



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Shulamit Reinharz

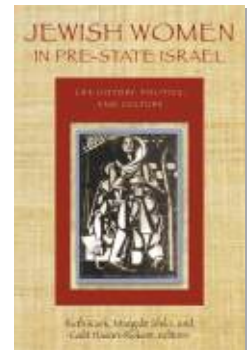
Published by Brandeis University Press

Kark, Ruth & Shilo, Margalit & Hasan-Rokem, Galit & Reinharz, Shulamit.

Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15689>

## “We Were There Too”

### *Women’s Commemoration in Israeli War Memorials*

#### Introduction

This article deals with the tension between myth and reality, as reflected in the gender narrative arising from Israeli war memorials. This issue alludes to a wider one that will be touched upon only briefly here (in the hope of dealing with it more fully elsewhere): the connections among nationalism, space, militarism, and gender stereotypes, in developing countries in general and in Israel in particular.<sup>1</sup>

One of the places in which the national narrative is reflected in general, and its gender components in particular, is in the area of commemoration. Plastic commemoration is one of the accepted methods for granting an image or myth eternal life and passing it on to future generations. One of the prevalent myths commemorated plastically — in long-established countries as well as in new societies — is that of the “the brave soldier,” tall, sturdy, and handsome, who expresses nationalist aspirations but does not always match the physical reality of the fighters. This is the case with the large statues erected to commemorate freedom fighters in Italy, or the famous statue by Nathan Rapaport in memory of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters, a copy of which is in Yad Vashem. To adapt the fighters both to the Zionist ideal and the ideal of the European fighter, Rapaport turned the thin, hungry Ghetto people into robust, muscular fighters. The aim of “beautifying” reality and adapting it to myth is more pronounced for everything connected to death: In plastic commemoration soldiers die a sterile death, without wounds, without drip-

<sup>1</sup> This article was written as part of a research study sponsored by the Littauer Foundation and I wish to thank the foundation for the support it gave me.

ping in blood, without even a bullet's entry point. They are handsome, robust, admirable — the aesthetics of death at its best.

Does the statement that the memorial is intended to perpetuate the myth and not necessarily reality also apply to the images of women that appear in the commemoration of men and women who died while on active military service for the State of Israel? And if so, what are the myths — or ethos — that this commemoration wishes to nurture in relation to Israeli women? How does the gender image, literal and figurative, ascertained through commemoration of the fallen, mesh with the role intended for women in the developing Israeli society? In what way does the woman's image in the area of commemoration contribute to gender construction in Israel? To answer these questions, I will first present the state of plastic commemoration in Israel and I will propose a typology of repeated feminine motifs. Then I will discuss the cultural roots of these motifs and I will treat the question of their generational development. All of this will be done while comparing the military and civilian roles of women, in different periods in the *Yishuv* and the State, with their gender and biological reflection in memorials and monuments erected in memory of Israeli military dead. Finally, I will ask in which ways the gender commemoration of fallen men and women reflects the status of women in changing Israeli society in general and in Israel military society in particular, and to what extent this contributes to a new delineation of this status.

## Memorials Commemorating Fallen Soldiers in the State of Israel

Modern research considers memorials an array of symbols through which one may examine the culture and ideological system of a society.<sup>2</sup> Like any "text," one must read plastic commemoration within the "context" in which it is located, which is the interrelationship between the body commissioning the work, the body executing the work, and the viewers. Similarly, the range of plastic commemoration teaches us a great deal about the essence of a society. The State of Israel constitutes a special field of study for this matter, owing to the large number of memorials, of all types, scattered throughout the country.<sup>3</sup>

For this study I reviewed over nine hundred memorials that had been erected up to 1998 and that appear on the listing of the Defense Ministry's Unit for Soldier Commemoration. Of them, twenty-seven are connected in some way to women: Some of them commemorate only women, others

commemorate both men and women, and a third group commemorates men but has a female figure appearing in it. Most of them memorialize male and female soldiers; a few were put up in the name of civilian victims of war or terrorist attacks. Sixteen of those with women figures, or 60 percent, are figurative, while figurative commemoration is used only in 13 percent of all Israeli military memorials. One possible explanation is the fact that most of the memorials with women were erected up to the 1970s, a period in which the figurative trend was at its height. Another explanation derives from the distinctiveness of the feminine image in the masculine sector, a distinctiveness that requires, as it were, prominent literal or figurative expression. It is difficult to connect this fact with the sex of the artist, since only four of the twenty-seven memorials under discussion were planned by women.

