

Nakba Survivor: “If You Wanted to Die in Palestine You Stayed. If You Wanted to Live, You Left.”

By [Maan Independent News Agency](#)

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Ghatheyya Mifleh al-Khawalda was 15 years old when she fled her home during the Nakba of 1948.

Now 80, Ghatheyya was once a carefree teenager who used to live with her mother and sister in the village of al-Qastina, northeast of Gaza.

Although her early life was marked by tragedy — her grandmother died when she was born and her father passed away on Eid al-Adha — she says she had a happy childhood.

“We had a very nice house, a big house with marble floors in the hallway. My father was a farmer, and we had farmland with orange trees, apple trees, grapefruit trees and others. I used to spend my days playing with my sister and the other girls in the village. We were very happy,” she told the Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

Her life changed dramatically in 1948, when Jewish militias arrived in the area where she lived.

“We had heard stories about attacks on other villages. Still, the attack on al-Qastina came without warning. Before that, there had been a British military camp nearby, but that year the British left and allowed the Jewish groups to take over.”

Some Jewish militia members were wearing uniform and others had civilian clothes, Ghatheyya said, and when they arrived in the village they began firing at people, killing three villagers.

“We ran away, afraid for our safety, and went to Tal al-Safi, a nearby village on a hill. It was within walking distance, and we were in a hurry to leave, so we didn’t take anything with us. It was like Doomsday. It was utter terror. People’s minds were imprisoned by fear. We couldn’t think of anything except leaving, not even simple things like bringing food with us,” she said.

After a few days in Tal es-Safi, militias came again and forced them to leave. Ghatheyya and her family fled to Beit Jibrin to spend the night, but were followed and forced to leave again.

“If you wanted to die, you stayed. If you wanted to live, you left,” she recalls. “Their main aim was not to kill us, but to get rid of us. If they had wanted us all dead, not one of us would have survived. They used fear to force us to leave our land.”

The family walked along the coast until they reached Gaza. There were thousands of people who fled other villages, sleeping in mosques or on the street, Ghatheyya says, and UNRWA began to build tents for the families.

Ghatheyya and her husband Ahmed, also a refugee from al-Qastina, now have 32 grandchildren and live with their son Nehad. She says she thinks often about her village, and had the chance to visit al-Qastina in the early 1980s and 1990s.

“Al-Qastina crosses my mind very often. It doesn’t make sense that I cannot be in my home, on my land, in the place where I grew up. I still dream of the days of the land.”

More than 760,000 Palestinians — estimated today to number 4.8 million with their descendants — were pushed into exile or driven out of their homes in the conflict surrounding Israel’s creation in 1948.

Around 160,000 Palestinians, who remained in Israel after 1948, now number around 1.36 million people, or 20 percent of the country’s population.

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