



Ownerless Objects?

*The story of the books
Palestinians left behind
in 1948*

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Palestinians fleeing their homes in 1948 with all the belongings they can carry in their hands. Photo courtesy of UNRWA/ Badil collection

“The Jewish National and University Library has gathered tens of thousands of abandoned books during the war. We thank the people of the army for the love and understanding they have shown towards this undertaking.”

–National Library News, June 1949

Between May 1948 and the end of February 1949, in the course of the 1948 war,¹ the staff of the Jewish National and University Library at Hebrew University collected some 30,000 books, manuscripts and newspapers that were left behind by the Palestinian residents of western Jerusalem.¹ About 6,000 of those books were then ‘loaned’ to the National Library’s Eastern Studies department.² Furthermore, in 1948 and the following years, the employees of the Custodian of Absentee Property gathered some 40,000-50,000 books from the cities of Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberias, Nazareth and other places. Most of these books – largely textbooks found in the schools and warehouses of the British mandate – were

later resold to Arab schools. Some 450 were handed over in 1954 to the National Library's Eastern Studies Department. Around 26,000 books suffered a worse fate: in 1957, it was decided that they were "unsuitable for use in Arab schools in Israel, [because] some of them contained inciting materials against the State, and therefore their distribution or selling might cause damage to the State"³. These texts were sold as paper waste.

This untold story of the fate of Palestinian 'abandoned' books clearly demonstrates how occupation and colonization is not limited to the taking over of physical space. Rather, it achieves its fulfilment by occupying cultural space as well, and by turning the cultural artefacts of the victims into ownerless objects with no past. Israel's collection of Palestinians' books marks the transformation of a lively and dynamic Palestinian culture into museum artefacts. Thus, Palestinian' books were placed within the shrine of Israeli libraries, fossilized on the shelves – accessible and at the same time completely lifeless.²

Two central issues will be discussed in this essay. First, it will retrace the months during which the staff of the National Library followed in the wake of the soldiers, moving from house to house in search of books and intellectual assets that had been left behind when thousands of Palestinians fled their homes. The second issue to be discussed is the conflicted handling of these books – their sorting and classification – in the years to come.

An image guides my investigation, an image that is by no means fictional. Zionist fighters march along, followed closely by the librarians of the National Library who are gathering up the books from all the houses of the neighbourhoods of western Jerusalem – Katamon, Musrara, Talbiya, Bakaa, the German Colony. The soldiers take over the houses, 'mop up' the area, eradicate resistance and secure the roads, while the librarians, some of whom are serving in the standing army and others who are 'civilians' (exempt due to their age or because their work was considered essential), assemble the cultural and intellectual assets. The librarians emerge from a seemingly marginal role allotted to them by history, to become part of creating the state's story. The work of librarians is facilitated by military action – thus, we have the above-cited letters of gratitude from library officials to the army and the Custodian of Absentee Property, whose cooperation was crucial.

Simultaneously, and even as the project was underway, I imagine the first seeds of hesitation, pangs of conscience and misgivings begin to sprout: are the books ours? What should we do with them? Are we, the employees of the National Library, looting the books or only keeping them safe temporarily? If we were to return the books to their rightful owners, how much should we charge for our efforts?

But in the midst of war, these hesitations do not affect the enthusiasm and efficiency of the library staff in carrying out their mission, or their belief that they are engaged in acts of salvation. And indeed, we must ask: would these books have been preserved had it not been for the vigorous efforts of these clerks, most of whom were only new immigrants from central Europe?

The second issue I wish to explore is the library's conflicted handling of these books: on the one hand, facilitating a systematic and ongoing separation between the books and their owners by sorting and cataloguing them into the 'property' of the library and, on the other hand (in a seemingly opposing mindset) keeping the books together in the National Library's storerooms marked by a special signature. In the 1950s, the collected books were marked by the names of their owners whenever possible. In the 1960s, however, the cataloguing system was dramatically altered, erasing the names of the owners and replacing them with a new signature, "AP" ("Abandoned Property"). This was a significant change: the books' connection to their owners was severed, but the new signature prevented the books from becoming an integral part of the library's collections – defacto preserving the Palestinian memory.