Although female figures are found in memorials commemorating men who fell within military frameworks in Israel — and not only in those commemorating female soldiers or mixed groups — the percentage of military memorials erected to memorialize women, that mention women in their text, or that portray female images mirrors the percent of women soldiers who lost their lives while on active duty. Defense ministry figures from 31 January 1998 show that out of a total of 20,298 soldiers who lost their lives since the early days of pre-State Israel, 704 (or 3.5 percent) were women. Twenty-seven of the 900 memorials (3 percent) mention women or portray a female image, while 2 percent of all military memorials were dedicated to the memory of women who fell in battle, were murdered in terrorist attacks or hostile acts, or were killed in accidents. There are also a few memorials in which there is a mention of women in textual but not in figurative expression. Chronologically, the largest number of memorials that refer to women or in which the figure of a woman appears are in memory of victims of the War of Independence; this was the only war in which women fought in the front lines and the one that claimed the largest number of female casualties in any Israeli war. Yet, the percentage of female soldiers who have been killed among all military victims has been rising gradually since the First Lebanon War in 1982, and especially since the outbreak of the first intifada (1987), as most were victims of terrorist attacks and accidents, which for the most part are not gender-related. These statistics, which change frequently as a result of the deaths of additional male and female soldiers — caused by combat, hostile acts, accidents, and illnesses — are not absolute and are intended to provide the reader with a general idea of the reference to women in memorials and monuments to Israel soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

## Women in the Defense Force and the Israel Defense Force (IDF)

Israel is the only country in the world that conscripts women for mandatory military service. Since the War of Independence the socialist ideology of sexual equality and the pre-State tradition in which men and women shared all military tasks gave birth to the image of the fighting woman soldier who takes her place alongside the armed men. Studies that have appeared in recent years show that in actuality, even in the days of ostensible “equality,” that is, in the time of the Haganah and the Palmah, the status of women in the defense force was very complex. Since the establishment of Bar Giora, in the early days of Sejera (1907), women have taken part in guard duty, but this did not become the norm and remained limited to the very few.<sup>5</sup> In the Haganah, groups of women trained for duty as officers and even a Gedud ha-Banot ha-Lohamot (Legion of Fighting Girls) was founded under the command of Shoshana Gestetner-Wilensky and Hana Sternfeld. Yet, most of the women were not trained for combat but rather were integrated into the military support system of nursing and communication.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of the Palmah in May 1941 triggered a series of debates over whether women should be trained for battle or auxiliary tasks. A turning point occurred in 1944, when the *haksharot* joined the Palmah, raising the percentage of women from 10 percent to 30 percent among all those mobilized. The high point of women participating in combat roles at that time was during the campaign to send paratroopers to Europe in the spring of 1944, when three Palmah women participated. Two of them — Hannah Szenes and Havivah Reik — lost their lives after being captured by the enemy.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the local women who enlisted in the British army during World War II did so within the more common frameworks. In addition to the above mentioned Palmah women, volunteers from the *Yishuv* served in the British women’s auxiliary forces (A.T.S.) and nearly six hundred more in the British air force (R.A.F.). Women soldiers served as wireless operators, clerical staff, radar operators, photographers, parachute inspectors, truck and ambulance drivers, mechanics, nurses, and medical orderlies. Aside from a few exceptions, women did not take part in combat.

At the end of World War II, the Palmah was the largest military framework in which *Yishuv* women could participate. Between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the War of Independence, a period in which the Palmah changed from being a British military framework into an underground organization, women in the Palmah engaged in four types of

roles: *operational*—duties such as manning battle stations, engaging in open warfare, and accompanying convoys; *professional* activity—in the fields of communication, nursing, medicine, and quartermastering; *administrative* tasks—working as regimental adjutancy clerks and division secretaries; and *instructional*—training for field maneuvers, sport, and weaponry. These roles were supposed to train women to take their place within the military framework that would be set up upon the establishment of an independent Jewish entity in Eretz Israel. Three female Haganah members even completed a flight course and served as pilots, but in the War of Independence, it was decided that they would not participate actively in combat for fear they would fall into captivity.<sup>8</sup>

