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Presence and Absence in 'Abandoned' Palestinian Villages

Rona Sela

This essay deals with the way Palestinian villages, emptied during the 1948 war when their inhabitants fled, were visually preserved in Israeli consciousness. The essay analyses a group of photographs in official Israeli archives that were taken by Israeli photographers between 1948 and 1951. These images, taken for Israeli national propaganda to describe the new Jewish immigrants who had been settled by the new Israeli state in these villages, show how they implement the Zionist world-view. In contrast to these purposes, however, reading these institutional photography archives also makes it possible to learn about Palestinian identity before 1948 and gain insight into the Palestinians people, who are missing from these photographs. The essay shows how the manner of reading these archives makes possible the extraction of different layers of meanings.

Keywords: *Palestinian villages, present-absent, reading photography archives, Zionist photography, enlisted photography, Israeli institutional archives, Allan Sekula, war of 1948 in Israel/Palestine, pictorial history of Palestine, Absentee Property Law, Jewish settlement, Zionist information campaign, Zoltan Kluger (1895–1970)*

Introduction

The essay deals with photography archives as multilayered collections of information. Reading photography archives and establishment photography archives in particular, makes it possible to examine how they reflect, even if subliminally, political and social processes and how these processes are marked with indelible signs.¹ On the surface, the establishment world view central to the archive reflects the official narrative. However, reading the archives makes possible the extraction of information, world views, and ideas of a nature not included in the declared stance of the archive. The archives permit a discussion of topics and context not expressed officially, yet which burst forth from the archive material despite attempts made to wipe them from public consciousness. Hence, they provide an important source for investigating fundamental subjects that existed on the margins of society and which are possible to discuss only by reading the archive's different layers. Allan Sekula claims that every collection of photographs carries a 'semantic availability'. In his opinion, the archive is a 'clearing house' of ideas, meaning and content that 'might be interpreted, sampled or reconstructed [...]. Archival potentials change over time; the keys are appropriated by different disciplines, discourses, "specialists"'.²

This essay deals with how Palestinian villages that existed before the 1948 war and were erased from the Israeli map after the establishment of the State of

An earlier version of this paper was published in Hebrew as 'Kefarai Falastin Hanifkadim-Nochechim' ('Present-Absent Palestinian Villages'), *Terminal 28* (Summer 2006), 22–25. A few months later, some images of Palestinian villages were included in the exhibition and catalogue by Naama Haikin, *Spatial Borders and Local Borders: A Photographic Discourse on Israeli Landscapes*, The Open Museum of Photography: Tel-Hai Industrial Park, 2006. In contrast to my argument, however, Haikin proposed that 'the new construction replacing the old is presented as a natural, organic, "self-evident" evolution'. Noga Kadman's book, *Betsidei Haderech Ubeshulay Hatodaa* (*Erased from Space and Consciousness*), Israel: November Books, dealing with depopulation of the Palestinian villages in the Israeli-Zionist discourse, appeared in the summer of 2008. Kadman does not deal with the visual aspect, examining the topic from the points of view of preservation of nature, preservation of historical sites, giving names to settlements etc. Titles of the photographs reproduced in the present article are those given by the artists or by the institutional archives.

1 – The term 'Reading photography archives' is based on Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive', *Blasted Allegories*, New York & Massachusetts: MIT Press 1987, 114–128.

2 – *Ibid.*, 115–117.

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3 – Data on the villages are from two main sources. The first, titled *Hayishuvim beIsrael (Settlements in Israel)* is Zeev Vilnai’s book from 1951, given by the newspaper Davar as a gift to its subscribers. This book presents a detailed survey of all the settlements in Israel including the uprooted Palestinian villages. The second, Walid Khalidi’s book, *All That Remains, The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel 1948*, published by the Institute for Palestine Studies in 1992, which serves as the most comprehensive research index on Palestinian settlements and villages before 1948.

4 – Rona Sela, ‘Historia Metzulemet Shel Falastine’ (‘Pictorial History of Palestine’), *Teoria ve Bikkoret (Theory and Criticism)* 31 (Winter 2007), 302–310.

