

Back to Hebron's Tegart Fort: An Autoethnography of Shame, Love, Loss, and the De-Securitization of the Self

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My first impression of the building, when I arrived at it as a fresh soldier in May 1989, was of a massive battleship. As I entered the compound, the building was revealed to me with a very broad front, something like 120 meters long. It was three stories high, with rows of narrow windows all along each level that made it appear as the frontage of a gunboat from the age of sail with decks full of firing loopholes. Apart from a rectangle painted in azure and white, the colors of the State of Israel, which enveloped the wall around the doorway, and a baseline of white all along the building, the rest of the structure was somber brown-beige. Dusty military vehicles parked on an asphalt strip that paralleled the building. Several small pine trees were scattered along the asphalt strip, providing only thin shade. A barbed wire fence encircled the compound. To complete the depressing look, a big sign on the doorway ironically declared: "SOLDIER, IMPROVE YOUR APPEARANCE, BY ORDER!" Another sign, with an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) logo announced: "Headquarters, The Regional Brigade, Yehudah / Civil Administration, Sub-District of Hebron." The brown-ness of the military building was a stark contrast to the whiteness of the small and low limestone-covered Palestinian houses and buildings that surrounded it – the city of Hebron. But perhaps what most gave the impression of a battleship to the Israeli Military Government Building, as it was known among everyone who served there, were the many high antennas and long metal cables that attached them to the roof of the brown fort. Two antennas especially, twice as tall as the building itself, seemed like masts on the deck of a sailing ship. With sails on these masts, I often thought in the next years, perhaps the building would have sailed away, like the sailing building in Monty Python's "Meaning of Life" film, in which the oppressed workers of the "Permanent Assurance Company" commandeer their office building, weigh anchor, and sail with it as pirates to rob the financial district.

The brown fort, this stationary battleship, dominated the city below it. It was visible from many parts in the city, and I could see it well before I arrived there, through the scratched plastic-covered windows of the military jeep that brought me from the bus stop at the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba, through the inner city of Hebron, to this hilltop. While we drove through the streets of Hebron, which was under curfew (something I never saw before, and was bewitched to witness now – how can an entire city become a ghost town?), stones were nonetheless thrown at the jeep from some alleyway. The sound of the hitting rocks was terrifying, louder than shootings. The paratroopers in the jeep only laughed and smugly joked about the "bored" Palestinian kids who didn't go to school today because of the curfew. But I was scared, even though the plastic coating on the windows prevented them from being shattered. When the jeep entered the compound of the Military Government Building, I sighed in relief, happy to be out of (immediate) danger. But as the paratroopers' sergeant stopped the jeep and told me, "Hey,

jobnik,¹ this is where you go off,” and as I stood in front of the building’s doorway, I looked anxiously at the gloomy fort. The initial feeling of safety was quickly replaced by a sense of estrangement and discomfort. The place looked old, foreign, menacing and imposing. “I don’t want to be here,” I distinctly remember thinking then. Yet I stayed there for almost the entire three years of my mandatory military service.

Those years and how they were constitutive in my subjectivity and identity are the subject of this autoethnography. In what follows, I first describe how a culture of violence and militancy caused me to be ashamed of myself due to my inability to fit into this system. Then I tell about love in the context of this militancy, and close with thinking about a terrible loss I suffered. I wish to share with the reader the way my insecurity prevented me from doing enough to prevent this loss while I still could. This introspection is part of my post-traumatic journey, and it is an effort to de-securitize the self. Perhaps it may be useful to others in similar conditions or to anyone who wishes to gain insights, from the perspective of the individual and the everyday, on how militarized cultures work. Furthermore, by telling such a story from the personal point of view, I also criticize this culture of militancy and seek to disrupt it.²

But first let me provide the necessary background on the Hebron fort. It was one of sixty-two similar military/police compounds built by the British during their rule in Palestine (1918-1948). They were constructed in the late 1930s and early 1940s and were called ‘Tegart forts,’ after their planner, Sir Charles Tegart, an expert in colonial counter-insurgency, who was brought to Palestine from Calcutta, India, to advise the local British Mandate authorities on the repression of the Palestinian Arab Revolt (1936-1939). Tegart proposed the construction of dozens of forts that would house military and police personnel for quick deployment of British forces to suppress uprisings. Hebron’s fort, completed in 1941, was one of the biggest Tegart buildings in the land and served the British control apparatus until 1948. It then was in the use of the Jordanians when they ruled the West Bank (1948-1967), the Israelis (1967-1997) and the Palestinian Authority (1997-2002).

