

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Delegation in Palestine

Jdr./JM. 29

International Committee of the Red-Cross,

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Geneva

Concerning: ICRC activity in the action at Deir Yassin (Jerusalem)

On Saturday 10 April, 5:00 p.m., the Arab Higher Committee asked me to do the impossible in order to save a large number of wounded and retrieve the dead located in the village of Deir Yassin. A battle had been in progress since the evening of the ninth, Jews having attacked this purely Arab village. The village is found about 5 kilometers from Jerusalem in the Jaffa direction.

{De Reynier relied on second-hand information, much from the Irgun or Lehi, for specific details he did not witness. The battle actually began in the morning of April 9 and serious resistance was ended by that afternoon.}

I telephoned the Jewish Agency which said it could do nothing as the attacking troops were composed entirely of Irgun Zvai Leumi extremists, over whom they do not have any bit of control. The British HQ confirmed to me the nature of the troops and their belief that the fighting was concluded, but it would not intervene.

Making use of other contacts, I managed in the course of the night to link up with the Irgun command and obtain from them authorization to make my way to Deir Yassin and take away the wounded and the dead. The departure was set for 9:00 a.m., Sunday April 11.

{His memoirs state that this was done through a Jewish nurse he contacted privately that night. He also said that it involved a visit to the area of Deir Yassin very early in the morning.}

At 9:00 a.m. on the 11th, at the agreed place I found a civilian who identified himself as an officer dispatched by the Irgun and we left together followed by two ambulances, two doctors, five to six nurses from the Magen David Adom *{Jewish equivalent of the Red Cross}*. Passage through the city of Jerusalem's barricades was easy, but at the first Irgun barricade they indicated that it was not possible to enter. A touchy discussion [followed], which came to a happy ending thanks to the intervention of a huge strapping fellow who thanked me very warmly, saying that the ICRC had personally saved his life three times in Germany and he would do anything for the ICRC. At my urging, he took responsibility to guide our convoy into position, making sure to obtain his superiors' permission. After numerous stops, we passed all the barricades and I made contact with the head officer commanding the force which occupied the village. The Arab force which up to this point had been shooting ceased their fire as soon as our car became visible on the crest.

{Arab forces in the area had been sniping at Deir Yassin. The huge friendly man he encountered is said by historian Uri Milstein to have been Lehi intelligence officer Moshe Barzilai.}

I explained to the head officer my mission, stressing that I am neither judge nor arbitrator, but only wish to bring the wounded and dead back to the Arab zone. He answered coldly that there were no wounded in the village, only dead, about 200. Right at the beginning of their attack, they had by loudspeaker warned

the women and children to surrender and they had their lives saved. 150 women and children, only, surrendered themselves and were sent over to the English. [Handwritten footnote by de Reynier: "Of whom more than 50 were wounded"] The remainder were considered combatants and paid with their lives for non-execution of the order.

{De Reynier is relating the explanation of the event as given by the "Irgun" commander. The figure of dead is generally agreed to have been exaggerated by the occupiers of the village. The fact that de Reynier is not permitted to view these alleged dead, and the evasiveness the commander gives below about the burial site's whereabouts, suggest that the report of 150 additional dead buried elsewhere was false. Nowadays, the generally believed number of dead in the whole village is about 110. The figure of 250 would become standard as a result of misrepresentations by the occupiers.}

I asked to see the dead. They let us proceed to the center of the village and there a new discussion began. I was surrounded by a circle of men clenching submachine-guns and saw many soldiers coming and going, each armed to the teeth, the bulk of them having an Arab knife at the waistband. One from among them proudly showed a knife, 60 centimeters long, 10 wide, double-edged, and still full of blood.

{In his memoirs, De Reynier indicates that this person was a woman member of the occupying force. The pronoun here, technically masculine, is of indeterminate gender grammatically ("L'un") and does not exclude that being the case. }

Finally the head officer told me that the Irgun is absolutely inclined in the future as in the past to respect the Geneva Conventions and that in order for me to have a formal confirmation I must make contact with their Commander in Chief whom I will find in the Tel Aviv district.

