

## David N. Myers VICTORY AND SORROW

### KHIRBET KHIZEH

By S. Yizhar

Translated by Nicholas de Lange  
and Yaacob Dweck

(Ibis Editions, 134 pp., \$16.95)

THE SHORT HISTORY of Hebrew as a modern language has yielded, over the course of little more than a century, an impressively long list of literary masters—the early twentieth-century Brenner and Bialik; the mid-century Nobel laureate Agnon; and the renowned contemporaries Amichai, Oz, Yehoshua, and Grossman. Much less known outside Israel, but certainly one of the most significant figures in the Hebrew literary canon, is Yizhar Smilansky, who wrote under the transposed pen name S. Yizhar, and died in Israel two years ago. Stylistically, Yizhar was a quiet revolutionary, expanding the register of literary Hebrew through a modern style that attended to the cadences and the phrasings of the Bible. With a sharp eye for physical description, Yizhar artfully lavished words upon the landscape of his land. He slowly unfolded its forbidding beauty in Faulknerian sentences that morphed into stream-of-consciousness paragraphs, whose hypnotic rhythm was periodically jolted by sharp ruptures in the plot. And thematically he was a stealthy provocateur, alternately planting bravado and self-doubt, insouciance and moral indignation, in his protagonists—ambivalent characters who both upheld and undermined the Zionist narrative of noble struggle for the ancient Jewish homeland.

This iconoclastic side notwithstanding, Yizhar came to be known by many contemporaries and critics as the quintessential writer of his generation—the so-called Palmach Generation (named after the Haganah strike force that played a leading role in the Jewish fight for Palestine in 1948). A good part of this reputation is owed to the *summa summarum* of Yizhar's literary career, a sprawling 1,100-page novel about the war of 1948 called *Yeme Ziklag*, or *The Days*

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of *Ziklag*, which appeared in 1958. The novel depicted in exhaustive detail the activities and the emotions of a group of young Israeli soldiers engaged in a week-long battle in 1948. The decidedly unheroic account of the soldiers leads one to wonder whether Yizhar really belongs to the Palmach Generation. As the literary scholar Dan Miron has observed, he was born five to ten years before other members of this generation, and he did not share in the euphoric spirit of triumph and redemption that accompanied the Jewish victory in 1948.

Nowhere is this lack of euphoria, this unexpected dourness of historical vision, clearer than in a novella that Yizhar wrote in 1949, a year after the war in which he participated as an intelligence officer. *Khirbet Khizeh* was published along with a much briefer short story, "*Ha-Shavui*," or "The Prisoner," which tells of an army unit's capture and mistreatment of an innocent Arab shepherd; but it was *Khirbet Khizeh* that became a cause célèbre in Israel. Thousands of copies were sold, and reviews and discussions of the novella swirled in the Israeli press for months, even years. What stood at the center of this remarkable work—and what provoked so much controversy in its day—was Yizhar's portrayal of an Israeli army unit called upon to stake out, occupy, and then expel the residents of a fictional Palestinian Arab town called Khirbet Khizeh, which had been vanquished in the war. Yizhar's typically languid pacing, whereby the unit is beset by boredom and puerile squabbles as it aimlessly wanders the countryside awaiting orders, is undone by the brutality and indifference of the Israeli soldiers as they expel the Arab residents from the village.

Yizhar's story challenged, to put it mildly, the sense of virtue that accompanied the carefully cultivated Zionist image of a new Jewish man, the legendary sabra. No longer content to be a passive victim of history like his Diaspora Jewish cousins, this new Jew was virile, armed, and prepared to fight for his land—but always, it was said, according to an exacting ethical code, the vaunted principle of "purity of arms" that was a doctrine of the new Israeli army. Striking an extraordinary balance between intimacy and detachment, *Khirbet Khizeh* rattled this myth of the noble sabra and

his purity. It cast doubt on the received account of the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem, according to which Palestinian Arabs fled their homes of their own volition or at the behest of Arab leaders. Instead, Yizhar painted a vivid portrait of expulsion. His story provoked a storm in the newspapers and journals of the nascent state of Israel, with some critics lauding the writer's honesty and courage, and others denouncing his work as imbalanced and even treasonous. The historian Anita Shapira has carefully chronicled its immediate reception and its subsequent appearances in Israeli public culture—for example, as a required text in Israeli schools in 1964, and as a television movie in 1978. She shows that the original boldness of *Khirbet Khizeh* was somewhat lost in the controversies over the story's historical veracity and political suitability—debates that reflected the complicated evolution of Israeli public memory of 1948.