Confronting the Past, Silencing Culture

Between December 1947 and September 1949, some 670,000 to 760,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from the towns and over 500 villages occupied by the Jews during the 1948 war. In recent years, following the declassification of most official political documents of the State of Israel, disclosure of private documents, and the consolidation of a new critical consciousness, much has been written in Israel about the war's catastrophic outcome for the defeated. The works of historians and sociologists, including Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris, Idit Zartal, and Baruch Kimmerling, have contributed significantly to this subject by confronting and exploring the past. We know much more today about the refugees and the way in which the State of Israel prevented them from returning to their homes. We even know much about the scope of the refugees' assets, property, land and factories that were looted, expropriated and sold, initially to the army and later to the highest bidder.⁴ However, little research has been done on the tragic implications of the war for Palestinian culture. This limited attention to the destruction of Palestinian culture is, interestingly enough, common to both Israeli and Palestinian discourse.

On 30 April, 1948, renowned educator and Christian Arab writer Khalil Sakakini fled his home in the Katamon neighbourhood in Jerusalem one day after the neighbourhood was taken over by Haganah forces. His diaries, which have been partly translated into Hebrew, reveal to Israeli readers a fairly broad picture of life in Palestine, beginning with the optimism of the 1920s and ending with the miseries of

war and exile in Egypt, where Sakakini died in 1961. In his escape from Jerusalem, Sakakini left behind not only his house and furniture (the grand piano, electric refrigerator, liquor cabinet and *narghilah*), but also his books, to which, two months after he had settled in Cairo, Sakakini bade farewell with emotion and pathos:

*Farewell, my library! Farewell, the house of wisdom, the abode of philosophers, a house and witness for literature! How many sleepless nights I spent there, reading and writing, the night is silent and the people asleep... goodbye, my books!... I know not what has become of you after we left: Were you looted? Burnt? Have you been ceremonially transferred to a private or public library? Did you end up on the shelves of grocery stores with your pages used to wrap onions?*⁵

We now know what became of that library: Tom Segev, who made Sakakini one of the protagonists of his book on Palestine during the British Mandate, notes in a footnote what he learned from Sakakini's daughter, Hala, who in the summer of 1967 visited the Jewish National and University Library with her sister and discovered there her father's books scrawled with his handwritten notes.⁶

Palestinian Books: Collection and 'Guardianship'

On 10 and 16 June, 1948, the first two letters were written that specifically referred to the gathering of Arab books. The first is a letter sent by Hebrew University administrator David Senator to the Jewish Agency's directorate for "urgent discussion" at the "appropriate Israeli government ministry". A memo written by Kurt Warman, director of the National Library, and entitled "on the urgent need for a central custodian authority for handling the matter of public and private abandoned books and libraries" was attached to Senator's letter. In the memo, Warman implores the Israeli government to grant the National Library the status of:

*a central certified authority, whose task would be to handle the issue of abandoned libraries, whether private or public... [Because] in our opinion, the National Library is the most suitable institution for reception and guardianship of the aforementioned books. The National Library has the means to see that the books are properly preserved, and to return them to their rightful owners, should such come forward.*⁷

The second document, dated 16 June, is a short eight-line letter written by Yisaschar Yoel, Warman's deputy. The letter, which is a report on the National Library's condition, concludes with the following words: "Our book collecting project reached the Musrara neighbourhood yesterday."⁸ How can we interpret these two documents, the first a measured administrative argument for authority and guardianship to

preserve Palestinian books, the second a brief sentence from the 'field' where the books are being acquired, the formerly Palestinian neighbourhood of Musrara, near the walls of Jerusalem's Old City.

I find these documents odd and unexpected.⁹ What is meant by Warman's memo, which throws us immediately into the deep water of the issue of ownership? And what lies behind Yoel's ten words mentioning the collection of books so incidentally, apropos other things? At this moment I think of the limitations of this research, and perhaps – if I am not overreaching – of the boundaries limiting the work of the historian: her dependency on documents, and all the documents that she does not succeed in finding (due to inability or overflowing archives or simply missing what one is seeking). I once again ponder Yoel's ten words: I am entranced by their simplicity and openness, by the straightforward manner in which they lay before us this historical event, in an almost naïve gesture. At the same time, I cannot but feel troubled by the events, words and actions that lay behind them.¹⁰ What are the books in question? Who does the word "our" refer to? Who are the collectors? And where did they collect books on the previous day?