The War of Independence was the last war in which women actively participated in combat, in line with the tradition already set in the Palmah days. After a woman soldier's body was mutilated near kibbutz Gevulot early in the war, the Israeli High Command decided to remove women soldiers from the front lines and forbid them from participating in future battles. The compulsory nature of the IDF draft as opposed to the voluntary nature of the Haganah and the Palmah also prevented the integration of women in combat roles. Finally, the first women officers in the IDF had received their training in the British army where women were not permitted in battle, strengthening the reversal of gender policy. Even tasks that had been open to women in the British army, such as driving heavy vehicles, were forbidden to them in the IDF—so they would not be placed in the front lines during war. Consequently, by the mid-1970s, only 150 military classifications were open to women in the IDF, as opposed to 571 which were available to women serving at that time in the American army. Today, some 500 military classifications are accessible to women serving in the IDF, of which 100 are reserved for officers.<sup>9</sup>

The ways in which women were integrated into military frameworks prior to the establishment of the state and the motives for doing so are reminiscent of a common pattern that characterizes many developing societies in the throes of an intense or ongoing national struggle. In many Third World countries, even among those that had not had any egalitarian, socialist tradition, many women joined the national struggle as a way to free themselves from the double bonds of servitude from their standing as women and their colonialist status.<sup>10</sup> Even in Western countries, such as Ireland during the days of national struggle, the differentiation between the public and the private sphere became blurred, similar to the situation in Palestine in the 1940s during the struggle against the British. This process enabled women to join

the gender-related discourse of the war, which simultaneously reinforced their traditional role while upsetting the social equilibrium and ruining the stability of these functions.<sup>11</sup> The dissonance between the two elements provides a partial explanation for the change that occurred in the role of women in Israel, in the national discourse in general and in the military framework in particular, after the establishment of the state. As a continuation to Nira Yuval-Davis's determination of the five ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes in civilian society, it seems that removing women from combat roles in the IDF, and transferring them to solely auxiliary jobs, was a stage in turning them into "mothers of the nation," "the biological production house of the members of the ethnic collective," as she says. By means of ensuring the masculine nature of most of the activist military functions, it was possible to reinforce the role of the woman as biological childbearer, as the cultural reinforcer, as the arbiter of the limits of national groups, and as a symbol in the ideological discourse in the construction of ethnic groups. Only after the woman has taken her place in these four areas, states Yuval-Davis, can she integrate into her fifth role in developing countries: taking part in the national, economic, political, and especially — in the military struggle of the new state.<sup>12</sup>

### Typology of Images

Although most of the women in the IDF served as auxiliaries, for several decades the collective public memory retained the original image of the fighting woman soldier. This image, particularly with regard to the War of Independence was reinforced in fiction and autobiography, such as in the books by Netiva Ben-Yehudah and Tamar Avidar.<sup>13</sup> How were the public image of women in the IDF and the reality behind it translated into military memorials? We can identify six types of women that recur in figurative memorials:

**1. Combat soldiers and frontliners.** The principle of sexual equality and the pre-State policy of allowing women into combat moulded an image of women combatants in the collective public memory. One would therefore expect a plethora of the fighters in Israeli plastic commemoration, particularly in that appearing in the wake of the War of Independence. Yet, only two combat women appear in Israeli iconography: One is in the statue by Batya Lishansky in Kefar Yehoshua (from the years 1949–1953), and the other is in a relief by Aharon Priver at kibbutz Tel Yosef (1955). Contrary to Levinger's

determination that only Lishansky gave the woman a role equal to that of the man, it turns out that the initiator of the memorial in Kefar Yehoshua and the person who proposed the model was precisely a man, Menahem Zaharoni, the teacher of local residents who fell in 1948. No Kefar Yehoshua girls were killed, but they did go to fight together with the boys, so it was obvious that they would appear on the memorial. Two young women from Tel Yosef were killed in 1948, and they are commemorated in Priver's memorial.<sup>14</sup>

The image of the female fighter no longer appears in memorials erected after 1953. So it appears that descriptions of female fighting found only a minor echo in plastic commemoration, even in those memorials erected not long after the war ended. As women's combat activities during the War of Independence were limited to specific sectors and were not a widespread phenomenon, their plastic commemoration appears to have been more faithful to reality than the literary image or myth of women's military equality, which never really achieved large-scale practical expression.