Both the novella's literary merits and the lingering effects of its call for self-reckoning have prompted the small Jerusalem publishing house Ibis Editions to add *Khirbet Khizeh* to its fine list of titles, mainly books translated from Hebrew and Arabic. Although a few of Yizhar's other writings (but not yet his huge masterpiece) have been translated, *Khirbet Khizeh* appears in English here for the first time, and it is long overdue. The rendering from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck is graceful and fluid, with but a few minor infelicities. Their important translation will enable Yizhar to gain the readership outside of Israel that his work so richly deserves.

**K**HIRBET KHIZEH opens with the recollection of the narrator that "it all happened a long time ago, but it has haunted me ever since... How easy it had been," he marvels, "to be seduced, to be knowingly led astray and join the great general mass of liars." It is not evident at this point—in fact, it is not evident until the end—what the exact source of the narrator's psychic discomfort is. But a significant clue is given soon enough, when the narrator avers that one way he could begin to unravel his story is by mentioning the "operational order" that guided his unit on "a clear splendid winter morning." The unit was operating just after military hostilities between the Jewish and Arab sides in the war of 1948 had concluded. This was a period of ongoing instability, when Israeli forces were attempting to pacify hostile Arab villages and towns as well as to stem the tide of "infiltration," when thousands of Pales-

tinian Arabs sought to steal back across the border from neighboring Arab countries, mostly to return to their homes and reconnect with relatives, but in a small number of cases to engage in terrorist activity. In this fragile environment, the narrator reports that an initial order was given to his unit to “assemble the inhabitants of the area extending from point X (see attached map) to point Y (see same map)—load them onto transports, and convey them across our lines; blow up the stone houses, and burn the huts; detain the youths and the suspects, and clear the area of ‘hostile forces.’” With a trace of the withering irony that will characterize his stance of omniscient but paralyzing passivity throughout, the narrator takes aim at the claims of Zionist chivalry: the order would no doubt be carried out, he remarks, with “courtesy and with a restraint born of true culture”—indeed, as a reflection of “the Jewish soul, the great Jewish soul.”

The fictional order received by the narrator’s unit calls to mind the notorious *Tokhnit Dalet*, or Plan D, of the Haganah, the pre-state military unit. Formulated in early March 1948, the plan signaled a shift from a defensive strategy to an offensive one, as the Jewish forces struggled to gain control over Palestine during the waning months of the British Mandate. Among its central features was the granting of discretion to commanders on the ground to decide what to do with conquered Arab villages. They were afforded the option, according to the plan, of “the destruction of villages (setting fire, blowing up, and planting mines)” or, in the case of resistance, “destruction of the armed force and expulsion of the population beyond the country’s borders.”

The precise intent of Plan D has been much disputed. Was it a mandate for the systematic and wholesale transfer of the Arab population of Palestine, or a much more localized and improvisatory order? Without frontally engaging this question, *Khirbet Khizeh* does succeed in capturing the mentality of soldiers called upon to “clear away”—or perhaps more faithfully to Yizhar’s *letahev*, to “cleanse”—a single village. Yizhar brilliantly captures the feelings—and consequences—of ennui as the Israeli army unit sits in wait for the final directive to enter Khirbet Khizeh. Boredom, in such a setting, is a corrosive force, allowing for rage, vengeance, and pettiness to escape the bounds of social and military convention. Yizhar is at his writerly best in capturing it. War was his recurrent theme, but his finest literary moments come in describing not the searing heat of bat-

tle but “the ruthless long waiting.” It is in this realm of suspension and dread that the narrator of *Khirbet Khizeh* reveals his inner conflicts—at once willing to go along with the small chatter, sadistic pranks, and anti-Arab racism of his comrades and at the same time attempting to preserve a modicum of conscience and decency.

For much of the story, he goes along and gets along—as, for example, when the unit is shaken out of its torpor upon receipt of the order to move into Khirbet Khizeh. The soldiers unleash volley after volley of machine-gun fire intended to flush out any living being left in the village. Four Arab men manage to flee in the opposite direction, inducing a weird titillation among the Jewish soldiers. “We were getting excited,” the narrator reports. “The thrill of the hunt that lurks inside every man had taken firm hold of us.” Firing ceaselessly at the fugitives, the soldiers manage to miss their targets with impressive though unintended incompetence. Finally the narrator, who had been silent throughout the barrage, screws up the courage to utter a few humanizing words before trailing off: “Let them be—you won’t hit them anyway.... It’s pointless. Too bad.”