In June 30, 2002, however, the fort was destroyed by the Israeli army during the high tide of the second Palestinian Intifada (Arabic: uprising, Al Aqsa Intifada), as part of Israel’s strategy then of destroying the Palestinian Authority’s ability to rule the Palestinian cities which Israel evacuated in the late 1990s. When I heard about the destruction of the place, I was quite content. It was for so many years a symbol of oppression and occupation, and even after it was handed over to the Palestinian Authority in 1997, it continued to serve *its* security services, which hardly adhere to democratic values and ethics. It was also a jail in which I, too, was, effectively, incarcerated. Yet I also felt sadness and even some longing for the place. That was due to the feeling of safety and belonging that I eventually acquired while in the fort, and to the memories of love and intimacy I had there, along with other more difficult and painful experiences.

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¹ Jobnik – a headquarters soldier, someone who has a desk ‘job’ and is not a ‘fighter’.

² See, in this context, Oded Löwenheim, “The ‘I’ in IR: An Autoethnographic Account,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol.36 No.4 (October 2010), pp. 1025-1048.

Increasingly, I felt that the destruction of the building also deleted part of my own private history and self. This was a history I tried to hide. Sometimes I even lied about it when talking with other Israelis about my army service. I did not lie because I harmed anyone - I did not kill or wound anybody while a soldier. Rather, I lied because I was ashamed of the way I came to that fort, and about my supposedly ignoble, “jobnick,” duties in it. My story here is not a “breaking the silence” narrative of an ex-fighter who laments his actions.³ Such stories, while regretting specific acts or missions, often maintain the militant ethos of the culture: their goal is to help reform the military, making it again a “moral army,” if such a thing can exist. My story, in contrast, is about how I realized that I have nothing to be ashamed of my time in the Hebron Tegart fort precisely because it consisted mainly of performing menial jobs, “idling,” and having a passionate love affair. By telling these stories, by returning to the destroyed, lost,⁴ Tegart fort, I want to proclaim my resistance to the culture of violence that produced me, continue the process of releasing myself from the grip of a culture of militancy that still surrounds me almost everywhere in Israel, and that, as time passes, I am even more aware of its pervasiveness and intricacies.⁵

Yet, how to return there? I’m a very physical person. I’m attached to the terrain and the landscape; I am connected to the materiality of things. Had it been possible, I would have gone to the fort to stand again before its doorway, walk its dark and damp corridors, enter my room there, go to the dining hall and to the infirmary. I would absorb the scents, the sights, the sounds of the place, those very material components of my long sense of humiliation and shame, yet this time, I would stand there tall. But the fort is destroyed for twelve years now, and as an Israeli citizen, I cannot enter the Palestinian Authority-controlled areas of Hebron to search the rubble, if they were still there.

Also, books and articles that were written generally on the subject of the Tegart forts do not contain, to the best of my knowledge, any detailed memoirs or histories of Hebron’s fort itself, except some fleeting mention here and there. Moreover, there is hardly any photographic evidence that this immense structure ever existed. There are no videos on YouTube and no images in Google Earth.⁶ I had several pictures I took there myself when I was a soldier, but I threw them away some twenty years ago, hoping, then, to delete my past. Now that I needed these pictures, they were gone. While I tried to contact some of my friends who served (time) there with me, the very few I managed to locate did not have any pictures.⁷

³ See, in this context, this website: <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>

⁴ See: Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Memory of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ On everyday manifestations of militarism in Israel see: Baruch Kimmerling, “Patterns of Militarism in Israel,” *European Journal of Sociology* Vol.34 No.2 (November 1993), pp. 196-223. On the pervasiveness of the “security networks” in Israel see: Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak, *Israel’s Security Networks: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶ The coordinates are: 31°32'09.58" N 35°05'39.88" E. Use the “historic imagery” option in Google Earth to see how the compound changed between August 2, 2004 and April 6, 2014. Yet, no satellite imagery of the compound with the Tegart Fort standing on it is available. The resolution of the imagery is low due to an understanding Israel has with the US government not to allow publication of high-resolution satellite images of Israel, and this includes the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