5 – Thanks to Dr Meir Pail for information on uprooted villages that were used for training in built-up areas by the army.
6 – Instead of ‘abandoned property’ the property became ‘absentee property’. See Absentee Property Law <http://www.geocities.com/savepalestinenow/israellaws/fulltext/absenteepropertylaw.htm>
7 – Wording the law in general terms, while avoiding the use of categories such as religion or nationality, served to camouflage its discriminatory nature. In a stricter directive, the burden of proof passed from the Custodian to the absentee to present evidence in order to appeal this classification. It was a clear indication and unequivocal political statement to the refugees that even if they succeeded in returning to Israel, their property would not be given back to them automatically
8 – Elias Khoury, *Bab al-Shams*, Tel Aviv: Andalus Publishing House 2002.
9 – David Grossman, *Nokhehim Nifkadim*, Israel: Hasifriya Hachadasha, HaKibbutz Hameuchad Publishers 1992.
10 – Haim Hanegbi and Tzachi Ostrovsky, ‘Beit Akal, Beit Sakakini’, *Plastika* 4 (2002), 114–121. See also Haim Hanegbi and Tzachi Ostrovsky, ‘Villa Dr. Kalabyan’, *Machbarot Kolenoa Darom, Al Heres, Trauma ve (South Cinema Notebooks, On Destruction, Trauma & Cinema)* 2 (2007), 67–70.

Israel were unconsciously represented in a number of Israeli institutional archives – the archive of the Jewish National Fund, the archive of the Government Press Office and the archive of the Israel Defence Forces.³ The paper examines the manner in which these villages are present in photographs taken for these institutional bodies between the years 1948–1951. It is important to note that the institutional archives did not seek to document the Palestinian villages emptied of their original inhabitants in 1948 but rather wished to wipe them from the collective consciousness in Israel. They are included in archive photographs of these organizations as part of an array of images created for entirely different purposes. The aim of their creation was Zionist-propagandist and sought to describe the Israeli reality of those years, which was contrary to the perception of the Palestinian reality and in conflict with it. The presence of the abandoned villages in these photographs, in retrospect, makes it possible to locate them in the continuum of Palestinian visual history, on the one hand, and, on the other, to deal with what the State of Israel’s official history tried to erase. The traces they left in Israeli archives are significant since visual Palestinian history lacks many chapters due to the numerous wars and tragedies endured by the country and its residents. Many archives disappeared or were looted in the aftermath of wars, and only in recent years have researchers attempted to rebuild this history.⁴

Historical background

During the 1948 war in Palestine, known as the War of Independence by Israelis and Naqba (the catastrophe) by Palestinians, many Palestinians left the country and became refugees; the State of Israel was established in May of the same year. Some Palestinians fled the horrors of war, hoping to return later, and others were forced out. That same year, the new state closed its borders to the Palestinians and expropriated their houses in towns and villages, declaring them ‘abandoned property’. The State of Israel used these premises to house the many Jewish immigrants who were starting to flood the shores of the country and needed housing.⁵ In the second half of 1948 the State of Israel, through emergency ordinances, anchored the perception of the conquered and emptied Palestinian refugee houses and areas as ‘abandoned property’. In March 1950, the state regulated the subject in the framework of the ‘Absentee Property Law’ designed to prevent Palestinian refugees from claiming their property.⁶ The property passed into the hands of the Custodian of Absentee Property according to section 4 of the Absentee Property Law, 1950.⁷

The issue of uprooted Palestinian villages and houses has been discussed at length in Israeli public discourse. The subject frequently arises as part of the current debate on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, and the subject of the refugees, the land, and the struggle over their sovereignty in particular. Palestinian artists also give literary and visual expression to the subject in works that touch on the scars left by memories of the uprooted villages, for example, Elias Khoury in his book *Bab al-Shams* and Makboula Nasr in *Naqba*, a series of photographs from recent years documenting the remains of the destroyed Palestinian villages.⁸ Israeli creators too confront the subject in a focused way: David Grossman in his book *Nokhehim Nifkadim (Present Absent)*,⁹ and Haim Hanegbi, together with the photographer Tzachi Ostrovsky, in a series of articles describing Palestinian houses in cities, and their residents who were not allowed to return to them (figure 1).¹⁰

Palestinians living in Israel do much towards preserving the collective memory of their people, and demand that the subject of villages, houses, and land be placed on the public agenda in Israel and the world. But, despite efforts by different cultural agents in Israel to deal with the subject, despite growing

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COLOUR
FIGURE



Figure 1. Tzachi Ostrovsky. *Abu Sulemain Abu Leil at his family home in Lifta, outside Jerusalem, September 2000.* From the project *Palestinian Homes in West Jerusalem* with writer Haim Hanegbi Courtesy of the Artist.