**2. The auxiliary.** A second group of figures assist the fighters by providing support in the field of medical care and communication. The female auxiliary appears in three memorials erected in the memory of soldiers who lost their lives in the War of Independence and does not recur in later ones. In Nitzanim and Tel Yosef, where female fighters fell, the figure is a young woman kneeling next to a wounded soldier and proffering assistance. The third auxiliary is part of Nathan Rapoport's monumental tableau at kibbutz Negba (1953) portraying an armed soldier flanked by male and female figures. Initially the muscular woman appears to be a combat soldier (in an article that appeared in *Kol Negbah* in October 1953, she is called "a fighting comrade"), but in truth she is a medic carrying a first-aid kit. Even though the auxiliary and nursing roles of women reached the IDF from the British army, these memorials are not at all reminiscent of the British memorials erected in memory of the nurses and auxiliary staff who lost their lives during the First and Second World Wars. Those images usually take the form of a nurse or suffice with a textual mention—a list of names that appears beneath the memorial cross.<sup>15</sup>

As most female soldiers both during the War of Independence and throughout the history of the IDF served as auxiliaries, one might assume that this would be the most prominent figure to appear in Israeli military memorials. The fact that only three female auxiliaries appear in over nine hundred such memorials teaches us how little impact this image had on the collective Israeli public memory of women in military settings, even though



it reflects the most prevalent historical reality of the roles women played within military frameworks in Israel, even during the War of Independence. The combat and auxiliary images are the only ones in plastic commemoration that reflect women soldiers in any military role. In contradistinction to the male soldier, who also appears as a single figure in a memorial, the combat and auxiliary female soldier always appears in a group. In this, Israel differs from Britain and the United States, where a female image appearing in the role of auxiliary force occurs as a single figure, such as in the memorial to the U.S. soldiers who fell in World War II in the Pacific region, in which one finds the figure of the nurse looking off to the distance. The explanation for that may be cultural, ideological, or even practical: Perhaps the difference between the Israeli pattern to that seen elsewhere derives from the strong collective awareness of Israeli society, from the feeling common in Israel that a woman has no right to independent existence within a military framework, or from the fact that since the Palmah period the IDF has not created any units of fighting women or any an active auxiliary force consisting only of women.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that the toning down (and even the disappearance) of the female soldier from the dominant Israeli culture seems to be connected with a two-dimensional, or even machoistic conception that dominated Israeli society for decades regarding the essence and purpose of the Israeli army (as exemplified in the slogan “the best men [should belong] to the air force and the best women [should belong] to the pilots.” In a culture that equated the term “army” solely with a fighting corps, female soldiers, barred from combat status since the War of Independence, carried little weight. Hence, they were also excluded from figurative military commemoration, and barely any place in textual commemoration, as their deaths almost always occurred in non-combat situations, such as accidents. This dichotomy also had given semantic expression. Although the military inscriptions on tombstones were determined by the way the male or female soldier had lost their lives, regardless of their sex, a different tradition became entrenched in practice. In contrast to the male soldier, about whom it was customary to say that “he fell in the line of duty” — even if he had been killed in circumstances other than combat — people usually said about a female soldier that “she was killed during her military service.” In recent years, this concept has changed, in light of the transformations in Israeli society regarding the army and because of the large number of male and female soldiers murdered in terrorist attacks. Still, this change is not yet expressed figuratively in commemoration of those in uniform, perhaps because of religious radicalization; it has prevented Israeli society from again adopting the figurative genre, which of late has re-

turned to popularity in the Western world, particularly in Europe. An exception in this respect is Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial, designed as a wall of remembrance. Elsewhere, especially in France, one can again see the erection of monuments bearing the figure of man as part of the process of his artistic return in many fields.

**3. Young mothers.** This is the most common figurative image of women appearing in plastic commemoration. At times it represents a real mother, such as in Hannah Orloff's 1952 statue at Ein Gev of a mother holding a baby in the air, erected in memory of Hannah Touchman-Adlerstein, a kibbutz mother who lost her life during the 1948 war. In other instances, such as David Paulus's 1949 statue at Ramat Rahel of a woman holding a torch and protecting two small children, she symbolizes the motherland. Even in the original cast of the Negba statue, which had six figures rather than three, one of them was a young mother embracing an infant.<sup>17</sup> During the War of Independence, the image of the fallen mother was more fitting to civilian reality than military: Only two of the war's female military casualties (1.5 percent of all women who died in the war) were mothers while 170 of the female civilian victims (about 47 percent) were mothers.<sup>18</sup> The motif of the young mother appears in later memorials, too, such as the one from 1965 by Matanya Abramson in *moshavah* Kineret and that by sculptor Rivka Keren, "United Family," in Kefar Yovel in memory of a terrorist act that occurred in 1975. The most unusual image of a young mother is a woman in early pregnancy who is also the mother of a soldier that appears in the Givatayim memorial to the fallen (erected 1978), and we shall return to this subject later.