⁷ I found an image of the place, from the 1940s, in Gad Kreuzer, *The Tegarts: The Construction of British Police forts in the Land of Yisrael, 1938-1943* (Mikveh Yisrael: The Council for Sites’ Conservation in Israel, 2011) [in Hebrew], p. 146, the picture at the bottom of the page. The caption reads: “The police fort in Hebron dominates its

Thus, after all these searches, I was really left with only the journals and stories that I wrote while I was there. Those notebooks, I *did* keep throughout the years, perhaps due to my reverence for the written word, but I have not opened them in a long time. Some of what I wrote there, I see now, is very awkward and even childish. But to be honest, this wasn't the reason I evaded these notebooks. Again, it was this shame about who I was and who I felt I should have been. So perhaps it is for the best that I hardly found anything else about the Tegart fort of Hebron. It is up to me now to return to myself – to my diaries and memories, in order to reconstruct the place and my experiences in it.

By reconstructing this experience, which is a story about what many Israelis would consider a “jobnick’s” meaningless military service⁸ at Hebron’s Tegart, I want not only to show how some facets of conflict and military life are absurd and farcical.⁹ My story is chiefly meant to help me reclaim my dignity and self-confidence regarding those years, by means of overcoming the deepest level of securitization: the securitization of the self, which is manifested, among other things, in self-censorship, shame, and internal doubt. Yes, the fort, this complex of control and occupation,¹⁰ is gone now. But the state of war that “lived” there is still very much in this land, and the culture of conflict materializes in other places and objects. Conflict and militancy continue, moreover, not only because people who are part of them are proud of what they do and believe that this is right and needed or because their ontological security stems from the conflict and its culture.¹¹ No less important a reason for the prolongation of conflict and militancy is that many who don't fit in the system nonetheless remain quiet or are silenced by others. These misfits remain doubtful of their internal truth, and embarrassed of their supposed weaknesses and flaws, of their “selfish” divergence from the “normal” and the conduct that society defines as desirable and respectable. Such supposed weaknesses and flaws brought me to the Tegart fort in Hebron on May 1989, and my very stay there until February 1992 was something I saw as a proof of their existence. Yet, by returning to this demolished fort in this paper, I want to reverse my understanding of that period in my life, and see – and show! – how my being there and my deeds there stemmed from internal strengths, not flaws. I cannot overemphasize how crucial this self-confidence is in releasing oneself from the grip of a culture of conflict and militancy.

surroundings and transmits [an image of] power and estrangement at the same time.” See the picture here:

<http://www.idekel.co.il/Books/Tigartim/#p=151> (accessed: January 22, 2015).

⁸ In recent years, high schools in Israel receive special budgetary bonuses from the Ministry of Education the more their graduates enlist into combatant units, which represent a “meaningful service”. See: Talila Neshet, “IDF launches educational offensive on Israel’s schools,” *Haaretz*, June 12, 2012 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/idf-launches-educational-offensive-on-israel-s-schools.premium-1.435940> Accessed: December 28, 2014).

⁹ On this, see: Rainer Hülse, “I, the Double Soldier: An Autobiographic Case Study on the Pitfalls of Dual Citizenship,” in *Autobiographical International Relations*, ed. Naeem Inayatullah (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 56-64.

¹⁰ It housed a military headquarters, police station, military court, a jail, Shin Bet [security service] offices, and offices of the Civil Administration – the Israeli bureaucracy that deals with the “civilian” aspects of managing the occupation of the Palestinians.

¹¹ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Affairs* Vol.12 No.3 (September 2006), pp. 341-370.

