

Testimonies From the Censored Deir Yassin Massacre: 'They Piled Bodies and Burned Them'

A young fellow tied to a tree and set on fire. A woman and an old man shot in back. Girls lined up against a wall and shot with a submachine gun. The testimonies collected by filmmaker Neta Shoshani about the massacre in Deir Yassin are difficult to process even 70 years after the fact

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Fighters from Israel's pre-state militia occupying the village of Deir Yassin, April 1948. Credit: IDF archive/ Still from the film 'Born in Deir Yassin'



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For two years now a document that makes for difficult reading has been lying in the archives of the association to commemorate the heritage of [Lehi – the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel pre-state underground militia](#). It was written by a member of the underground about 70 years ago. Reading it could reopen a bleeding wound from the days of the [War of Independence](#) that to this day stirs a great deal of emotion in Israeli society.

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“Last Friday together with Etzel” – the acronym for the National Military Organization, also known as the Irgun, another pre-state underground militia, led by Menachem Begin – “our movement carried out a tremendous operation to occupy the Arab village on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv road – [Deir Yassin](#). I participated in this operation in the most active way,” wrote Yehuda Feder, whose nom de guerre in Lehi (also known as the Stern Gang) was “Giora.”

Further along in the letter, he describes in detail his part in the massacre that took place there. “This was the first time in my life that at my hands and before my eyes Arabs fell. In the village I killed an armed Arab man and two Arab girls of 16 or 17 who were helping the Arab who was shooting. I stood them against a wall and blasted them with two rounds from the Tommy gun,” he wrote, describing how he carried out the execution of the girls with a submachine gun.

Along with that, he tells about looting in the village with his buddies after it was occupied. “We confiscated a lot of money and silver and gold jewelry fell into our hands,” he wrote. He

concludes the letter with the words: “This was a really tremendous operation and it is with reason that the left is vilifying us again.”



Pictures of the occupation of Deir Yassin. Most researchers state that 110 inhabitants of the village were killed there. Credit: IDF archive / Defense Ministry

This letter is one of the historical documents revealed in a new documentary film entitled “Born in Deir Yassin” by director Neta Shoshani, who devoted the past several years to comprehensive historical research on the Deir Yassin massacre, one of the constitutive incidents of the War of Independence, which has remained a blot on Israel to this day.

In advance of the premiere screening of the film at the Jerusalem Film Festival, Shoshani showed Haaretz the testimonies she has gathered about the incident, the result of extensive digging in archives along with in-depth interviews with the last living participants in the action. Some of them broke a silence of decades when they spoke to her, often for the first time in front of a camera.

The assault on the village of Deir Yassin began on the morning of April 9, 1948, as part of Operation Nachshon to break through the blockaded road to Jerusalem, with the participation of about 130 Lehi and Irgun fighters who received aid from the Haganah – the pre-independence army. The fighters encountered stiff resistance and sniper fire and advanced slowly through the village lanes while throwing grenades and blowing up houses.





Orphaned children whose parents had been killed at Deir Yassin. Credit: IDF archive / Still from the film 'Born in Deir Yassin'



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Four of the fighters were killed and dozens were wounded. The number of Arab inhabitants who were killed there and the circumstances of their deaths has been disputed for many years, but most researchers state that 110 inhabitants of the village, among them women, children and elderly people, were killed there.

“They ran like cats,” related the commander of the operation, Yehoshua Zettler, the Jerusalem commander of Lehi, as he described the Arabs fleeing from their homes. Shoshani interviewed him in 2009, a few weeks before his death. Zettler denied that his people carried out a massacre in the village but he spared no words to describe the way its inhabitants were killed. “I won’t tell you that we were there with kid gloves on. House after house ... we’re putting in explosives and they are running away. An explosion and move on, an explosion and

move on and within a few hours, half the village isn't there any more," he said.

Zettler also provided a harsh account of the burning of the bodies of those who were killed, after the village was occupied. "Our guys made a number of mistakes there that made me angry. Why did they do that?" he said. "They took dead people, piled them up and burned them. There began to be a stink. This is not so simple."

Another harsh account was provided by Prof. Mordechai Gichon, a lieutenant colonel in the Israel Defense Forces reserves, who was a Haganah intelligence officer sent to Deir Yassin when the battle ended. "To me it looked a bit like a pogrom," said Gichon, who died about a year ago. "If you're occupying an army position – it's not a pogrom, even if a hundred people are killed. But if you are coming into a civilian locale and dead people are scattered around in it – then it looks like a pogrom. When the Cossacks burst into Jewish neighborhoods, then that should have looked something like this."

According to Gichon, "There was a feeling of considerable slaughter and it was hard for me to explain it to myself as having been done in self-defense. My impression was more of a massacre than anything else. If it is a matter of killing innocent civilians, then it can be called a massacre."

Yair Tsaban, a former Meretz MK and government minister, related in his interview with Shoshani that after the massacre, in which he did not participate, he was sent with fellow members of the Youth Brigades to bury the corpses of the dead. "The rationale was that the Red Cross was liable to show up at any moment and it was necessary to blur the traces [of the killings] because publication of pictures and testimonies about what had happened in the village would be very damaging to the image of our War of Independence," he said.





