

"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"

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[Gish Amit](#)

Translated by Rebecca Gillis

Goodbye, my books! Farewell to the house of wisdom, the temple of philosophy, the scientific institute, the literary academy! How much midnight oil did I burn with you, reading and writing, in the silence of the night while the people slept ... farewell, my books! ... I do not know what became of you after we left: were you looted? Burned? Were you transferred, with due respect, to a public or private library? Did you find your way to the grocer, your pages wrapping onions?¹

When Khalil al-Sakakini, a renowned educator and Christian Arab author, fled his home in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Katamon, on 30th April 1948, one day after the occupation of the neighborhood by the *Hagana* forces, he left behind not only his house and furniture, his huge piano, electric refrigerator, liquor cupboard and *narghila*, but also his books. Like others, he believed he would soon return home. Nineteen years later, in the summer of 1967, Sakakini's daughter visited The Jewish National and University Library with her sister, and discovered there her father's books with the notes he used to inscribe on them. What became of Sakakini's books, which he says were of use to doctors and government officials alike? How did they make their way from his house, west of the Old City, not far from its walls, to the shelves of the Zionist National Library? What happened to the books of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who fled their homes during the 1948 war? What has become of Palestinian culture?

Several things come to mind as I set out on this research project, as I take the first, hesitant steps on a journey whose paths I do not yet know. Occupation is not limited to sovereignty over space; it reaches its full potential in its sovereignty over culture, its erasure or acquisition. Military force never operates in isolation. This is the picture which interests me, which directs, at least at present, my steps, a picture which is not at all imaginary: soldiers march over it. The librarians of the National Library tread in their footsteps and gather books from homes whose occupants have fled, in all the neighborhoods of West Jerusalem: Katamon, Musrara, Talbiya, Baka'a and The German Colony. The soldiers occupy the houses, cleanse the space, clear out pockets of resistance and open roads, while the librarians -- some of whom are themselves conscripted into the army, as others are released from

service because of age or because they do hold down vital jobs – loot a culture and a spiritual heritage. A task of the utmost importance: to extricate the librarians from the apparently marginal function assigned them by history, in order to expose their part in the creation of the State's narrative, the construction of this collective awareness, their part in the atrocity (later, as I learned afterwards, would come the thank you letters from the library clerks to the military personnel and the wardens of confiscated property, without whom all this could not have taken place).

At the same time and at the height of the work, seeds of vacillation and soul searching would be sown: are these in fact our books, and what should be done with them, are we, the National Library people, looting the books, or are we perhaps taking care of them temporarily? Will we return them to their owners and how much will we demand in payment for our efforts? All this, as I said, at the height of the war, without these reservations influencing the enthusiasm by one iota, the determination and effort involved in this operation, and the belief that this was a genuine act of rescue and kindness. This could be partly true: after all, would there have been anything left of these books if not for the energetic efforts of the clerks, most of whom had arrived here a few years previously from Europe?

Perhaps one should add that in recent years much has been written about the destructive results, at least for the defeated, of the 1948 war. The work of Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris and others have made an important contribution to this understanding, in their exposure of the deep, murky past, which Zionist consciousness and its agents in the media, literature and the academy has attempted to suppress. Today we know much more about the Palestinian refugees, and the way in which Israel intentionally and systematically prevented them from returning to their homes. We know that the popular-ethical-heroic version of the War of Independence as established in the Zionist ethos, is at least distorted; we even know something about the extent of the refugees' property and the looting of lands and factories, their confiscation and sale, first to the army and then to the highest bidder. Nevertheless, we remain almost entirely ignorant as to the disaster which the war inflicted on Palestinian culture.

There, for example, is a letter – of unknown authorship – sent to Dr. Kurt Warman, who was the director of the National Library, on 26th July 1948, about three months after the occupation of Katamon and several weeks after Dov Yosef was appointed military governor of the city. In July 1948 West Jerusalem was under Israeli control, and among the thousands of Arab residents of the Western city only about 750 non-Jews remained, many of them Greeks who were permitted to remain in their homes in the Greek and German Colonies.² The *Al Hamishmar* newspaper reported at that time on the conquest of the Arab village of Malcha and the completion of the cutting off of Ein Karem. At the same time its journalists were very busy condemning looting and robbery which were becoming widespread and whose extent no one could deny. At the beginning of the month the newspaper reported on a new law, "Articles for a time of emergency (confiscated property)" which made the recording of the confiscated property compulsory. On the same day the journalist wrote that "at long last the heads of the police and the leaders of the city have come out in attack on robbery and looting [...] Officer Sopher, Jerusalem's commissioner of police, announced that enormous efforts were being made to expose those guilty of looting in the occupied areas of Jerusalem. These efforts have already produced

results." The letter to Dr. Warman which could not get to Jerusalem because of blocked roads, and therefore remained in his house in Ben Yehuda Street, Tel Aviv, begins thus:

I estimate that to date around 12,000 books or more have been collected. The best part of the libraries of the Arab writers and scholars is now in a safe place. We also have several bags of manuscripts, whose value has not yet been assessed. Most of the books come from Katamon, but we got to the German Colony, Baka'a and Musrara as well. We found several wonderful Arabic libraries in Musrara. We also took part of the library of the Swedish School from Musrara. It is not yet quiet there, but I hope we will be able to continue in the next few days. After Dr. Unger complained to me that we had not made enough effort to save medical books, during the last few days, I took out, among others, the library of the health department of the German Colony. This was immediately protested by the Jerusalem Health department of the Israeli government. We are conducting negotiations, and I hope that we will be able to reach an agreement [...] A few days ago the University let us have two or three workers to help in this operation. This led to very fruitful work, which till ~~now~~ only three of us, Goldman, Eliyahu and I had been doing. These [workers] were not employed in the project on a daily basis, but only from time to time. We were given a room in Bergman's apartment and we also found a small storeroom in Eitingon's house. These two rooms have solved the problem of a place for the time being.³

This letter, with its incredible sincerity and rhetoric, provides us with some important details: it notes the number of books that have been collected in the first three months of the western city's occupation (until the beginning of 1949, some additional 18,000 books will be collected, and the National Library will receive a total of some 30,000 books which used to belong to the Arabs of western Jerusalem). The letter specifies the neighborhoods from which the books had been taken, and it reveals that books had not only been taken from private houses, but also from public institutions, in this case the Christian Arab School in the Katamon neighborhood. In addition, the letter implies the disagreement that broke out between the librarians as to the books that should be collected, and it also points to the government ministries' eagerness to take hold of the plunder: it seems that they did not have the patience to wait until the war was over and the situations of the books' owners became clear. Two other details seem worthy of mentioning: first, we are witnessing a moment that beautifully illustrates the way in which one culture emerges from the ashes of another, which the former had destroyed: the ruin of the Palestinian culture is the moment of birth of a new Israeli consciousness, which is based not only on erasing the Palestinians' presence, but also on erasing their culture. Once you have erased the culture, you can claim that this culture had never existed – there is nothing to contradict or refute this conception (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 matters that have been buried and repressed, the Arabs remain farmers. And I also think of myself, the son of a middle-class family, with parents who voted for Meretz their entire lives: have I ever encountered during my childhood the names of any Arab novelists? Have I heard of Arab scholars and intellectuals? Could I have imagined

that the Arabs are not just an amorphous mass of distant and invisible people, with whom we should somehow make peace, but that they also have a culture, a history, that they write poetry and prose and philosophy, that they make movies and stage plays? As far as I can remember, I could not even imagine it). Furthermore, the letter not only points to the takeover act, but also to its rhetoric: the books, which had been scattered everywhere, have finally reached a safe place. (A note about rhetoric: in one of his articles, which focuses on re-examining the 1948 war, Ilan Pappé⁴ suggests to convert ideological terms like "The War of Independence" and "Aliyah" into more neutral terms, which may allow for a more objective discussion of the relevant issues. I do not take this offer lightly, but the decisive importance of linguistic and lexical preferences is already clear to me, as is the fact that these traps cannot be avoided; not merely because of my tendency to doubt the possibility of objectivity – after all, doesn't the use of the term "The 1948 War" in Israel today imply to the writer's political views and inclinations just as much as the use of terms constructed by the Zionist ideology? – but because I feel that I have to take into account, in one way or another, that war is indeed a dirty business, and that those who took part in it, on both sides, are not made of one piece, homogeneous and free of contradictions. This and more: the renowned Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg once wrote that for a long time historians had dealt with political and military events; with states and not with individuals. From Thucydides to Machiavelli, through Hegel, this fact had had a decisive effect on the conception of sovereignty as a belligerent, immoral entity. However, he adds, there is a crucial difference between subjects and states: the first have a biography.⁵ If this insight strikes me as significant, it is not because I seek to absolve the workers of the National Library from their responsibility to their actions during the 1948 war, but because I feel that given their individuality, it would be a mistake to refer to them only as political agents or ideological entities in action; their biography will never fully correspond with history.

