Pyrrhic Progress

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Chapter 4

Memory

Searching for Shaar Ha’aliya

When driving in to Haifa today on the coastal highway, official green signs direct the public to various local neighborhoods: the Carmel Center, Neve David, and Shaar Ha’aliya. After following the signs at the entrance of the city, turning right at the restaurant Maxim, and then taking the road that leads to the Carmel, there is a place marker: a large stone sign in Hebrew, Arabic, and English that reads Sha’ar Ha’aliyah. Today this is an unassuming, residential neighborhood. There are large grassy areas, some low apartment buildings, and except for the name, there is no mark of what it once was.

In and around this area are a few memorials, but they don’t have anything to do with the historic Shaar Ha’aliya. One is Gan Ofira, “Ofira’s Park.” The same type of stone sign, with the same font and city of Haifa seal as the Shaar Ha’aliya sign, explain in a few lines that this park is in honor of Ofira Navon who lived from 1936 to 1993: “The wife of the fifth president of the State of Israel. She was very active in promoting the welfare and well-being of children in Israel.” Near the beach, there is Hecht Park, named for a former member of the Jewish underground fighting unit, the Etzel, who was born in Belgium and who made significant contributions to Israeli society and the city of Haifa after his immigration to Palestine in
1936. At the entrance to the park, there is a modest, yet prominent, stone structure that has a photograph of Dr. Hecht and a detailed biography in both Hebrew and English. However, when standing at the memorial for Dr. Hecht, it is possible to see something else: right behind is a sign on which Shaar Ha’aliya appears prominently. It is the local gas station.

Standing here, looking at the gas station, it is almost impossible not to feel that Shaar Ha’aliya has—rather pathetically—been forgotten. To the extent that any memorialization is, in fact, being done at the historic site, it is not for anyone who was involved in Shaar Ha’aliya itself, let alone the immigrants who were there. In this location, which is arguably the most symbolic physical spot for the post-1948 mass immigration, passersby can immediately learn about Ofira Navon and Reuven Hecht, but anyone who doesn’t know to look for more about Shaar Ha’aliya could just mistake it for any other name on a gas station. Still this is not a complete picture. For one thing, Shaar Ha’aliya does have a place, albeit a small one, in Israeli historiography: it is written about directly in most historiography specific to the period of the mass immigration and in at least one general survey on Israeli history. It is described in music, film, novels, and oral testimony. And while there is no museum where the camp once stood, the neighborhood is still officially known as Shaar
Ha’aliya. By leaving the name in place, there remains a trace of—and an invitation to investigate—this past.

This chapter contends with the questions of how and why Shaar Ha’aliya has been forgotten by asking the same questions about the way it is remembered. A beautiful articulation of this dichotomy is found in Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor*: “When we say that a people ‘remembers’ we are really saying that a past has been actively transmitted to the present generation and that this past has been accepted as meaningful. Conversely, a people ‘forgets’ when the generation that now possesses the past does not convey it to the next, or when the latter rejects what it receives and does not pass it onward, which is to say the same thing.” This raises the question: In what ways has Shaar Ha’aliya’s past actively been transmitted to the present generation? Has it been accepted as meaningful? Or, conversely, has it been rejected or even not conveyed?

To answer these questions, this chapter begins where there is nothing: the site of the camp. The omission of any historical markers is the most...
striking example of how Shaar Ha’aliya has been excluded from Israeli national remembrance. To illustrate this point, I compare the absence of memorialization at Shaar Ha’aliya with the abundance of memorialization twenty minutes away at Atlit. Atlit served as a detention camp for illegal Jewish immigrants to British Mandate Palestine. Its heritage site is widely known and hugely elaborate. I argue that Atlit is an important key to understanding why the story of Shaar Ha’aliya has been excluded from Israeli national mythology. Many of the images and themes in Atlit depict the immigrants as victims and heroes, the proto-Israelis as heroes and the British as oppressors, which are some of the exact themes and images in the history of Shaar Ha’aliya: the immigrants are still victims and heroes, but now it is the Israeli state that is in the role of the oppressor. In effect, state-memorialization of Shaar Ha’aliya would be in direct confrontation with the state itself.

This point becomes even sharper through an analysis of the way Shaar Ha’aliya is remembered. Whether in film, song, novels, personal stories, or memoirs, the experience of Shaar Ha’aliya, in all its complexity and variation, is very much alive. And so, following the discussion of the site of memory, I analyze the representation of Shaar Ha’aliya in the rich reservoir of historical remembrances. I argue that these personal remembrances help shed light on why, on an official, national level, it simply is not being conveyed to the next generation.

This chapter uses the general memory of Shaar Ha’aliya as a way to understand the memory of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine and vice versa because the two are intertwined. The reasons these are both challenging are the same: an honest confrontation with the memory of Shaar Ha’aliya and its central role in Israeli history would have to include the story of Jewish immigrants to the Jewish state behind medically defended barbed wire. Understanding Shaar Ha’aliya as a quarantine—as implemented and symbolized by barbed wire—is a clue to understanding why the overall memory of the Shaar Ha’aliya processing camp is challenging and currently marginalized.
Sites of Memory: Atlit

Fifteen kilometers south of Shaar Ha’aliya is the Atlit Heritage Site. In its most famous incarnation, Atlit was the location of the British Mandate detention camp for illegal Jewish immigrants to Palestine from 1939 to 1948. Today it is one of Israel’s most impressive heritage sites. Before you arrive at the camp museum, there are large, official signs on the highway that let you know you are almost there: Atlit Detention Camp. And these aren’t the green direction markers for Shaar Ha’aliya: these are brown guide signs, with a symbol that lets you know you are reaching a location of historical importance. The anticipation is justified. The museum is an evocative and careful recreation of the camp experience. The intention is that you not just learn, but actually feel what it must have been like for the Jewish immigrants who were detained there by the British. They had narrowly escaped genocide in Europe, they were so close to being in the Promised Land but then—right on the shores of the land of Israel—they were detained at Atlit, watched over by armed British guards, and shut behind rows and rows of barbed wire.

Once you are past the parking lot and reception area, you are in the reconstructed camp grounds, which, despite the natural beauty of the place, successfully convey a sense of being contained. The only way to enter the camp is by walking between barbed wire fences. There is a restored watch tower in front of you, a patrol car and two military tanks to your side. A mannequin stands guard in front of a small bus carrying what seems to be newly arriving immigrants with hints of somber faces looking out of the bus’s darkened windows. The mannequin that oversees them is dressed as a guard. He is wearing a khaki uniform and has a rifle slung over his arm.

Tours of the site begin in a sparse wooden structure that had once been the registration shack. Visitors then continue in historical footsteps, walking through the premises’ expansive, tree-filled grounds to what would have been the next stop for the detainees, a disinfection cabin. You
continue on outside and reach the living quarters, a cabin that is brought to life with mannequins set in modest living conditions. There are rows of single metal beds, clothes hanging from rafters, suitcases, wash tubs, a game of checkers to pass the time, and a baby’s crib. This is a temporary stop on a migrant’s journey. Clearly, it is not the final destination or home, but it isn’t an atmosphere of suffering (one of the mannequins is even smiling). It’s a setting of tidy simplicity, not squalor. There is a sense of endurance, of making do with an existence that is certainly meager but not deplorable.