'They ran like cats,' related the commander of the operation, Yehoshua Zettler, the Jerusalem commander of Lehi, as he described the Arabs fleeing from their homes in Deir Yassin. Credit: IDF archive / Defense Ministry

“I saw a fair number of corpses,” he added. “I don’t remember encountering the corpse of a fighting man. Not at all. I remember mostly women and old men.” Tsaban testified that he saw inhabitants shot in the back and dismissed the claims of some of participants in the action that the locals had been hit in exchanges of fire. “An old man and a woman, sitting in the corner of a room with their faces to the wall, and they are shot in the back,” he recalled. “That cannot have been in the heat of battle. No way.”

The massacre at Deir Yassin had many repercussions. The Jewish Agency, the chief rabbis and the heads of the Haganah condemned it. The left used it to denounce the right. Abroad, it was compared to the crimes of the Nazis. Additionally, as historian Benny Morris notes in his book “Righteous Victims,” “Deir Yassin had a profound demographic and political effect: It was followed by mass flight of Arabs from their locales.”

Shoshani first became interested in the Deir Yassin story about a decade ago, while working on her final project at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, which focused on visual documentation of the Kfar Shaul state psychiatric

hospital, which in turn was built on the lands of Deir Yassin after the war. Following her documentation of the place as it is today, with its buildings that had served the village's inhabitants in the past and today are part of the hospital, she also wanted to find historical pictures of the massacre that took place there 70 years ago.



A street in Deir Yassin, today and in 1948. 'Within a few hours, half the village wasn't there any more,' Zettler wrote of the day. Credit: Itai Raziel (today), Zionist Archive (1948) / Still from the film 'Born in Deir Yassin'

To her surprise, she found that the task was not at all simple. “On the internet are pictures of corpses that are captioned as having been photographed at Deir Yassin, but they are from Sabra and Chatila,” she says, referring to the 1982 massacre by Christian militiamen of hundreds of residents of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. “In the IDF Archive they released to me for publication pictures of the fighters from Deir Yassin themselves,” she continued and displayed a series of photos showing armed Irgun and Lehi members, but no trace of the Arabs who were killed.

At the Haganah Archive, where Shoshani continued her search – “like a naive child,” as she said – another surprise awaited her. “An older man came up to me, very hush-hush, took me to a side room and told me that he had taken pictures immediately after the massacre,” she said.

The man was Shraga Peled, 91, who at the time of the massacre was in the Haganah Information Service. He told Shoshani that after the battle he was sent to the village with a camera to document what he saw there. “When I got to Deir Yassin, the first thing I saw was a big tree to which a young Arab fellow was

tied. And this tree was burnt in a fire. They had tied him to it and burned him. I photographed that,” he related. He also claims he photographed from afar what looked like a few dozen other corpses collected in a quarry adjacent to the village. He handed the film over to his superiors, he says, and since then he has not seen the photos.



'When the Cossacks burst into Jewish neighborhoods, then that should have looked something like this,' wrote Lt. Col. Mordechai Gichon of Deir Yassin. Credit: IDF archive / Defense Ministry

Possibly this is because the photos are part of the visual material that is hidden to this day in the Archive of the IDF and the Defense Ministry, of which the state is prohibiting publication even 70 years after the fact. Shoshani petitioned the High Court of Justice about this a decade ago as part of her final project at Bezalel. Haaretz joined her in the petition.

The state explained that publication of the pictures was liable to damage the state's foreign relations and the "respect for the dead." In 2010, after viewing the pictures, the Supreme Court justices rejected the petition, leaving the material far from the public eye. In the meantime Shoshani managed to get hold of some other photos connected to the massacre, among them a series of pictures documenting orphaned children whose parents had been killed at Deir Yassin.

The Deir Yassin massacre continues to upset everyone who deals with it, even at a distance of 70 years. Not everyone agrees with the characterization "massacre." Historian Dr. Uri Milstein, who studies Israel's wars, does a lot to propagate the thesis that there wasn't any massacre in the village. In many articles he has

written, he claims that this is “a mendacious myth” and “a blood libel” and that the Arab dead were killed in “a battle in a built-up area.”



Orphaned children whose parents had been killed at Deir Yassin. Credit: Still from the film 'Born in Deir Yassin'



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“I don’t think that anyone there had the intention of coming there and killing children,” says Shoshani in summing up the materials she has gathered about the incident. However, she says, “This was not a battle against fighters but rather the sudden occupation of a village, in confrontation with inhabitants who defended their homes with meager means. There were also cases, apparently isolated, of mowing down inhabitants, ‘executions,’ after the fighting was over, for the purpose of deterrence and out of fear.”

The Deir Yassin massacre was the first of a number of incidents in which Jewish fighters were involved in killing civilians in the War of Independence and after it was over. Another infamous incident was [the one at Kafr Qasem in 1956](#), on the day the

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Deir Yassin, the state is still censoring the archival materials from Kafr Qasem.

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