Shame, evasions, and lies

For years after my discharge from the IDF, I was ashamed to talk about my assignment in the army. I variously kept silent in company of “fighters” (i.e., people who served in combat units such as infantry or armored corps), provided a blurry and partial description of my position, or lied about it. Once, in 1997, when I was already a doctoral student in IR at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I was conversing with another student, and somehow, as often happens among young persons in Israel, we arrived at the subject of the military service. “So, what did you do in the army?” my friend asked. He was a religious Jewish man, about my age, with the general appearance of a wimp – a thin, bespectacled guy with an outdated forelock in his hair, wearing old jeans and a plaid shirt that was hanging out of his pants from behind. A kind of a “good boy Jerusalem.” I can’t remember exactly why, perhaps it was his wimpy look, but I said, with confidence: “I was in the Yanshuf [Hebrew: owl] unit in Hebron.” Now, the Yanshuf unit was some kind of a secret elite force that we sometimes saw in Hebron’s fort. Most of us, the headquarters soldiers, didn’t really know what they did. They were shrouded in an aura of prowess and toughness, hardly ever smiling, coming and going in the Tegart fort without prior notice as they were directly under the command of the General Staff. “Are you serious?!” my friend suddenly exclaimed, “I was in Yanshuf too!” Then he asked when had I served, in whose team I was, and all kind of insider questions, to which I had no answers and from which I did not even learn what the Yanshuf unit really was. Yet, rather than admitting my lie or just saying that I was joking, I ensnared myself even further by inventing all kind of names and details that I saw he recognized as clearly false. Of course, I also reddened and sweated. Luckily, the conversation ended when someone else interjected and the subject changed. However, for days I felt ashamed and humiliated. I saw the Yanshuf veteran a few times after that, and we tried to pretend that the ‘incident’ did not happen, although since then, I always felt a thin sneer from him. And the memory of the shame, of reddening and sweating was already so strong in my body, that even in those other times when I saw that person, I felt these sensations again. In fact, even when writing this paper, sixteen years after that incident, I still faintly feel these reactions. Part of that relates, of course, to the embarrassment of being caught lying. But part of my stressful response is due to the remnants of a deeper shame – the one that had led me to lie from the outset.

Barrages of stones

“Your Company Sergeant is really crazy, he’s so mad that he can kill a person without even knowing it! Don’t mess with him, you’ll be sorry for it, he’s really a psycho! You should know that he came down from [the-then-Israeli-occupied southern] Lebanon just yesterday. And he is easily outraged, he’s just looking for trouble.” The squad commander, a young sergeant, shouted at us, new recruits to the artillery corps, while we were sitting inside an asbestos shed at the rookie base on a mountaintop overlooking the Palestinian city of Nablus in the West Bank, on a cold February night in 1989. We were packed against each other on hard wooden benches with our backs straight as sticks, and were terrified. From outside, we heard someone shouting and yelling incomprehensible swearing, and every few seconds, the shouting person – the Company Sergeant, apparently – threw heavy stones at the shed. The stones crashed on the outer wall, shook the small structure, and echoed terrifyingly within it. “He’s a wild animal, your Company Sergeant!” the other commanders repeatedly snapped, as they walked among the rows of benches, staring closely at us (we, though, were not allowed to make eye contact with them).

And indeed, the shouts and cries of the company sergeant, along with the occasional

stone throwing, sounded to me as if a wounded wild animal raged outside the little asbestos shed. I wanted to believe that this was just a “show,” but as the show continued through the night, it became less clear whether this was a game or not. On and on the shouts, the swearing, and the stones continued. We were forced to sit and absorb this abuse without moving a muscle. This is how new recruits were welcomed in the boot camp: the first object was to terrorize us.

And terrorized I became. Up until then, even though I grew up in not a very “delicate” working class neighborhood of Jerusalem, I was never shouted at or verbally abused in this manner. I did not choose to be in the artillery corps – this is where they sent me on my first day after enlistment. I knew it would not be easy, but nothing prepared me for the concentrated harassment and stupidity of basic training, the training of how to become someone whose work is to kill other people.¹² The shouts and the swearing, the threats and the corporeal punishments (“give me 50 pushups!”) that continued during the next weeks, were intolerable to me. Moreover, there were humiliations: my girlfriend sent me from Jerusalem a letter or a package with goodies almost every week. For each of these items I had to “convince” the staff that I was “worthy” of receiving them. Tens of push-ups at a time, running around the base with the heavy “Galil” rifle above my head, forced to shout “I am a sissy who misses his girlfriend,” or burnish the latrines – such hazing and harassments were supposed to make fighters out of me and my comrades. In addition to the humiliations and harassments, there were also endless drills, constant running from one place in the base to another, and a never ending deficit on the sergeants’ “Bank of Time” (we always “owed” them precious seconds for not getting on time to this or that spot or not finishing our meal in less than 7 minutes). I also distinctly remember the terribly depressing feeling of getting up before sunrise, every morning, at 4:45 am, standing shivering without a coat before the tents for morning checkup or being torn from sleep at the middle of the night after the sergeants reconstructed for us the “night of the gliders” attack¹³

