



A Palestinian at Yad Vashem

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It was quite an experience. It took a lot to get myself, a Palestinian, to undertake the trip¹. And I only did it after an intense discussion with a German acquaintance about the triangular connection between Germany, the Jews, and the Palestinians. The effect on me was profound in many ways. I even repeated the visit again to let the first impressions sink in and more reactions come out.

I went to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem with the usual convictions of a Palestinian Arab: We were never responsible for the pogroms and discrimination against Jews in Europe, neither in the past or in the Nazi era. So why should Palestinians pay for the crimes of Europeans against Jews? The Jews have lived historically in Arab and Islamic countries generally at peace with others, and they usually suffered only what the rest of the population had to go through. Arabs are Semitic peoples themselves, and

it would be ridiculous to talk about Arab 'anti-Semitism'. What Palestinians and Arabs are up against is modern political Zionism, with its invasion of our historic land and culture, using false myths and pretenses.

What was striking at first was the vast number of tourist and school buses near the entrance of Yad Vashem, not to mention private cars and public transport in the car parks and roads around the site. I was told that every Israeli student and soldier is scheduled to visit the memorial at least once. The visit is also on the itinerary of many local tourist agencies and, of course, a must for visiting foreign official dignitaries.

The place, with its many sites, is very imposing in its visual and architectural constructions. In particular, the design and effect of the Children's Memorial was very moving and the Valley of the Communities very dramatic. The Historical Museum is remarkably effective in conveying the message in a way that does not have to resort to exaggerated language. Reality is shocking enough. One immediate reaction was that the Palestinians could learn from the memorial how to honor their own martyrs and history.

Considering the millions of words used by all the people who visited Yad Vashem to express their reactions to the Holocaust, I am not sure I can come up with original ways of expressing the horror and revulsion at what took place under the Nazis. A Palestinian refugee can particularly imagine the endless dimensions of the suffering of the victims and of the survivors. The survivors, especially, sometimes envy the dead, after dear ones are gone, homes and treasured possessions lost, and communities and relations torn asunder.

But I cannot help looking with a Palestinian's eyes and heart. And my reactions could not be isolated from the recent history of our country, invaded and taken over by force, money, intrigue, and alliances with the powerful of the day. In short, as Palestinians put it, Palestine was stolen from its original inhabitants, who are the descendents of all the people who inhabited the land. Not only did 'Israel' take over and claim for itself the geography of Palestine but also its history, religion, language, mythology, culture - even the falafel and hommus.

The Holocaust to us Palestinians has been used mainly to justify to the world - and to Jews themselves everywhere - the settler colonization of our country. Many writers, including some Israelis and Jews elsewhere, have exposed this manipulation of the suffering of the Jews. In the Historical Museum, the progression of the catastrophe was gripping and it was almost painful to see what fanatic ideology could drive human kind to do. Yet the political aim of the museum was so clear right from the opening plaque at the entrance: all *that* happened to the Jews because they were "bereft of a state."

Following all the atrocious pictures of the rise of Nazism, the growing anti-Semitism, the treatment of Jews, and the lead up to the death camps, what really caused something in me to break was a certain picture and comment. The picture of Haj Amin Husseini shaking hands with Goebbels blew away much of the trail of my empathy. It just seemed too cheap a shot, after the gravity of the previous sequence of tragedies of the Nazi extermination of Jewish communities in Europe, to lump together the Palestinian struggle against foreign invaders with what the Nazis stood for and did to the Jews!

Haj Amin, who is very much criticized by most Palestinian historians, was merely practicing the age-old politics of 'my enemy's enemy', before the full scale of what happened in the Holocaust was known. And when he uses the phrase "*Jihad* (struggle) against the Jews", he is just employing the usual parlance of his Islamic background of the day, before the Jews became Israelis. Also, Haj Amin al-Husseini's quoted words in a letter to Ribbentrop: "to prevent an agreement with Britain and the US to allow Jews to leave for Eretz-Israel", put differently, would read: "to prevent foreign Zionist colonialists from taking over his country Palestine". To display it out of context, as continuation of Nazi actions, is cheating history and cheating oneself.

Throughout the tour of the exhibition, I could also see the *nakbah* (the impending Palestinian catastrophe that befell our people) in the making. The second time round, especially, a strange déjà vu impression kept creeping up on me. I noticed again and again some parallels between what is on display at Yad Vashem and what happened to the Palestinians at the hands of the Zionists or Israelis in later years.

The methods used by the Zionists against the Palestinians seemed already all there. Dehumanizing the enemy and especially the victim, as the term "Arab" in Israel is found in "Juden" in Germany. For the places forbidden to "Jews", substitute "Palestinians", forbidden to tread in their own land. For the Nazi racial classification and branding of victims with "Juden" and yellow STAR, substitute the Orange ID, the strict permits, the special car plates, and the division of the Palestinians into Druze, Moslems, Bedouins, Christians, uprooted, unrecognized, 1967 evacuees,

Jerusalemites, returnees, refugees, etc.

The "illegal immigration" to "Eretz Israel" reminded me of the Palestinians refugees trying "illegally" to sneak back to their own homes and lands after 1948-49. And the list could go on: for the barbed wire of the Warsaw Ghetto substitute the barbed wire surrounding Gaza and its Palestinian access cage at the Erez passage; and for the Jews' attempts to break out of concentration camps through tunnels, remember the Palestinian and Lebanese attempts to break out of prisons, borders and detention centers, created and caused by the Israelis.

How do you explain engraving Jewish communities in solid rock, in the Valley of Jewish Communities, while destroying Palestinian communities and erasing to the ground more than 400 of their villages? Even the revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto evoked the stand of the Palestinian refugees in Tel Zaatar, Sabra and Shatila and other camps in Lebanon, all caused ultimately by their dispossession at the hands of the 'Jews'.

Like the Nazis on trial in Nuremberg, Ariel Sharon denies having "Palestinian blood" on his own proper hands. The "Final Solution" expression has often been used also for the Palestinians, not to mention the often-heard hate cry among Israelis of "Death to the Arabs" and the calls for 'Transfer', or deportation of Palestinians from their lands. And in parallel with Holocaust deniers we still find *nakbah*-deniers among most Jews and Israelis. One is reminded of how Nelson Mandela talked about how Apartheid used to give Afrikaners a false sense of superiority that justified their inhuman actions.

A strange twist has taken place in Palestine. If the Warsaw ghetto is now a

memory, the ghetto-like West Bank and Gaza colonies of Israeli settlers, are a living memory created by Jews themselves, with their barbed wire, watch towers, glaring lights, armed guards and dogs. One often wonders, what kind of life and future do Jewish children lead in these colonial settlements, compared to the easy going Palestinian towns and villages around them?

The way the Jews honor their dead at Yad Vashem, could be a lesson to Palestinians to create their own memorials. But when Palestinians come round to creating their own memorials, I hope that these memorials would be different in at least two aspects: without using the suffering of the people for begging material and political support and without instilling even more hatred towards others.

No real and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians will ever take root by falsifying history. Israelis and Jews everywhere have to undergo a serious re-education process for what they did to the Palestinians. They have to learn the facts and recognize their responsibility. And not withstanding what compromises the leaders on both sides agree upon, Palestinians cannot forgive without an Israeli recognition of what they did to the Palestinians. It is perhaps the historic role of the Palestinians to help Zionist Israelis and Jews everywhere to get rid of their entrenched racist and anti-other attitudes. Israel can never become a normal country, accepted by the entire world, without Palestinian absolution, just as the Jews did with Germany.

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¹ The trips took place in 1999 and 2000.

