

Walking on Ruins:

The Untold Story of Yalu

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The possession of a small red book – sometimes also called a German passport – grants me more privileges than most people in Palestine possess. Including: the privilege to decide where to go. For example: travelling to Yalu, a Palestinian village that stopped existing physically almost fifty years ago.

A Day in Yalu

My idea of travelling to Yalu was formed in late summer 2016. I remembered my friend Ramzi from Ramallah, one of the numerous Palestinians born too late to savor their origins.. He had grown up in Jordan, but his family was originally from Yalu. I started out on a Saturday morning. Ramallah and Yalu are located close to each other, less than twenty kilometers apart. But since walls and checkpoints make direct travelling difficult, I took a detour through Jerusalem.

The Palestinian village of Yalu, located around 13 kilometers southeast of Ramla in the water-rich and fertile Latrun area, has a long history to tell. Associated with Ajalon, an ancient village mentioned in the Old Testament, Yalu lived through eras of Romans, Hasmoneans, Byzantines, and Ottomans.¹ In 1948, most of the Latrun area – together with today's West Bank – came under Jordanian administration; the rest remained no-man's land. The Jordan-Israel armistice lines of 1949 clearly allocate the Latrun area to today's occupied Palestinian territory.

Yalu was destroyed in 1967. On 6 June, voices on loudspeakers told the approximately 1,700 inhabitants to leave the village; remaining persons would be in high danger.² Old people chose to stay or had to be left behind;³ the rest packed a few belongings and fled, probably without being aware that it was their last day in the village. The area became a closed military

zone. Bulldozers kept on demolishing houses. The neighboring villages of ‘Imwas and Bayt Nuba shared the same fate. Now the villages, all in all home to approximately nine thousand inhabitants, are covered by the Ayalon Canada Park, a nature reserve established by the Jewish National Fund.⁴ In March 1976, residents of Yalu, ‘Imwas, and Bayt Nuba officially addressed a letter to Israel’s former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. The request for implementation of their “legitimate humanitarian right to return . . . without applying for compensations from the State” contained within has been without answer.⁵

Entering the Park

Asking for a taxi to Canada Park in Jerusalem was unexpectedly uncomfortable. The driver, a Palestinian, was rather less than amused to learn my planned destination. The bag of food in my hand did not help to correct the picture of me being a tourist only wanting to enjoy the beautiful nature in the park. Anyway. The ends justifies the means, I thought, and stepped into the car.

“Ayalon – Canada Park,” written in Hebrew and Arabic, embellishes a huge stone at the entrance of the park, next to it the Israeli flag and a big sign of the Jewish National Fund. I walk over to an information board a few meters ahead. Again, I read the park’s name in big letters, with the difference this time that there is no Arabic translation. I am sad to realize that I am not surprised. The entrance is located in the park’s northwest; my destination, the remnants of Yalu, lies in the northeastern part, marked as an “historic sight” with a cartoonish pillar. I trace the shortest way within a maze of colorfully painted trails. I start walking through the park. Dusty roads, almond and olive trees everywhere. Sometimes a bunch of cactus plants and cypresses. I hear crickets chirping. People are hard to find, probably because it is the Sabbath. The heat is nearly unbearable. I breathe dust. After an hour I wish I had asked the family that was having a barbecue near the entrance for a ride. After one and a half hours, I realize that I am lost – instead of having hiked to the northwest, I find myself in the park’s south. It is now late afternoon, but the heat stubbornly stays, as the biggest child on the playground that does not want to leave the swing to the others.

In 1973, Bernard Bloomfield – former president of the Jewish National Fund of Canada – launched a campaign to raise donations for the establishment of the planned recreational park. The fifteen million dollars collected were tax-deductible, due to the organization’s charitable status.⁶ In 1975, former Canadian prime minister John Diefenbaker himself declared the park open.⁷ Approximately seven thousand dunams,⁸ the Ayalon Canada Park covers the destroyed Palestinian villages of Yalu, ‘Imwas, and Dayr Ayyub. Countless picnic areas, playgrounds, hiking trails, springs, and panoramic views have turned Ayalon Canada Park into a popular tourist destination. The signs inside the park refer to the area’s various historical periods, but not to its Palestinian history.