The smells too, were revolting: the whole base was shrouded in odors of urine, excrement, Lysol, diesel fuel, aftershave, and frying oil from the kitchen. Our uniforms had a scent of rotten fabric that was stored too long in the quartermastership. Big stains of rifle cleaning oil were always a part of our appearance. Of course, the rifles were never clean enough for the liking of the sergeants, who always found “elephants” (i.e., remnants of soot) in one’s rifle barrel – a good enough reason to deny your home leave. I cried often. I could not keep up with the intensity of the basic training, I never managed to fix my gear as nicely and neatly as the others, and it always fell apart. I was always the last in the runs, always the one whose “incompetence” led to the whole company suffering collective punishments. When we were taken on a tour to the Lebanese border, where we were supposed to be deployed once our basic and advanced training completed, I could not tolerate the cannons’ roar – it was unimaginable how loud the gunfire was (they made a showcase for us), penetrating into one’s soul. Eventually, after not being able to complete a trek/march, due to terrible back pains (I have scoliosis but nonetheless was made to carry, in addition to my personal gear, also the radio, some old and heavy American device made during the Vietnam war), I was sent to the base’s officer of mental

¹² On military training see: Benjamin Schrader, "Auto-archeology and the Political Affect of War," *Journal of Narrative Politics* Vol.1 No. 1 (Sept. 2014), pp. 4-23. Especially, see his discussion of John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 146-158.

¹³ A 1987 attack by Palestinians who entered northern Israel from Lebanon with hang gliders, in which one of the attackers managed to infiltrate an IDF encampment, where he killed five soldiers sleeping in their tent.

health. He wasn't sympathetic, but perhaps he feared that I might commit suicide (I was so depressed), and so he sent me to a medical committee in the army's central medical base. There, my "profile" was lowered from 72 to 64 and this meant that I was out of a field unit.¹⁴

After the medical committee, when I returned to the basic training base to give back my Galil rifle at the armory, the quartermaster disassembled the rifle, to see if all the parts were there. To my horror, he could not find the striking pin – the part without which the rifle won't shoot and becomes a useless metal rod. Seven years in military prison was the punishment, we were told, for losing this part. I started frantically searching my pockets, unpacked my backpack, and all my belongings. My set of ceremonial, "going home," uniforms was saturated with diesel, but I could not care less. I anxiously searched within the backpack and my kitbag – to no avail. True, I could not recall disassembling this part before I left the base, but at this stage I was so traumatized that I wasn't sure about anything. As I looked for the missing part, my head deep within my packs, suddenly I heard the voice of the Company Sergeant, Shlomi, above me. "Looking for this?" he asked, and held out the striking pin. "Yes," I muttered, amazed. "How did you get it?" "Well, we took it out a few nights ago, when you bastards were asleep, just to make sure that you won't hurt yourself or anybody else." Then he added, contemptuously: "Personally, I think you're just bluffing and you're a slacker."¹⁵ He then handed the piece to the quartermaster, who grinned ironically. As I straightened up, standing again, I saw a few of my comrades from the company standing near Shlomi. There was no empathy in their eyes, just contempt and admonition for my supposed evasion of duty. This is how I left the boot camp, with humiliation and shame.

I didn't want to commit suicide, but my depression and despair were so deep that I did engage with the idea to the extent that there was no need to play tricks on the military shrinks, who probably thought it was safer to discharge me from the corps (but, alas, not from the military itself). Surely, I discovered then how thin and arbitrary is the line that separates between "going on" and "falling apart." I can clearly recall how basic training, and even military life after it, seemed to be a journey without an end, an infinite darkness of abuse and pain. I was happy that they let me go, but also remorseful for the way they sent me away. I had second thoughts: perhaps I could have made another effort to "get over it"; perhaps, indeed, I really was too pampered and lazy. But I also knew that there was no way in the world that I could get accustomed to this life – the never ending abuse of the commanders, the feeling of complete loss

¹⁴ A glimpse on how the doctors on such committees see the soldiers that come to them can be gained from this passage: "Soldiers may be frequent attendees for many reasons that are not strictly medical and the medical officer may have difficulty in identifying the genuinely sick patient. In addition, the physician may himself be exhausted by his many duties.