The next stop in the tour is the large, restored “illegal immigration” ship. There is a sense of excitement about this ship. The booklet, the website, and the tour guides explain that it was bought in Latvia in 2005 specifically for the Atlit Heritage Site and that it was brought to Israel and to Atlit with great difficulty. It is the most dramatic example of the extensive effort and expense put into this heritage site. It is meant to “perpetuate and commemorate the journey of the Ma’apilim [illegal Jewish immigrants] for future generations.” Inside there is an elaborate sound and light show that re-creates the immigrants’ experiences, the challenges of leaving the only homes they had known, the cramped quarters inside the ship itself, and the joy of arriving at the land of Israel. You come out of the ship’s dark, cramped interior and step into the light and fresh air surrounded by green fields. The tour then continues to another cabin to watch a movie that dramatizes the raid by the Palmach, the underground Jewish fighting unit, on Atlit in October 1945, when they liberated all the immigrants who were being detained there. The culmination of the movie is the creation of the State of Israel. An Israeli flag is flown, there is celebration, kissing, and a barbed wire gate opens. With that, the movie ends. This dramatic conclusion to the movie is no accident. Barbed wire is central to the memorialization of Atlit. It appears in photographs. It is emphasized in descriptive texts. It is referred to, repeatedly and with emotion, by the immigrants who are quoted in the museum catalog. And it is physically abundant throughout the camp itself: there is a barbed wire gate you
walk through at the entrance of the camp; there are barbed wire fences along the camp’s boundaries; and the windows of the registration shack are blocked by barbed wire. In the disinfection hut, there are large photographs of immigrants inside the camp (children and babies, armed guards, people dancing, and others holding large Israeli flags) that span the entire length of two walls. All these photographs are dramatically mounted behind barbed wire.

These images, descriptive signs in the site itself, and the museum pamphlet and booklet make clear that the barbed wire fence at Atlit was callous and repressive. It divided families “with fathers and older children on one side of the fence and mothers and younger children on the other side” \(^{11}\) and kept the *ma’apilim* from connecting with Israel’s beauty: “Here in Atlit, you can no longer see the spectacular view of Mount Carmel that we were so excited to see from the [boat] *Mircea*. Barbed wire fences surround our eyes.” \(^{12}\) The people who are contained inside the camp are

Figure 8. *Barbed Wire*, the Atlit Heritage Site. Photo © Rhona Seidelman.
romantic figures. Although they are victims, they have heroic, valiant spirits that will not be crushed by the fence: “Out of excitement they begin to dance the *hora* [a traditional Jewish dance] behind the barbed wire fences.” And when they break out of the barbed wire, as part of the 1945 Palmach operation, it is an act of bravery and liberation. Above all, the Atlit memorialization makes it clear that, of all places in the world, *here*, this should not have happened to Jews: “After all the hardships they had endured making their way to Israel, they found themselves once again incarcerated behind prison bars—this time within the Land of Israel!”

From a Jewish Israeli perspective, the role of barbed wire in Atlit’s memorialization is uncomplicated and intentionally emotional. The narrative is of “us versus them.” The British are the oppressors, and the Jews are the heroes. The British tried to keep the Jews out of the land of Israel, but the Jews had perseverance, determination, and morality on their side. Then when the British could not keep these Jews out of the Promised Land, they kept them captive behind barbed wire.

For this message to be conveyed, the history of Atlit has to be contained. And as in any history, to keep the frame tidy, certain stories have to be excluded. In the museum guidebook, you can find hints of events that have been pushed to the background. One is in the account of the Palmach evacuation of the camp in October 1945: “When the raid took place all the *Ma’apilim* were ready to go. Seven immigrants who were suspected of cooperating with the Nazis were left in the camp hospital, handcuffed.” Who were these men? What happened to them after they were left behind? It is interesting to imagine how, if told from the perspective of these shamed, deserted, and suspicious men, the story would be complicated. Another fleeting allusion that appears in both the heritage site tour and the museum catalog directly relates to Shaar Ha’aliya. As I was observing the disinfection hut, the guide pointed out an area in the back: it is a *mikve*, a bath for Jewish ritual cleansing. She explained that it was built on the premises after the state was established. Why there would be people in Atlit needing a *mikve* after 1948 was left unsaid. As far as the movie
showed it, the state was established, the flag was flown, the barbed wire was cut through, and Atlit was no more. On my tour, this was left unresolved, just another interesting anecdote in a day full of information. For those looking for something of an answer, the guidebook offers this: “The camp was used as one of the first absorption centers for the flood of new immigrants who arrived soon after the founding of the State of Israel.” In fact, from 1951 to 1952, the Atlit camp served as Shaar Ha’aliya Bet, the temporary setting to help alleviate crowding at Shaar Ha’aliya. Aside from the mikve, there is no reference to this in the heritage site. In some ways, it would then seem that Shaar Ha’aliya has been forgotten twice: once in Haifa and once more in Atlit. Certainly, any historical periodization will, inevitably, leave out some parts of the past. Nevertheless, this double erasure raises the question: What is it about Shaar Ha’aliya that, as yet, just does not seem to fit into the local landscape?

“A Certain Idea” of Israel

The Israeli story, as experienced through Atlit, brings to mind a phrase of Charles de Gaulle’s that Pierre Nora confronts in Lieux de Mémorie, “a certain idea of France.” Nora writes, “Every event on the national scene has brutally and incessantly confronted us as citizens with what de Gaulle, at the beginning of his Mémoires de guerre, called ‘a certain idea of France.’” This “idea” of De Gaulle’s that Nora finds troubling is the harmonious model of France’s “greatness and destiny.” It is fair to say that there is also “a certain idea of Israel,” a similarly harmonious model of Israel’s greatness and its destiny that is embodied in the Atlit memorial: Jewish, Ashkenazi ma’apilim with an unwavering and unimpeachable connection to the land of Israel face an external oppressor with military bravery, romantic stoicism, heroism, and cunning. And in the end, they are victorious. This is indeed a harmonious model of the past, one that Tamar Katriel has described as nostalgic, heroic, and “sacrifice filled.”
It should be expected that official remembrances would be this idealized and this narrow. We know that groups pick and choose their memories and that states use memory to further political agendas. Yerushalmi used a Jewish frame for this universal truth: “For any people there are certain fundamental elements of the past—historical or mythic, often a fusion of both—that become ‘Torah,’ be it oral or written, a teaching that is canonical, shared, commanding consensus; and only insofar as this ‘Torah’ becomes ‘tradition’ does it survive [ . . . ] Only those moments out of the past are transmitted that are felt to be formative and exemplary for the halakhah [Jewish Law] of a people as it is lived in the present; the rest of ‘history’ falls, one might almost say literally, by the ‘wayside.’”

For example, the Torah for pre-1975 France was a glorious history told around the revolution and the resistance while less flattering histories such as the revolution’s Reign of Terror and the collaborative Vichy regime fell by the wayside. In Germany, there is a surviving tradition that the outbreak of World War I was met with collective, “exhilarated patriotism,” even though this was not the case. And while there is little memorialized public history in Toronto, Canada, to the extent that it does exist, it begins with, and celebrates, British imperialism and colonial markers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The history that has fallen by the wayside is that of the indigenous peoples who have lived in the vicinity of this city for more than eleven thousand years.

In short, there will always be stories that are forgotten and others, often whitewashed, that are adopted as “consensus, formative and exemplary.” Not surprisingly, state endorsed remembrances are selected to legitimize the power of its leaders and ideology and to help shape particular models of citizenship and patriotism. This is what the Atlit heritage museum does. As Tamar Katriel has shown, it validates the “Zionist tale” that victimization legitimates the Jewish tie to the land of Israel while also reinforcing the central Zionist values of “struggle, choice and human agency.” Through its display of Israel’s historic greatness, there is a promise of its
similarly great destiny as the visitors are encouraged to see their own “present and future potential” and to have their “commitment to the national cause” strengthened.  

