

WEEKEND

Adam Raz

Two pages of issue No. 60 of the Kibbutz Nahshon bulletin, distributed to members at the end of the 1967 Six-Day War, were glued together. After the bulletins had been mimeographed, an unknown person decided to silence the reservations members had in connection with the lands of neighboring Palestinian villages whose inhabitants had recently fled or been expelled, and whose houses had been razed to the ground. "It was decided," says a note attached to a surviving, uncensored copy of the bulletin, "not to make our deliberations public."

The question of whether to cultivate the now-ownerless lands nearby was not the only moral dilemma that vexed kibbutz members in the summer of 1967. An equally fraught issue was what to do about the large mass grave for Egyptian forces that was dug at the time in fields that were being tended by Nahshon but did not belong to it.

Few kibbutzniks are willing to talk about the subject today. It's also not clear how many know the whole story. Indeed, interviews conducted by Haaretz and the Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research in recent weeks show that even individuals at the highest levels of government and of the Israel Defense Forces were also unaware of the scale of this story – not least because of sweeping, decades-long censorship. Others, who did know about the episode, declined to talk about it on the record.

Now, however, the story can be told: Dozens of Egyptian commandos who were killed in the 1967 war were buried side by side in the soil of the kibbutz. Their remains are still there, apparently beneath a tract that, since the early 2000s, has been used by the Mini Israel park, a tourist attraction.

The first person to breach the conspiracy of silence was a member of Kibbutz Nahshon, Dan Meir, who approached the media with the story in the 1990s. The military censor, a unit in the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate, did not allow the revelations to be published. "I know that this information is harrowing," Meir said in an interview back then. "It's not right that they are still buried there and that we turned the plots of land into a full-fledged agricultural area. This story distresses and haunts me. Almost 30 years have passed [since 1967] and I feel a need to unburden myself. I want the Egyptians to be returned to their home."

Meir, who has since died, was not alone in his views.

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Kibbutz Nahshon lies west of Jerusalem, abutting what was considered to be no-man's land, on the border between Israel and Jordan, after Israel's War of Independence – that is, quite close to the Green Line. It was founded by members of the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in 1950, adjacent to the monastery at Latrun, which was established in 1890 (and became no-man's land). Three Palestinian villages were located nearby, on what was Jordanian territory up until the Six-Day War: Bayt Nuba, Yalu and Imwas (Emmaus); the latter was closest to the kibbutz and to the site of the short battle that took place in the area in 1967. The events were well documented in the chronicles of the war. When it broke out, a small force of the Jordanian Legion was stationed in the Latrun enclave. It was joined by a commando unit from the Egyptian army's 33rd Battalion, an elite group of about 100 soldiers.

The Egyptian force planned to capture the air bases at Lod, Tel Nof and Ramle. Opposite it were troops from the IDF's 4th Territorial Brigade, a small contingent from the Nahal Brigade and a defense force comprised of residents from local Jewish communities. On the first day of fighting, June 5, 1967, the sides exchanged rounds of mortar shells. On the second day, the commander of the 4th Brigade, Moshe Yotvat, ordered the capture of the enclave. Within two hours the Latrun police station was taken, and a few hours later the entire surrounding Ayalon Valley was in the hands of the IDF.

Lt. Col. (res.) Ze'ev Bloch is one of the founders of Kibbutz Nahshon. He served as the regional commander in the 1967 war and was later appointed governor of Hebron. In his memoirs he noted that the Egyptian commando unit was not organized in a professional way and not given up-to-date maps. "It's important to grasp the depth of the confusion, shock and fear that gripped them," he wrote. "In the absence of an organized command, they had no idea where they were... The truth is that the commando troops were lost in the field."

The first clash with the Egyptians took place on June 6. The commandos hid in the fields of thorns that surrounded the kibbutz. About 25 of those soldiers were killed in a fire that was ignited in the fields, while they were being encircled by an Israeli infantry battalion under the command of Lt. Col. Yaakov Neria, and due to the use of phosphorus shells. Additional exchanges of fire that day and the following

Where the bodies are buried

During the 1967 war, an elite Egyptian army unit sustained heavy losses near Kibbutz Nahshon. The bodies were interred in a mass grave, in fields tended but not owned by the kibbutz. The story was hushed up and the fields became part of the Mini Israel park. One of the people involved in burying some of the bodies wonders why no one has asked him about it until now



An Egyptian soldier captured by Israeli forces during fighting near Kibbutz Nahshon, in June 1967.

Kibbutz Nahshon Archives

things sometimes happen in war. Don't forget that the Egyptians came here in order to murder us... [But] despite everything, I don't rule out the possibility that on the other side there are Egyptian families who still believe that their sons' remains will be returned."