**4. Older mothers.** The older mother who sends her son to war, a common image figure in European iconography, appears in only two Israeli memorials. One is in that by Nathan Rapoport in Be'er Tuviah (from 1975), and the other, from the early 1970s, is by Mordecai Kafri at Balfouriyah.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that this motif is missing in memorials erected soon after the 1948 war. Despite the fact that one of the hit plays of those days was Nathan Shaham's, *Hem yaggi'u mahar* (They Will Arrive Tomorrow), about a mother who sends her son to his death, and one of the best-selling books of the time was Moshe Shamir's *Hu halakh ba-sadot* (He Walked in the Fields) that describes the system of relations between a mother in the kibbutz and her son the soldier, a large number of soldiers had immigrated from Europe without parents, while others were Holocaust survivors (40 percent of those killed in 1948 were survivors as opposed to 20 percent in the general population) who

were war orphans. Consequently, the image of a mother sending her son off to war was irrelevant to many of those participating in the War of Independence.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in the days when “the entire country is the front,” mothers were often part of the defense system, so it was difficult to speak of a mother sending her son to battle as if she was not involved at all in what was happening. Only after the generational metamorphosis occurring between the Sinai Campaign and the Six-Day War, and the sociocultural changes that occurred in their wake, could one totally separate combatants from the civilians and depict a mother sending her son off to war like the mythological mother in Sparta — who tells her son to return with his shield or on his shield, meaning, be victorious or die in battle. The contrast between the diminutive elderly mother in a long gown and the young, bare-chested son the soldier embracing her with one hand and holding his weapon in the other, is clearly expressed in Rapoport’s statue.

**5. Weeping women.** Weeping women, or more precisely mothers mourning their sons, constitute another common motif in memorials in European iconography. In Israel, this motif appears three times: in the 1954 statue by Aaron Ashkenazi at kibbutz Revadim in honor of the Gush Etzion victims; in the Faigin memorial in Haifa, executed in 1974, in which a mother is kneeling at the feet of her fallen son; and in the 1979 marble plaque at moshav Kefar Yehoshua designed by Batya Lishansky after the Yom Kippur War. The same artist, Lishansky, had been identified, thirty years earlier, in collective public memory with the images of women fighters. Since military monuments are intended to serve as a kind of gravestone for the bereaved families, the motif of the weeping mother seems at first glance quite natural; but apparently the contrast between the figure of the weeping mother, who symbolizes giving in to tragedy, and the Zionist ethos of parents standing firm in the face of bereavement, prevented most of the early designers of memorials from utilizing this image.

The appearance of older and particularly weeping mothers in Israeli iconography from the 1950s on has a sociocultural significance beyond the expression of personal bereavement. The inclusion of these images in military commemoration indicates the perpetual existence of a popular immigrant culture that allowed mothers (and at times fathers) publicly and vocally to mourn the death of their children. Simultaneously it was a first indication of the psychological transformation that was about to occur in all of Israeli society from the 1970s onward, when the first cracks in the heroic national and personal façade regarding the treatment of bereavement began to show.

**6. The virgin.** The virgin, and particularly the fighting virgin based on the pagan tradition of Artemis and later Christian tradition of Joan of Arc, frequently appears in European Christian iconography. In Israel, the image of the innocent maiden is found only once, in a commemorative relief created in 1970 by Gershon Kinspel at the Kefar Gallim agricultural school depicting a teenage boy and girl carrying sheaves of wheat and flowers. The interweaving of the motif of innocence and pastorality suits both the time — an agricultural school and the years between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War when many Israelis lived in hope that active combat had become an issue of the past.