This “certain idea of Israel” engulfs citizens and visitors far beyond what you find at Atlit. In her pioneering work on Israeli collective memory, Yael Zerubavel mapped precisely this phenomenon. In abundant detail, she uncovered the evolution and manipulation of three of Israel’s central national myths: the Bar Kokhva Revolt, the Battle of Tel Hai, and the fall of Masada. Through music, literature, folklore, celebrated sites of memory, and state-sanctioned educational material, these historical events have all been transformed into myths that reinforce solidarity, contemporary Israeli political agendas, Zionist ideology, and Zionist interpretation of the past as a way to “actively change the course of Jewish history.”

This then echoes back to Yerushalmi’s words about the histories that are remembered and the histories that are forgotten, since it is no secret that in Israel’s process of myth-making many voices were left by the wayside. Those who did not fit into the pioneering, Zionist, heroic mold (such as Arabs, Mizrahim/ Sephardim, Holocaust survivors, post-1948 Jewish refugees and immigrants) were excluded. And since Shaar Ha’aliya was the “Atlit” for Mizrahim, Holocaust survivors, and refugees (people excluded from the Israeli myth), the erasure of its historical site is one expression of how the State of Israel has left these people, and their stories, by the wayside. But important distinctions do exist between Shaar Ha’aliya’s groups of immigrants and their experiences of absorption in Israeli society. For example, Holocaust survivors were originally perceived in Israel with tremendous derision, but their image underwent a significant metamorphosis, most notably with the Eichmann trial of 1961, when they came to be viewed with growing sympathy. As they and their offspring became an increasingly empowered group in Israeli society, their stories gained a central place in official Israeli remembrance. What has also played an important role, of course, is the fact that remembrance of the Holocaust is a powerful tool in both foreign and domestic Israeli politics. Whatever
the various reasons, the result is that Holocaust survivors and their families have places of remembrance in Israel where their experiences and history are honored and where they are celebrated as essential players in the state. There is no official state heritage site that does the same thing for Mizrahim.

However, when we compare the erased history at the site of Shaar Ha’aliya with the celebrated history at the site of Atlit, it is useful to consider an idea from Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan: “Collective remembrance [ . . . ] is rarely what the state tells us to remember.” And indeed, the absence of historical markers at the site of Shaar Ha’aliya is only one part of the story. Standing in contrast are the vivid, complicated, and rich memories that are being transmitted through stories, music, and personal testimony. These remembrances do indeed “demand the right to be heard.” But as we will see, one persistent part of these remembrances is the image of Shaar Ha’aliya as a fenced-off, isolating space that kept new immigrants outside of Israel. It is an image that challenges the “certain idea of Israel.”

**Shaar Ha’aliya in Art**

In *Scapegoat*, Eli Amir’s immigration novel set in the 1950s, the young protagonist, Nuri, is struggling with his identity. As he turns into an Israeli, he finds himself becoming distanced from his Iraqi immigrant family, their culture, and their lifestyle. The novel opens with a metaphor for this change: Nuri leaving Shaar Ha’aliya. He rides a bus up to Haifa as the camp recedes into the background. Moving slowly up Mt. Carmel, Nuri looks behind him and sees “a blue sea, far away, and the tents of Shaar Ha’aliya. Many tents within fences. Like a camp for soldiers who lost the war.” This brief image links Shaar Ha’aliya to conflict, defeat, and confinement. But Nuri has some release: he is getting away, and Shaar Ha’aliya is behind him. Haifa is the future, the open, promising ascent into Israel. The camp is the past—the lowly, fenced-in setting of Diasporic immigrants.
This confining image of Shaar Ha’aliya from *Scapegoat* (1983) is fleshed out by the author in his later novel *The Dove Flyer* (1992). This prequel to *Scapegoat* in Amir’s Baghdad trilogy tells the story of how Nuri’s family came to flee Iraq, describing the increasingly hostile conditions for Jews that forced them to leave their beloved home. *The Dove Flyer* ends where *Scapegoat* picks up, with the family living in the paltry surroundings of the immigrant transit camp, or *ma’abara*, after spending a few weeks in Shaar Ha’aliya. Amir captures the great disappointment and hardship at the encounter with the camp: “My pregnant mother sat laboriously on the floor of the truck and leaned on the floor, and pulled herself up, and descended and stood and exhaustedly looked upon what was revealed to her. ‘Where have you brought me?’ [ . . . ] ‘What is the name of this place?’ she asked.”^38^ For the next twenty pages, the harsh conditions in Shaar Ha’aliya are brought to life: filth, spoiled food, despair, encounters with brusque, mocking Israelis and unfriendly new immigrants.

The fence is introduced immediately with the family’s arrival at the camp. It is part of the bleak environment, but it doesn’t stand out. But then, during their first meal in Shaar Ha’aliya, the youngest son, Moshi, erupts in tears; he is disgusted by the “worm-like” noodles they are given in the camp and hungry for the food he knows from back home: “Moshi turned over his plate and threw it down on the dirt floor and fled from the tent. ‘Abed, go get him,’ Mother screamed.” The mother is consoled by Abed, an acquaintance from Baghdad who had already settled in Israel and was helping the family get adjusted: “Don’t worry Um-Kabie, we are in a detention camp, with barbed wire. Where would he run off to?”^39^ Even in this moment—when the reader is relieved that the fence could shelter the young child—there is still a sting, with the blunt description of Shaar Ha’aliya as a detention camp surrounded not just by a barrier but by barbed wire.

Later, when the men go to leave the camp for an outing to Haifa, an argument breaks out over how they should go: “Father wanted to go out through the camp’s gate and Abed said that they wouldn’t let him leave
that way. That you have to sneak out through the fence.” Abed offered a biting, biblical take on their situation: “You don’t understand that you are immigrants in quarantine, tainted, disease-carriers, lice, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts.” After an argument, the sons tried to “push and drag” their father through the fence against his will. Abed finds a hole and crawls under with the boys following. When their father still refuses to crawl through, Abed—now outside of the fence—turns to him: “Come. Come and go from slavery into freedom,” said Abed. “Isn’t that why you came to Israel?”

Finally, it is the sea that draws him out, and the scene ends with the father and sons playing giddily, joyfully, in the water and sand.

*Scapegoat,* Amir’s first novel, may in fact be the most wide-reaching, officially sponsored representation of Shaar Ha’aliya known by young Israelis. This classic, short, and accessible text, taught in public schools, is based on Eli Amir’s own life story. Born in Baghdad in 1937, he immigrated to Israel in 1950. Amir speaks openly about his own challenges of integration and the discrimination he and his family encountered as immigrants from an Arab country. Whereas in *The Dove Flyer* the reader gets to spend more time with the immigrant’s experience of Shaar Ha’aliya and its barbed wire fence, in *Scapegoat,* the reference to Shaar Ha’aliya is fleeting, and it is not continued in the novel. The place where Nuri’s family lives is simply an unnamed transit camp. If you are not looking for Shaar Ha’aliya in this text, you could miss it. And yet it is still there, immediately and centrally. The camp fence isn’t highlighted, but it too is there. An organic part of the dismal whole, it reinforces the impression that Shaar Ha’aliya and the immigrants who are a part of it are isolated and separate.

Three years after the publication of *Scapegoat,* and six years before *The Dove Flyer,* the famed singer Chava Alberstein came out with the album “The Immigrants,” a collaboration with Gideon Hafen, who composed music for the song “Sharalia.” Alberstein herself spent time in Shaar Ha’aliya when her family immigrated to Israel from Poland in 1951. She was five years old at the time. By the time “The Immigrants” came out, she had established her reputation as the “Joan Baez of Israel.” It was her
The song “Sharalia” is a charming depiction of the immigrant encounter with Israel and Shaar Ha’aliya. The music is upbeat, with a tinge of melancholy, and the overall effect is playful. While the lyrics are, on occasion, also playful, they are still a moving, somber account of uprooting. “Sharalia” opens with the immigrants’ arrival:

This story begins at the end.
A ship with passengers reaches the shore.
Tired people, in a new land
stand before a large gate and look upon it in silence.