"The average number of primary care consultations per conscript soldier is 10 per year. This is approximately four times higher than that of an age-matched Israeli civilian population. There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. These range from the heavy physical demands on the conscripts to administrative requests. *In addition, conscripts may exaggerate illness in order to be exempted from certain duties.*" Anthony D. Heymann, Yaniv Shilo, Amir Tirosh, Liora Valinsky, and Shlomo Vinker, "Differences between Soldiers, with and without Emotional Distress, in Number of Primary Care Medical Visits and Type of Presenting Complaints," *Israel Medical Association Journal* Vol.9 (February 2007), pp. 90 – 93, p. 92 (italics added).

¹⁵ Contacting a mental health officer is often seen in Israel as one of "the most common ways of avoiding service" in the IDF. See: Gabriel Ben Dor and Ami Pedhazur, "Under the Threat of Terrorism: A Reassessment of the Factors Influencing the Motivation to Serve in the Israeli Reserves," *Israel Affairs* Vol.12, No.3 (July 2006), pp.430– 438, p.435.

of control over my life that was regimented from minute to minute now, the imminent sense of danger, the cannons' roar, my excruciating back pains, the terrible odors of the camp, and the distance from my home, family, and girlfriend.

Thus, after reporting back to the army's central sorting base on May 1989, I was sent to the Regional Brigade Yehudah – Hebron's Tegart fort. I asked for a close-to-home posting, and technically it was close to Jerusalem, only 30 km away. But it turned out that this was a "closed base" where you had to stay there for weeks at a time (for no rational reason or end, I realized over the years). The base was closed in another sense: it was a citadel in the midst of a very hostile Palestinian city.¹⁶ I was posted to the H.Q. of a brigade that was responsible for suppressing the Palestinian uprising in one the most difficult "sectors" of the Palestinian Occupied Territories. At that time, suppressing the Palestinian Intifada was one of the main tasks of the Israeli army: almost every fighting unit spent months and months in the Occupied Territories as, essentially, a riot-police force or an ethnic militia in a civil war condition. But these concepts I know only now with the hindsight of a politics scholar.¹⁷ At that time, even though I was against the Occupation as a political condition and actual policy, and even though I "failed" to become a fighter – and perhaps, because of this "failure" – I still respected the combat soldiers who actually maintained the Occupation. I envied their comradeship, professionalism, and endurance. They seemed to me as an image of indisputable masculinity. I could not see the connection between this militant masculinity and the Occupation. I, on the other hand, having been categorized (and stigmatized) as a soldier with psychological "fault clause,"¹⁸ was to become a "general camp worker" under the Master Sergeant of the Tegart fort. A meaningless – and socially despised – service of picking up cigarette butts, painting tree trunks in white, and "helping" in all kind of similar jobs inside the camp awaited me there.

The Master Sergeant, a middle-aged Mizrahi Jew from a "development town" in the southern plains of the country, seemed to me then all-too-pleased to receive into his care an Ashkenazi "good boy Jerusalem" like myself (Mizrahis – Jews whose origins are from North Africa or West Asia; Ashkenazis – Jews with Central-East European origins. "Development town": usually a peripheral and low-income city in "second-Israel"). He was very overt and clear about that. "Now you pampered Ashkenazi boy will learn what hard work really is," he told me many times, and sent me to paint the stairwell of the fort, to shine the stairs (but the moment I finished washing, someone would come and leave greasy shoe marks all over the place, and I would have to start all over again), or to wash the brigadier's and his deputy's jeeps. And the thousands of cigarette butts that I picked up – I wondered: how these soldiers could smoke so much and yet chase these Palestinian youths who threw stones at the settlers and the army?

As time passed, the Master Sergeant softened somehow. Especially after he discovered I played chess. He was an avid chess player, and I liked the game too. So, from time to time, he conceded that I clean the corridor tomorrow or that I wash the jeep in the afternoon, and instead we passed many hours playing chess in his office. It was fun to play chess. But increasingly, I

¹⁶ Only after some months there, I realized that the place was not guarded heavily and it was, actually, quite easy to penetrate it. What prevented the Palestinians from penetrating and killing someone at night, I do not really know.

¹⁷ Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli scholar of politics and history, argues that since the mid 1980s, there is a de-facto situation of "one state" in Israel and Palestine, and that the occupation is irreversible. See his *Son of the Cypresses: Memories, Reflections, and Regrets from a Political Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 199. If one accepts this thesis, then it can be argued that the conflict has transformed into a civil war.