At around the time Dr. Warman's letter was written, or perhaps a little earlier, Dr. Strauss, the director of the Oriental Studies department of the National Library published a memo titled "Processing of Arab Books from the Occupied Territories." [Strauss was responsible for receiving, cataloguing and taking care of the books. His words denote both the excitement he felt at the books arriving in an ever increasing flow at the doors of his library as well as his confusion and distress. This was a time of utter chaos. He himself was unable to keep track of and sort out the thousands of books properly, and his call for more workers to help him with the task had been refused up till now. In addition, the National Library was in difficulties at that time, as it had to transfer from the Wolfson Building on Mt. Scopus to Terra Sancta⁶ in West Jerusalem. Here is the first part of that document:

Since the National Library has been entrusted with collecting abandoned libraries in the occupied territories, beginning with widespread operations in the western neighborhoods of Jerusalem, approximately 9,000 Arab books have been collected so far. The number of books thus brought to the Library is greater than the number of Arab books collected by us during all the years of the institution's existence. Not only is there a large percentage of books among those found in the occupied territories which we did not have, there are also series of journals (beautifully bound) which are not in the Library's archives. Since our approach to this operation takes into

account the possibility of receiving for the Library part from among these books as a fee, we may be able to expand our collection considerably. But in order to make the best use of this possibility, we must be diligent in arranging and processing the books which at present are stored in bags. Since the arrangement which will apply to this property has not yet been decided, it is appropriate to prepare the records to facilitate the return of the books to their previous owners. For the authorities (the government of Israel and the Military rulers), records including only the author's name and the title of the book are sufficient. The owners of the libraries themselves do not require more detail. Taking note of the fact that our work is not being done at present in the Library itself, and it is possible that the books will be placed in cartons for transfer to Mt. Scopus, we should mark each book with the same number which appears in the records [...] To facilitate the choice of those books which we will receive as fee – if this is decided upon – we should classify the record according to subject for example ancient and modern literature, humanities and natural sciences etc..⁷

The central concept in this quotation is "fee" (although the expression "The National Library has been entrusted" is of utmost importance, in demonstrating that the episode of the collection of the books took place with the approval of the official authorities and of the army, as an efficient and sophisticated confluence of two orders of power. It is also important because of its euphemistic tone, which lessens the crime by rendering the Library a passive entity). Do we have here a fabulous demonstration of sophisticated apologetics, a rhetorical trick by a clerk who is aware that this is an official, even public document, and who wishes thereby to camouflage his enthusiasm and take control of the books from behind a smokescreen of future distribution arrangements? Or could it be that Strauss honestly believed that the National Library was undertaking a charitable salvage operation, for which it was entitled to reparation. Either way, it is clear that Strauss, like his colleagues, understood the value of the books, wanted them, and did not intend to give them up easily. If we had any doubt about this, the following sentences from the memo make it very clear:

If a decent portion of these books were to be transferred to the Library we would be able to expand our research capability considerably. We should make clear that we must first and foremost put those books into the Library which we do not yet have. As to the rest of the books, we are most interested in works by classic authors [...] Examination of the books we have received requires library processing with an accurate knowledge of our needs, and it is unnecessary to point out that from this point of view the Oriental Studies departments in Libraries of similar institutions in other countries of the Near East are well endowed with books but not well ordered so that they do not enable the reader and the researcher to work as he can in ours.⁸

The conditional which appears at the start of the quotation does not disguise the fact that Strauss had a well formed answer to the question of what to do with the books; in fact it only serves to emphasize the situation. Moreover, I think that this document, with its hesitant opening and definitive, even arrogant