{Research by Uri Milstein suggests that the chief officer met by de Reynier was Petachiah Zalivensky from the Lehi, however, these comments appear to refer to the Irgun Commander-in-Chief, Begin. In that case, either the joint operation acknowledged the Irgun as the superior organization in these matters or at this point de Reynier was talking to an Irgun leader like Mordechai Raanan, Yehuda Lapidot, or Yehoshua Goldshmidt. Another possibility is a simple misunderstanding of the comments.}

For the time being, I would be able to visit some houses and the situation is the following: more than 200 dead in total, men, women, children. About 150 cadavers weren't able to be preserved in the village in view of the danger presented by the decomposition of the bodies. They have been gathered together, transported some distance and thrown into a large hole (I was not able to determine if he is talking about a pit, a grain silo, or a large natural excavation.) *[[Handwritten notation by de Reynier: "Impossible to visit because under fire. No mans land"]]* About 20 bodies can be found in the no-mans-land between the Irgun forces and the Arab forces. About fifty bodies are in the village.

{The above explanation is that of the officer de Reynier is speaking to not necessarily his own observations; later it appears de Reynier reported seeing 50 bodies. No one has reported finding the other bodies mentioned. The MDA doctor with him, Alfred Engel, thought he saw about one hundred dead in the houses. In his memoirs, apparently trying to calculate a figure of 250, de Reynier mistakenly writes that 50 surrendered rather than 150, thus yielding the improbable figure of 350 dead at Deir Yassin that is implied in his book.}

I made again, for the 10th time, an inquiry about the wounded and coldly the head officer responded: "We have not yet cleaned up all the village houses but I can assure you that there does not remain nor will remain a single Arab alive here."

The houses visited by me presented the appearance of most complete disorder, everything is broken, bodies litter the ground.

{Alfred Engel, the MDA doctor with him, has said the scene was more horrible than any he had observed as an army doctor in all five years of World War One. He said that the dead had obviously been shot "at close range." Engel's description, de Reynier's above, and all other accounts by de Reynier, do not suggest any of the houses were blown up. References to rubble (decombres) are absent and in his memoirs de Reynier explains that the "disorder" in the houses were damaged furniture, covers, and other such debris. The fact that particular rooms can be distinguished and that one was -- according to his memoirs -- "dark" indicates that no significant structural damage had occurred. Also, de Reynier in his memoirs attributes cause of death to bullets, hand grenades and knives, and not to trauma from heavy explosions or structural collapse.}

In the third room of one house it appeared that something stirred and I discovered a little girl about ten years old, frightfully wounded, comatose but alive, who had not received any care for at least 24 hours despite the presence in the village of the troop doctor who was at my side. I was at great pains to overcome the Irgun's resistance and I had to forcibly place the wounded child in our ambulance.

{In his memoirs, de Reynier said he was assisted in this by the huge friendly man he had met earlier. According to the research of Uri Milstein, this was Lehi intelligence officer Moshe Barzilai.}

I could not help but make to the head officer remarks which forced themselves out about how much credit I could give to his assertions that there were no longer any wounded there. He answered that he had informed me that the cleaning up was not finished. I gave an instruction to bring a squad of soldiers to be placed under the orders of the Irgun doctor and the MDA doctor, the job of which would be loading the dead on a truck and the wounded on an ambulance. Further instructions would follow.

Having returned to Jerusalem at 12:30 p.m., I was at the Arab Higher Committee asking what to do with the dead. After a long discussion they asked me, for political and health reasons, to undertake the burial of the dead on site. I returned to the Jewish side and gave to the Irgun head officer the following instructions:

all the dead are to be buried properly on site

a list of names of the dead is to be furnished me

identity cards of the dead are to be turned over to me

the wounded to be turned over to me immediately at the barricade of Zone B near the Jewish Agency, where I will send them on by Arab ambulance

{According to his memoirs, none of the dead Arab villagers turned out to have identity papers. Burial was ultimately actually not done that day but the next day and by senior leaders of the Gadna, a Haganah youth brigade squad. The Irgun and Lehi members apparently had tried to burn some of the bodies as a method of disposal before leaving. According to the head of the burial squad, the bodies were eventually placed in the village quarry and covered with dirt. Some were left in the houses and the houses were then blasted to collapse on them.}

I have received a formal promise that these instructions, given in writing, will be punctually followed and respected by the Irgun.

Towards 5:00 p.m., an old woman, gravely wounded, was brought to said place.

At the same time, I returned to the Jewish Agency and expressed the ICRC's position in this affair to the various leading responsible authorities (Mr. Leo Cohn). The Jewish Agency, insofar as it represents the Jewish community in Palestine, is severely to blame for the events of Deir Yassin, which are a manifest

violation of the spirit and letter of the Geneva Conventions which on 4-4-48 they assured the ICRC that they would absolutely respect.