Several gender motifs are striking in their absence. The first is a *pietà*-like image of a mother holding her dead son, common in both Western and Eastern European military iconography. It is difficult to know if the abstention from presenting an image similar to the Christian *Pietà* stems from Judeo-traditional or psychological reasons. Equally absent is the wounded female soldier, even though the figure of the wounded male soldier does appear in many memorials. This applies to European memorials: One of the few places in which a wounded woman appears is among the sculpted figures by Fritz Kremer and Willy Lammert at the Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany. Perhaps it comes from the cultural aversion to confronting the reality of female war casualties, even though this phenomenon did, of course, actually occur, mainly in the War of Independence.<sup>21</sup>

### Factors Influencing Israeli Military Commemoration

To understand the typology presented here, one must analyze it against the background of the specific factors influencing commemoration in Israel. In contrast to most countries in which the iconographic system refers to time-bound events or to a number of wars separated by decades or more, it seems that Israeli memorialization is a dense, continuous, ongoing process that began prior to the establishment of the state and has gone on to the present. From Melnikoff's "Roaring Lion" in memory of the defenders of Tel Hai (1934) — the first Israeli memorial to list women casualties and whose original cast was a female form — to the memorial at the Ashkelon junction in memory of the female soldier, Hofit Ayyash, who was murdered in a terrorist attack in 1996, Israeli iconography consists of an ongoing, developing system of images that reflects the changing attitude toward an interaction between the variables of gender and the military. No similar developing con-

tinuum of memorial imagery appears elsewhere, as plastic commemoration in most countries reflects a static-retrospective view of women and/or female combatants through a prism of a specific war.

Religious dictates are a second factor influencing Israeli commemorative iconography. From the medieval period onward, Jewish religious prohibitions stemming from a broad interpretation of the commandment “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness” (Exodus 20:4) eradicated any traces of figurative iconography in the cultural sphere.<sup>22</sup> Consequently it is not surprising that close to 90 percent of the figurative memorials in which women appear are found in secular *moshavim* or *kibbutzim*, which did not feel themselves curtailed by religious cultural prohibitions of this sort. It is also clear why these memorials — erected in settlements where only a pure Israeli identity could be considered suitable to commemorate military casualties — bear no religious imagery. An exception to this rule is the military memorial in Givatayim, which has both religious and gender elements: a mother in her first pregnancy, a grandfather in *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), a grandson who is looking forward toward the horizon and going off to battle (and to his death), and a wall with letters in Rashi script.<sup>23</sup>

The dynamics surrounding the design of a memorial and the dialog between artist and viewer bring me to a final point: the historical sources of Israeli military commemoration. “Memory is not created in a vacuum,” writes James Young, in his book *The Texture of Memory*, and its plastic expression is rooted in various iconographic traditions.<sup>24</sup> One must not forget the Judeo-cultural context of the images I mentioned — Rachel lamenting her children, Deborah the valiant prophet, Hannah and her seven sons, and so on — but the lack of any regular tradition of figurative iconography in both Judaism and the *Yishuv*, except for the few exception noted (Melnikoff, Lishansky) point us toward another cultural context: the European.

Most of the motifs I have cited are well rooted in some European cultural tradition: religious, ideological, artistic, or historical. When searching for the roots of Israeli iconography, one must, therefore, keep in mind European iconography, in both Western and, especially, Eastern Europe.

## Conclusion

“Landscapes are culture before they are nature,” claims Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*; “constructs of the imagination projected onto wood

and water and rock."<sup>25</sup> An observer of the Israeli commemorative landscape will find it defies it to recover a single collective memory of either female military casualties or gender images that is embodied in Israeli commemorative culture. Instead one finds a developing continuum of images that reflects the emotional and physical maturation process of the young state and even sheds light on the construction and transformation of Israeli gender identity over the course of fifty years. From the image of the female combatant, the only type in evidence before 1948, which disappeared in the Israeli reality after the establishment of the state, there was a shift in the early 1950s to the image of the auxiliary and the young mother; this symbolizes not only the dozens of mothers who were killed in the War of Independence, both soldiers and civilians, but also the homeland and the hope of continuity. As one progresses chronologically from the period in which women played an active role in military and civil defense, the auxiliaries and young mothers fade away and are replaced by images that represent the passive role relegated to most Israeli women from the Sinai Campaign onward: older, weeping mothers, sacrificing their children for the motherland. The same image was chosen to commemorate male and female soldiers alike, the woman who supplies fighters for the nation from the imperative of her biological function and who mourns their death—for only a mother can mourn in public—by gendered privilege. From this point onward the elderly mother image remains dominant in Israeli commemorative iconography until figurative images disappear at the end of the 1980s.