end, is symptomatic of the way the National Library related to the treasures which landed there (the word "landed" is not accurate, of course, since the National Library took an active part in collecting the books). It combines acquisitiveness, greed, arrogance and unrestrained pleasure with caveats, none of them too wide reaching or threatening. In this context, discussion of the looting of the books would be incomplete without reference to Edward Said, who taught us that the Orient is not a silent fact of nature, just as the Occident is not just there: they are both man's creation. Said, who would certainly argue that the books underwent orientalizing, not only because they were discovered as "Oriental", but more importantly because they could be made Oriental;⁹ and ultimately he would remind us that the episode of the books is connected to that same strong network of power relations and special interests, supervision and control, which determines who may speak (to represent the Orient) and who remains silent, voiceless, devoid of the possibility of self-representation. With this in mind, we should think not only about the megalomania of the National Library and its logic¹⁰, but also seek to understand the specific role played by the Oriental Studies department of the Library, and its workers: on the one hand well known Orientalists, Zionist intellectuals, educated in Oriental Studies departments in Britain and Germany (Dr. David Bennett, Professor Gutthold Weil), scholars who were not only librarians but also major figures in the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University, and whose efforts invested in the collecting of the books was for them part of a much broader system of mapping and interpreting the East. On the other hand, they were librarians hailing from Oriental countries, particularly Iraq, who were consistently employed in the task of collecting and cataloguing the books. Their work shows us once again how *Mizrachim*¹¹, themselves the subject of Orientalism of the Ashkenazi Israeli establishment, became major players in the oppression of the Arabs.

In this context, and at 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, who wished to speak on behalf of those whose voice had been taken from them, and in addition a descendent of the disinheritors.

Back to Dr. Strauss' memo, we should also pay attention to the quick adjustment to the new situation, including a daring leap towards the creation of the "obvious," where the books are not ours, but are already entirely ours, including the position which refers to the books' presence, only months after the process of their collection began, with complete naturalness and serenity ("It is beyond doubt that we first have to bring into the National Library those books that are not currently in our possession"). Also worthwhile noting is the similarity between this phenomenon and what occurred at that time in the government offices, not far from the National Library. The very process which Benny Morris¹² refers to extensively in his book about the creation of the refugee problem: as with the refugees and their houses – with all obvious reservations in light of the differences – the workers of the National

Library initially did not know what to do with the books, and therefore made different statements regarding their possible future return to their owners, subject to conditions and restrictions that were unlikely to be met. After a while, no one was willing to seriously discuss returning the books to their owners, who were already far from Jerusalem at that point, until this option had gradually become inconceivable. The people of the National Library did not pre-plan the pillaging; in the course of the war they learned from soldiers about the existence of the books, and they went to take them. Perhaps they sincerely believed they were saving them, and maybe they seriously considered returning them to their owners once the fighting ended. However, they very quickly fell in love with their plunder, and the possibilities which this plunder presented pushed away every other thought from their mind.

I would like to complete this brief description of the looting of the books, given here in only general terms, using another document.¹³ Each year, the National Library publishes a pamphlet titled *Library News*. The pamphlet publishes details of the institution's major acquisitions over a given period, relevant scientific articles and information about important events (appointments, cultural activities and so on). The pamphlet for the months January – June, 1948-1949 notes:

The library has collected thousands of abandoned books during war, and has thus saved them from destruction. This operation was carried out with great devotion and at personal risk on the part of some of the employees. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the military personnel and the guardians in the relevant government departments for their enormous help, understanding and love demonstrated with regard to this important work.¹⁴

The point here is the way, in which the above text purges the sin, purifying it until no trace of the violence and misdoing involved remains. Not only the occupation, the expulsion of the Arabs and the taking over of their libraries fades away as though they never happened; the pangs of conscience, if there were any (and I believe there were), utterly vanish from the picture. What is left is a collection of enervated terms and events, devoid of history, subsisting in a homogenous space, completely emptied of any political connection. Anyone reading this document without knowing the history of the war is likely to think, mistakenly, that the Arabs left their homes of their own accord, or because of some mysterious reason or other, leaving behind thousands of abandoned books. Luckily, the Library staff as a sort of elite, fearless, cultural task-force, were conscripted to save the books, at the risk of their own lives. According to this description, it would seem that the Arabs should be grateful to their saviors, and appreciate the brave efforts of the Zionist librarians; without whom, who knows what would have become of the books? At the same time, even this strict interpretation is lenient, given that the books, as described here do not have, nor did they ever have, owners. They are simply abandoned books, cast to the wind, available to any passerby who wants them, like a pile of books on a street corner which one might come upon by chance.

And finally, the 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 1949:¹⁵

Ajaj Nuwaihid – Baka'a

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

And so on and so forth, a record which fades into the distance. Will we be able to retrieve them from oblivion, to bring them back for a while from the land of the dead?