By beginning “at the end,” Alberstein reminds us that the commonly held idea of immigration as a beginning is misleading: there was so much more that happened to these people before they arrived in Israel. There is something somber and immediately isolating about this encounter, as these “tired people” silently gaze at the gate before them. Right from the start, the immigrants are on the outside.

Throughout, the lyrics evoke the immigrants’ suffering. Their experiences of the camp are, to a large extent, the familiar challenges of immigration and acclimation. Alberstein describes the people as “tired.” In Israel, “nothing is as promised.” Their plans prove to be little more than “dreams.” They change professions and identities. They struggle with Hebrew, which is described as “hard” and “apathetic,” and they crave their mother tongues. Their living conditions at Shaar Ha’aliya are terrible: “roofs fly off in winter,” treasured belongings are drenched in rainwater, and “everyone is sobbing.” The refrain evokes the immigrants’ pain and longing:

Someone says, “We’re here”
Someone says, “Maybe”
Someone cries, “We’ve found it!”
They whisper to him, “Please God”
Someone screams, “For now”
They scream to him, “For how long?”
These are the thoughts of people looking for a home and some peace. Yet what they are experiencing are not only the difficulties of migrants but also the agony and despair of Holocaust survivors. They huddle together, listening to the radio programs that list names of other survivors, hoping to find relatives who have not been murdered. We learn that others don’t listen to these programs. In what seems to be a despondent attempt at starting a new life, they have “changed their names.” These are people, Alberstein tells us, who have “no more strength” and have “given up.”

The camp itself is described as “a grey place with no color, no view.” Enclosed by the fence, the immigrants inside have nowhere to go:

   On the Sabbath eve we go for a walk.
   White shirt, shined shoes.
   We go for a walk but there is nothing to see:
   A row of huts, a few trees and a fence.
   We return slowly, there’s no reason to hurry.

The isolation and the fence are subtle images of confinement and disappointment, but no one is actively causing the immigrants’ suffering. No one is blamed. The lyrics of this song are profoundly sad, but, at the same time, they are very funny and lighthearted. She takes playful jabs at these immigrants who embellished their pasts, at Israeli bureaucracy, and at the immigrants who cling to that bureaucracy. Overall, if you “visit” Shaar Ha’aliya through Chava Alberstein’s song, it’s not such a bad place to be. There is discomfort, sadness, and suffering; there is comic relief and tenderness but no anger and no accusations.

Almost twenty years after Alberstein’s song first appeared, a wholly different representation of Shaar Ha’aliya came out in the documentary The Ringworm Children. As discussed in chapter 1, up until the introduction of antifungal treatment in 1960, the Western medical procedure for ringworm around the world was extremely harsh. Children who underwent treatment were isolated in the Shaar Ha’aliya Institute for Ringworm and Trachoma for one to three months. Their heads were shaved and then
waxed to remove any remaining hairs, and then they were irradiated. Physical and emotional scars were an immediate part of this experience. Then in 1974, an Israeli epidemiologist, Baruch Modan, found that the people who had undergone ringworm treatment in the 1950s were at greater risk for head and neck tumors. In 1994, the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) passed the Ringworm Victims Compensation Law, which established that people who had been treated for ringworm in the 1950s were entitled to monetary restitution from the state. Legal proceedings for individuals seeking compensation continue to this day.

For so many people, the bureaucratic machinations of the compensation law as well as—more terribly—cancer and death brought the traumas from the past powerfully into the present. In the early twenty-first century, the testimonies/experiences of people who, as children, were treated for ringworm at Shaar Ha’aliya were brought to a wide public audience in various ways: news broadcasts, internet forums, as well as the 2003 movie The Ringworm Children. This movie tells the story of people who were treated for ringworm from 1952 to 1960 at Shaar Ha’aliya. The movie was screened for the first time in 2003 at the Haifa International Film Festival, where it won an award for best documentary. Following the Haifa festival, it was then screened at a select number of theatres throughout Israel. Today it is readily available on various channels of YouTube and has received thousands of views.

Unsurprisingly, the tone of this movie is angry and accusatory, which is immediately clear from the text that sets up the movie’s premise: “During the 50’s masses of Jewish immigrants immigrated from North Africa. About 100,000 of their children were subjected to X-rays radiation, as a treatment against ringworm. Thousands of them died, and those who survived suffered cancerous after effects. This film endeavors to identify the people who were responsible for this calamity.” In the opening scene, a man by the name of David Deeri is filmed traveling to Shaar Ha’aliya for the first time since he was a boy. He speaks to someone off screen:
“Am I nervous?” He asks.

“My stomach is churning. I’m about to go back forty-six years in time, to my long lost childhood, my long lost youth. To relive the event that ruined my life. I remember that the camp was located in the entrance to Haifa, next to the old cemetery.”

He continues, saying, “We’re talking about seventy thousand victims, most of them dead. Because of that damned concept.” As he arrives at a deserted area with old, decrepit buildings, there is a subscript that reads: “Shaar Ha’aliya” Treatment Center, Haifa. At that point, he gets out of the car, looks around and declares, “Here! Yes, this is the place. The sea was over there, and there were no buildings or trees only the mountains at our backs. The train used to run here. I remember how we climbed the fence to watch the trains go by and follow the trucks that unloaded new children, new victims, brought here to be treated so hideously.” The movie ends at the same place that it began, with David Deeri in what seems to be the deserted Shaar Ha’aliya, standing behind a wire fence, looking out over the train tracks as the song “The Walk to Caesarea” (popularly known as “Eli Eli”) is played in the background.

In this movie, Shaar Ha’aliya is not remembered as a processing camp but only as a treatment center. Anything that this place was beyond the traumatic medical experience does not exist. The physical space shown, the “site” of Shaar Ha’aliya in 2003, is one of decay. This idea is pushed further by juxtaposing it, in images and in words, with an “old cemetery.” It is remembered as a place where innocent children were victims, enclosed behind fences, and treated “hideously.”

The word konseptziya that Deeri uses is loaded with meaning in the Israeli context. It conjures the 1973 Agranat Commission on the Yom Kippur War on the failings and the hubris of the military elite. This word evokes the tragedies that befell Israel because of myopic power. Moreover, even in this short scene, there is an abundant use of Holocaust
imagery, with the trains and trucks that unloaded new children, the term *transports*, and Hana Szenes’s song “The Walk to Caesarea.” This is not only a way to fiercely accuse the Jewish state, it is also a way for people whose stories have been marginalized to claim access to the most hallowed of Jewish/Israeli Ashkenazi traumas. In *The Ringworm Children*, the memory of Shaar Ha’aliya is unambiguous. The harshest ideas are used to convey persecution, death, abuse of power, and victimization. The Mizrahi immigrants are victims who suffer terribly. The State of Israel, its Ashkenazi leaders, and its Ashkenazi medical establishment are the victimizers.