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During the Six-Day War, and in the War of Independence (1947-49), local Palestinian civilians and fighters, and troops from Arab countries who were killed in Israel, were buried wherever they fell in battle. It was only after the 1973 Yom Kippur War that arrangements were made for locating MIAs and exchanging bodies between the sides. Indeed, there were no such exchanges until 1974, so any foreign Arab or local Palestinian soldiers who were killed from 1947 until that year remained buried where they were.

Different methods of burial prevailed over the years at each battle site. In the War of Independence, as said, Palestinian residents or Arab fighters were frequently buried at the spot where they died – sometimes by Haganah militia personnel and subsequently by the IDF, or by Palestinians who did not flee. Burial was in mass graves without any markings, and with all personal identifying items. The International Red Cross collected bodies in only a few cases during that war.

The mass graves do not necessarily attest to a dark history (for example, a massacre) or to an effort at concealment, but rather to wars that claimed victims. The dead, whether they were fighters who were killed on the outskirts

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day brought the number of Egyptian fatalities to about 80.

Guy Khoury, a monk in the Latrun monastery, wrote in his diary that bodies of the commandos were "strewn along the way." A few of the survivors were taken captive by the IDF, and some slipped into the huge convoy of refugees that departed from the three neighboring Palestinian villages.

In the afternoon of June 9, when the 4th Brigade was already heading east to continue fighting, en route to Beit Horon, a small force of IDF soldiers, accompanied by a bulldozer, arrived at Lot 5 of Kibbutz Nahshon (located on no-man's land – not owned by the kibbutz but cultivated by it). The ground at the site was totally scorched in the wake of the fire that had raged during the three previous days. The unit dug a grave 20 meters long for the large number of Egyptians' bodies; nothing was taken from them that might facilitate future identification. One Israeli soldier at the site counted some 80 bodies. A rumor in the kibbutz had it that one of its members had taken a watch from one soldier's body and had worn it until the day he died. Another member told us that he took a souvenir from one of the bodies: a Kalashnikov rifle.

A pamphlet published about a year after the war, entitled "Our Six Days," a

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Ze'ev Bloch.

Lior Yavne/Akevot Institute

copy of which is on file in the Kibbutz Nahshon archive, contains shocking testimony about the makeshift burial. Kibbutz member Rami Yizrael wrote: "It seems to me that two days after the war I was already sent to work with Asher cultivating the no-man's land... When I passed by the road on the way to Lot 5, I sensed a horrible smell from the large mass grave of the commandos. When I couldn't go on, because I felt dizzy, I decided to check things out. I discovered two arms and two legs that were severed from the Egyptian commandos, probably after they were hit by explosives and had been blown to bits. I buried them with a hoe. It didn't help. The stench was still there. I went over to the large mass grave, and to my horror half a body was sticking out. I covered it quickly."

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A military source who later took an interest in the subject admitted to Haaretz that he was the one who demanded that the story of the incident be banned for publication over the years, because its revelation, he said, "was liable to generate a regional furor." Indeed, as early as the 1990s, a report that the Yedioth Ahronoth daily intended to publish about the burial of the Egyptian commandos was banned by order of the military censor. In the materials remaining from the recently recovered article, which was based on an interview with kibbutz member Dan Meir, he relates that on the day after the burial, he noticed a huge mound.

"I was amazed that the army didn't fence off the grave and didn't even put up a small sign," he said. (By contrast, kibbutz member Eli Peleg says today that the grave was actually marked temporarily by means of a pipe that was stuck into the ground and was visible for a year or two.)

Yosef Schreiber, another member of Nahshon who has since died, added in the banned article, "It is more hurtful to the kibbutz members that Canada Park was built on the grounds of three Arab villages, which were demolished in the war and their inhabitants expelled. The matter of the mass grave bothered them less." However, Schreiber had no qualms about what he thought should be done: "I have no doubt that we need to approach the IDF and try to finish this business. I think that everyone needs to do whatever is possible in order return the Egyptians to their home."

Similar sentiments were expressed by the late Binyamin Naor, another kibbutz member quoted in the same unpublished article. "I am certain that if Jews were buried like that, we would cry out to the heavens. Maybe the IDF should have marked the grave and fenced it off, but that didn't happen. There was a war, and unpleasant

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BODIES

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of a kibbutz, a moshav or a city, simply had to be buried. There are in fact many mass graves in Israel dating from the War of Independence, like the controversial one at Tantura, which was the subject of an article in these pages from January ("There's a mass Palestinian grave at a popular Israeli beach, veterans confess").

