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RAF Ein Shemer: A Forgotten Case of Jewish and Arab Work in a British Army Camp in Palestine during the Second World War

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This article explores lingering recollections of a marginalised sphere of participation by Jewish and Arab citizens of Mandatory Palestine in the Allied war effort. During the war, Palestine became a major staging ground for Allied troops in the Middle East. Some 15,000 Jewish and 35,000 Arab workers worked in administrative, construction, catering, and maintenance roles within the newly built army bases. The story of civilian labour in RAF Ein Shemer reveals previously neglected normative and non-normative patterns of inter-communal relations between British soldiers and Jewish and Arab workers on the social, economic, ideological, and romantic levels within the context of a colonial-era military installation.

KEYWORDS British army camps, civilian labour, Second World War, Mandatory Palestine, RAF Ein Shemer, Royal Air Force, memory politics

During the Second World War, Palestine became a major staging ground for Allied troops in the Middle East. Some 15,000 Jewish and 35,000 Arab workers worked in administrative, security, armament, cleaning, construction, catering and maintenance roles within the newly built army bases.¹ The camps functioned as a common space in which Jews and Arabs served and contributed to the Allied war effort. Yet, significant as civilian work in the camps was, it has so far remained a little studied field of inquiry.

¹ O. Shapira, *Influences and Interactions [sic] between the British Army Camps, Colonies and Settlements in Samaria During WWII* (MA diss., University of Haifa, 2004); B. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.

This article traces the patterns of Jewish and Arab labour in RAF Ein Shemer, one of Palestine's pre-eminent military installations.² It shows that the camp was a complex social space, in and around which Jewish and Arab workers had their contemporary experiences shaped by multiple factors: the colonial sense of racialised hierarchies; their type and nature of employment and skill levels; and the changing Allied deployments at the base; as well as by the broader patterns of Jewish-Arab-British inter-communal relations. As oral testimonies demonstrate, however, these experiences were then mediated, rehearsed or marginalised in ways determined primarily by the results of the 1948 War and subsequent conflicts in Israel/Palestine. Thus, these different – and in different ways marginalised – memories of RAF Ein Shemer reflect the many ways in which the local impact of a global event could be recast, side-lined, or forgotten by post-imperial and post-colonial struggles.

Methodology and scope

This article explores the lingering recollections of a marginalised sphere of participation by Jewish and Arab residents of Mandatory Palestine in the Allied war effort. From the standpoint of micro-history and social history, it traces the life stories of the workers in one of these camps, and compare and contrast them by using a wide range of unpublished primary and secondary sources, such as diaries, formal correspondence, intelligence reports, memoirs and interviews with former employees and their families. Comparable evidence from other British army camps in Palestine serves to highlight commonalities and differences with RAF Ein Shemer.³

The author has used semi-structured interviews to document a body of 'local knowledge' known to the informants.⁴ The use of semi-structured interviews has long been a staple of local history research.⁵ It allowed for flexibility while conducting the interview, enabling the interviewees to narrate meaningful oral texts, while simultaneously addressing a varied set of questions that concern camp work.⁶ The

² RAF Ein Shemer, a Royal Air Force station, was part of a larger conglomerate of British Armed Forces installations in the vicinity of the Ein Shemer – Pardes Hanna Jewish settlement block. While this article refers to the RAF station in particular, the station also served as home for Allied/British army personnel, collectively referred to as British soldiers/Army camp personnel in contemporary sources. The article follows that established use, since Hebrew and Arabic sources (and to some extent also British records cited in the article) consistently referred to it as a *camp*, and it is part and parcel of the wider socio-economic history of civilian employment in the service of British Army installations in Palestine, that is in no way unique to RAF Ein Shemer and/or RAF stations in particular.

³ The author has been unable to find comparable scholarship on civilian work in British army camps during the Second World War in other provinces of the empire.

⁴ N.R. Sirhan, *Folk Stories and Personal Narratives in Palestinian Spoken Arabic: A Cultural and Linguistic Study* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); R.A. Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁵ W.L. Lang and L.K. Mercier, 'Getting It Down Right: Oral History's Reliability in Local History Research', *Oral History Review*, 12 (1984), 81–99.

⁶ E. Drever, *Using Semi-Structured Interviews in Small-Scale Research: A Teacher's Guide* (Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1995); R. Longhurst, 'Semi-structured interviews and focus groups', *Key Methods in Geography*, 3 (2003), 143–56.

presumed unreliability, inconsistency and biased nature of oral testimonies have led some to question their merit as historical evidence.⁷ As Lynn Abrams and Paul Thompson have shown, however, one can compensate for many of these shortcomings by contrasting different narrations, and finding points of agreement with external primary sources.⁸

Contacts within local heritage institutions helped coordinate the interviews in the Jewish and Arab settlements around RAF Ein Shemer. Most of the interviews in Arab villages were organised with the aid of the Triangle Forum for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Interviews with Jews were coordinated courtesy of local archives. The interviews lasted for 60–120 minutes in Hebrew or colloquial Palestinian Arabic, according to the narrator's preference, and recorded on tape.

The interviewees mentioned in this article have given their informed consent to be mentioned by name. Because of ongoing political tensions, special care has been taken to protect the safety and well-being of interviewees residing in the West Bank, who are not named in the current study.

Historiography of camp work in Palestine

In Israel/Palestine, the history of the First World War has received considerably more public and scholarly attention than that of the Second World War.⁹ During the later conflict, Palestine did not serve as a main theatre of war.¹⁰ Thus, representations of the Second World War in the Israeli public sphere are limited to the commemoration of the Holocaust as part of the national narrative of tribulation and salvation culminating with the establishment of the State of Israel.¹¹ Formal recollection of other aspects of Second World War has been shunned, and its cultural

⁷ For theoretical discussions of this issue: A.M. Hoffman, 'Reliability and validity in oral history', *Communication Quarterly*, 22:1 (1974), 23–7; T. Lummis, 'Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence', *International Journal of Oral History*, 2:2 (1981), 109–20; A.M. Hoffman and H.S. Hoffman, 'Reliability and validity in oral history: The case for memory', in *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, ed. by Jaclyn Jeffrey et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 107–35.

⁸ L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, 2016), 18–32 and 54–77; P. Thompson and J. Bornat, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–70.

⁹ The relevant body of scholarship is vast. Important works include A.P. Wavell, *The Palestine Campaigns* (London: Constable, 1931); A.P.C. Bruce, *The Last Crusade: The Palestine Campaign in the First World War* (London: John Murray, 2002); S. Tamari and I.S. Turjman, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Y. Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign, 1914–1918* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). The Society for the Heritage of World War One in Israel publishes additional scholarship in its annual collection of papers.

¹⁰ J.J. Gitlin, 'Call and Response: The Efficacy of British Wartime Propaganda in Palestine and Bahrain during the Second World War' (MA diss., University of Maryland, 2018).

