

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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The Making of “The Village Under The Forest”

Unfolding as a personal meditation from the Jewish Diaspora, “The Village Under The Forest” is a new documentary that explores the hidden remains of the destroyed Palestinian village of Luby, which lies under a purposefully cultivated forest plantation called the South Africa Forest. Using the forest and the village ruins as metaphors, the documentary explores themes related to the erasure and persistence of memory and dares to imagine a future in which dignity, acknowledgement and co-habitation become shared possibilities in Israel and Palestine.

In this month’s Voices from the South, writer and narrator of the film, Heidi Grunebaum, reflects on the development of the film, her personal journey of having one foot in South Africa and one foot in Israel, and the moral, ethical, and political implications of staying silent to current injustice.

The film was directed by Emmy-winner Mark J Kaplan, and was written and narrated by scholar and author Heidi Grunebaum. The Village Under the Forest will have its Norway premiere in Oslo on 12th September.

By Heidi Grunebaum

Writer and Narrator, “The Village Under the Forest”

The idea for our film, The Village Under The Forest, was born in 2009. I was part of a South African delegation attending a conference in Bethlehem that was connected to the Palestine Kairos process. After the conference we went to look for the remains of the destroyed Palestinian village, Luby that lies hidden beneath a vast cultivated pine forest and recreation park, “The South Africa Forest,” in the Galilee, in Palestine/Israel.

Luby, along with some 500 hundred Palestinian villages, was forcibly depopulated in the 1948 War for Palestine by military units of what became

the new Israeli state’s army. Like Luby, most villages were physically demolished during and after the war.

The destruction of the villages prevented the physical return of some 750,000 Palestinian refugees. Official maps were redrawn and some 9,000 Arabic place names, including villages, urban locales, natural landmarks and historic ruins were Hebraicised. The landscape of Palestine was ineradicably transformed.

Some 86 forests were planted over the remains of Palestinian villages by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the South Africa Forest being just one of many made possible by the contributions from South African Jewry. JNF forests

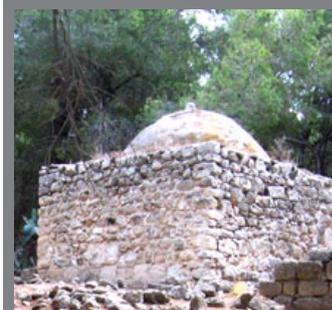


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The Village Under The Forest will hold its Norway premiere on Thursday, 12 September at 7pm in Oslo.

For more information and tickets, visit <http://www.karibu.no>



Photo: Heidi Grunebaum in the closing scene of the "Village Under The Forest"

have been planted and named after donors from countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia, Switzerland, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela.

What happened at Lubyia stirred us deeply as South Africans. One of our South African colleagues had been a victim of the mass forced removals in apartheid South Africa after the Group Areas Act, 1950. He and his family were removed to a 'township' called Vergenoeg which means, 'far enough'.

These tragic resonances were compounded by the fact that the South Africa Forest had been planted by funds from South Africans. We wanted to bring this story to a wider audience.

Research and Reflection

After our visit in 2009, I began research on the Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe, and its erasure from Israel's landscape and national discourse. The massive tree-planting

of the JNF has been an important mechanism in obliterating Palestinians' presence from the land. International supporters of the JNF believe that their tax-deductible tree-planting sponsorships contribute to a noble act of environmental preservation, and not of destruction.

The JNF played an important role as a land purchase and settlement agency for the Zionist movement since its establishment in 1901. Nowadays its colonial and ethnically discriminatory land use statutes are being increasingly challenged. Yet it remains a central institution in Israel's land regime holding 13% of Israel's public lands and exerting control over Israel's remaining public lands through the Israel Lands

Authority (ILA) on whose board of directors JNF office-bearers hold 6 of the ILA's 13 seats.

The organisation's involvement in settlement, infrastructural, forestation and other state projects includes areas from which Palestinians had been depopulated and prevented from return. With few physical traces of Palestinian presence, it has been easier for Israel to dismiss Palestinian claims for acknowledgement and return as tendentious.

By sponsoring trees in a JNF forest in the names of our loved ones, diaspora Jewry has played a direct role, unwittingly or not, in the erasure of Palestinians from the landscape. Despite not knowing, we are complicit in the dispossession of Palestinians from their lands because this act has been done in our name and in the name of Jewry across the world.

A Personal Journey

When I approached Mark Kaplan with the idea for a documentary film that linked South Africa to Israel/Palestine, the idea awoke Mark's wish to reconcile aspects of his own identity as a South African who took a stand against apartheid, and, like myself, as a Jewish person whose family had been killed in the Shoah. Mark has a long history of documentary film-making committed to human rights, bearing witness and speaking truth to power.

The film is crafted in the meditative

“The themes of the film resonate for many audiences for whom issues of identity, memory, home and family are experienced so painfully and precariously under the lived impact of war and forced displacement.”

register of a personal journey. It weaves together two seemingly irreconcilable narratives through interconnected landscapes, localities and the experiences of people who have lived this history. In the film, the forest and the village also become metaphors of a much larger and more contemporary process of enforced dispossession and spatial engineering. So the themes of the film resonate for many audiences for whom issues of identity, memory, home and family are experienced so painfully and precariously under the lived impact of war and forced displacement.

A South-South Effort

The film has truly been a South-South collaboration and effort. The film has connected activist, academic and film-making networks across many countries. We were introduced to Dima Abu-Ghoush, director of *Collage Productions*, a film production and media company in Ramallah. Collage joined the project as production manager for filming in Palestine/Israel providing production, research and logistical support. They helped us navigate the tricky terrain of check-point crossings, the exhausting travails and siege-like conditions that Palestinians face in daily life under occupation.

Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian and Refugee

Rights in Bethlehem provided contact with two activists and intellectuals who shaped the film in fundamental ways.

Dr Mahmoud Issa, an oral historian and Palestinian refugee of Lubyian descent lives in Denmark. His book on Lubyia is based on years of archival research and 700 recorded interviews with displaced Lubyians inside Israel and across the Palestinian diaspora. Dr Issa is an advocate of refugee and migrant rights who came on board as the film's historical consultant and introduced us to Palestinians from Lubyia who wanted to share their experiences on film.

The Way Forward

To raise the moral, ethical and political implications of acknowledging the Nakba means raising crucial questions for Israeli Jews and for the Jewish diaspora. It also raises complex moral questions for European societies for whom the establishment of Israel exonerated post-war Europe from

its history of anti-Semitism and its complicity with the Shoah. Whatever our histories and locations, facing these questions means that our ignorance and complicity, coupled with our silence and denial of the founding and ongoing dispossession of Palestinians must be addressed.

A shared vision of co-habitation can only be forged if it is premised on the acknowledgement that the Palestinian catastrophe cannot be forgotten. Palestinian and Jewish Israeli pasts and futures are intertwined.

In a very modest way, *The Village Under the Forest* joins a growing global movement of people whose ethos, solidarity and commitment to the Palestinian struggle is rooted in such a vision. ■

Heidi Grunebaum is a scholar, writer and senior researcher at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape.

Mark J Kaplan is an award-winning filmmaker, whose 25-year documentary film-making career has been committed to human rights. His work treats themes of memory, social justice and the search for accountability.

For more info, visit: <http://www.villageunderforest.com>

