first day bought grapes, figs, fresh vegetables, wheat, and other provisions from vendors coming down from Beit Jann, a Druze village atop Mount Jarmaq. Meanwhile, our ladies helped the nuns with the cooking and cleaning, important tasks since there were many official visitors over the next fortnight. Many of these spoke only English, and the priest was happy that I could translate.

The first visitor was from the new Ministry of Religious Affairs, who came to check on the people of Rama and to see whether the priest, as a foreigner, had any special requests. Father Michel told him what had happened in the village

and insisted that he meet Jamil Nakhle, who was then staying in his daughter's house because his own had been looted. During the meeting, at which I was present, the venerable old man stated emphatically that the Jews liked to see themselves as having moral values over and above everybody else's, but that they had behaved shamefully to people who had totally surrendered and were expecting fulfillment of the promises spelled out in the leaflets air-dropped the previous day.

Another visit was from a UN observation team headed by a young American or Canadian officer accompanied by an Israeli army liaison officer. The UN officer asked about the sequence of events during the village's occupation and at one point asked the priest, in front of the Israeli, whether there was any shooting at or over the heads of people when they had been ordered to leave. I could see that the priest was very uneasy, but finally replied hesitantly that there was. About a week later another team showed up, this one headed by an older French officer, again accompanied by an Israeli liaison officer. After the introductions and generalities, the French officer mentioned in passing that he was interested in ecclesiastical architecture and would very much like to visit Father Michel's church. They left the Israeli officer in my company, and we talked about peripheral things, primarily the importance of the olive tree to the Arab farmer. After a half hour, they returned and the French officer said he had to leave. The nuns were dismayed that he would not stay for coffee, but the priest looked happy. Later, when we were alone, he told me that the French officer, who had clearly understood that it was impossible to speak freely in the presence of the Israeli, had cast only the most cursory glance around the church. They sat down on a church bench, and the French officer said, "Father, this time I am the confessor, and I want you to tell me freely what happened in Rama." Father Michel was delighted and gave him all the details.

One day during the second week of our stay at the convent, three Israeli officers came and asked the priest to convene the elders of the community. Father Michel took them to Jamil Nakhle's and asked me to come along to help translate. It turned out that they were asking the Christians of Rama to accept the people of the village of Iqrit as guests. On repeated questioning regarding the duration of their proposed stay, the officers emphatically insisted that it would be at most two weeks, enough time for the fighting near the Lebanese border to be over and for things to settle down. The reason for the temporary transfer of the Iqrit people, they said, was for safety reasons, to keep them out of the danger zone; the people of the nearby Maronite village of Kafr Bir'im had already been temporarily relocated for that reason to the mainly Maronite village of Jish. Since the people of Iqrit were Greek Catholic, it was decided to send them to Rama, where many were of the same sect. Jamil Nakhle told the officers that it was all right for the people of Iqrit to come, and promised that all help would be forthcoming for the two weeks. Fifty years later, despite a ruling in their favor by the Israeli courts, the people of Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im are still stranded, and their lands have been annexed to new Jewish settlements.

THE LITTLE HOUSE IN 'AFFULA

After a week or so at the convent, we were feeling very much at home. Everyone staying there would sit together for coffee or tea and discuss all sorts of issues. One evening when we were analyzing the events in Rama, I wondered aloud why the Israeli officers had allowed me to remain. My friend 'Atallah, who was visiting at the convent, said he thought that they had believed my story and that as Nazarenes we were not to be treated like the local people. However, fifty years later, I discovered quite unexpectedly the real reason we had been spared expulsion.

The story begins in the late 1920s, when my father, who was the agent for Mobil Oil's marketing company for the Nazareth area, was looking for a subagent to serve 'Affula. 'Affula was then a tiny Jewish settlement around an important railway station on the old Haifa-Damascus railroad, built during Ottoman times and still running in the early years of the British Mandate. The man he hired was Salek Lurie, a new immigrant from Poland who lived with his wife Lisa in a tin-roofed cabin near the station. I was a schoolboy at the time and I used to accompany my father to the Lurie cabin on Thursdays and Sundays, the days we had off from school. During the first Palestinian uprising in 1929, when the residents of 'Affula were in some danger, my father, worried about the Luries, sent his driver to bring them to Nazareth and then to Haifa, where they would be safe. Throughout my youth, our two families would always visit each other on religious holidays and on occasions of joy, such as when my youngest brother and sister were born, and of sorrow, such as when my ninety-six-year-old grandfather died. To this day, the eucalyptus trees lining the railway tracks across from the little house in 'Affula remain imprinted in my mind, inextricably intertwined with the memory of my schoolboy's wonder at the slowly turning arms and accelerating wheels of a locomotive.

A few years ago, my brother Anis, an engineer who remained in Nazareth, told me what had really happened on that unforgettable day fifty years earlier. It seems that one of the four young officers who listened to my request that our family remain behind was Arye Lurie, the son of Salek and Lisa Lurie. Anis had been told this by Arye himself, also an engineer, who had visited him in his office in Nazareth. Arye had recognized me in the Nakhle house but had remained quiet so as to be in a better position to help us.

Since I learned the answer to the question I had posed over coffee in the convent's sitting room back in 1948, other thoughts have whirled in my head. One is how, even in the bitterest of conflicts, individuals can still be decent and remember with gratitude past kindnesses. Another thought concerns the future. I see it bleak and bloody if the humanistic individuals on both sides allow those with narrow horizons and tunnel vision to win and prevail.