¹¹ J.T. Baumel, "'In everlasting memory": Individual and communal Holocaust commemoration in Israel', *Israel Affairs*, 1:3 (1995), 146–170; M. Brog, 'Victims and victors: Holocaust and military commemoration in Israel collective memory', *Israel Studies*, 8:3 (2003), 65–99.

memory is limited mainly to the private sphere of war veterans (e.g. volunteers of the Jewish Brigade) and members of their families.¹²

British army camps in Palestine have received little attention by scholars. If they have examined the role played by the camps, and by camp workers, they have done so in the context of the armed national struggle for Palestine. In the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, chroniclers of the history of the Jewish underground militias, based on oral testimonies, put strong emphasis on the illegal acquisition (Hebrew: *rechesb*) of arms from the camps. Nationalist Israeli scholarship largely ignored the social and cultural aspects of camp work.¹³

On the Arab side, books dedicated to depopulated Palestinian villages often contain references to work in the camps (Arabic singular: *mu'askar, kamb*), based primarily on oral evidence as well. Village books stress the importance of camp work to the economic prosperity and development of individual villages. For example, 'Abd al-Rahim al-Mudawwar summarised the experiences of camp workers residing in the town of Tirat Haifa,¹⁴ while Muhammad Aql discussed the topic in his history of the Wadi 'Ara region, east of RAF Ein Shemer.¹⁵ Many other Palestinian village books contain *in passim* references to Arab labour in adjacent camps as manual workers or guards.¹⁶ In his novel *Moon Above Beit Daras* (Ara.: *Qamar fi Beit Daras*), 'Abdallah Tayeh provided a detailed literary account of camp work. It paints a vivid image of the daily routine of camp life: the road to and from the camps, the economic prosperity brought about by camp work, but also the hardships of manual labour and the deleterious impact of occupational injuries or fatalities on village life.¹⁷

Israeli geographers have discussed the spatial effect of the British army camps on Jewish patterns of settlement. Amiram Derman concluded that the camps had only

¹² Y. Gelber, *Toldot ha-Hitnadvut ha-Yehudit* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and Igud ha-Hayalim ha-Meshuhrarim be-Israel, 1979–1984) 4 vols.; S. Dagan, *Ha-Brigada ha-Yehudit, ha-Gdud ha-Shlishi* (Tel Aviv: Igud ha-Hayalim ha-Meshuhrarim be-Israel, 1996); H. Blum, *The Brigade: An Epic Story of Vengeance, Salvation, and WWII* (New York NY: Harper Collins, 2002); M. Beckman, *Jewish Brigade: An Army with Two Masters 1944–45* (Stroud: History Press, 2011); S.M. Roca, *The Jewish Brigade Group and the Jewish Units in the British Army in World War II* (Italy: Soldiershop Publishing, 2013).

¹³ For example, see *Sefer ha-Hagana*, the official history of armed militia of the Yishuv. The book is based on early collections of oral testimonies preserved at the Hagana Historical Archives (hereafter HHA).

¹⁴ A.R. al-Mudawwar, *Qaryat Tirat Haifa: Min silsilat al-qura al-filistiniya al-mudammara*, 19 (Bir Zeit: Markaz Dirasat wa-Tawthiq al-Mujtama' al-Filistini, 1997), 77–80.

¹⁵ M. Aql, *Al-Mufassal fi Ta'rikh Wadi 'Ara wa-'Ar'ara: Min Bidayat Thawrat 1936 ila Nihayat Harb 1948* (Jerusalem: no publication details, 1999), 132.

¹⁶ K.'A. Abu Shawish, 'Qaryat Barqa al-Muhajjara: Dirasa Ta'rikhiyya Ijtima'iyya Siyasiyya,' in the proceedings of the strategic conference *Filastin Tuhaddith Akhbaraha* (Nablus: al-Najjah University, 2016), 12; N.M. Ko', *Al-Ta'rikh al-Shafawi li-Khribet Beit Lid*, *Silsilat al-Ta'rikh al-Shafawi* (Missing place of publication: Missing Publisher, 2010), 25–26; M. H. Al-Najjar, *Al-Nas wal-Turath fi Isdud* (Missing place of publication: Jam'iyat al-Thaqafa wal-Fikr al-Hurr, 2013), 44 etc. On the historical merit of the literary genre of village books: S. Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998) and Davis, 2011.

¹⁷ 'A. Tayeh, *Qamar fi Beit Daras* (Missing place of publication: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Filastiniyyin and UNDP, 2001), 87–91.

limited effects on the local settlements. Allegedly, the low wages of most Jewish workers left them with no surplus capital to invest.¹⁸ Derman's work was later challenged by Uri Shapira, a graduate student from the University of Haifa. Shapira combined oral and documentary evidence from multiple sources to describe the different social, economic and geographical effects of the Ein Shemer camp block on neighbouring Jewish settlements.¹⁹ More recently, Sary Mark has examined the logistical and administrative aspects of military infrastructure projects undertaken by the British army during Second World War using a wide array of cartographic sources and field surveys.²⁰

Some Israeli scholars referred to Arab work in the camps as a possible cause for the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem. Benny Morris, for example, assessed possible economic reasons for the Palestinian exodus in 1948, noticing that most workers 'were laid off in the immediate post-war [Second World War] years',²¹ Alon Kadish, an Israeli military historian, discussed the Arab proletariat in the camps, and unconvincingly claimed that their dismissal towards the end of the Mandate was a leading cause for their so-called 'willingness' to abandon their ancestral villages.²² Both Morris and Kadish used few Arab narrative sources, and their findings differ considerably from the voices documented in native Arabic scholarship and in the current study.

In summary, existing literature stresses the economic importance of British military camps as employers and providers of indirect material aid. Many village histories documented the camps' material influence on neighbouring Arab and Jewish communities. These studies extensively used oral testimonies as a source of historical evidence. Other studies explored the negative effects of arms pilfered from the camps on the armed struggle between the Jews and Arabs over Palestine, with special emphasis given to its role in the collapse of the Arab society in the War of 1948. The social life of the camp workers, however, and the interactions between different groups employed in the camps have been little studied so far. Moreover, no attempt has been made to compare and contrast British, Arab and Jewish accounts of the phenomenon, whether be it at the local or the national level.

Civilian labour in RAF Ein Shemer

The following section is devoted to a micro-historical exploration of civilian labour in RAF Ein Shemer. It presents the three major groups of civilian labourers: Jewish, Arab, and Italian POWs, and surveys key episodes and phenomena related to their work on camp.

¹⁸ A. Derman, 'The Impact of British Camps Deployment on Jewish Settlements in Israel', *Horizons in Geography*, 11–12 (1984), 99.

¹⁹ Shapira, 2–18.

²⁰ S. Mark, 'Imperial or Local Case? The Physical Presence of the British Army in Palestine between 1918–1948' (PhD diss., University of Haifa, 2018), 306–9.

²¹ Morris, 20.

²² A. Kadish, 'Workers in Army Camps and Palestinian Society Before the 1948 War', in *1948 and After: The Jerusalem School on War, the Military and Society*, ed. by Alon Kadish, (Moshav Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2015), 17–47.