In the name of the ICRC, I addressed to the Jewish Agency an official protest. I asked the Agency if it had any objection to my announcing to the Arab authorities that at least 200 persons, men, women, and children, have been killed at Deir Yassin by the Irgun, according to their [*the Irgun's*] own admission. A complete report would be made to the ICRC specifying that no care whatsoever had been given to the wounded. The Jewish Agency, shocked, declared that they accepted my request absolutely, sincerely regretted what happened, but unfortunately lacked any power over the Irgun, extremists acting on their own initiative. I repeated that this does not diminish in any way the Agency's responsibility. The same evening (4-11), at 9:30 p.m., Jerusalem radio broadcast the Arab Higher Committee's declaration making reference to my oral report and condemning this, at its own initiative, as a Jewish crime. The radio did add my own declaration which stated that two ambulances, a truck, three Jewish doctors and 5 to 6 Jewish medical workers were entirely devoted in our rescue operation. The contents of this broadcast are in the attached newspaper.

{That portion of the broadcast proved ineffective. A "take no prisoners" massacre by Arab guerrillas of a convoy of medical personnel to Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus, that included Jewish medical personnel, occurred on the 13th in Sheikh Jerakh near Mt. Scopus. Seventy-eight civilian medical personnel were killed, as well as five of the defenders accompanying the convoy. The British forces, who witnessed the entire incident, did almost nothing to stop it, apparently to allow retribution for Deir Yassin. An additional massacre of surrendered defenders at Kfar Etzion on May 14, 1948, has also been attributed to Deir Yassin.}

This affair, which had great repercussions here and, I believe, throughout the world has a good side for the ICRC: we have proven that in Palestine we enjoy equal confidence and authority from the two sides of the line of fire and that even the Irgun was not inaccessible to us. The result we achieved has been very positively appreciated by the Jews and by the Arabs.

We have thus to this day accomplished two distinct rescue operations in situations insoluble to all, save for the ICRC. The first, on March 28, 1948, Easter Sunday, in favor of the Jews in a purely Arab area, saving 49 wounded from certain death; the other, on April 11, 1948, in favor of the Arabs, saving 2 (to total today of 3) wounded and overseeing the disposition of more than 200 dead.

{The first incident was the ambush at Nebi Daniel, by Arabs of an armed convoy from the Jewish settlement at Kfar Etzion. A large number of Arab forces succeeded in trapping the survivors of the attack, many of whom were wounded. Red Cross intervention by de Reynier saved their lives. The Red Cross later helped to safely evacuate the remaining defenders of the Etzion block after the massacre in Kfar Etzion,, and also in evacuating Jews from the Old City of Jerusalem. Anger over that attack and the mutilation of the dead bodies of convoy members was part of the emotional motivation for the attack and massacre at Deir Yassin.}

I request: From the Arab side, as well as the leading Jewish authorities' side, I have been asked to provide a succinct report of my observations at Deir Yassin. I believe that normally the ICRC, when approached by the two parties, agrees to prepare and provide an identical report to the two parties. The odd thing here is that the Irgun asked me this as well but they asked me to affirm that I was approached on the evening of April 9 via a request emanating from their command, transmitted by the MDA, which called upon the ICRC to rescue the wounded and sick. The MDA, like myself, did not receive any request from the Irgun; I was only summoned by the Arabs on the evening of April 10. This being so, and the case can be demonstrated, I ask as a matter of policy how I should I follow through on the parallel requests to draw up a report. To this date, I have refused, saying that Geneva alone will decide. I think that it might be wise to follow through on the parallel requests in order to develop and educate public opinion towards putting the Red Cross concept into practice. I also think that it might be wise to refuse as we risk being dragged very far down into discussions of details and lawyer argumentation.

[signature]

J. de REYNIER

{De Reynier proved far-seeing in his final sentence. He also says in his memoirs that the request from the Irgun at some point included a threat of personal harm if he did not sign a statement giving their version. He related that he then told them that he had already sent out a report to Geneva saying differently so it was too late to say anything different. The above would be that report.}

Note - The translation is based on the memo of Jacques de Reynier in the office of the Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The memo was obtained by the [Deir Yassin Remembered](#) group.