This movie is important because it has given a far-reaching stage to people whose voices had been sidelined. Before the film’s release, the public story about ringworm at Shaar Ha’aliya was being told exclusively by doctors, journalists, and politicians. Through this film, we hear about ringworm treatment and all its terrible repercussions by the people who actually experienced it and who, up until then, were not being widely heard. But *The Ringworm Children* is also very problematic—so much so that in a popular news program broadcast in Israel in the winter of 2018, David Belahsan, the filmmaker behind *The Ringworm Children*, denounced his own film. In this television special devoted to the ringworm controversy, Belahsan explains that the movie was not sufficiently developed in its treatment of this highly sensitive subject and that he came out with it too early, and as a result, he concludes that it is negligent and mistaken. The film’s problems are indeed severe. It is framed as a documentary, yet it has glaring historical inaccuracies. For example, it claims that one hundred thousand children received radiation treatment, and David Deeri said that seventy thousand people were dead. In fact, around twelve thousand children were treated at the Shaar Ha’aliya Institute for the Treatment of Ringworm and Trachoma. This number includes treatment for trachoma as well as ringworm. The film suggests that the children were intentionally harmed when the existing evidence suggests that they were the victims of a terribly misguided but internationally accepted and
common medical procedure. And I strongly believe that the site that the filmmakers show David Deeri confronting was not actually Shaar Ha’aliya. Shortly after the movie came out, I scoured the area of Shaar Ha’aliya, thinking that I would find the old huts that appear in the film. I had with me an archival map of the camp boundaries as well as a contemporary map of the city of Haifa. I found no indication of decayed buildings nor newly constructed buildings that may have, recently, been built in their place. These structures might be near, but they are unlikely the actual “‘Shaar Ha’aliya’ Treatment Center” as the movie claims. Perhaps the trauma of the place has distorted the memory. Or perhaps the remembrance has been distorted to express the trauma. It is hard to say.

Even though I am aware of this movie’s serious faults, I continue to return to it as a consequential document. Charbonneau beautifully describes the value of illness memoirs in a way that, to my mind, also explains the value of The Ringworm Children’s imperfect depiction of history: “Memoirs are therefore not documents that make it possible to retrace an improbable truth of history, but monuments erected in honour of the individual, subjective and irreplaceable life of men and women whom the trial of contagion, when it took place, modified in their very flesh and in that body of writing that is their work.”54 The experience of ringworm in Shaar Ha’aliya modified the flesh, lives, and stories of many people. This movie, with all its many grave faults, is a monument in their honor.

In each of these four texts, there is, at the very least, a sadness associated with Shaar Ha’aliya, a bleakness. These are far from idealized homecomings. Alberstein’s Shaar Ha’aliya, somewhat nostalgic and romantic, is the most pleasant. Yet this story of immigration is not a grand, heroic voyage, such as, for example, the one conveyed in Edith Piaf’s booming rendition of Exodus. Nor is it a glorified, jingoistic depiction of the absorbing country, such as the one found in Neil Diamond’s “America”: “Never looking back again / They’re coming to America [. . .] / Home, to a new and a
shiny place [...] / Freedom’s light burning warm [...]” Admittedly, both of these examples are from different contexts and by artists with less direct ties to the experience about which they are singing. Nevertheless, they help to illuminate what “Sharalia” isn’t. The experiences and the people in Alberstein’s song are small, human, drudging, heartbreaking, aching, and funny. Their immigration is not bombastic and glorious, it is wracked with doubt and stumbles.

Perhaps the main difference between Alberstein’s Shaar Ha’aliya and that of the two others is, in fact, humor. Thirty-five years after her arrival in Israel, she was able to look back and see lightness among the struggles. A key to this different retrospective is very likely what came after, or as an Israeli scholar once commented, the answer is in the names. Alberstein is clearly Ashkenazi. Deeri is clearly Moroccan. It is not surprising that the memories of the Iraqi and Moroccan immigrants are colored by the discrimination these groups have experienced in Israel. It must be acknowledged that Alberstein’s milieu of Holocaust survivors, as described in “Sharalia,” also encountered discrimination. The author Aharon Appelfeld has poignantly described the prejudice that survivors faced and which he, as a young Holocaust survivor, internalized: “They were called ‘the Desert Generation,’ or ‘the dregs of humanity.’ Survivors embodied the nakedness of exile, the wanderings, the Holocaust. Like many others, I also did not wish to belong to them, to speak their language, or to be linked to their memories.” However, historian Hana Yablonka has shown that, ultimately, Holocaust survivors were rapidly and positively integrated into Israeli society, notwithstanding the emotional, psychological, physical, and social struggles that profoundly shaped this process. Moreover, Alberstein’s personal history in Israel is one of brilliant acclaim. And while she herself is openly critical of Israeli policies, including the repression of the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture that were so dear to her home, her success developed out of a trajectory that can be described as predominantly Ashkenazi Israeli conformity. Thus it is not surprising that, when
in “Sharalia” she looks back at her first steps in Israel, she is not angry and, although occasionally sad, can still be nostalgic and amused.

In contrast, Eli Amir has said that he began writing as a response to discrimination:

I think I started to write because of pain. Because of insult. The pain of my father [. . .] who lost his crown and became a shadow of himself. And the second thing was that at the Hebrew University I felt, as a Jew who comes from a Moslem country, I felt an outsider [sic] I felt, even, discriminated against. [. . .] I felt that I am, I don’t know exactly the term to use, a type of second class human being. And when I was a student I thought: how can I change the attitude toward me and my culture? [. . .] And so one day I thought, maybe I’ll write a story.90

The result was his first novel, Scapegoat. Appropriately, from this well-spring of insult and pain, Shaar Ha’aliya is recalled without Alberstein’s humor.

Yet the role of discrimination in the shaping of these memories is most obviously relevant to The Ringworm Children. The gravity of this movie stems from what could be understood as a double injury: the emotional injury that came of discrimination and the physical injury of the aggressive and ill-fated medical procedure. This brings to mind the words attributed to God in Ritzato shel Haoleh Danino. This iconic song about the Ashkenazi establishment’s poor treatment of Moroccan immigrants as part of the selective immigration policy was written as a biting social commentary by the Ashkenazi poet laureate Natan Alterman in 1955. It was then given new breadth when the Moroccan-born Israeli musician Shlomo Bar put it to music in 1985. In the song, the “Immigrant Danino” stands before a medical selection committee that will determine whether he is physically fit to immigrate to Israel. When they suspect that he has a limp, they ask him to jump. God speaks to Danino, who has been demeaned in front of his children, and makes a promise: “Fear not. I will cover your defect. But
I will not cover up the insult of your people’s rebirth, whose light shines in your tears.” The “insult” of Israel’s rebirth similarly reverberates in *The Ringworm Children* and its remembrance of Shaar Ha’aliya.

In all four of these very different texts the fence is remembered and, by its very nature, it is containing and isolating. Only *The Dove Flyer* calls attention to the barbed wire, but then there is a glimmer of goodness, since its menacing presence is what would keep the boy Moshi from getting lost outside. The idea of the fence that is conveyed in the movie is similar to what comes across in *Scapegoat, The Dove Flyer,* and “Sharalia” but far more fierce. In those other texts, the Shaar Ha’aliya fence keeps the immigrants temporarily confined, whereas in the movie, it keeps the children captive.

There is another indirect but very important way that *The Ringworm Children* shapes the memory of the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine: it not only challenges the “certain idea” of Israel, it challenges the “certain idea” of Israeli medicine. The Jewish Agency took considerable pride in the ringworm campaign, which they expressed through many public displays of confidence in their work. They made presentations about its achievements in congresses. They wrote letters about it to donors from abroad, where it was described as a way to “cure” Mizrahi children and turn them into healthy Israelis. “You may have heard of the latest addition to the camp . . . ,” Weisberger wrote to an American Jewish woman who had sent a package to Shaar Ha’aliya and wanted to know how she could help, “a hospital for 500 children established with a view to cure the aliyah of children from Algiers; Tunis and Perisa, arriving here at the rate of a few hundred at a time and invariably infested with Trychophititia or Trachoma both diseases prevalent in those countries and, if attended to in time, leave no mark on the health of the future generation of Israel.” They invited the press on guided tours of the premises that resulted in largely laudatory articles. One journalist praised “the blessed activity of the Jewish Agency’s absorption department.” Another described how the children “learn to value the treatment they are given.”
Ringworm was on track to become the Zionist health campaign of the new state, the grand, mythic “success” story that malaria and trachoma had been for the prestate Yishuv. It was a project that could offer pride on a national—and even on an international—level in its application of scientific knowledge and technological progress for the betterment of unfortunate children. It was seen as the best of western health care being given, for free, to children who, were it not for the State of Israel, would have been deprived. It was seen as Jews taking care of their brethren. But *The Ringworm Children* helps show that beneath this eager commitment to and belief in the medical campaign, lie other less heroic undercurrents. The undercurrent of paternalism used ill health as an opportunity to shape children into particular models of citizenship. Irrational anxiety saw children afflicted with a superficial infection as a threat to the greater society. Questionable judgment aggressively applied a medical treatment that had adverse physical and psychological effects on immigrant children, and obeisance to medical authority prevented reconsideration even when the method of treatment was discernibly severe.