Built in 1942, some forty kilometres south of Haifa, RAF Ein Shemer was the largest military airfield in the country and home to seven Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons and 1,500 RAF personnel. Between the autumn of 1943 and June 1945, it was home to 203 Group, RAF's 78 Operational Training Unit (OTU).²³ RAF Ein Shemer and ten other nearby army camps formed the third largest concentration of military installations in the country.²⁴ No less importantly, it was the workplace for as many as 600, mainly Arab, workers. This made it, in the opinion of its Commanding Officer, Group Captain G.M. Lindeman, 'the largest camp of its sort for civilian labour in the Middle East'.²⁵ By virtue of its location in the borderlands between the Jewish and Arab zones of settlements, it had been a contested staging ground for Jews and Arabs during the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, and continued to be so during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (see Figure 1).²⁶

The construction of RAF Ein Shemer was tasked to Jewish 'civilian contractors' (Hebrew *kablanim*), who were responsible for the erection and maintenance of the infrastructure on base. The Solel Boneh Company, an affiliate of the Histadrut, the primary Jewish labour union, and private contractors like Noifeld, Yener and Ya'akobovitch from Pardes Hanna, and Anzelevitch from Hadera, provided a mixed (Arab and Jewish) workforce of skilled carpenters, builders, pavers, painters, plumbers and operators of heavy machinery.²⁷ As sons of former Jewish camp workers reminisced, specialised artisans often moved from one construction site to another, while being hardly ever home.²⁸ Because of the transient nature of their work on site, it seems that skilled construction workers did not consider any single camp their own.

Later on, Arab villagers (Arabic *fellahin*) from Baqa al-Gharbiyya, Deir al-Ghusun, 'Illar, and Jatt came to supply the bulk of the workforce. They filled the ranks of the sanitary staff, gardeners and cooks, those responsible for storage, basic maintenance, and guard duty in the base. The SHAY, the Hagana's intelligence branch, kept a close eye over Arab employment in the camps, reporting on 16 December 1943 that villagers from Baqa al-Gharbiyya's satellite hamlet of Khirbet al-Manshiyya 'work in the camps, aerodromes [e.g. RAF Ein Shemer] and in camps around Netanya and Pardes-Hanna'.²⁹ (The Hagana was the armed wing of the Yeshuv's labour block.) A reprimanding circular from the Group Captain Lindeman testifies to the importance of Arab work for camp sanitation. Entitled 'How clean is Your Chalet?'. It reads in part:

²³ *Royal Air Force Operations Record Book and Appendices, R.A.F Station Ein Shemer, ORB Jan 1944–Feb 1948* (hereafter RAF Record Book), AIR 28/249, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA).

²⁴ A. Lake, *Flying Units of the RAF* (Shrewsbury, 1999); Shapira.

²⁵ RAF Record Book, 5 March 1945.

²⁶ For the Jewish version of the evacuation of RAF Ein Shemer and its take-over by Israel Defense Forces personnel in May 1948, see the testimony of Itshaq Shemi, 'The *Notrut* as an interim step towards the Israel Defense Forces (exploits in Samaria, 1948)', Hagana Archives (thereafter: ATA), 186.25, undated (1950s).

²⁷ Civilian contractors, monthly statistics, file S9\1125, Central Zionist Archives (hereafter CZA); Interview with Farid Mustafa al-Dik, 2 February 2018 (hereafter int. al-Dik); Interview with Dudik Shalit, Pardes Hanna, 7 May 2019 (hereafter int. Shalit).

²⁸ Interview with Moshe Dayagi, Kefar Neter, 21 March 2017; Shapira, 6.

²⁹ 'Comments by "Barak" on Baqa al-Gharbiyya's Village Report, as Obtained from a Man Familiar with the Village', 105/227, HHA.

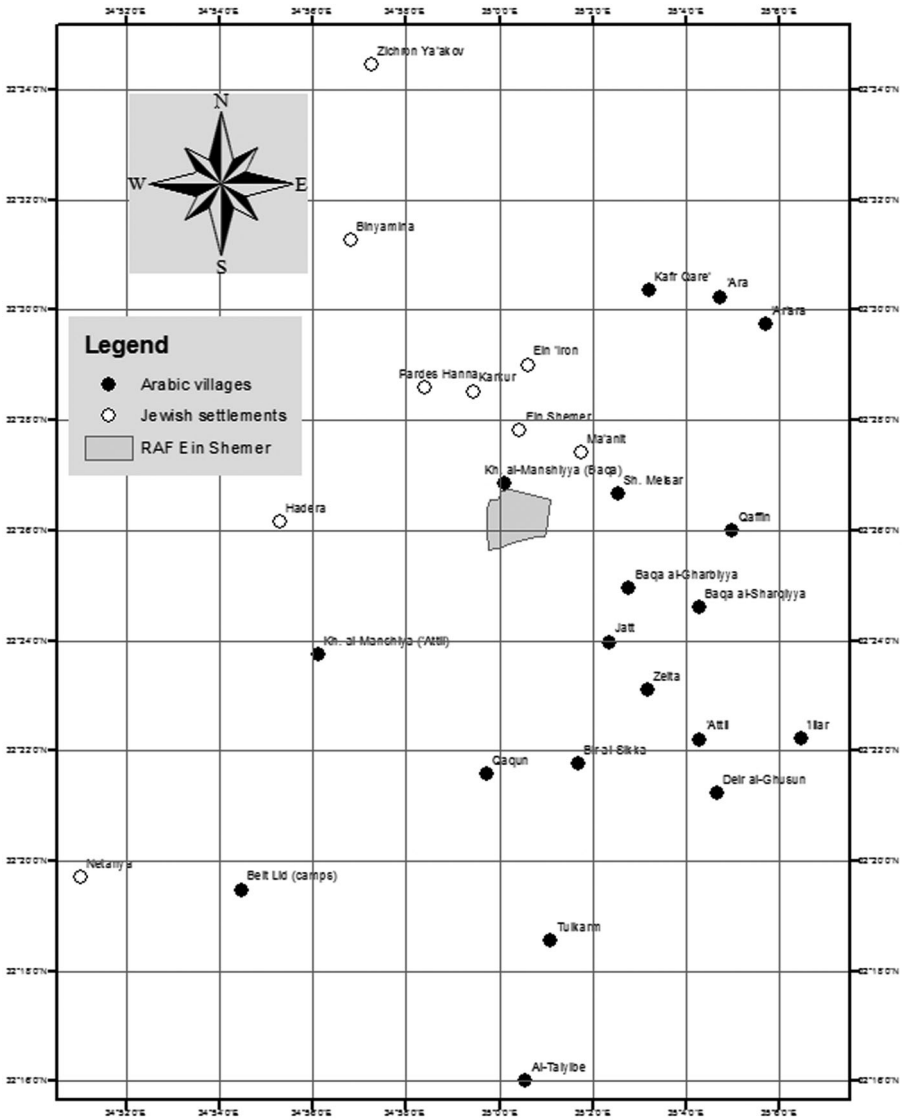


FIGURE 1. General location map of sites mentioned in the text.

N.C.O's, you have no batman, and you have no hut orderly. There is an Arab somewhere, but he is only supposed to deal with the surrounds of your billets – and he won't do that if you give him too much to do. ³⁰

These patterns of Arab employment in RAF Ein Shemer reflect wider trends of Arab employment in camps throughout Palestine. They correspond in full, for

³⁰ Group Captain G.M. Lindeman, Commanding Officer, 'How Clean is Your Chalet?', 14 December 1944, AIR 28/250, TNA.