It is necessary to read many more documents before we can answer these questions, decipher them, and realize that these words characterize the entire affair of the 'collection' of Palestinians' books: a constant and ongoing movement between exposure and concealment, between explicit statements and vague, almost alienated general rhetoric, which naturally plays a political role.

Owners on the Margins: The Question of Return

Warman's memo explicitly mentions custodianship, not ownership. Between May and the beginning of August 1948, the official treatment of the books was one of restraint. In all the letters, reports and memos from this period, the staff of the National Library reiterates the stance that the Palestinians' books have been entrusted to the Library for indefinite guardianship. In all of these documents there appear, if only in the margins, legal owners who may one day return. I believe it would be wrong to claim that the books' owners were the primary concern of the National Library's employees although they may have believed that the books would one day be returned. This may explain why the Library's eagerness to receive the books has not yet taken on an overtly possessive shape.

Here is where the work of interpretation is essential, but also where the act of interpretation becomes so charged. Some would consider Dr. Warman's appeal to the Custodian a testimony of his careful treatment of the books and his sincere efforts to ensure the property's safety and preservation. I, on the other hand, am inclined to read these words – with their urgent claim for ownership only two weeks after

the collection project had begun – as revealing a man indifferent to the implications and context of his actions. Where others may see restraint, I mostly find an efficient, disturbingly cold professionalism. And even if we assume for a moment that Warman, a product of German education and 19th-century positivism, yearned for the “good order of things”, doesn’t this desire itself prompt an uneasy feeling? Furthermore, Warman’s stated objective was to prevent chaos in the collection of books. There is, of course, much logic to Warman’s demand that one authority should be appointed to handle, sort and distribute the books, and it was not unlikely that this authority should be his own. He himself notes:

The National Library possesses the mechanism most capable of handling all the problems, which are many and very often complicated, having to do with these books... [and it also possesses] the biggest catalogue in the country which makes the bibliographical identification and processing of the books easier.¹¹

He adds that, as the books are in Arabic, “the National Library employs the most experienced expert librarians for this sort of literature, as well. In passing, Warman also mentions:

The absence of an official authority recognized by the civilian and military leadership has significantly obstructed and is still obstructing the rescuing of the books. Among the many difficulties that stand in our way, there should be mentioned the inappropriate phenomenon of competition between different public institutions over the find.

Remarkable in this last sentence is not only its rhetoric, which turns the act of confiscation into an act of ‘rescuing’ and the books themselves into a ‘find’, but also the matter at hand. It is clear there was a struggle between various institutions seeking to obtain the books, as well as greed among these institutions (some only recently founded) and impatience with the appropriation and distribution of the books. Warman’s appeal “of the most pressing urgency” may have been born, in fact, from his interest in the prestige of the National Library in a competition with other libraries and government offices, as well as his own ambitions and professional career.

This document seems to point to some of the book affair’s most obvious characteristics: a mixture of arrogance, greed and indifference hidden under the guise of professionalism; the inseparable combination of occupation and passion for acquiring possessions; a fear of losing books; but also a banality of action, where the extraordinary becomes an ordinary matter of administration.

A Safe Place for ‘Magnificent Arab Libraries’

In July 1948, western Jerusalem was under Jewish control and of the thousands of Palestinian residents of the western city, only about 750 non-Jews remained in the area, mostly non-Arabs.¹² The issue of looting and robbery by the conquering army was discussed by the Jewish public. *Al-Hamishmar* newspaper reported the conquest of the village of Malha, its reporters denouncing increasing looting and robberies. At the beginning of the month, the paper reported a new law, the “Emergency Regulations (Absentees’ Property)”, which obligated registration of absentees’ assets, noting that “finally, the police chiefs and city leaders have waged a war on the looting and robbery... Katzin Sofer, the head of the Jerusalem Police, has announced that great efforts are being carried out to find those responsible for the pillaging in the occupied territories in Jerusalem; those efforts have already yielded some initial results.”¹³

On 26 July, we find a letter to Dr. Warman, the head of the National Library, by an unknown writer:

*According to my estimates, 12,000 books or more have been collected so far. A large portion of the libraries of Arab writers and scholars is now in a safe place. Several bags of manuscripts, whose value has not been evaluated yet, are also in our hands. Most of the books come from Katamon, but we have also reached the German Colony and Musrara. We found some magnificent Arab libraries in Musrara. We also removed from Musrara part of the Swedish School’s library. The winds have not yet quieted in this area, but I hope we can continue there in the coming days. After Dr. Unger complained to me that we have not tried hard enough to save medical libraries, I took out in the recent days the library of the health department in the German Colony. The Israeli Government’s Jerusalem Health Department was quick to claim it, but we are in negotiations and I hope we can reach an agreement... several days ago, the university allotted for this action 2-3 of its workers. This has improved the productivity of the project which until now has been in the hands of only three people: Goldman, Eliyahu and myself. And even those did not do it daily, but in intervals. We received a room at Bergman’s house, and also discovered a small storeroom in Itingon’s house. These two rooms have solved the problem of space for now.*¹⁴

This letter provides us with some important details: it notes the number of books that have been collected in the first three months of the city’s western occupation; it specifies the neighbourhoods from which the books have been taken; and it discloses that books were not only taken from private houses, but also from public institutions, in this case the Christian Arab School in the Katamon neighbourhood. In addition, the letter implies disagreements between the librarians as to which books should be collected, and also indicates the government’s eagerness to grab the plunder despite issues of ownership.

Two other things seem worthy of mention. First, here we are witnessing a moment that strikingly illustrates the way in which one culture emerges from the ashes of another; the ruin of Palestinian culture is the birth moment of a new Israeli consciousness based not only on erasing the Palestinians' presence, but also on erasing their culture. Once the culture is erased, one can claim that it never existed – there is nothing to contradict or refute this conception.¹⁵ Second, this letter not only underscores the act of takeover, but also its rhetoric: the books, which have been scattered everywhere, have finally come to rest in a safe place.

Processing Arab Books: A Right and a Service Rendered

At about the same time that this letter was sent to Dr. Warman (perhaps a bit earlier) the head of the Eastern Sciences Department at the National Library, Dr. Strauss, published a memo entitled, "Processing the Arab books from the occupied territories". It was Strauss' responsibility to receive the books, catalogue them and store them. His words attest both to his excitement at the growing influx of books, as well as to his resulting confusion and distress. It was a time of complete and total chaos; he found it difficult to handle the thousands of books and sort them properly, and his requests for help and more assistants have thus far been denied. In addition, the National Library had been forced to relocate from the Wolfson Building on the Mount Scopus campus to the Terra Sancta Building in western Jerusalem. The first part of the document reads:

Since the National Library was granted the right to collect abandoned libraries in the occupied territories and began a comprehensive operation in Jerusalem's Arab neighbourhood, nearly 9,000 books have been assembled. The number of books that were brought to the library in this way is greater than the number of Arabic books that have been collected by us throughout the years of this institution's existence. And not only this, but also among the books that have been found in the occupied territories there is a substantial number of books that have not been in our possession before, and many newspapers (nicely bound) that are not in the National Library's archive. Seeing that when approaching this task we have before our eyes the possibility of receiving some of the books as a fee for our services, indeed we have been given the opportunity to expand our collections considerably. However, in order to take advantage of this opportunity, we must invest much work in arranging and processing the books, which are in the meantime packed in sacks. Since the rules that would apply to these books have not been set yet, it is fitting that lists are compiled in a manner that would make it easier to reach an agreement in case the books are returned to their previous owners. For the authorities (the Israeli government and military governors) we shall provide lists that include the name of the author and

of the book alone, and for the libraries' owners also there is no need to go into more detail. Taking into account that our work is currently not being carried out in the National Library itself, and since it is possible that the books will once again be placed in crates and carried to Mount Scopus, it would be advisable to mark each book with the same number that would appear on the lists... in order to make it easier to select the books we are to receive as a fee for our services – if such an arrangement is agreed upon – the list should be divided according to the subjects the books belong to, such as old and modern literature, humanities, sciences, etc.¹⁶