The tragic outcome, as conveyed in the movie, was not simply about the failure of any old health campaign. More than any of the other diseases treated at Shaar Ha’aliya, ringworm treatment was put on a pedestal as a symbol of the greatness that Zionist medicine could achieve. The same way that the State of Israel was bringing to life Herzl’s dream of a Jewish state, the ringworm campaign was bringing to life his dream of how the Jewish state’s biomedical genius and benevolence would bring it glory: “The blessings emanating from our medical institutions, like a beneficial stream, have made more friends for us here in Palestine . . . than all our technical and industrial innovations.”66 However, Herzl overlooked biomedicine’s potential for devastating mistakes. As David Musto put it, “the history of medicine . . . is filled with useless and even harmful remedies applied with confidence to the trusting patient.”67 Since the ringworm campaign was placed on so high a pedestal, it had even farther to fall. And fall it did. The subject of ringworm treatment is a wound
that is far from healed. In 2017, *The Ancestral Sin*, an Israeli documentary series about the discrimination of Moroccan immigrants to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, was met with an uproar. One of the outcomes are campaigns to change the names of any public streets and institutions that are named after Dr. Giora Josephtal and Dr. Chaim Sheba, who played leading roles in the establishment of the Shaar Ha’aliya Ringworm and Trachoma Institute. The first public memorialization of the celebrated campaign’s tragic failure from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. This important remembrance of the patients’ experiences of medicine at Shaar Ha’aliya is pained, angry, and accusatory. It is a reminder that when the fear of contagion and the fear of immigrants come together the outcome is sometimes terrible.

**Personal Testimonies: Immigrant Voices**

In his memoir, *Call It Dreaming*, the acclaimed translator and scholar of Arabic literature Sasson Somekh writes about his arrival and two week stay at Shaar Ha’aliya. He paints a picture of general hardship: endless lines, unpleasant food, and poor living conditions. But what made the setting particularly bad, according to Somekh, was that it was in Israel. For so many of the immigrants, this reception challenged their ideals of what Israel represented. They had expected that in “their own” country things would be different, somehow better and more, than where they were coming from: “But the complaint and the discomfort began to gnaw at the marrow of joie de vivre that characterized so many of them [immigrants at Shaar Ha’aliya], with their hope that they were moving to their own country where no one could demean them because of their religion. Now bitterness spread.” This bitterness that Somekh describes is evident throughout personal remembrances of Shaar Ha’aliya. Many immigrants made it very clear that Shaar Ha’aliya was a pitiful welcome to the Jewish state. One immigrant from Bulgaria recalled that coming to Shaar Ha’aliya
was a “shock” and that it was lodged in his memory as the worst part of his immigration experience. Many people vividly remember the filth, chaos, and discomfort of their time there. Some describe being disheartened when their expectations and excitement about arriving in Israel were dashed at the sight of Shaar Ha’aliya. One man explained that regardless of expectations and regardless of the fact that it was temporary, Shaar Ha’aliya was simply “awful,” a sentiment that many others echo.

However, there are people who have beautiful memories of their time in Shaar Ha’aliya. Corina immigrated to Israel from Romania in 1950, when she was twenty years old. As she stretched out in the sun on a bed in front of a cabin, life in Israel seemed to her to be absolutely wonderful. Sami stayed in Shaar Ha’aliya for two weeks when he emigrated from Iraq in the winter of 1950. He was sixteen years old, without his parents, and having a ball with his friends. He loved the jam, bread, and olives that they would bring back to their tent to eat. During his medical exam, he spoke in Hebrew, and when they weren’t able to understand something that the health care workers said, he and his friends turned to each other for help and figured it out. He experienced Shaar Ha’aliya as a fun, liberating adventure.

There are others for whom the stay at Shaar Ha’aliya had little impact. In the scheme of their lives and memories of their immigration, Shaar Ha’aliya played an uneventful role. In an interview conducted in 1990, one man makes only two brief references to Shaar Ha’aliya. The first statement relates to his own experience there:

Q. Where did you arrive in Israel?
A. At Shaar Ha’aliya. From Shaar Ha’aliya I went to Pardes Hana.

The second statement is a general comment about immigration policy in the 1950s: “I explained to him that the immigrants who came from Islamic countries were concentrated at Shaar Ha’aliya, from there they were either transferred to Beer-Sheva in an open truck or were dumped in
In a thirty-seven page interview that focuses on immigration in the 1950s and his own later work counseling and aiding immigrants, these are the only two references he makes to Shaar Ha’aliya. This man was born in Basra and immigrated to Israel at the age of thirty, so he wasn’t a child who was shielded from difficulties by his parents. He was from the “marked” group of Iraqi immigrants who, in the eyes of Shaar Ha’aliya officials, were largely perceived as troublemakers. Therefore his apparently easy experience at Shaar Ha’aliya cannot be explained as him coming from a “preferred” country of origin. Moreover, his immigration was in 1950, one of the two most chaotic, overcrowded years in Shaar Ha’aliya’s history. Yet despite these factors that could have been expected to have a negative impact on his experience, all he had to say about Shaar Ha’aliya was that he was there.

One immigrant from Azerbaijan remembers staying in Shaar Ha’aliya for around two months in 1951 (a long stay during yet another one of the camp’s two most difficult years); his only comment was that it was “not bad.” Another immigrant from Libya stayed in Shaar Ha’aliya for a week in July 1949, when he was already a thirty-eight-year-old man. In an interview on his immigration experience, he briefly mentions it only once, saying, “I was there for a week, and then they transferred us to Beer Yaakov.” This offhand attitude appears in another interview with a Moroccan immigrant who moved to Israel at age sixteen. He remembers that when he arrived in Israel he was completely alone, but this memory does not seem to have negatively affected his outlook on Shaar Ha’aliya, which comes across as a very marginal experience for him: “They dropped me off at that ‘aliya’ camp in Haifa, but I have nobody, alone, no family, nothing, later they said to me: Let’s move to Beer-Yaakov, there’s an immigrant camp there and you’ll be happy there.” The distance from the immediacy of the events makes these personal testimonies “reconstructed experience, a melding of memory and later elaboration.” Naturally, they are shaped not only by what happened at the time but by who the people later became
and the issues that became important to their stories and their worlds. To some extent, the range of memories about Shaar Ha’aliya also exists in the specific memories of the quarantine but with more polarization. Most people who remember their experiences at Shaar Ha’aliya, whether neutral or negative, don’t mention the fence at all. Two examples of people who do remember the fence, as we recall from chapter 2, were Sylvia and Eliezer Meltzer. Yet Sylvia’s prevailing memory of her arrival in Israel, which was also her arrival in Shaar Ha’aliya, is that it was “like a dream come true.”

And it’s not that the fence doesn’t factor into her story at all. Not only does she remember it, but it is a central player in her brief Shaar Ha’aliya narrative. Yet it is significant to point out that this memory is not negative. She isn’t shocked about being faced with barbed wire and she doesn’t dwell on—which gives the impression that she is not upset by—her own statement that “I don’t think they let people go out.” Clearly, the image of the quarantine is not an obstacle for her, and neither was the structure itself: “I would go out through a hole in the fence,” “My uncle used to go in through the hole in the fence,” “We used to leave from there,” “I always entered and exited through a hole in the fence.” For Sylvia and Eliezer, like so many of the immigrants at Shaar Ha’aliya, the fence and going through the hole in the fence were matter-of-fact. Whether going in or going out, this act wasn’t hidden, it wasn’t a cause for concern, it wasn’t oppressive, and it wasn’t hard—it was just done.