Beyond reflecting the military and civilian process of the disappearance of female combatants, the dwarfing of the position of the auxiliaries, and the transition to the mothers, the transformation of the female image in plastic commemoration alludes to three wide-ranging processes that have left their mark on Israeli society from the establishment of the state until the present. The first is a process of genderization and retreat from the egalitarian-socialist ethos, conveyed in the figurative commemoration of female military casualties and particularly in the transition from the image of the female combatant and auxiliary to that of the mother. In removing women soldiers from combat roles—and thus also from Israeli commemorative iconography—the military was turned into a completely masculine sector, one of the expressions of genderization of Israel society in recent years. Other areas evidencing this same process are labor relations, allotment of public resources, and the definition of obligations in the public and private sector, all of which contradicted the egalitarian ethos that the *halutzim* adopted as their credo. The struggle for equality in these areas began in the days of the

*Yishuv* and has remained one of the focal points of political, economic, and social tension throughout the history of the state.<sup>26</sup>

The transition to the image of the mother in the plastic military commemoration alludes to an additional process of genderization that characterizes the gender construction in developing countries: turning women into “the mother of the nation,” a birth machine ensuring the existence of the nation, while at the same time maintaining the ethnocultural uniqueness of the new state.<sup>27</sup> This situation was common also in developing countries outside the Third World, as one can see from the Australian model of the 1930s. In the song competition held on the “white continent” in 1938, songs of praise were sung to women who were outstanding in perpetual fertility and people encouraged this situation as preserving the cultured nation:

Ye girls of British race, Famous for your beauty,  
 reed Fast in all your grace, For this is your duty.  
 As Anzac gave in war, So daughters at your call,  
 will quick respond the more. To replace those that fall.<sup>28</sup>

In Israel, this process meshed with one of the central issues that troubled David Ben-Gurion in the early years of the state: the demographic question. His belief that the state’s existence could only be guaranteed by swift demographic growth was expressed in his plan for mass immigration that recruited the economic resources of the new state, but also in the encouragement of “internal immigration.” Expressions of the latter were birth grants, cash allotments for children, prizes to mother’s of large families, and the creation of the ethos that determined a special place for the Hebrew women as a mother and particularly as the mother of soldiers. As early as his first speeches during War of Independence, Ben-Gurion awarded particular honor to mothers of the fallen and spoke of the special connection between them and their sons and daughters, who had given their lives for the state.<sup>29</sup> How deeply etched in the public consciousness was the image of the mother as an instrument for the nation’s continuity can be seen in the way midwives in the 1950s and 1960s informed mothers of the newborn’s sex (*mazzal tov*, you have a soldier boy; *mazzal tov*, you have a soldier girl). The iconographic transfer of bereavement from the female soldier to the mother — young or mature — is indicative of the changes in the Israeli ethos about the way in which a Hebrew woman is to bear the burden of the nation: no longer as a one defending it with her body but as one providing the future defenders, by means of her body. The genderization process in Israeli society — both in the

ethos and in action — reflects, therefore, a change in the image of the woman in figurative commemoration in the State of Israel.

The transformations in the image of the mother allude to another process that shaped the national discourse in Israel from the 1960s: the trend toward decollectivization. The first images of young mothers that appeared in plastic commemoration, such as the one in Ramat Rahel (1949), were very similar to their European counterparts in that they represented the homeland more than the image of the individual mother. The beauty and purity, the bravery and vision that the young mother embodied were intended to reflect the collective characteristics of the people of that homeland and to serve as a model. Yet, the iconographic feminization of the motherland, a model well known from Europe (Marianne in France and *Winged Victory* in Britain) that left its mark in the East as well (such the monumental statue in memory of the Stalingrad fighters in the form of a woman holding a sword), barely registered in a country that was called *eretz hemdat avot* ("the lovely country of the Patriarchs"). The problematics in equating the motherland with a mother image resulted in the situation whereby the mothers that appeared in Israeli commemorative iconography from the end of the 1950s already had ceased to represent the collective ethos and became flesh-and-blood mothers. An expression of this is the shift from the image of the pretty, young, striking mother to that of the mature, minor key mother representing only herself. The decollectivization of the mother image in Israeli iconography, therefore, *predates* the general trend of diminishing the collective ethos in Israeli society, which left its mark in the areas of society, culture, and the state almost a decade later.<sup>30</sup>