FIGURE 2. An Arab worker walking near Station barracks, alongside a flooded *wadi*, December 1944 (National Archives, AIR 28/250).

example, with the portrait of camp work in Tayeh's novel *Moon Above Beit Daras*, which details the daily life of workers from Beit Daras, Hamame, Isdud, and nearby villages in Camp Shahma (Army Camp No. 69) in the south of Palestine.³¹ The steady participation by mostly unskilled workers from neighbouring villages in ancillary roles on camp stands in contrast with the transitory employment of skilled artisans, and seems to have led to the formation of work-cliques based on clan or village affiliations. The apparent distinction between Arab and Jewish patterns of employment in RAF Ein Shemer seems to stem from the ethnic composition of skilled versus unskilled labour in the vicinity, and may not be representative for camps where there was a majority of Jewish labourers in auxiliary roles (such as in Netanya or Hadera) (Figure 2).

A supporting example can be found in the favouritism reportedly shown by supervisors in allocating long-term employment opportunities on camp. British regulations dictated that in order for natives to work in military installations, they had

³¹ Tayeh, 87–88; A.H. Jude, *Isdood: Castle of the Palestinian South* (Dalton, GA: Amazone Press [sic], 2012), 96–97 [in Arabic]; interview with Harb Abu Seif, al-Ramla, 19 January 2019 (b. 1936 at Hamame); interview with Zaki Abu Marase, Lydda, 1 May 2019 (b. 1945 at al-Majdal, Gaza Sub-district).

to arrange for a permit, or ‘pass’³², from one of the authorised foremen or civilian contractors. A letter of complaint by Ein Iron resident Hayim Teller to the British authorities demonstrates that such protocols opened the door for much abuse. It allowed contractors to strengthen existing bonds of solidarity along kinship, village, and ideological lines. ‘There has been much disorder and injustice in the allocation of work and wages’, Teller complained, ‘the engineers in charge take advantage of favouritism for the benefit of their friends and relatives’.³³ On the Arab side, foremen, known by their colloquial Arabic Ottoman-era title *baş reis*, similarly abused their position to the benefit of their kin. This practice, however, exposed them to retribution by disqualified villagers: ‘P.N. ... people were angry with him for favouritism, and those whom he did not give an opportunity to work grew angry, and gave him trouble and bit him’.³⁴

In January 1944, there were 194 Arab workers in RAF Ein Shemer. Flooded with an influx of Italian prisoners of war (POWs), RAF authorities decided to employ them ‘as extensively as possible ... in lieu of civilians’, except for the armament section, due to their political ‘unreliability’.³⁵ Those men taken prisoner in Italy or captured during the Fall of Tunisia in 1943, following the Italian surrender in September 1943, although former Italian belligerents, were not actually prisoners of war. Although classified as ‘cooperating’ co-belligerent personnel, and drawn upon to address the manpower shortages for the Allied war effort, the Italians were usually referred to as POWs in official British correspondence, and also in local Arabic and Hebrew sources. As such, they will be referred to as POW in this article.

About 150 Italian POWs served as sanitary staff, cooks, and infrastructure maintenance crews. The Italians roamed freely in the camp, as well as in adjacent Jewish settlements (see Figure 3). However, by November 1944, Arab cooks replaced their Italian counterparts, because according to the Station’s Commanding Officer the latter ‘complain[ed] that cleaning tables and scrubbing floors is no part of their duty, while Arabs are not subject to such scruples’.³⁶

Local perceptions of Italian personnel were coloured by ethno-religious and economic divisions, rather than by any political consideration of their former allegiance to the Axis powers (with which some Arabs in Palestine admittedly sympathised).³⁷ In the context of RAF Ein Shemer, at least, their foreign (e.g. Christian) religion and their status as immediate contenders for work meant that

³² ‘Pass’ is an English term which was absorbed into the local colloquial Arabic.

³³ Shapira, 100. The letter is dated 18 September 1940 and refers to an adjacent army camp.

³⁴ Interview with Saleh Qi’dan Bayud, 19 March 2018 (hereafter int. Qi’dan).

³⁵ ‘Revision of Establishment – No. 78 (G.R.) O.T.U.’, Secret, 22 January 1944, 5–6, AIR 28/250, TNA. B. Moore, ‘Enforced Diaspora: The Fate of Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War’, *War in History*, 22:2 (2015), 174–90; B. Moore, ‘Turning liabilities into assets: British government policy towards German and Italian prisoners of war during the Second World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32:1 (1997), 117–36.

³⁶ RAF Record Book, 30 November 1944.

³⁷ P. Wien, ‘Coming to terms with the past: German academia and historical relations between the Arab lands and Nazi Germany’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42:2 (2010), 311–21; W. Helmreich, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (London: Routledge, 2016).



FIGURE 3. Italian POWs cleaning a street in Zichron Ya'akov, under the watch of Y. Leitner, circa 1944 (Leitner family papers).

Jewish and Arab workers did not consider them as fellow members of a social underclass treated dismissively by their British overseers.

In other camps in Palestine, there were attempts to unionise labour after the USSR was brought into the war on the side of the Allies. These attempts were headed by the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), and to a lesser extent by the Histadrut. Starting in 1943, the PCP distributed around Jaffa Tel-Aviv a worker's journal by the name of *Ba-Kemp*, in which it covered the social and economic situation in the camps. The journal called upon the British to accede to workers' demands for a basic wage, cost of living allowance, the establishment of subsidised canteens, extra pay for overtime, compensation in case of injury or sickness, an annual holiday, formal recognition of worker unions and of subsidised housing.³⁸ No communist activity is known to have taken place among the civilian workers at RAF Ein Shemer. There is a record of a single worker's strike, but this was due to the political unrest in Syria and Lebanon, rather than for any socioeconomic factors.³⁹ This finding supports Zachary Lockman's earlier research showing that left-wing efforts to sustain an inter-communal class identity in Palestine failed, in part, due to the simmering ethno-religious tensions in Palestine in the aftermath of the Arab Revolt.⁴⁰ This apparent lack of political collaboration between Arab and Jewish workers in RAF Ein Shemer adds further credence to Lockman's findings.

The diverse origins of the camp's Arab workers occasionally led to civil strife. Oral testimonies mention internal skirmishes between workers from different villages. The most severe skirmish occurred on 18 August 1945, an official holiday

³⁸ *Ba-Kemp*, 8/klali/155 and, 168, HHA.

³⁹ RAF Record Book, 22 May 1945.