The Remains of Yalu

After what feels an eternity, I reach Yalu. It feels macabre, but the sight of the ruins nearly makes me jump with joy. I walk around randomly. From stone to stone, from ruin to ruin. The low-quality picture of the Hebrew map does not help me orientate myself. Far ahead, I see some people, but do not feel like talking to them. There is not much left of Yalu: a few stones on the ground, sometimes still connected to walls or parts of houses. Most of the stones were taken away, and nature fought back its place. Bunches of cactus plants and almond trees are mute witnesses of the life that existed before. They are in full bloom.

I spot a huge arched cave on the other side of the valley, next to it a small black square, surrounded by systematically placed stones. A house, I realize, and rush toward it. It was built directly into the hill. Its walls cut into the rock face must have rescued it from the bulldozers. I enter. For a few moments, the sudden blackness robs my eyesight. As far as I can see, the room has an approximate depth of five to seven meters. The floor consists of sand and bricks, and in the middle of the room I spot large holes in the ground. What might have been here? In whose house am I standing? A gloomy feeling of uncertainty turns the room black again. I step out. The view's colorfulness suddenly feels illusive; too much beauty for such a forlorn place. While descending, I pass the massive arched cave. The innumerable cactus plants in front seem to guard it. As I stroll around the ruins, so does my mind. Today, the place challenges one's imagination. I try to picture the life that existed here. What the houses looked like, how the people lived. Where they gathered for special occasions, whether they lived a happy life. How Ramzi would have lived if his family had not been forced to leave.

I climb up the highest hill. I am astonished by the view. Lush hills, cactus plants, and palms cover the area. Below, I even spot a lake. The setting sun lets the colors shine. I feel far away from civilization.⁹ I discover a small tower of stones, one of those with big stones below and tiny pebbles on top. A "sign of civilization," as I was told. In this case, I am not sure if someone was thoughtful or simply very ignorant. I look at the settlements all around. Big houses, even a factory were placed there. I wonder what is going on in those people's minds. Suddenly a naive thought crosses my mind: how easy it would be to exit the park here and go straight to Ramallah! But then I remember the borders and checkpoints. I sigh and start walking back to the park's entry.

Leaving Yalu

I feel confused. I witnessed how life had disappeared and houses were turned into ruins, or even less than that. What do I think about the last few hours? Why did I come here? How should I feel while walking over the ruins of my friend's hometown? I feel I have more questions than before.

On the way to exit the park, I pass a group of guys sitting on benches and smoking *argileh*. All of them come from Ramla, I find out later. I ask for the bus to Jerusalem, but shortly thereafter find myself getting a free ride to Jerusalem's Damascus Gate. We

talk, of course. “Yalu? There is no Yalu anymore,” Mahdi says dryly. Silence. I remember sayings about how helpful it is to “leave the past behind.” But what if force has left no past to leave behind?

One Park, Two Stories

On its homepage, the Jewish National Fund presents itself as a “global environmental leader” that “is greening the desert with millions of trees [and] building thousands of parks.” Further, it claims to promote “the preservation of historical sites throughout Israel ensuring that the stories behind each historical site are properly documented and can be retold for generations to come.”¹⁰ But this is only half the truth. When the Jewish National Fund addressed potential Canadian benefactors in 1984, it claimed that their donations would “enable the vital work of land reclamation, road-building, infrastructure preparation, and tree-planting.”¹¹ The fact that the Ayalon Canada Park would be built on the forcefully depopulated villages – located in today’s occupied Palestinian territory and therefore making the park illegal under international law – was not mentioned. When driving on Highway No. 1 from Jerusalem to the Ayalon Canada Park, no sign marks the crossing of the Green Line.¹² Until today, the Jewish National Fund neglects any Palestinian past on the park’s territory.¹³ A typical reference on the Jewish National Fund web site merely mentions “many fierce battles . . . during the War of Independence, between the IDF and the Jordanian Legion.”¹⁴

Remembering the Past. But Which One?