However, two other immigrants who do remember the fence describe it in extremely negative terms. Yaacov Steiner was twenty years old when his family decided that they would leave Hungary and immigrate to Palestine. He remembers that they made their decision in 1947, on the day of the dramatic partition vote by the UN Security Council, when Jews throughout the world celebrated the internationally accepted plan to establish a Jewish state. It would take another two difficult years before Yaacov was able to realize that dream to “make aliya” to leave behind the world he knew, move to the distant and foreign Middle East, and become a part of the historic
creation of the Jewish state. Finally, in 1949, he reached what was now the sovereign State of Israel. He was alone. He had come to lay the groundwork for his family’s arrival and to begin his new life.

As chance would have it, Yaacov’s immigration took place a few months after Israel had opened Shaar Ha’aliya. For Yaacov, like the majority of the immigrants, it had been so hard to get to Israel. And his idea of “aliya” was full of such hope and expectation of belonging. But when he saw Shaar Ha’aliya, all the excitement that had surrounded this long-anticipated arrival came crashing down. The sight of the camp, its paucity and overcrowding, left him “in shock,” but what upset him most of all was that he wasn’t allowed to leave: “The real shock came when [my friend] and I wanted to go for a walk in Haifa, and we wanted to leave Shaar Ha’aliya and the camp was closed in with a sharp barbed wire fence [. . .] They simply refused to let us leave.” The explanation that Steiner was given was that he was in a transit camp, but he found this perplexing: “I didn’t understand where I was in transit to. I thought I was moving from bondage to freedom, from a country where I was a second, third or even fourth class citizen, or even lower, and I was coming to my country.” Much like Eli Amir’s Nuri, Steiner offers the lonely image of Haifa, the established, Israeli city that was in the distance, out of reach to him while he was behind barbed wire in Shaar Ha’aliya: “I saw the lights of Haifa from the camp and they didn’t let me leave.”

Mia Abramov remembers having a similar reaction. She was twenty-four when she immigrated to Israel in 1951. Like Yaacov Steiner, she and her family had to wait several years and overcome many obstacles before it was possible for them to leave Europe. There had been such a buildup that her arrival in Israel was euphoric: “From the moment I descended [from the boat] I knew that I had made aliya to Israel, and there are no words to describe [how that felt].” Although her trip had been frightening, the fear passed the minute she arrived: “I felt the relief of freedom. There’s nothing more to say. It was a feeling of freedom.” Then in contrast to these exuberant emotions, the sight of Shaar Ha’aliya and its fence was dramatically
disappointing: “Everything was a blur. It was a shock to see such a thing, with a fence like this in the country that I was ascending to in freedom.” She couldn’t comprehend that she was expected to be behind barbed wire: “That I would enter a fence like this was incomprehensible.” Mia Abramov remembers feeling that, finally, she was living as a free person in her own country and that no one had any business putting her behind barbed wire. Both Yaacov and Mia tell their story of immigrating to Israel with memories of emotional anticipation, as expressed by Steiner: “When I saw the shores [...] I was intoxicated by the sight.” But this anticipation made his encounter with the Shaar Ha’aliya quarantine even harder. The disappointment can still be felt decades later as Steiner tries to verbalize his disappointment and the struggle to reconcile his “great expectations” with being “greeted by these things.” This dissonance between the beauty of their expectations and the bleakness of what they found made Shaar Ha’aliya an even harder pill to swallow. Steiner and Abramov’s narratives are of the Jewish immigrant who had to overcome years of obstacles and anticipation before being allowed to immigrate to Israel or “make aliya.” And then, when they did finally manage to get to “their own” country, the fence at Shaar Ha’aliya was a disheartening and alienating reality.

Personal Testimonies: Administrators

These many different remembrances of Shaar Ha’aliya are, appropriately, all from the viewpoint of the many immigrants. Two additional texts give the perspective of men who oversaw the camp administration and immigrant health services. Shaar Ha’aliya: The Diary of the Mass Aliya, 1947–1957 by Yehuda Weisberger is not actually his memoir, although that is how it first seems. While working as Shaar Ha’aliya’s director, Weisberger always had a sense of its historical importance, and he set out to write its story. In 1963, several years after he had moved on to a new job, he contacted publishers, writing that he expected his book on the camp to be ready for publication around two years later, in 1965. This goal was
still not realized when Weisberger died in 1979. In an attempt to see his work completed, Weisberger’s wife, Leah, worked in coordination with friends to publish the 1985 book *Shaar Ha’aliya: The Diary of the Mass Aliya, 1947–1957*. Although he clearly is not the actual author of the book, Weisberger is presented as such, presumably because the contents come from the diary and files that he himself had written and collected. It is not clear who actually authored or edited the manuscript. It is also not always clear when Weisberger’s voice ends and where it is the voice of others. As such, it is important to approach this as the complicated source that it is. It is not a primary source because it has been edited many years after the fact by people distanced from the actual events. Neither is it Yehuda Weisberger’s memoir, even though it is attributed to him. What is certainly clear is that this is a very important book, most obviously because it is the most comprehensive, published manuscript on Weisberger’s experience in Shaar Ha’aliya and it is a main source of information on this chapter of Israeli history.89

*The Diary of the Mass Aliya* begins with Yehuda’s biography. It then presents the situation for immigrants in Israel during the mass immigration before discussing Weisberger’s work as the head of the immigrant absorption center Neve Haim and then his job as the director of Shaar Ha’aliya from 1949 to 1957.90 Not surprisingly, the perspective on, and image of, Shaar Ha’aliya that comes through in this book are very similar to what comes through in Weisberger’s archives. He depicts the many problems that exist in all corners of the camp, whether with the staff or with the immigrants, conflicts between the immigrants and the guards, overcrowding and wasted food. This book gives the administrator’s story. It presents the actions and frustrations of a person with good intentions facing an exciting but also relentless, overwhelming task. Weisberger wasn’t a high-powered decision-maker; he was the person on site, tasked with the difficult job of seeing Shaar Ha’aliya through the day-to-day. In the book, he comes across as someone working to maintain his position of
authority as he envisions it. Perhaps because this book was completed by Yehuda’s loved ones, at times, he is depicted as a classic hero: possessing a strong character, persevering, rising to meet difficult challenges. But what also comes through are his own prejudices and limitations, as he looks on some immigrants with respect and others with disdain.

There are not many references to the barbed wire fence in this book. One is part of a broad description of the difficult conditions, such as the long lines, the police guard, the cramped quarters and the barbed wire fence. But there are two other references—one direct and one indirect—that are more complicated. On page 71, in the book’s earliest descriptions of Shaar Ha’aliya, it is explained that the Jewish Agency’s decision to enclose the camp with barbed wire and a police force was financial: they were concerned that if the border wasn’t closed by a fence, then immigrants would smuggle property through without paying taxes. A page earlier, the section on Shaar Ha’aliya opens with a description of the considerations that led to the establishment of Shaar Ha’aliya. The list of reasons—the immigrants posed health risks, were a security risk, were at risk of dodging the draft—are well-suited to the needs of a general immigration processing camp. But in the book, there is no direct suggestion that the fence was because of medical reasons, only economics. This point brings us back to the problematics of this book as a source. This issue, of immigration and smuggling and Israel’s early economy, was central to the policy of the mass immigration and immigration processing. However, as a stand-alone explanation for Shaar Ha’aliya’s barbed wire fence, this claim contradicts Weisberger’s own archival records and the many complicated references to health and quarantine that he himself made to defend and explain the barbed wire fence.