¹⁸ See: Heymann et al., "Differences between Soldiers ...", p. 91.

grew bitter – while I was happy that I was no longer in the artillery corps, and I even became used to my menial jobs at the fort, I wanted something more “meaningful” out of this military service.¹⁹ Before enlisting, I did not think that my military service would be one of playing chess with a Master Sergeant (a feared but also laughable role in the IDF) and cleaning the damp and dark corridors and staircases of an old British-built fort in a Palestinian city in the middle of the “*shtachim*” (Hebrew: the [occupied] territories). Especially, I did not have much to tell, I did not *want* much to tell, to my high school friends, who were now all serving in elite fighting units, in the prestigious Air Force, and in the military intelligence. Nor did I feel I had anything worthy of telling to my girlfriend in Jerusalem, who, despite her best efforts to hide her disappointment with me, was clearly unsatisfied with the fact that her boyfriend was such a miserable, almost detestable, jobnick (she was still in high school, and her friends’ boyfriends *were* a source of pride. “Among the best of our lads,” as our school’s principal used to call them).

Looking for something “better” to do, in my spare time, something more meaningful to tell Michal, my girlfriend, I started sneaking in to watch the trials of Palestinians in the military court in the Tegart fort. It was a small and crowded hall, with two columns of wooden benches for the audience of about forty people and a raised platform for the judge. The judge was a standing-army officer at the rank of a major. He was thin, tall, and balding, always wearing ironed Dacron synthetic uniforms, the hallmark of a professional officer in the IDF then. I don’t think that I ever saw him acquit anyone. The defendants were usually young men, sometimes even youths, charged with throwing stones at military vehicles or at settlers’ transportation. Other times, the charge was blocking a road with burning tires or piles of rocks, spraying PLO and other “nationalistic” graffiti, flying a “PLO flag” in public (no one would dare say then “the Palestinian flag”), distributing “incitement materials,” or throwing Molotov cocktails at the army or the settlers. The trials were always held in Hebrew, although a Druze-Arab-Israeli soldier would serve as a translator for the defendants and the families. The eyelids of the judge were always half closed, as if he was so tired or worn out. Perhaps he was.

I pitied the young men that the judge sentenced for periods of one year, two years or sometimes five years in jail (Hebron’s jail was also part of the Tegart construct). They often looked so clueless about what had happened in the court, the translation into Arabic notwithstanding. Their families, who attended the deliberations, were almost always hopeful that the defendants would be acquitted due to a father’s pledge to supervise a son so that he will never “cause trouble again.” Or, they hoped that a father’s request for mercy would be heard because he worked in Israel for many years, and therefore he would be believed when he denounced the acts of his son. Obviously, the Palestinians in the courtroom were strangers to the proceedings of the Israeli military justice system. The families were always shattered and crying when the sons were found guilty. It was a very hard place to be in, and a very emotional situation. The “case” I remember the most was Imad Abu Hamid’s.

The story of Imad Abu Hamid

¹⁹ On boredom and war, see: Jorg Kustermans and Erik Ringmar, “Modernity, Boredom and War: A Suggestive Essay,” *Review of International Studies* Vol. 37 No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 1775-1792. My story is not exactly of boredom that leads to war, but of boredom *in* war. The recent (2014) Israeli film “Zero Motivation” (director: Talya Lavie) presents most clearly this sense of boredom and, above all, the sinking into a state of oblivion and despair during a meaningless military service in the IDF.

Imad Abu Hamid (pseudonym) threw stones 48 times, according to his admission, at IDF jeeps and settler cars. Yet it was neither the army nor any other Israeli force/agency that brought him to trial. He turned himself in.

Imad Abu Hamid was the son of the *Mukhtar* (Arabic: chieftain) of one of the big towns in the Hebron area. His father used to arrive every week, several times, to the Tegart fort, to have business with the Civil Administration officials and the Shin Bet [the General Security Service], probably to provide “intelligence.” I never saw a person who was more submissive, or so I perceived him then. He was full of “olive oil” smiles for the soldiers at the fort’s gate whenever he came. He used to give us (yes, I was also sometimes guarding the gate) Kanafeh – a sweet cheese pastry, to smooth his entry into the compound (and to bypass the line of the “ordinary” Palestinians who had to wait until someone from inside would come to call them in). In return, we would let him in without any escort. I can’t imagine anyone today doing this in the checkpoints of Gaza or the West Bank, and I can’t imagine soldiers eating Palestinian food this way, for fear of poisoning, but the Occupation was younger in those days.