The expression “The National Library has been granted the right” is very important, because it indicates that the collection of books has been carried out with official and military permission. It is also important because of its sanctimonious tone, which bleaches the sin by turning the library into a passive body. However, I want to concentrate on what I feel is the most important concept in this letter, the term “fee for services rendered”. How are we to understand it? Is this a spectacular display of sophisticated apologetics, the rhetorical trick of an administrator conscious of the fact he is writing an official, perhaps even public, document and who is therefore trying to conceal his eagerness to adopt the books under the cloak of future distribution arrangements? Alternately, is it possible that Strauss honestly believed that the National Library had performed an act of grace and salvation, and therefore deserved a reward for its efforts? Either way, it is clear that Strauss, like his colleagues, recognized the value of the books, coveted them, and had no intention of giving them up easily. If we have any doubts, the following sentences in the memo make this clear:

If a substantial number of these books is given to the National Library, we would be able to dramatically expand our research opportunities. Doubtless, we have first to bring into the National Library those books that are not currently in our possession. As for the other books, we are mainly interested in classical literature publications... examining the books that have come into our hands therefore requires library processing with exact awareness of our needs, and it should be noted that in this aspect, the Eastern Department at the National Library far surpasses similar institutions in the rest of the Near East countries that, although they are wealthy in books, are not adequately organized and do not allow the reader and the researcher the kind of work that can be done here.¹⁷

The conditional that appears at the beginning of the quote should not distract us from the fact that Strauss had a solid answer to the question of what should be done with the books; in fact, it underscores it.

The National Library and Orientalisation

The book looting cannot be understood without first tracking the history of the National Library. Since the establishment of the Hebrew University in 1925, the National Library had been intended to serve both as an archive for Israeli and Jewish culture over the years, and – in the words of Chaim Nahman Bialik who spoke at the university’s groundbreaking ceremony – to serve as a place whose windows are “open to the four winds... to bring to it all that is good and sublime from the fruits of man’s creative mind in all times and in all countries.”¹⁸ This attitude is what allowed Arab texts, including scripture, literature, science, and foreign language books, to become integrated in the National Library, namely to become part of ‘our’ knowledge of the East. In short, discussion of this book affair cannot be complete without returning to Edward Said, who taught us that the Orient (like the Occident) is not a fixed fact of nature – they are both the creation of man. Said would probably have claimed that the books were orientalised not only because they were discovered as ‘oriental’, but also and mainly because it was possible to force them into becoming ‘oriental’. He also would have reminded us that this book affair is related to that enormous chain of power relations and interests, supervision and control, that decides who should be allowed to talk (represent the Orient), and who will remain silent, voiceless, devoid of the opportunity to represent himself.

The role played by the Eastern Department of the National Library in the looting of Palestinian books expressed two of its functions. On the one hand, it was home to celebrated Orientalists, Zionist intellectuals who were educated at Middle Eastern studies departments in Britain and Germany (Dr. David Bennett, Prof. Guthold Weill, etc.), scholars who were not only librarians, but also central figures at the Oriental Studies Institute in Hebrew University and for whom the collection of these books was part of a wider task of mapping and understanding the East. On the other hand, the department accommodated Arab librarians¹⁹ as well as librarians from eastern countries (mainly from Iraq) in the daily work of collecting and cataloguing the books. Their work once more reveals to us how the eastern Jews, themselves the object of the Israeli and Ashkenazi establishment’s orientalism, have become major players in the oppression of the Arabs.²⁰

In Love with Plunder

Strauss’ memo is also notable for its quick adjustment to the new situation, including a daring leap towards the creation of the ‘obvious’, where the books are not ours, but yet are already entirely ours, only months after the process of their collection began. A similar process was occurring not far from the National Library in the new government offices, as Benny Morris delineates in his book about the creation of

the refugee problem and the dispossession of refugee property. The workers of the National Library did not know what to do with the books initially, and therefore made various statements about their possible future return to their owners, subject to hard-to-meet conditions and restrictions. After a while, no one was willing to discuss seriously returning the books to their owners, who were already far from Jerusalem at that point.

I wish to complete this short chronicle of the pillaging of the books with one last document.²¹ Its importance lies in the manner that it bleaches and purifies this sin, until no sign of violence and wrongdoing remains. It is not only the occupation, the expulsion of the Arabs and the taking of their libraries that evaporate, but also the pangs of conscience, if such ever existed (and I believe that they did), that disappear. Those who read this document without knowing the history of the war might easily come to think that the Palestinians left their houses willingly, for some reason leaving behind tens of thousands of abandoned books for the staff of the National Library to rescue fearlessly.