⁴⁰ Z. Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996), 292–9.

celebrating the Allied victory over Japan, and involved workers from Baqa al-Gharbiyya and Deir al-Ghusun.⁴¹ What apparently began as a dispute over the outcome of a road race, turned into a riot in Baqa, which ended in the death of a woman and her child.⁴² According to the *Palestine Post*, ‘the Deir al-Ghusun truck has been winning as of late, and had aroused the resentment of the other villages’. In retrospective recollections of both parties, too, the episode figures prominently as a local-patriotic stand to protect the honour of Baqa’s residents.⁴³

As in other camps, Jewish and Arab workers in RAF Ein Shemer enjoyed only limited social welfare benefits. They toiled for eight-hour shifts, from 8.00 am to 4.00 pm, arriving by transport provided by the military. They laboured for six days a week; with their day of rest on Sunday (Jews moreover did not work on the Sabbath). As day workers, they were not entitled to sickness leave or severance pay. Jews though received somewhat better working conditions. For example, they were fully excused during their religious observances, while Arabs were given only partial leave.⁴⁴ The need for a large workforce, and the cheaper cost of Arab labour, meant that the RAF preferred to employ Arabs in all but the most skilled positions.

As in other parts of Palestine, the rapid expansion of the Ein Shemer camp block led to the unchecked growth of auxiliary services close to the camps: coffee houses, restaurants, canteens, housing and civilian transportation services to and from camp. These services catered for the needs of both civilian workers and RAF personnel, especially in the early years of the RAF Station when many basic amenities were in short supply. A large part of the workforce consisted of Arab and Jewish teenagers or young men (Arabic *shabab*, Hebrew *ne‘arim*), fresh out of school.⁴⁵ Camp records show that camp officials considered the unregulated presence of adolescent peddlers as a hygienic and commercial nuisance, as it deprived the ‘Institute Funds of the Station’ of necessary revenue. Consequently, they decided to license a civilian contractor’s ‘Milk and Fruit’ bar with providing refreshments and local fruits, in order to put a stop to ‘all undesirable trading with hawkers’.⁴⁶ The struggle against the presence of adolescent peddlers on camp may also reflect fears of ‘juvenile delinquency’, commonly ascribed to underemployed adolescent males near British colonial administrative or military sites during that time.⁴⁷

⁴¹ ‘Bad Losers’, *Palestine Post*, 19 August 1945. Interestingly enough, the incident is absent from the RAF Record Book for 18 August 1945.

⁴² Similar contests took place between Jewish and Arab workers en route to the camps near Sarafand (alRamla Sub-district); Kadish, 30, 49.

⁴³ Int. al-Dik, 18 February 2018; interview with Mahmud Hasan Khalaf, Baqa al-Gharbiyya, 5 May 2018 (hereafter int. Khalaf); interview with Muhammad Rajab Ghanaim, Baqa al-Gharbiyya, 1 March 2018 (hereafter int. Ghanaim); interview with Rafiq Yasin, Bir al-Sikka, 21 March 2019 (b. 1929 near Deir al-Ghusun).

⁴⁴ For example, in 1944, Arabs were given only two-day’s leave, on Saturday and Sunday, instead of the 4-day-long ‘Eid al-Adhha; RAF Record Book, 18 September 1944, 25 November 1944 and 29 March 1945.

⁴⁵ Interviews with Shalit, al-Dik, Ghanaim, Qi’dan, al-Daqq and more.

⁴⁶ RAF Record Book, 8 May 1944.

⁴⁷ C.M. Craven, ‘Juvenile Delinquency in the Colonies’, *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 4 (1934), 179–85; S. Simoni, ‘A Dangerous Legacy: Welfare in British Palestine, 1930–1939’, *Jewish History*, 13:2 (1999), 81–109.

The establishment of RAF Ein Shemer and adjacent camps had a profound impact on the local Jewish and Arab economies, in both formal and informal ways. The war's most noticeable effect in Palestine was the establishment of a war economy on the homefront, promulgation of food rationing and confiscation of food-stuffs.⁴⁸ According to a report in the Hebrew newspaper *Eshnav*:

the village of Baqa al-Gharbiyya ... was initially assigned a quota of 800 tons of wheat, but now the authorities found that the assessment was incorrect and demanded an additional 800 tons. After they announced in the village that the refusal would cause all of the recovered wheat to be confiscated, the village handed over the additional 800 tons.⁴⁹

These measures severely affected the residents of Baqa al-Gharbiyya, many of whom worked in RAF Ein Shemer.

One of the more interesting, and ironic, economic consequences of camp work was its help in the restitution of damages incurred by the Arab countryside during the Great Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, a popular anti-colonial uprising against Jewish colonisation under British auspices in Palestine. Residents of Baqa al-Gharbiyya participated actively in the revolt and suffered heavily from British 'pacification' measures. On 27 July 1938, following the killing of an Arab police sergeant, British troops descended on Baqa al-Gharbiyya, temporarily expelled its inhabitants, burned the corn in a few threshing floors, and dynamited fifty-four homes of suspected rebel collaborators in the village.⁵⁰ Following suppression of the revolt, the Arabs found themselves in dire economic straits. From passive resistance to colonial rule, they turned during the Second World War to work in the service of the Allied cause. Members of at least 43 percent of the afflicted families worked in the camp or other war-related industries, which facilitated the construction of new homes for themselves and their families.⁵¹ Baqa al-Gharbiyya became one of the most prosperous towns in the region. Thus, camp work helped heal the physical wounds of the Arab Revolt.⁵²

RAF Ein Shemer was an oasis of surplus in a time of austerity. Workers used their physical access to the camp to engage in legal and illegal occupations, which enriched them significantly. British authorities did their best to curtail the pilfering of military goods but met with limited success. According to the Station's Security Report for May 1945, 'until recently the station has been wide open along most of its perimeter, and the available guards have been unable to prevent petty pilfering. At times this has reached alarming proportions ... this epidemic of thieving is to be

⁴⁸ Int. al-Dik, 8 February 2018.

⁴⁹ *Eshnav* (newspaper), 6 November 1942, 5.

⁵⁰ *Filastin* (newspaper), 28 July 1938, 1 and 8; J. Qi'dan et al., *Sanabil min al-Ta'rikh wal-Tuwath: Baqa al-Gharbiyya* (Baqa al-Gharbiyya: Al-Qassemi Academy, 2011), 55–63.

⁵¹ According to a detailed list compiled with the aid of the interviewees and contemporary news reports only five (10 percent) of homeowners worked in the camps, due to their old age, but a quarter of their children did so; another five (10 percent) served in civilian jobs such as police and railroads employees, which aided the Allied war effort.

⁵² Int. Qi'dan, 19 March 2018; interview with Hafizha Sadeq Ghanaim, 20 June 2019.

checked'.⁵³ RAF authorities instituted rigorous screening to curtail thefts, and reportedly used informants to catch thieves: 'The Arabs informed one on another. Then they [the British] made special barracks to strip-search them to see if there are any stolen articles of clothing from the camp in their possession'.⁵⁴ Those caught for theft were apparently punished severely and their relatives were collectively penalised by having their work '*pass*' revoked.⁵⁵ According to a report published in the *Palestine Post*, an eighteen-year-old Arab cook from Baqa al-Gharbiyya was sentenced to one year in jail for stealing five rounds of ammunition.⁵⁶

Social and cultural outlooks of camp work

The following section surveys, through the aid of oral testimonies and contemporary documentation, the different social encounters that took place at RAF Ein Shemer in the course of civilian labour. Furthermore, it explores the ways in which camp work was perceived and represented, both in official British correspondence and in the recollections of civilian workers.