The Jewish National Fund seems to hide and eliminate remnants of Palestinian life within the Latrun area; thousands of planted trees seem to “greenwash” the past. Ilan Pappé, Israeli historian and author of *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, frames this engagement within the so-called process of *memoricide*.¹⁵ In his opinion, Palestinian villages have not only been seized, ethnically cleansed, and destroyed. Rather, the Jewish National Fund tries to eliminate the area’s Palestinian past and present from public awareness. Walid Khalidi, co-founder of the Institute for Palestine Studies, would be right: “It is a platitude of historiography that the victors in war get away with both the loot and the version of events.”¹⁶

In June 2017, Yalu will observe fifty years of extinction. The Palestinian village has a long history to tell, a history of forced transformation and oblivion, of applying thick layers of a trimmed present on the remaining shreds of the past. Since its depopulation in 1967 and the creation of Ayalon Canada Park on its ruins, deceptive silence rests on the Palestinian village. Hopefully one day Yalu *will* tell its story – and clear the windrows of silence from its ruins.

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Endnotes

- 1 John Reynolds, *Where Villages Stood: Israel's Continuing Violations of International Law in Occupied Latroun, 1967–2007* (Ramallah: al-Haq, 2007), online at www.academia.edu/12909263/Where_Villages_Stood_Occupied_Latroun_1967-2007 (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 2 *Memory of the Cactus: A Story of Three Palestinian Villages* [film], al-Haq, 23 June 2010, online at vimeo.com/12801869 (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 3 Eighteen elderly residents were unable to leave. See: "Letter from the Latroun Villagers to the Canadian Museum of Civilisation," 12 October 2010, online at www.alhaq.org/advocacy/topics/settlements-and-settler-violence/197-letter-from-the-latroun-villagers-to-the-canadian-museum-of-civilisation.
- 4 Ayalon Canada Park covers Yalu, 'Imwas, and Dayr Ayyub, which was depopulated in 1948. Since 1970, Bayt Nuba has been covered by the settlement Mevo Horon, housing approximately 2,400 settlers. See the 2016 policy resolution (G16-P010) proposed by the Green Party of Canada, *Revoking the Charitable Status of the Jewish National Fund Canada (JNF)*, online at www.greenparty.ca/en/convention-2016/voting/resolutions/g16-p010 (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 5 Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 181–82.
- 6 Reynolds, *Where Villages Stood*.
- 7 Corey Levine, "Israel: It Is Time to Renounce 'Canada Park,'" *Canadian Charger*, 31 March 2011, online at www.thecanadiancharger.com/page.php?id=5&a=848 (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 8 "The Ghost of the Latroun Area: 46 Years of Occupation," *al-Haq*, 13 June 2013, online at www.alhaq.org/documentation/weekly-focuses/713-the-ghost-of-the-latroun-area-46-years-of-occupation (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 9 This might also be due to the dust on my clothes, my sunburned skin, the lack of water, a bleeding knee from climbing stones, and small spikes all over from accidentally walking *into* a field of cactus plants.
- 10 Jewish National Fund, "About JNF," n.d., online at www.jnf.org/about-jnf/ (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 11 Reynolds, *Where Villages Stood*.
- 12 Eitan Bronstein, "Restless Park: On the Latroun Villages and Zochrot," *Zochrot*, 2014, online at zochrot.org/en/article/51029 (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 13 Al-Haq, "What is 'Canada Park'?" 2008, online at www.alhaq.org/images/stories/PDFz/what-is-canada-park.pdf (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 14 "Ayalon Canada Park – Biblical & Modern Israel," *Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael – Jewish National Fund*, n.d., online at www.kkl-jnf.org/tourism-and-recreation/forests-and-parks/ayalon-canada-park.aspx (accessed 23 January 2017).
- 15 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).
- 16 Cited in Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*, 234.