How, then, should this source be approached? And what does it offer? Shaar Ha’aliya: The Diary of the Mass Aliya, 1947–1957 has been crucial to the remembrance of Shaar Ha’aliya, particularly in historiography. Weisberger’s book has been one of the most important sources on Shaar
Ha’aliya’s history and Weisberger himself was the most important advocate for having Shaar Ha’aliya history recorded and known. The importance, complexity, and problems of this text come through in its record of the barbed wire fence: it is a fleeting and condensed reference told as part of an abundant history in a book whose authorship is not completely clear. Not unlike the contemporary site of Shaar Ha’aliya—which invites questions for someone who knows to ask more—it is a valuable starting point, not a full picture.

In contrast to the complex authorship of the Weisberger book, Avraham Sternberg’s book is a memoir. Sternberg served as head of Israel’s Immigrant Health Services from 1949 to 1953. In 1973, he published a book about this experience, *A People Is Absorbed* (*Bihekalet Am*). It is a rich account of the overwhelming human and medical realities of the time, the politics of early Israeli health care policy (particularly the conflict between the well-established Kupat Holim and the newly established Ministry of Health), the considerations that led to the establishment of the Immigrant Health Services, and the particular challenges that he and his colleagues faced in their day-to-day work. His book describes the daunting task of overseeing the care of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world, many of whom were severely ill, in the terrible conditions of temporary tents and huts. Throughout the entire book, there is an atmosphere of near crisis, as he and his colleagues try to use their minimal resources to help the people under their care, all of which they were doing while trying desperately to prevent the spread of epidemics.

Sternberg is very sympathetic, even empathetic, toward the immigrants and their suffering. He is moved by the rupture that they are encountering: “Every process of immigration and absorption, even in the most generous and comfortable physical and financial conditions, is also primarily a process of removing human beings from their roots.” He is aware that the medical establishment and the medical aspect of immigration can make the immigrant’s experience even worse: “Sometimes the patients
that the doctors cared for resisted their demands, mostly by shouting and getting upset.”98 Nevertheless, his confidence in biomedicine is resolute and unapologetic. Even when the medical practices were harsh or coercive, he saw them as the price for saving lives. Sternberg comes across as many things: a strict and hard-working administrator, a compassionate physician and human being, as well as an unwavering practitioner of Western medicine.

Appropriately, his memories of Shaar Ha’aliya are compassionate but also clinical and practical. He documents the ideas behind the conception of the quarantine, the administration and structure, the number of people on staff, and the way the medical processing worked. He also includes words of kindness and sympathy for the people affected by this place. He praises the health care workers and their devotion to the immigrants’ well-being: “The period was the beginning steps of the State of Israel. The concern for the immigrant who needed hospitalization was clear and was considered an elemental obligation. Tending to the sick person was the soul of medicine.”99 And he is attuned to how bleak an experience Shaar Ha’aliya was for the immigrants: “The tremendous tension, the shouts and tears of the children, the fear and insecurity that are reflected in the eyes of the adults, within the grey, external structure that is filled with the smell of masses of people.”100

The Challenges of Remembrance

These are the many stories and images that come to mind while looking around Shaar Ha’aliya today, as though the earlier setting is superimposed onto the contemporary site. Alongside the regular scene of twenty-first-century bustle, in a place that is now so clearly an integrated part of Israel, the mind’s eye can imagine an extraordinary scene of bustle from the 1950s, in a place that is so central to, yet still so excluded from, the rest of Israel. It is a place where Eli Amir, the young teenager, is trying to reconcile
his beautiful dream of the Promised Land with the dank, grey structures facing him. A five-year-old girl, Hava Alberstein, or Hava Alberstein–like, is shielded by exhausted parents. Frigid, demoralizing, destructive rain is falling into their tent, and they have put an umbrella over their young daughter. They are trying to keep their child safe and healthy, although there is so much working against them. David Deeri, a young boy alone, is there—newly arrived and immediately separated from his parents. His head is shaved and then, painfully and seemingly without reason, it is waxed. Yehuda Weisberger, a young man, newly orphaned by the Holocaust, walks around the camp, trying to maintain control and humanity in an environment that quickly must have felt beyond his control. And then there is Avraham Sternberg who, scanning the sights around him, is envisioning how much worse it would become if an epidemic broke out. Faithfully, perhaps desperately, perhaps even blindly, he turns to medicine as a solution for control. All around are the tents, the lines, the strained encounters between people. And of course, there is the fence, containing, or trying to contain, it all.

These vivid images bring back the earlier questions of remembering and forgetting: In what ways has Shaar Ha’aliya’s past actively been transmitted to the present generation? Has it been accepted as meaningful? Or, conversely, has it been rejected, or even not conveyed? According to Yerushalmi, collective forgetting is when “human groups fail—whether purposely or passively, out of rebellion, indifference, or indolence, or as the result of some disruptive historical catastrophe—to transmit what they know out of the past to their posterity.” True, there is no memorialization at the site of Shaar Ha’aliya, but its story most certainly is being transmitted. In so many ways and through so many mediums, it is deeply embedded in Israeli historical remembrances. It is safe to say that among those doing the remembering, it has been accepted as meaningful. However, as of yet, it has not been accepted as meaningful by many others outside that circle and certainly not yet by the state itself.
Despite the richness of the remembrances, the abundant memorialization so close by, at Atlit, makes the Shaar Ha’aliya space seem practically barren. But Atlit also makes it clear just how challenging it would be to include the memory of Shaar Ha’aliya in the Israeli landscape. This is easy to grasp simply by imagining what a national heritage site at Shaar Ha’aliya would look like if it were modeled on Atlit. The cabins and conditions would be practically identical, with rows of beds, lack of privacy, and a general, material poverty of daily life. In fact, the conditions in the Shaar Ha’aliya tents and cabins would be worse (dirtier, more ragged) than Atlit. At Shaar Ha’aliya, there would be barbed wire. There wouldn’t be an actual watchtower, but there would be a gate and guards. But in this case, the guards would be Israeli Jews. The Atlit remembrances emphasize the Palmach raid on the camp in October 1945 and the liberation of the immigrants who were detained there. A heroic image of immigrants breaking out of captivity could still be maintained in Shaar Ha’aliya by recreating scenes of people crawling out under the barbed wire. In this way, the Shaar Ha’aliya museum would keep the same image of the detained or isolated Jews as either heroes or victims. But those images of the Jews behind barbed wire in Atlit are complicated by the idea that if the people inside the barbed wire are perceived as heroes and victims, then wouldn’t that make the people keeping them there oppressors? This is an easy image for Israel when the guards are British but not when those guards are Israelis. And if the barbed wire at Atlit is uncomplicated and easily reconcilable within the Jewish Israeli story, the barbed wire at Shaar Ha’aliya is anything but. It is fiercely complicated and dissonant.

The fact is that the themes that are such an inseparable part of how Atlit is remembered are an equally inseparable part of how Shaar Ha’aliya is remembered: Jews arriving in the land of / State of Israel should not have been put behind barbed wire; the immigrants in the camp have been treated poorly, and the people who put them there are to blame. Because the architects of Atlit were British and the detainees were Jewish, these
memories reinforce existing Jewish Israeli national identity, which helps explain the elaborate heritage site. Yet the architects of Shaar Ha’aliya were Israeli and the detainees were Jewish Israelis. This dissonance helps explain the absence of a national heritage site. The criticism of Israel (that is an indelible part of those memories) and the image of the fence as a symbol of exclusion (that is an indelible part of that criticism) makes it clear how challenging it will be to integrate this history into the mainstream Israeli story.