In Arab recollections, Allied forces are differentiated along racial lines as English (Arabic *ingliz*), Indian (Arabic *hunud*), and 'Negro' (Arabic *zunu*).⁵⁷ As surviving British service records show, this distinction mirrors the actual racial divisions practised by the British at that time.⁵⁸ Moreover, Jews and Arabs alike found common ground in disavowing the condescending British attitude towards them as 'natives'.⁵⁹ The racial diversity of the British Empire is evident in local recollections involving troops from different realms of the Empire. Arabs distinguished between African and Indian people of colour according to their faith. An *imam* from Baqa al-Gharbiyya led the Friday prayers for Muslim Indian troops. They discerned between different types of '*ingliz*' of English, Australian, and New Zealand stock according to their dress.⁶⁰ Arab and Jewish children of the period cherish memories involving Australians giving them chewing gum or chocolate.⁶¹

⁵³ Security Report for April 1945, 2–3, AIR 28/250, TNA.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Int. Ghanaim, Baqa al-Gharbiyya, 1 March 2018. The dismissal of relatives stems perhaps from suspicion that they had conspired with the thieves. This practice is evident in another group of camps near Ras al-'Ain (interview with Kafr Qassem resident, b. 1936, 15 July 2017).

⁵⁶ Security Report for April 1945, 2, AIR 28/250, TNA; *Palestine Post*, 13 November 1945, *Palestine Post*, 20 December 1945.

⁵⁷ Arab interlocutors often referred informally to Senegalese drivers with the derogatory term 'slaves', (Arabic '*abid*'), reflecting prevailing prejudices against African slaves in the Ottoman Empire. The qualifier '*abid*' is used to this day to refer to a class of freed slaves of low social status residing in Baqa al-Gharbiyya and neighbouring villages: E.M. Troutt Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1–6.

⁵⁸ Gov to Bina (B), 'other Ranks ORB', 3 February 1946, 8/klali/19, HHA.

⁵⁹ Testimony of Yeruham Greenfeld, 20 November 1958, 139.35, HHA.

⁶⁰ Int. Ghanaim, 1 March 2018.

⁶¹ Interview with Muhammad 'Amrur, al-Tira, 23 March 2015 (b. 1939 in Khirbet al-'Amarir); interviews with Binyamina residents Carmela (b. 1928) and Gideon ha-Cohen (b. 1925) and Amitsur Cohen, 18 February 2019.

A son of a Jewish camp worker heard his father complaining that their Jewish foreman was ‘Englified’ (Hebrew *meunglaz*), that is, he was drunk, inflexible, disorderly but formally polite.⁶² Former Arab workers, conversely, recalled their British superiors fondly for sharing the last cigarette in a pack, or allowing them to take food home to their families. Some workers were even rewarded with a flight on a sortie by the Camp’s Commanding Officer.⁶³

Arab workers in RAF Ein Shemer remember with incredulity the differing spatial and gender arrangements in camp. The separation of the living and dining arrangements of soldiers according to rank (Officers, NCOs, and privates) and ethnicity (White, Indian, Black) contrasted with established native Arab customs according to which all members of the extended household, masters and servants, hosts and guests alike, would dine together.⁶⁴

Work in the camp brought Arabs into contact with new gender roles, which challenged the gender constructs of traditional Arab society. While no Arab woman is known to have ever worked on camp, Jewish women like Sonia Magen of the adjacent Kibbutz Ein Shemer operated heavy equipment in its construction.⁶⁵ Female employment in heavy construction projects reflected the values of labour equality and social egalitarianism among Jewish workers (Hebrew *po‘alim*) and pioneers (Hebrew *halutzim*).⁶⁶ Arab camp workers from Baqa al-Gharbiyya, on the contrary, narrated stories which should be interpreted in light of local sensibilities and traditional gender constructs: a female officer commanded seven men on a plane, which then crashed into a house in Baqa and caused the death of an Arab family.⁶⁷ Another of the beautiful ‘airplane ladies’ (Arabic *banat al-tiran*) ordered a man to make her some tea in an electric kettle, but he did not know how to use electricity correctly, so she chastised him and ordered him to clean the place up and make her bed. This was practically unheard-of in Arab patriarchal society, where it is the role of women to attend to such chores (and remains so even today).⁶⁸

The disruptions of traditional gender roles did not permeate local Arab society. Instead of becoming agents of social change, Arab camp workers looked upon British gender roles with suspicion. As their recollections reveal, their willingness to work in conditions contrary to established gender roles in Arab society stemmed from an economic impetus. They disavowed these gender constructs as foreign and potentially disastrous and prevented their adoption in their home villages. Admittedly, the evidence offered by then-juvenile camp workers might not represent the full work-related experiences of the different generations then alive. Yet, the social censure against work by Arab women in camp is well attested to.

⁶² Interview with Mordechai Naor, Tel Aviv, 29 February 2018 (hereafter int. Naor).

⁶³ Int. al-Dik, 8 February 2018.

⁶⁴ Int. Ghanaim, 13 February 2018; int. al-Dik, 8 February 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview with Hafizha Sadeq Ghanaim, 20 June 2019; interview with Elisha Shamri, Ein Shemer, 1 March 2018 (hereafter int. Shamri) and work cards held by Kibbutz Ein Shemer’s Archive.

⁶⁶ M.E. Spiro, *Gender and Culture: Kibbutz Women Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2017), 3–61.

⁶⁷ The incident appears in the RAF Record Book on 28 September 1944; but the pilot was male.

⁶⁸ M.M. Haj-Yahia, ‘Wife abuse and battering in the sociocultural context of Arab society’, *Family Process*, 39:2 (2000), 237–55; V.M. Moghadam, ‘Patriarchy in transition: Women and the changing family in the Middle East’, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35:2 (2004), 137–62.

Jewish workers socialised with British troops at nearby coffeehouses like Teacher's Garden Café and other public institutions in Karkur. Jewish residents of Karkur nicknamed their settlement a 'colony of love' because many English-speaking women fraternised with the British soldiers, under the auspices of the local Jewish Hospitality Committee.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, this fraternisation with the gentiles (Hebrew *goyim*) aroused hostility among conservative sections of the Jewish populace for nationalist or religious reasons. To the best of my knowledge, Arab workers did not socialise as closely with British troops, nor did they report any romantic engagements with camp personnel. The lack of female Arab workers in the camps mitigated the chances of heterosexual romantic relations forming in the first place, which were further censured by way of honour killings.⁷⁰

Italian personnel were heavily involved in the illicit trade in stolen military goods and in their interactions with Allied troops, Arab and Jewish workers figure prominently in the station's records and local lore.⁷¹ Former Arab camp workers claim that the Italians taught them new ways to steal much needed supplies. This claim is substantiated by repeated comments made in the Station's Operational Record. For instance, according to the report for April 1945, 'it was proved without doubt that the culprits in the vast majority of the cases were Italian co-operators, who stole, and sold to the local Jews and Arabs. As they co-operated in fact far more with the local inhabitants than with the R.A.F, it was decided to dispense with their services; they have now been replaced by Arabs'.⁷² The last of the Italians departed on 23 March 1945.⁷³