¹ Khalil Al-Sakakini, *This is the Way I am, Gentlemen!*, Gideon Shilo (trans.), Jerusalem 1990, pp. 239-240 [Hebrew].

² Nathan Krystall, "The Fall of the New City 1947-1950", Salim Tamari (ed.), *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and Their Fate in the War*, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 92-146.

³ Catalogue, *Exhibition to Mark Forty Years of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem 1965, [Hebrew], Archive of the National University Library, Jerusalem, Israel, 793/200.

⁴ Ilan Pappé, "The New History of the 1948 War", *Theory and Criticism* 3 (winter 1993), pp. 99-114 [Hebrew].

⁵ Carlo Ginzburg "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian", *Critical Inquiry* 18 [1], (1991), pp. 79-92.

⁶ Terra Sancta housed the Hebrew University between 1948 and the conquest of Mt. Scopus in 1967. In the first years after 1948 it housed [parts of] the library and lectures took place there, but then there was the Givat Ram Campus where the National Library was established; though parts of the Terra Sancta building still housed certain Hebrew U. departments (the Magnes Press among others).

⁷ See note 4 above.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Edward W.Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1978.

¹⁰ I was surprised to discover that Shlomo Shunami, who was in charge of collecting the Palestinian books in 1948, was appointed in 1950 to be head of the "Treasures of the Diaspora" department of the National Library, which attempted to bring to Israel hundreds of thousands of books belonging to Holocaust victims. It is no coincidence that in his work *Episodes in the Salvage of Treasures of the Diaspora* Shunami lumps together the bringing to Israel of books belonging to Holocaust victims and

the collection of the Arab books in that he presents them as two salvage operations, selflessly and assiduously carried out. Thus, after setting out the episode of treasures of the diaspora over seven pages, he is free to mention in brief, the episode of the Arab books:

At the time of the war of Independence, the operation to salvage books in Jerusalem was carried out, and after that also in other places, in the abandoned Arab neighborhoods. The employees of the Library, together with workers from the University "combed" at great personal risk, the border territories, and more than once were fired upon by the Arab legion, and survived by a miracle. Remarkable among the rescued books is the rich and important British Council Library which in large part is housed today in the reading room of the National University Library to the great benefit of the readers.

Shlomo Shunami, *On Libraries and the Librarian*. Jerusalem 1968, pp. 63-64 [Hebrew].

¹¹ The Hebrew term for Oriental Jews (mainly of North African, Yemenite and Iraqi origin).

¹² Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, Tel Aviv 1991 [Hebrew].

¹³ This project is indebted to the existence of archives. Two things come to mind in this context: first the gap between the chaos of war, at least as usually understood, and the methodology of documentation. I feel sure that there are many things which we will not mention, of which nothing will remain: conversations which were not recorded, letters which were lost forever, decisions which were made verbally and operations carried out by those who preferred not to mention them. At the same time I am overwhelmed by the abundance of documents and papers kept in archives, which reveal, I think, something deeper than an active administration. Secondly, much has been said of the power stored in archives, its unstoppable aggression and the various ways in which it serves the ruling power; about the function of archives as social agents, connected with the memorial industry and the articulation of the imagined analogy between past and present, while erasing pictures which are inconsistent with the way in which the national community seeks to understand itself. I am thrilled by the fact that archives tend to appear as undermining the existence of the order they are supposed to serve. These spaces, jealously guarding incriminating testimony as well as evidence which might one day incriminate their owners, are likely to undermine teleological narratives which are constantly being established, apparently undisturbed. The documents, so carefully preserved, actually exposed the cracks and fissures, the breaches and exchanges which imperial history seeks to hide from us. Following the trail of remnants, of partial and unfinished objects, archives have the power to act against imperial history while at the same time to lead us into more delicate, uncertain territory. I will therefore allow the archive to surprise me, to confound my expectations, to contradict my *a priori* assumptions, to reveal what I as yet do not and cannot, know.

¹⁴ See note 8 above. It seems that this expression has become engrained in the self image of the National Library. In an exhibition marking forty years of the Hebrew University in 1965, the 1948 war was given pride of place, but one should note how simplistically the abandoned books episode is summed up in the catalogue: "During the War of Independence, many abandoned Arab books were found". See: Catalogue, *Exhibition to Mark Forty Years of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 5724*. Jerusalem 1965, p. 36 [Hebrew]

¹⁵ Israel State Archive, Jerusalem, 1429/3.