His occasional pangs of conscience stand in stark contrast to the condescension and outright revulsion of his comrades toward “Ayrabs” (de Lange and Dweck’s ingenious translation for the derogatory Hebrew term *arabush*), who are cast as uniformly primitive, cowardly, and barely capable of human speech. On a subsequent occasion, after scores of villagers have been rounded up, the commander of the unit, Moishe, issues a direct order to expel them and then raze the village. The narrator again screws up his courage to speak: “Do we really have to expel them? What more can these people do? Who can they hurt?” After several minutes of exchange with his fellow soldiers, he is told to shut up—and he dutifully complies.

Writing just four years after the end of the Holocaust, Yizhar is unsparing in exposing the narrator’s impotence, as well as the utter indifference of the other soldiers as they push along and load up the remaining villagers for deportation, ignoring their cries for help. The soldiers’ callous disregard, even at the sight of a sickly newborn, works together with the narrator’s paralysis to create a feeling of profound hopelessness, a sort of Israeli *No Exit*, as if there were no sense in attempting to escape the moral morass. What makes the scenes of deportation in *Khirbet Khizeh* all the more

haunting is how easily they conjure up images of forced population removal from the recent and not-so-recent past—images that are deeply imprinted in Jewish memory, as well as in our contemporary consciousness.

In contemplating the actions of his unit, the narrator happens onto the most tragic irony of the conflict between Jews and Arabs over Palestine: the fact that the histories of the two peoples were eerily parallel in many ways, perhaps no more so than at the very moment when the Jews decisively left behind exile and the Palestinians decisively entered it. This sudden realization shakes the narrator to the core:

I had never been in the Diaspora—I said to myself—I had never known what it was like ... but people had spoken to me, told me, taught me, and repeatedly recited to me, from every direction, in books and newspapers, everywhere: exile. They had played on all my nerves. Our nation’s protest to the world: exile! It had entered me, apparently with my mother’s milk. What, in fact, had we perpetrated here today?

Convulsed by “tremors running through me,” the narrator prepares to confront his commander one more time. He manages to stammer that “this is a filthy war.” Moishe blurts in response: “Immigrants of ours will come to this Khirbet what’s-its-name, you hear me, and they’ll take this land and work it and it’ll be beautiful here!” This retort pushes the narrator to the edge of madness as he strains to absorb the image of the seamless passage of one group into the homes of another without so much as a word of protest from his fellow soldiers. The novella reaches its emotional crescendo in a howl that must have taken away the breath of its Israeli readers:

My guts cried out. Colonizers, they shouted. Lies, my guts shouted. Khirbet Khizeh is not ours. The Spandau gun never gave us any rights. Oh, my guts screamed. What hadn’t they told us about refugees. Everything, everything was for the refugees, their welfare, their rescue ... our refugees, naturally. Those we were driving out—that was a totally different matter. Wait. Two thousand years of exile. The whole story. Jews being killed. Europe. We were the masters now.

The narrator’s grave qualms about the Jews’ budding experiment with power—that they had become, in the lacerating

words of Proverbs, “like a servant who comes to reign”—are especially poignant in that they never reach the ears of another soul. Returning again to the theme of moral paralysis and its companion, silent complicity, Yizhar has his narrator cry out only to himself. This famous and futile scream, this act of moral evisceration and the attendant disappearance of any shred of agency, paves the way for the story’s final sentence. Evoking a line from Genesis in which God promises to descend to undertake a moral reckoning of Sodom and Gomorrah, the narrator observes the calmness that has fallen over the valley in which Khirbet Khizeh was located and concludes that at some point “God would come forth and descend to roam the valley, and see whether all was according to the cry that had reached him.”

IT WAS THE famous observation of young Gershom Scholem, writing to Franz Rosenzweig in 1926, that the Hebrew language in its modern secular guise still contained an “apocalyptic thorn.” The biblical echo of *Khirbet Khizeh*’s final sentence is a kind of apocalyptic thorn, serving to warn against the belief that Jews operating under the Zionist flag can seize control of their own historical fate, and thereby liberate themselves, with moral impunity. The contingencies of history—or the judgment of an inscrutable God—can easily produce another deluge, transforming apparent winners into losers and the just into the unjust.