The National Library publishes an annual booklet entitled, *The National Library's News*, detailing the institute's major recent acquisitions, relevant academic publications, and information about other events of importance. In the report for the period between January 1948 and June 1949, it says:

Throughout the years of fighting, the National Library has collected tens of thousands of abandoned books, thus saving them from ruin. This operation has been carried out with dedication and sacrifice on the employees' part. We wish to take this opportunity to thank the people of the army and the custodians of the relevant government ministries, for their great help and the understanding and love they have shown, and are still showing, to this important work.²²

According to this description, Palestinians should be grateful and cherish the Zionist librarians' momentous efforts: if it hadn't been for them, who knows what would have become of their libraries? The document goes even further, however, implying that the Palestinians' books never had any owners in the first place. The books were simply 'found', scattered at the mercy of passersby, an anonymous pile of books one might stumble upon in the street.

The Owners of the Objects

Following is a partial list of the dozens of book-owners whose names appeared on the report submitted to the National Library's directorate in March 1949:²³

Ajaj Nuwaihid – Bakaa
Hanna Sawida – Katamon
Khalil Baydas – Bakaa
George Sai'd – Bakaa
Michael Kattan – Bakaa
Saliman Sa'ed – Bakaa
Aref Hikmet Nashashibi – St. Paul St.
George Khamas – Katamon
Khalil Sakakini – Katamon
Henry Kattan – Bakaa
Attorney Saa – Musrara
Yousef Heikal – Katamon
Tawfik al-Tibi – Katamon
Francis Khayyat – Musrara
Hagob Malikian – Talbiya
Emil Salah – German Colony
Z. T. Dajani – Railroad station neighbourhood
S. A. Awad – Katamon
Fuad Abu Rahma – Katamon
Adel Hasan al-Turjeman – St. Paul St.
Niqola Faraj – Musrara
M. Hanoush – Talbiya

And the list goes on and on, a fading remembrance booklet of the lost and looted books of Palestinians and Palestinian culture. Can they be saved from oblivion?

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Endnotes

- ¹ State Archives, Jerusalem, (hereafter SA) GL-429/3.
- ² Most of the books are still kept in the storerooms of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.
- ³ SA GL-1429/5.
- ⁴ Tamar Berger, *Dionysus at the Mall* (Israel: Hakibbutz Hame'uhad Publishing House, 1998) [Hebrew]; Tom Segev, *1949 – The First Israelis* (Jerusalem: Domino Publishing House, 1984) [Hebrew]; and Dalia Habash and Terry Rempel, "Assessing Palestinian Property in West Jerusalem" in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighbourhoods and Their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: The Institute of Jerusalem Studies & Badil Resource Centre, 1999) 154-183.
- ⁵ Khalil Al-Sakakini, *This is the Way I Am, Gentlemen!*, Translated by Gideon Shilo (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1990) [Hebrew] 239-240.
- ⁶ See Tom Segev, *Days of the Anemones, the Land of Israel During the British Mandate* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1990) [Hebrew].
- ⁷ Hebrew University Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter HUA), 042/1948.
- ⁸ National Library Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter NLA), 793/200.
- ⁹ As a researcher I feel that I should defend myself from them, in light of what appears to me to be open and unrestrained aggression, which instantly throws me into the heart of this affair. Had I been given the privilege, I would have preferred to become acquainted with the events of those days more slowly. I would ask the documents to show patience, I would urge them to reveal themselves in a more measured

way. However, they are manifestly raring to go, and they demand from me – almost force me – to move faster.

¹⁰ To put things differently, I believe that the magic in these words is somehow connected to a certain kind of inner contradiction. They tell us, without embellishment, everything we wish to know, and at the same time they make us feel as if so much has been left beyond our reach. They tell us so much, and at the same time so little.

¹¹ NLA 793/200.

¹² See Nathan Krystall, "The Fall of the New City 1947-1950", in *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighbourhoods and Their Fate in the War*, ed. Salim Tamari (Jerusalem: The Institute of Jerusalem Studies & Badil Resource Centre, 1999) 92-146.