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interest in it for political needs and the activity of non-profit organisations to revive the memory of these villages – for example by pilgrimages to them on Naqba day, so far no attempt has been made to clarify how they are preserved in Israeli consciousness. It is worth mentioning that the Israeli state did much to erase all visible signs of these villages and their remains, as if things not seen will finally be forgotten.¹¹ Thus, a journey through the country in the presence of remnants of villages – prickly pear bushes, ruins of Arab structures, olive trees, gravestones, for the most part will not be noticed by the average Israeli, and will not arouse moral, emotional, or intellectual concerns.

The uprooted Palestinian villages in Israeli institutional archives

Two kinds of visual representation of the uprooted Palestinian villages, whose residents were expelled or fled from the horror of the 1948 war, exist in Israeli public memory. The first, uprooted villages settled by the State, which I will describe further on. The second, villages destroyed by the State. Already during the War of 1948, the Israeli army demolished different villages as part of the political and security goal to leave them in this state (figure 2),¹² ‘transfer after the fact’ as defined by different researchers. Thus, the army also destroyed large sections of the Old City in Tiberius in Palestinian neighbourhoods left empty after the war. There was also an aborted attempt to destroy sections of Old Jaffa and Acre. The aim of these actions was to prevent the return of Palestinians to their former abodes. These acts of destruction also expressed lack of concern with conservation, with heritage and culture, with buildings having archeological, architectural, historical, and religious value.¹³

11 – The fate of Palestinian villages that existed until 1967 is identical. For example, only after a long and uncompromising struggle by the non-profit organisation, Zochrot, against the Jewish National Fund and the Civil Administration, and Zochrot’s petition to the High Court resulting in a precedent setting process, were signs placed in Canada Park in May 2006, mentioning the two Palestinian villages that had existed there before – Amwas, and Yalu. Until then, park signs gave a detailed description of life in the area in ancient historical periods, among them the Second Temple period, and the Hellenistic, Roman and Mamluk periods, yet denied the bustling and active Palestinian life until 1967 in these villages.
12 – Arnon Golan, ‘Tefisat Karka Aravit Al-Yedei Yishuvim Yehudim beMilchemet Haatzmaut’ (‘The Capture of Arab Lands by Jewish Settlements in the War of Independence’), *Cathedra* 63 (April 1992), 122–135.
13 – Yair Paz, ‘Shimur Hamoreshet Haadrichalit Bashchunot Hanetushot leachar Milchemet Haatzmaut’ (‘Preservation of the Architectural Heritage in Abandoned. Neighborhoods after the War of Independence’), *Cathedra* 88 (July 1998), 95–134.

0 Figure 2. Unknown Photographer, *View of*
1 *Majdal Yaba as seen from the Mukhtar*
2 *House*, silver print, 1948. Israel Defence
3 Forces Archive, Israel. In 1948 Israeli
4 government ordered the destruction of the
5 houses in the village.



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Until the middle of the 1960s, the I.D.F used uninhabited and ruined villages to train for fighting in urban areas. These military activities, especially the use of live ammunition and explosives, which took place far from settled areas, slashed the landscape and left intact very little of the original village buildings. Photographs describing this military activity are kept in the I.D.F. archives, and enable us to see the process of continuous destruction the villages endured. In the period between 1965 and until after the Six Day War (1967), the uninhabited villages, including those used earlier for training purposes, were destroyed totally in initiated operations. In the opinion of Aharon Shai, who revealed this data, the object of the operations was to rid the country of villages and their remains, since establishment elements assumed they caused distress for Palestinian residents of the country, spoil the landscape, and were a nuisance for travellers (this term was originally used).¹⁴ It seems these villages were obliterated for a major political reason: the desire to erase them from public consciousness and memory.