Arab workers, too, tell with pride how they supplemented their official income with the profits from selling fenced camp goods. Arab workers testify to stealing undergarments, blankets and lux lamps: 'Baqa [al-Gharbiyya] was full of them', narrated one worker, 'they would bring a thousand units and a week later, they were all gone'.⁷⁴ Others smuggled cigarettes and foodstuffs, which were in abundance in the camps, in addition to what was already given to them free of charge.⁷⁵ An account of stealing 'blankets and sheets from Officers' billets' appears in the RAF Station's Operations Record Book.⁷⁶ Jews stole camp goods too, but focused, in contrast, on strategic pilfering of building supplies and weapons.⁷⁷ Dudik Shalit, b. 1932 in Pardes Hanna, remembers aiding his father to steal cement and steel

⁶⁹ <<https://makomshamur.wordpress.com/2011/07/15/%D7%91%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%A7%D7%A4%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%9B%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%A8-colony-of-love>> [accessed 1 May 2018]; Int. Shalit, 5 May 2019; RAF Record Book, 6 May 1944.

⁷⁰ Int. al-Dik, 8 February 2018. One case involved the non-normative romantic engagement between British soldiers and two daughters of the Jallad family near the Beit Lid army camp (no. 12). The affair ended with the murder of the daughters by their relatives: R. Mamat and A. Blair, *Miniqrot Tsurim: Sipuro ha-Mufla shel Ya'akov Barazani* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1979), 211 and local testimonies.

⁷¹ Int. Ghanaim, 1 March 2018.

⁷² Security Report for April 1945, 3, AIR 28/250, TNA.

⁷³ RAF Record Book, 5 March 1945 (Subsequent comment by RAF Station commander); Civilian Labour statistics for 1 April 1944, file S9/1125, CZA.

⁷⁴ Int. Ghanaim, 1 March 2018.

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Int. Hafizha, 16 June 2019.

⁷⁶ RAF Record Book, 5 March 1945.

⁷⁷ Int. Shamri; Compare with Lockman, 296–297.

bars from RAF Ein Shemer for the Hagana to resell at a premium.⁷⁸ Former Arab and Jewish camp workers subscribe to the notion that Jewish pilferers were treated more benignly, and were less thoroughly searched than their Arab counterparts.⁷⁹

Labour conditions for Jewish and Arab workers in Ein Shemer, when compared to conditions available to them elsewhere, led them to hold diverging feelings about their conditions at work. Jewish workers interviewed by Shapira complained about their detrimental working conditions in comparison with average conditions for Jewish day labourers in the free market (a point also raised by camp authorities).⁸⁰ The Arab workers interviewed by the author, however, stressed the high income offered for camp work (upwards of 270 Palestine *mills* per day) in comparison with available vocations in agriculture. Albeit thankful for their share, the income imbalance between the two groups is undeniable, with Jewish camp workers being paid twice as much as their Arab counterparts by the same civilian contractor.

What about the encounters between the Jewish and Arab workers? Jews and Arabs worked in the same common spaces, served under the same civilian contractors, and fulfilled many of the same basic functions in the camp.⁸¹ Yet, surprisingly, no direct narratives of encounters or meetings on camp were narrated during these interviews. Jews and Arabs narrated their work experiences separately. Why so? The reasons for that might be the politics of memory after 1948.

The politics of memory after 1948

The marginalised story of civilian labour in RAF Ein Shemer serves to elucidate different ways in which such histories are 'hidden' from different communities and from some researchers in Israel/Palestine. While camp work does not figure prominently in the collective consciousness of the Arab residents of the region, Israeli Jews highlight it as an integral part of their armed struggle for national liberation. Jewish workers emphasised their participation in an organised effort, sanctioned by the highest military and civilian echelons in the Yishuv, to procure munitions for the struggle against foreign rule. Jewish labourers acknowledge having had a problem of double allegiance. 'Until nightfall Jewish workers were loyal to the King', commented the son of one Jewish camp worker, 'and at night-time to the Hagana, stealing weapons and fuel even during the War'.⁸² Testimonies of Hagana members, collected by the Hagana Archives, claim that once the looming threat of invasion by the Axis powers lessened following the Allied victory at the Second Battle of al-Alamayn (October–November 1942) the Hagana felt itself at greater ease to steal arms to the detriment of the Allied war effort.⁸³

Arabs, on the other hand, referred in their stories to the surplus of stolen civilian items in camp and framed their exploits in filching them as examples of the

⁷⁸ Int. Shalit, 7 May 2019.

⁷⁹ Int. al-Dik, 8 February 2018; Interview with Amitsur Cohen, Binyamina, 19 August 2018.

⁸⁰ RAF Record Book, 14 December 1944.

⁸¹ Civilian Labour statistics for 1 June 1944, file S9/1125, CZA.

⁸² Int. Naor.

⁸³ Testimony of Avraham Broshi, 23 March 1972, 195.96, HHA.

resourceful ways by which they improved their modest standard of living, while dispelling any hint of involvement in armed insurrection against authorities (Arabic *al-sulutat, al-hukuma*). In the author's opinion, this finding is best explained by the power-relations that developed post-1948. The establishment of the State of Israel took place amidst the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, a bloody and protracted civil war. In the aftermath of the conflict, Israeli authorities perceived their Arab subjects as an internal threat by virtue of their religious and national affiliations.⁸⁴

During the years 1948–1966 the Arab residents of the Triangle Area, including those near RAF Ein Shemer, lived under Israeli martial law (Hebrew *memshal tsva'i*; Arabic *hukm 'askari*).⁸⁵ As Hillel Cohen had shown in his seminal work *Good Arabs*, Israel's security agencies suppressed public recollections of armed Arab resistance to British and Jewish rule, since they viewed them as professions of disloyalty to the new Jewish state.⁸⁶ Following the 1967 War, the remaining Arab communities across the border in the Jordanian-held West Bank came under Israeli military rule. While restrictions on public discourse were gradually eased during the 1980s and 1990s, many elderly camp employees remain reluctant to share their memories of these periods out of fear of retribution on part of 'the authorities'.⁸⁷

In the State of Israel, the epistemological concept of 'security information' (Hebrew *yeda' bitchoni*), entails formal and informal rules, regulations and practices that govern the use and dissemination of pre-state 'security information'.⁸⁸ Until the late 2000s, access to archival records pertaining to RAF Ein Shemer (modern IAA Ein Shemer), and other sensitive sites, was highly regulated, with the privileged status of '*hoker murshe*', or authorised researcher, being awarded only to a few Jewish researchers affiliated with Israel's security establishment.⁸⁹ These records include surviving intelligence files of the *Yishuu's* espionage organs and the Palestine Police's Criminal Investigation Department. Forgotten in the cellars of the Shin Bet until accidentally re-discovered in 1993, they were opened to the public only in a redacted form. Similarly, vintage maps, drawings, plans, and aerial photographs of RAF Ein Shemer were declassified only in recent years.