This is what Yizhar seems to be suggesting, and it is most surprising that he does so. I say surprising because in his own society Yizhar was not at all a marginal man. He was born in 1916 into the heart and soul of the Zionist settlement project in Palestine, in Rehovot, to a well-known family of stalwart Zionists. His great-uncle Moshe Smilansky was one of the leaders of the first wave of Zionist settlers in Palestine and a prominent personality in the Yishuv. Yizhar, for his part, never surrendered his family’s Zionist commitments. He fought in the 1948 war, and David Ben-Gurion, the towering political figure of the era, was his friend. He served for seventeen years as a member of the Knesset, a six-term parliamentarian from Mapai, Ben-Gurion’s mainstream Labor Zionist party, which dominated political life for the state’s first three decades.

How, then, to make sense of Yizhar’s act of literary dissidence, his fierce independence in exposing the moral numbness and psychological opacity of the soldiers in *Khirbet Khizeh*? After

all, Israeli society in the wake of the war placed great value on conformism as the new state sought to secure economic and military stability, ever fearful of a “second round” of fighting from the Arab side. Yizhar was unwilling to follow in the path of most of his countrymen in ignoring or justifying the plight of the Palestinians. Lecturing to a group of Zionist youth after the war, he spoke candidly about a great deception perpetrated by Zionist leaders: “They planted deep in the heart of everyone that there is place for two peoples in this country—that one does not need to push the other out.” And yet now, he continued, they tell us that “there is no room for Arabs in this country. They are not trustworthy, they can be a fifth column during wartime. This country is indeed only for Jews, since the Jew has no other place in the world other than this country.” Although he did not consistently advocate the cause of the Palestinians or the refugees throughout his life, Yizhar remained attuned to the moral and political blemishes of the Zionist movement. In 1990 he spoke of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza at a memorial for Martin Buber: “The Palestinian question is not an Arab question, but entirely a Jewish question.... It is a question for the Jews and a question for Judaism. And instead of continuing to run away from it, one must stop and turn to face it, turn and look at it directly.”

It has often been noted that Hebrew literature has assumed, in the words of Todd Hasak-Lowy, a “critical and oppositional stance vis-à-vis the (political) establishment.” Yizhar was a perfect representative of this tendency. So, too, was the young A.B. Yehoshua, writing twenty years after *Khirbet Khizeh*, in a seminal short story called “*Mul ha-ye’arot*,” or “Facing the Forest,” in which the Jewish protagonist silently assents to the destruction of a forest by an Arab whose destroyed village once stood in its place. This dissenting current has been continued by Israeli writers today, notably including Oz and Grossman. What is striking is that all these figures, from Yizhar to the present, are undeniably part of the political and cultural establishment of Israel, serving as official or unofficial representatives of the state, especially when abroad. This is not to say, of course, that the robust Israeli public square censors out all radical or transgressive voices in its midst. (To give but one small example: there is, amid the cacophony of the Israeli press, a Hebrew-language journal called *Sedek* devoted to the *Nakba*, as the Palestinian “catastrophe” of 1948 is

known in Arabic.) It is to observe that the tradition of criticism issuing from prominent Hebrew writers toward the establishment most often emerges from within the establishment itself.

At the same time, it is undeniable that the bounds of the establishment change over time. There was a three-decade-long period during which the narrative of self-induced Arab flight went largely unchallenged in Israel. Then, in the 1980s, the “New Historians” began to call into question this pillar (and a number of others) of Israeli collective memory. Benny Morris, in a series of works beginning with *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1987), relied on a massive trove of new archival sources to document the extent of forced removal by Jewish forces of Palestinian Arabs in 1948. A great deal of controversy attended Morris and his fellow revisionist historians in the 1990s. Over time, though, their work has begun to shift the terms of public debate from outright denial of forced expulsions to a widening admission that they took place.

The New Historians were far from the first ones to point to Israel’s role in the exodus of Palestinian refugees. A long line of Palestinian scholars, including Arif al-Arif and Walid Khalidi, have traced the contours and effects of the *Nakba* for decades. And in 1959, the Iraqi-born Israeli scholar Rony Gabbay published a six-hundred-page study of the Arab refugee problem called *A Political Study of the Arab-Jewish Conflict*, in which he documented a “radical change”—from a defensive to an offensive posture—on the part of Jewish forces toward the Arab population of Palestine in the spring of 1948. He also determined that “in some cases, reluctant Arabs were forced to flee into Arab country.”