¹³ *Al-Hamishmar*, 1 July, 1948.

¹⁴ NLA, 793/200.

¹⁵ I think, for instance, of *Hirbet Hiz'a* by the Israeli novelist S. Yizhar. Even there, in the heart of this brave attempt to reveal things that have been buried and repressed, the Arabs remain farmers. And I also think of myself, the son of a bourgeois, middle-class family, with parents who voted for Meretz their entire lives. Did I ever encounter in my childhood the names of Arab novelists? As far as I can remember, I did not even imagine it.

¹⁶ NLA 793/200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Menachem Megidor, "Preface" in *Hidden Treasures – From the Collections of the Jewish National and University Library*, eds. Rafael Wizser and Rebecca Palsar (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2000) 7 [Hebrew].

¹⁹ I recently had the opportunity to speak with two of them, Aziz Shihadeh, an attorney from Nazareth who worked at the library from 1963 to 1966, and Butrous Abu Manneh, a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa, who worked at the library from 1956 to 1958. Shihadeh told me of:

big sacks of flour containing books. We knew that these were books of Arabs from 1948. The sacks were put behind the department's reading hall. We would get dozens of sacks, sometimes even a hundred, and catalog them.

GA: Did this bother you?

AS: No, at that time it did not bother me. The person is more important than the book. If the people have been exiled and dispersed across the world, what good does the book do? It's good the books were not burned. There are people who would have burned them.

GA: Why do you think the books were not burned?

AS: The Jews appreciate the book. They are a civilized people. They are not barbarians. And besides, had the books been left to the street children, they would have ransacked or destroyed them. People in the street would not have valued these books. (Aziz Shihadeh, meeting in Nazareth, 28 Feb., 2007)

Abu Manneh told me similar things: "I appreciate the initiative to bring together and preserve these books. This really is a civilized act – or else the books would have been lost. I'm sure that the act was sincere and based on the notion that at stake were cultural assets that should be preserved. The people of the library were decent." (Butrous Abu Manneh, meeting in Haifa, 14 March, 2007)

²⁰ In this context, and in the current stage of my work, I cannot help but think about the fact of my being an Israeli. I thought about it when I met with Knesset Member Jamal Zahalka, who approached the National Library several years ago with a request to return Khalil al-Sakakini's books, a request which was answered with the following reply: "We are unable to discuss your request until the list of books is handed to us." (Needless to say that such a list could have only existed in the hands of the National Library.) Zahalka was courteous and tried his best to assist me. However, and for no apparent reason, I could not help but feel that he was looking me over with suspicion and that his tone was tinged with irony towards me, a somewhat questionable interviewer, seeking to speak on behalf of those whose voice had been taken from them, and at the same time a descendent of the disinheritors.

²¹ NLA, 793/200. A last note: this study owes its existence to archives. Two things occur to me in this context. First, the gap between the chaos of war, at least as it is usually conceived, and the methodical nature of documentation. I am convinced that there are many things of which nothing has been said, and of which nothing remains: undocumented conversations, letters that were lost forever, oral agreements and operations that went unmentioned. However, I cannot but be impressed by the plentiful documents kept in the archives, which I believe reveal more than just the mechanism of administration. Secondly, much has been said about the power of the archive, its incessant aggression and the varied ways in which it serves the regime. All this is true, but still, archives may also undermine the same order on whose behalf they are supposed to function. These spaces, which zealously preserve the incriminating testimonies and the evidence that might, some day, indict their owners, could undermine teleological narratives which unravel in a seemingly undisturbed manner. Because it is the documents, so zealously kept, which expose the breaks, the rifts, the cuts and the transformations that imperial history seeks to hide. By preserving remnants and partial, incomplete objects, archives have the power to act against imperial history and at the same time lead us towards more fragile, uncertain dimensions.

²² It seems that since then, this version of events has become fixed in the National Library's consciousness. In an exhibition that was held in 1965 marking 40 years since the Hebrew University's inception, the 1948 war was given a place of honor. However, the book affair was summed up very simply in the catalog: "During the Liberation War, many abandoned Arab books were found." (The National Library, *An Exhibition Marking 40 Years Since the Hebrew University's Foundation* (Jerusalem: The National Library and the Hebrew University, 1965) 36).

²³ SA, GL-1429/3.