A third process that characterized the discourse within Israeli society and expressed itself in the iconographic sphere is the transition to multiculturalism. Despite the broad cultural spectrum that the immigrants brought with them — prior to the establishment of the state and afterward as well — the official culture, reflecting the definitive Israeli ethos for over two decades, was both dominant and all-encompassing. Nevertheless, the richness and diversity of immigrant sub-cultures continued to express themselves in certain fields, particularly during major transitional events such as births, marriage, and death. In the commemorative sphere, tension between the official, dominant culture and the influence of the immigrant cultures — both from Europe as well as Eastern countries — is expressed by the image of the older, weeping mothers. "Who can describe a mother's pain; who can assuage the pain of her mourning and who can heal her mortal wound, even if she hides it with innocent humility and courage from the eyes of strangers?"



writes Ben-Gurion in spring 1950.<sup>31</sup> Even before the national ethos of concealing bereavement began to soften, a process that reached its climax in recent years with soldiers crying over the graves of their comrades in arms, Israeli iconography recognized the right of the bereaved family to mourn publicly — a central component of some of the immigrant subcultures, even those from Europe. As noted, an example of that is the 1974 memorial by Faigin in Haifa of a mother kneeling weeping over her fallen son. Apparently, in this area, too, plastic commemoration in Israel that contains images of women preceded the general trend in Israeli society.

These last two processes — the decollectivization and the move to multiculturalism — were supposed to yield new patterns of military commemoration, reflecting the cluster of military and civilian roles that women filled over the course of years. Thereby, commemoration was not only to reflect the complete picture of women's activity within the military framework but even to contribute to the process of refashioning the national discourse over the place of women in this framework. Yet, unfortunately, we are witnessing an almost totally opposite process: In the commemorative memorial for the Women's Corps ("Memorial to the Fighting Hebrew Woman") that was erected during the state's jubilee year near the Shikmim field school in the old kibbutz Nitzanim, it was decided to present a number of groups of women in the form of semi-abstract figures. Among the groups, one may discern a woman supporting her friend and even a mother protecting her small children, but there is no hint of female combat soldiers, not even one in an auxiliary role. Toward the close of the twentieth century, too, when more opportunities were available to the young women joining the army than ever before, the image of the woman in plastic commemoration and accompanying text is somewhat passive, and in its form and motifs it is reminiscent more of the works of Kremer and Lammert in the women's concentration camp Ravensbruck than the "fighting Hebrew woman" who does everything, it seems, except fight. In Israeli society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one is not supposed to create a figurative connection between the woman and militarism, even though she stood at the center of the public discourse concerned with sexism, racism, violence in general, and especially violence in the family, not as an abstract figure but as a real victim.<sup>32</sup> It also does not seem that the presentation of women in plastic military commemoration will change in the near future. For even at a time, when young women are accepted to military pilot training or other elite units, in a society in which political discourse is conducted mainly by former members of the General Staff's commando unit and the social discourse is shaped in the

offices of the representatives of the clerical-patriarchal parties, it is hard to believe that women in active combat roles will receive expression in the area of commemoration.<sup>33</sup>

And now for the final question: myth versus reality. Plastic commemoration of men — even in Israel — tends to reinforce the myth, while the iconography related to the country's women focuses unequivocally on the universal reality of the mother figure, she who stands outside the circle of combat. Is adherence to the image of the mother, young and old alike, the image prevalent in Israeli military iconography and Holocaust memorials, nothing more than an expression of yearning for normalization and family continuity, in a country forced to grapple almost daily with additions to the "family of bereavement"?<sup>34</sup>

To sum up, when discussing a memorial continuum that reflects a tragic, lengthy, and ongoing process, the universality of motherhood — "the source of all life" in the words of Mordecai Kafri, and the focal point of human consolation — effaces any competing image. The female combatants and auxiliaries belong to the past, and who knows, perhaps also to the future. But the mother links the past to the present and future alike, and traditionally the utterance "mama" is considered the child's first cry and the final whisper of the dying. There are myths that are stronger than reality, but there is, apparently, also a reality that is stronger than myth.