Even before Gabbay—indeed, in the midst of the war itself and in its immediate aftermath—there was open discussion of expulsions, and of the repatriation of Arab refugees, in Israeli political parties, newspapers, and government circles. In 1950, the young journalist Uri Avnery wrote a wartime memoir, *Ha-tsad ha-sheni shel ha-matbe’a*, or *The Other Side of the Coin*, that discussed the kind of cruelty, indifference, and violence by Israeli soldiers toward innocent Palestinian Arabs that Yizhar depicted in *Khirbet Khizeh*. Even earlier, in late July 1948, Meir Ya’ari, one of the leaders of the leftist Mapam party, published in the party newspaper *Al ha-mishmar* a set of remarks that he had delivered earlier that summer expressing incredulity at his comrades’ mixture of glee and de-

nial. They deluded themselves into the belief that “we didn’t expel [the Arabs]. They ran away of their own accord. In any event, our borders are narrow. Why shouldn’t we inherit the land after they dispossessed themselves? Why shouldn’t we cleanse the terrain and grab this unexpected opportunity?” Two days later, another party member wrote in the same paper that “the vast majority of the villagers did not collaborate with the invaders [the Arab armies], and we should accept these residents back into our state as citizens with full rights.”

Such sentiments, both regarding acts of expulsion and the advisability of some form of repatriation for Palestinian refugees, were not unique to *Al ha-mishmar*, but appeared in other publications of the Israeli left. A rare voice of concern was heard even in the more centrist Mapai party of Ben-Gurion. Benny Morris has recorded a Mapai party discussion from June 1948 in which a number of members demanded to know if expulsions were in fact taking place, as had been widely rumored. One of them, Shmuel Yavnieli, expressed his opinion that Jews who had suffered persecution were now acting like “servants who reign.”

THE PRESENCE OF such agitation over the behavior of Jewish forces suggests that Israelis knew about, discussed, and felt remorse over expulsions already in 1948. It also places Yizhar’s *Khirbet Khizeh* in a broader historical context. To be sure, his was not a normative voice in Israeli society. But Yizhar did dwell at the center of his society, and the position of the narrator in his story, caught between the indifference of his fellow soldiers and his own disgust at the acts of expulsions of his unit, reflected that of hundreds, if not thousands, of Israeli combatants. It was Yizhar’s particular achievement to address this predicament with poignancy, introspection, and an honesty that few have ever matched. Pushing the bounds of acceptable discourse, Yizhar proceeded to a place of profound self-revelation without reaching the point of self-abnegation.

Almost sixty years after the publication of *Khirbet Khizeh*, Israeli writers and intellectuals continue the tradition of “connected criticism” (the term is Michael Walzer’s) so distinctly personified by Yizhar. For the most part, they focus on the burdensome political and moral costs of the occupation that was a consequence of the Six Day War in 1967. By contrast, 1948 remains an extraordinarily charged subject, even after the trailblazing work of the New Historians. The

assumption that mentioning the Palestinian refugee problem necessarily calls into question the right of the state of Israel to exist still serves as a major deterrent to serious engagement by many Israelis—and by many of Israel’s friends abroad. Alan Dershowitz’s *The Case for Israel*, a canonical source for Israel’s advocates in this country, rehearses the argument that panic and exhortations from their leaders were the chief reasons for the flight of Palestinians. In his chapter “Did Israel Create the Arab Refugee Problem?”, Dershowitz offers only the vague statement that “the military actions of the Haganah certainly contributed to the flight,” and follows the old script by noting only one instance of violent action by Jewish forces against Palestinian Arabs: the massacre by Jewish forces at Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948.

Such obfuscation is of no value to the cause of truth or the cause of peace. Accept the truth from whoever says it, the rabbis taught. The pressing question is not whether raising the refugee question undermines the state of Israel. It is, rather, whether Israel can avoid confronting it any longer. This is not to say that the refugee question is the sole matter on which resolution of the Palestinian conflict hinges. It is also not to say that Israel bears sole responsibility for resolving the long-standing refugee problem: the Palestinians’ own leaders and the neighboring Arab states have had a major hand in perpetuating it. (Nor, for that matter, is it to say that the oft-deferred claims of the Jews who were forced from Arab lands and suffered massive property losses after 1948 can be justified any longer, though one must add that the two instances are not quite symmetrical.)

It is to say only—though this is saying a lot—that the deep wound of the Nakba must finally be exposed to the light of day, and in some way be healed, if there is to be any hope for progress and peace between Jews and Arabs in the land known as Israel and Palestine. The return of Palestinian refugees to their old homes in the current state of Israel is an impossibility for many reasons. But that should not obviate the essential step of acknowledging Israel’s role in the dispossession of Palestinian Arabs in 1948. S. Yizhar—as Israeli a writer as ever there was—began this essential work of self-reckoning with *Khirbet Khizeh* in 1949. While many have set out on the path that he opened a half-century ago, none has ever penetrated as deeply into the Israeli soul, exposing both its darkness and its light. ♦