The uprooted villages documented were those that appeared in photographs of Jewish settlement on Palestinian lands with the establishment of the State of Israel. In the archive of the Government Press Office within the Prime Minister's Office and the Jewish National Fund archive, are large numbers of photographs dating from 1948–1950 of Palestinian villages settled by Jewish immigrants – ‘olim’ in Zionist terminology. Benny Morris, in his book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947–1949*,¹⁵ demonstrated that settlements founded in 1948 were almost all established outside the built area of uprooted Arab villages (figure 3), although a considerable number of settlements from 1949 on were established in the villages themselves, renewal being quicker and cheaper than building a completely new settlement (figure 4). Thus, the State solved three problems simultaneously: First, the need to provide housing solutions for many new Jewish immigrants, especially in a period of economic difficulties and logistic problems.¹⁶ Second, the desire not to leave empty villages by populating them as quickly as possible thus erasing their old identity and replacing it with another. This was part of the land and demographic policy, which claimed that a massive exchange of land from Palestinian to Jewish ownership and their repopulation by Jewish settlers would create a *fait accompli*, eradicating any hope among the Palestinian refugees of returning one day to their lands and homes. Third, populating the frontier and ‘filling’ the captured territories with a civilian populace in order to determine the country's borders and to fortify them. The villages were euphemistically termed ‘abandoned’, language used to blur the tragedy that

14 – Aharon Shai, ‘Goral Hakfarim Haarviim Hanetushim beMedinat Israel Erev Milchemet Sheshet Hayamim Veachreha’ (‘Fate of the Abandoned Arab Villages in the State of Israel before and after the Six Day War’), *Cathedra* 105 (September 2002), 151–170.

15 – Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

16 – The uprooted villages served as an initial housing solution for immigrants. After they were populated, immigrants were housed in tents and tin shacks in transit camps.



Figure 3. Zoltan Kluger, *Tents and Hunts at Moshav Hossen, put up by immigrants from North Africa underneath an abandoned Arab village in the upper Galilee, 01/06/1949*. The Government Press Office, Israel.

occurred there, and demonstrates how common language adopts what the governmental system wants to erase or obscure. David Grossman expressed this as ‘words that do not describe reality but try to hide it’.¹⁷ As mentioned, the law passed in 1950 defined residents of the ‘abandoned’ villages as ‘absentees’, that is missing or absent, whether they did not return to their homes or any other area in the State of Israel between 29 November 1947 and 1 September 1948 by choice, or whether the State prevented them from doing so, which happened frequently.

The photographs documenting Jewish settlement in Palestinian populated areas are the last evidence of villages just before they lost their Palestinian identity and became Israeli, immediately after their physical and legal expropriation. In fact, its residents are already missing – present absentees with a new meaning – yet many of the photographs show villages with houses and fields intact, allowing a glimpse into what the Israeli collective consciousness has repressed. Over the years, these villages have changed their



Figure 4. Zoltan Kluger, *Moshav Kerem Maharal, formerly an abandoned Arab village, 03/10/1949*. The Government Press Office, Israel.

0 texture, their character, and their identity. Areas where land has passed into 0
Israeli hands show changes in the way land is cultivated, in the crops, and in the
rural- communal structure. For example, in a photograph of Akir (which
became Ekkron), the foreground shows remains of the Palestinian village, and
5 behind them, houses typical of Jewish building. The characteristic scenery of 5
the Palestinian agricultural periphery began to change, taking on the features of
an Israeli agricultural periphery (figure 5).