Moreover, since 1948, RAF Ein Shemer's Arab workers have been barred from visiting their former workplace. During the period of martial law, they were

⁸⁴ I. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish state: Israel's control of a national minority* (Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press, 1982); H.C. Kelman, 'The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities: The role of the other in existential conflicts', *Journal of Social Issues*, 55:3 (1999), 581–600.

⁸⁵ A. Shmueli, I. Shnell and A. Soffer, *The Little Triangle: Transformation of a region* (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 1985), 9, 29.

⁸⁶ H. Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 123–58.

⁸⁷ Pre-interview coordination talks with residents of Baqa al-Gharbiyya, Qaffin, Meisar and Zeimer, January 2018 – April 2019.

⁸⁸ See for example Yaacov Lozowick, Israel's Chief Archivist at the Israel State Archives, about the problems of archival disclosure (Jerusalem: Israel State Archives, 2018): <http://www.archives.gov.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/state_archivist_report_2018.pdf> (Hebrew).

⁸⁹ The case of *Gershom Gurnberg and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel vs. the Director of the IDF and Defense Establishment Archives*, heard before the Israeli Supreme Court, 2467/05. A representative example of the work published by 'Authorised Researchers', is Y. Gelber, *Roots of the Lily: Intelligence in the Yishuu, 1918–1947* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Press, 1992).

subjected to strict limitations on their freedom of movement. During night-time a full curfew was in force, and during daytime the inhabitants were forbidden to leave the village without a proper permit (Arabic *tasrih*).⁹⁰ Yet, the same economic imperatives that encouraged Baqa's residents to work on camp drove them to search illegally for livelihood in Jewish towns. Ironically, these circumstances were the only way former employees could enter their previous place of employment. When asked if he visited the camp after 1948, one interviewee narrated the following story:

After '48 I was arrested there because I worked in Tel Aviv without a permit. The police officer got on the bus and called for our identity cards: 'Present me with your ID card', and he saw that I had no permit and told me 'get off the bus'. They took us to the Ein Shemer base. I told them I had used to work there. They interned me underground where I used to work – at the 'SIGNALS section' that had offices above ground and bunkers beneath it. They did not believe that I used to work underground. I began to explain to them what was there. I was detained for one day and the next day [they led me] to court ... They fined me five Liras. It took a whole neighbourhood to pay the fine. A worker in Tel Aviv took 25 *grush* a day.

In this story, RAF Ein Shemer turns from a workplace into a place of incarceration. Knowledge of its layout, once considered a beneficial quality in the service of the British military, was looked upon with suspicion, distrust and disbelief by the new Jewish occupiers of the base. The visit, in and of itself, is portrayed as an exceptional circumstance, derived from an act of defiance of Israeli martial law for the same economic imperatives that once inspired Arabs to work on camp in the first place.

Nonetheless, recollections of working life at the base had lasting significance, at least on the individual level. Some workers still recall their work in RAF Ein Shemer as a formative episode in their life that empowered them and offered them rare opportunities for social mobility. According to some narrators, it was here, in the employment of the British military, that they learned discipline, perseverance, precision, inventiveness and hard work. Muhammad Rajab Ghanaïm, a retired banker and former secretary of Baqa's municipal council, started his service as a thirteen-year-old mail delivery boy, but ended it being in charge of the camp's labour office, which had charge of 450 people. He received letters of recommendation from the camp's commanding officer: 'I built myself in the camp. It is in the camp that I became Muhammad Rajab ... Those of my age or younger built themselves in the camp. It is where their personality was fashioned. In the end I was responsible for everyone, I became an emperor'.⁹¹ Ghanaïm still holds onto worn-out recommendation letters given to him by his British superiors (see [Figure 4](#)).

⁹⁰ Qi'dan et al, 2014, 194.

⁹¹ Int. Ghanaïm, 13 February 2018.

Central Registration
R.A.F. Station
Ein Sh

To whom it may concern

MOHAMMAD RAJAB SU

engaged as a runner in this Section in
His conscientious ability to do whatever
language and a fair knowledge of typing, was rewarded,
after seven months, by his promotion to a Junior Clerk,
against an aimon deficiency. This promotion, to the
writer's regret, necessitated his transfer to another
Section, where he was employed as a Tice-keeper until
March 1945. Termination of his service was in no way
connected with any inefficiency on his part, but was
brought about by the re-arranging of the
position which made him "excess."

The writer has no hesitation in
recommending Mohamad Rajab Sulaiman for clerical work
of a general nature, and his intelligence, honesty,
obedience, punctuality and good manners are considered
worthy of a position of trust.

18th March 1945.

FIGURE 4. M. Ghanaim's recommendation letter.

Conclusion

Civilian work in British military camps during the Second World War, as exemplified by the case of RAF Ein Shemer, is a marginalised sphere of participation by residents of Mandatory Palestine in the Allied war effort. Tens of thousands of Jews and Arabs supplied logistical support for Allied troops within the newly built army

bases. RAF Ein Shemer also suggests the ways in which civilian work came at a cost for the Allied war effort. If economic necessity provided incentives for civilians to serve the Allied forces, they also encouraged the pilferage of goods and material. Given the material superiority enjoyed by the Allies, this never really impeded the war effort, but it does indicate the complexity of the wartime experience.

The history, memory and representation of Arab and Jewish work in British army camps during the Second World War has been deeply entwined with that of the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine, in a way which has served to distort and reframe local historical memory. Whereas Jews remember it primarily through the lens of their armed struggle for national liberation, in surviving Arab communities' stories about camp life in particular, and about military-related experiences in general, rarely surface in the public discourse due to life under Israeli rule. Concomitantly, the 'hidden histories' of crime, gender roles, interfaith sexual engagements, and internal violence, have not been regarded as aspects of the same story before. The framing, categorisation and protection of documents and physical sites of memory relating to RAF Ein Shemer as concerning 'security information' may have contributed to the side-lining of public discussion about this history by non-Jewish sectors of Israel's population. Many former British camps, while serving as possible sites of memory for the workers, are in operational use by the Israel Defence Forces, and thus off limits for former Arab-Palestinian workers and their relatives citing 'security concerns'.

RAF Ein Shemer and similar British military installations in Palestine were colonial spaces governed in line with the perception and norms of imperial military administrators. In contrast to the volunteers who served the war effort elsewhere in the Commonwealth, work in the British camps in Palestine was mainly motivated by pragmatic economic incentives rather than by any ideological sympathy with the Allied cause.⁹² Beyond its material contribution to the economic development of the countryside, camp employment did not result in Jewish-Arab political cooperation, nor did it transform the established social and gender relations in surrounding communities. It does, however, attest to the agency of individuals from religiously varied and ethnically diverse communities in adapting, adopting, mitigating, and benefitting from imposed colonial practices. From a post-colonial perspective, in RAF Ein Shemer, Indian, African, New Zealander, Australian, Italian, Arab, Jewish, be they civilian or military personnel, or POWs, participated in – and benefitted from – serving the Allied cause. Lesser-known aspects of the experiences themselves, as remembered and as evidenced by written records, challenge narratives of the Allied cause as a solely Western military endeavour.

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⁹² M. Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Walcha, NSW: Ohio Productions, 2002).

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