A similar fate awaited the bodies of "infiltrators" – a term used by the state to classify the thousands of Palestinians in exile who penetrated the country's borders in the 1950s in an attempt to return to their lands and homes. A December 1949 document on the subject that was drawn up by the IDF's Central Command HQ ordered the dead to be dealt with in one of two ways. If the infiltrators were killed in areas where no Arab citizens lived, "the commander of the patrol or of the ambush is responsible for the immediate burial of the body in the place of the killing. The body is to be interred and covered with earth." In the cases where infiltrators entered the Triangle area – an area of dense Arab population in the center of the country – "the military governor is responsible for removing the body from the place of the killing and transferring it to the residents of the Arab villages" for burial.

Yitzhak Pundak, commander of the 6th Brigade, which was stationed in Latrun at the end of 1948, provided testimony later about the appalling way the infiltrators' bodies were handled:

"One day I was summoned to the central front. In the bureau of Maj. Gen. Zvi Ayalon, and in the presence of intelligence officer Binyamin Jibli, I was ordered to liquidate every infiltrator encountered by our forces, and as deterrence to leave the body in the field, to make an example of it... It was an unconventional order. I don't recall any discussion being held before it was issued, nor was any written order issued stipulating that this is how we must act.

"When I asked why there was no order in writing, the general and the intelligence officer emphasized that they were speaking in the name of the chief of staff. Gradually the trails filled up with bloated bodies. In the summer heat they gave off bad smells and at night they were prey for jackals and predatory birds. Swarms of flies marked the location of the corpses. The stench that spread through the area reached our outposts and soldiers started to suffer from headaches, dizziness, nausea and breathing difficulties.



The Mini Israel tourist attraction. A few weeks ago, equipped with aerial and satellite photographs, Bloch succeeded, "after using the requisite caution," in locating the mass grave, according to his best estimate, at the park's eastern fringes. Tomer Appelbaum

"One of the battalion commanders, a member of the 53rd Battalion who had taken part in the defense of [Kibbutz] Negba and whose company had suffered many losses, took the situation in hand and displayed initiative. Without requesting authorization from his commanders, he equipped his soldiers with cans of fuel which they poured on the bodies and set them afire. For many hours the fires burned in the unit's sector."

Bodies of troops from Arab countries were also buried near where they were killed. An army document from February 1968 that dealt with the question of "locating graves – enemy dead," stated: "Activity to locate graves of enemy dead was carried out only close to the conclusion of the Six-Day War. All told, seven concentrations of enemy dead (the total number of dead is not clear) were located, not including the area of combat of the 80th Brigade."

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The years have passed and the soil of Kibbutz Nahshon has also changed. The mass grave described here was dug in Lot 5, near the field in which dozens of fighters were burned to death. After the war, crops were grown on the site, and in 1983 a grove of almond trees was planted there. Afterward the grove was supplanted by a wheat field. One type of crop succeeded another, revenues flowed in. In the 1990s, it was decided to rezone the land and establish a tourist

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attraction on it. Thus, since 2002, Lot 5 has been subsumed within the property of the popular Mini Israel park.

Ze'ev Bloch, a walking encyclopedia of the history of the conflict, was present when the Egyptian soldiers were buried. In 1968, he wrote laconically, "A week after the war I was still finding bodies scattered on the Latrun hills. I was given a backhoe to bury some of them – some were buried by the monks."

A few weeks ago, equipped with aerial and satellite photographs, he succeeded in finding, "after using the requisite caution," the mass grave and locating it, according to his best estimate, at the park's eastern fringes, close to Highway 424. "The soldiers were buried in what is today the boundary of Mini Israel, not far from the main road," he said, indicating the site on a map. Other kibbutz members

confirmed his explanation.

Bloch can't say with certainty today what happened to the bodies, "but it's a reasonable assumption that the soldiers are still buried there," he says. Conversations with a source who deals with locating MIAs in Israel make it clear that an operation to remove dozens of bodies from a grave of this size could not have been carried out without the knowledge of the kibbutz inhabitants. Nahshon member Eli Peleg adds that a few years after the inauguration of Mini Israel, an army officer visited the kibbutz and started to question the members about the grave. "In my opinion, nothing came of that," he says.

And he's right. A source knowledgeable about MIAs confirmed to Haaretz that the fighters of the Egyptian commando unit are still buried at the site. To the best of his knowledge, he says, no request by the Egyptians to disinter them and return them to Egypt has ever been made.

Bloch, who no longer lives on Kibbutz Nahshon, says that if there is no possibility to return the bodies to their home country, a monument should at least be erected for them. If any official person were to look seriously for the grave, he adds, he would be willing to help. To this day, no one has approached him. Maybe it's time.

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