Most of the photographs describe civilian settlement, whereas just a few
10 photographs hint at the army that captured these settlements (for example in
Kakkun) (figure 6) or soldiers settled in the villages. Thus, there is also a small
but impressive group of photographs in the I.D.F. Archive describing the
15 villages immediately after their capture, before their habitation by Jewish
residents, for example, Al- Bassa. Most of the photographs from the Jewish
National Fund and Government Press Office archives were taken by Zoltan
Kluger¹⁸ the quintessential institutional photographer, and are of village
20 settlements. Only a few photographs show Jewish settlement in Palestinian
buildings in towns, where Jewish settlement in Palestinian property began (for
example photographs from Jaffa depicting seamstresses in the sun, a chat in a
café, mothers and children). The village photographs describe Tira (which
25 became Tirat Yehuda), Ayn Hawd (which became Ein Hod), Beyt Dajan (Beit
Dagan) Yehudiya or its second name, Al-'Abbasiyya (Yahud), Rantiya
(Rinatia), Akir (Ekkron), Tarshiha (Maona), Ijzim (Kerem Maharal), Ein
Ghazal (Ein Ayala), Suhmata (Hosen), to mention just a few. The photographs
show the absorption of Jewish immigrants in the new country on the ruins of
30 another entity, and therefore include two ethnic and geographic characteristics,
each different from the other, combined into a new reality: First, the typical
Palestinian village, its style and cultivation of the land, which symbolize the
absent Palestinian entity. Second, new settlers busy with different daily
35 activities – sewing, embroidery, study, work in the garden – all symbolizing
the normality of Israeli settlement in these regions. For instance, the photograph
taken of the Elkosh settlement in July 1949 is divided into two main areas: In
the foreground, Jewish immigrants from Kurdistan, dressed and adorned in
40 clothes and jewellery from their country of origin, engaged in the traditional
handcraft of embroidery. In the background is the Palestinian village Dir

18 – Kluger was the main photographer of
15 the Jewish national institutions from the
beginning of the 1930 to the beginning of
the 1950s. His work was enlisted for
promoting the Zionist perspective. See Rona
Sela, *Tzilum BeFalastin/Eretz-Israel bishnot
Hasloshim veHaarbaaim (Photography in
Palestine in the 1930s & 1940s)*, Israel:
20 Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishing House
2000; Rona Sela, 'Lichbosh et Haar,
Hatzalamim veKeren Kayemeth leIsrael'
(‘The photographers and the Jewish
National Fund’), *Keren Kayemeth
25 Umezalemeth (The Jewish National Fund
and Photography)*, Israel 2003, 16–20.

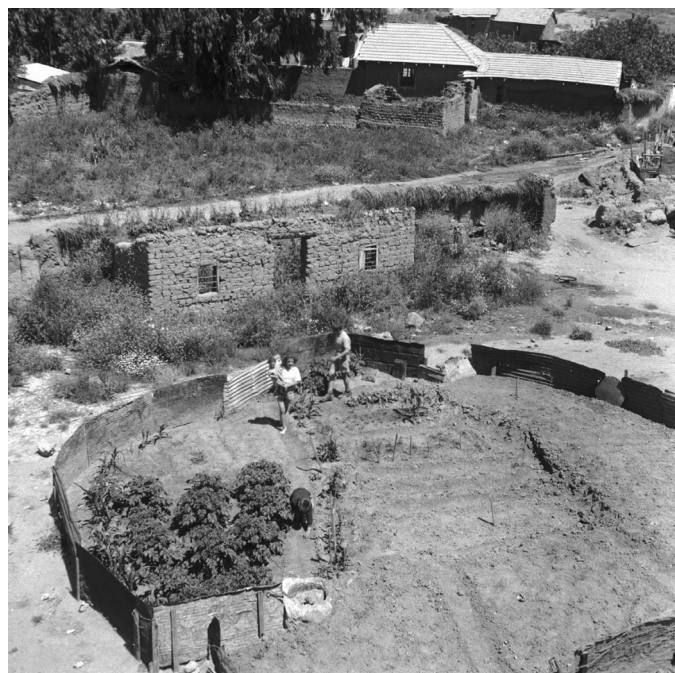


Figure 5. Trudi Schwartz, *The Arab village Akir (Ekron) that was occupied by the Israel Defence Force populated by new immigrants, 01/05/1949*. Jewish National Funds Archives, Israel.



Figure 6. Unknown Photographer. *Israeli Fighters in Kakun after its occupation.* Israel Defence Forces Archive, Israel.

al-Kassi. The village and its vegetation remain whole, untouched by the war, or so it seems in the photograph (figure 7). The settlement was given the Hebrew name Elkosh after the biblical name.¹⁹ Use of the biblical name alludes to the claim of moral historic justice of the people of Israel in Eretz- Israel, and their right of return to the land of their forefathers. The same applies to Tarshiha, which became Maona.²⁰ The archive photograph as expected carries the new Hebrew name of the place without referring to the Palestinian name. So too, an additional photograph from Dir al-Kassi, which shows an Israeli teacher and her class dancing in a clearing on the outskirts of the village, while in the background a Jewish mother, in typical Kurdistan attire, watches her child. Especially interesting is the Yahud photograph, which portrays Bulgarian and Turkish Jewish immigrants in the main square of Yahud moments after their arrival. Their belongings and suitcases are against a background of palm trees and spacious, ornamented, Arab style shops (figure 8). Another photograph worth mentioning is of Tarshiha, where a signpost in Hebrew and Arabic declares paradoxically and somewhat naively: 'To the Homeland building, the Socialist Society now in Israel for Peace' (figure 9).

These photographs were produced as part of the Zionist information campaign that sought to document Jewish settlement throughout the young country, and as an extension of the Zionist pre-state ethos of redeeming the land. Furthermore, since the State, in a lightning sale, sold a million *dunams* of Palestinian land to the Jewish National Fund in order to bypass the U.N. decision allowing refugees to return to their homes, these photographs served as a record of Jewish National Fund activities in settling the lands, and as part of its public relations and fund raising campaign.²¹ According to this perception, Israel's existence required Jewish ownership of the maximum land it was able to control and settle. Traditionally, the security of the state was linked to intensive Jewish settlement, especially in border areas.²² This point of view, however, did not confront the moral and legal questions that should have

19 – Elkosh was the birthplace of the prophet Nahum hence called 'the Elkoshite'.

20 – The name given was based on the Blessings of Moses 'The eternal God is a dwelling place [...] and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them'. Zeev Vilnai, *Hayishuvim beIsrael (Settlements in Israel)*, Israel: Davar 1951, 192.

21 – From discussions with Mrs Sima Zelig, manager of the photography archive in the Jewish National Fund information department from 1950 to 1997, November 1998 and February 1999.

22 – Yossi Amitai, 'Hamiut Haaravi BeIsrael, 1948–1966' ('The Arab Minority in Israel: Years of Military Rule'), Hatzmaut: Chamishim Hashanim Harishonot (*Independence The First 50 Years*), Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History 1988, 129–149.

0 Figure 7. Zoltan Kluger, *Immigrants from Kurdistan at the Elkosh village in the upper Galilee, 01/07/1949*. The Government Press Office, Israel.



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15 Figure 8. Zoltan Kluger, *An immigrants' family sitting on their luggage in the main square in Yehud, 01/10/1948*. The Government Press Office, Israel.



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30 Figure 9. Zoltan Kluger, *New immigrants temporarily settled in abandoned Arab houses at the Tarshiha village in the Galilee, 01/05/1949*. The Government Press Office, Israel.



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Figure 10. Zoltan Kluger, *A family of new immigrants at Moshav Tirat Yehuda, 01/10/1949*. The Government Press Office, Israel.



0 arisen following the appropriation of these lands, and this is precisely what is 0
expressed in these seemingly naive photographs,. Those absent from the
photographs become present through the land, the houses, the vegetation, and
those present in the photographs appear, to some extent, foreign to the land
5 and the landscape. Furthermore, the Jewish immigrants, in many cases, are 5
dressed in clothes from their country of origin and have not yet adopted an
Israeli appearance. The proximity of different ethnic and architectural
characteristics in the same photograph, above all, points to who was part of
the land and absent. This is also apparent in the photograph showing a family
10 from Tirat Yehuda; the settlement seen in the photograph survived in its 10
entirety without damage, and indicates severed Palestinian habitation. In the
forefront of the picture are a mother and her three small children stepping
through a ploughed field, behind them a man, maybe the father of the family
(figure 10). Their foreignness in the land and landscape is what gives rise to
15 thoughts concerning the people that cultivated the land, were an integral part 15
of it, lived in these houses, and looked entirely different. However, those who
ordered the photographs, like most of the population, were blind to the
Palestinian entity and sought to present the Jewish inhabitants and ingathering
of the exiles. Thus, for example, in Yuli Gersht's film, *Zion Admati (Zion, My*
20 *Land)* (2004), the director interviews a family in Kfar Danil (Daniel) and asks 20
them about the Palestinian house adjacent to theirs. It is clear from their
answer that, for more than fifty years, the house was invisible to them. Thus,
without intending to, the photographs turn the missing into the visible, the
absent into the present, the forgotten into spokesmen for memory, and assist in
25 creating a map of the country in its prior condition. 25

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