Many times I saw the *Mukhtar* also groveling – again, that’s how I saw it then, with the eyes of a twenty years old – before a Shin Bet agent who took the Arab name “Farēs” (literally, a horseman) and no one in the fort – that is, no regular soldier – knew his real Hebrew name. “Farēs” used to stroll with the *Mukhtar* in front of the fort, his arm on the old man’s back, patronizingly. “Does he tell you anything important,” I asked him once, when he came out of the fort and I was “idling” on the staircase in the afternoon sun, reading *The Lord of Rings* and listening to the countless muezzins of the city’s mosques calling the believers to prayer. Ever since Farēs saw me reading that book, a few weeks before that, he started treating me as a human being and not just a “camp worker”. Perhaps he had some liking, too, for fantasy books. “Nah, he already gave us everything he knows, he’s practically useless.” “So why do you keep having him here,” I wondered. “I don’t know, perhaps I just like the guy, and perhaps we could nonetheless squeeze a few more drops out of this lemon,” he answered with a wry smile.

Everybody in the fort was amazed by Imad’s, the *Mukhtar*’s son, trial. It was inconceivable that a son of such a known collaborator²⁰ would commit offenses against the army, and not only this, but also that he will turn himself in on his own accord! The courtroom was busy with Palestinians from his town, his family (including the *Mukhtar*), and many of the fort’s soldiers who came to watch the trial out of curiosity. As the defendant started telling his story, even the sleepy military judge opened his otherwise always half-closed eyelids.

It turned out that the *Mukhtar* wanted to marry Imad to one of the daughters of another “notable” family in the town. But Imad was madly in love with another woman, who was unfortunately from an ordinary family. He was forced, nonetheless, to marry the rich girl. He hated her, he told the court, and he hated his father for forcing him into this marriage. He decided to avenge himself, and in order to disgrace his father he started throwing stones at the military jeeps that passed through the main street of his town. He hoped that the army would catch him and thus he would shame his collaborator father and prove himself a worthy man to his true love. But the soldiers were apparently inept or indifferent, and even though he hardly tried to escape, they never caught him. He decided, then, to turn himself in.

²⁰ On the origins of Palestinian collaboration see: Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Imad's attorney, a Jewish-Israeli female human rights lawyer from Jerusalem, who was seen by most of the soldiers in Hebron as a "whore of the Palestinians," tried to implore the court to release him, for his crimes were not motivated by nationalistic motives *per se* and the army and the settler vehicles which he stoned were not seriously damaged. But the *Mukhtar* rose up, and started shouting at his son, cursing him, and asking the court to *aggravate* his sentence. Eventually, the sleepy judge sentenced Imad to two years of prison. Imad was shocked: he probably did not believe that he would be sent to jail for such a long time. Did he expect his father's reaction in the court? The military police took Imad, who was now on the verge of collapsing, out of the court and led him to the prison, which was in the inner courtyard of the building. His father and mother followed him, the father shouting and swearing, waving his walking cane at his son, the mother weeping.

That weekend, when I returned to Jerusalem for a home leave, Michal broke up with me. We were high school sweethearts, since 10th grade and it was first love for both of us. By the time I was posted to Hebron's Tegart, we were almost three years together. But Michal and I gradually started drifting apart after my "evasion" – so she saw it, too – from completing basic training in the artillery corps. It wasn't that she could not understand the stress I was under there, or the darkness I saw all around me. But she thought that I could have been "stronger," nonetheless. It bothered her that I did not "strive harder" to finish basic training, and it shamed her that I turned into a "camp worker" in such a miserable place like the fort of Hebron (she did not even want to come visit me there). Her dad, who in the Six Day War, was a lieutenant in the paratroopers and was seriously wounded – an Egyptian-shot bullet smashed his jaws, leaving his face with a fixed cynical expression despite the many plastic surgeries and recovery treatments he received – wasn't very pleased either, to put it mildly, that Michal would "hang around" with a slacker. My dad, on the other hand, who also participated in that war and in the Yom Kippur War, when he saw many of his comrades killed by Egyptian fire – was much happier that I became a "jobnick." He kept urging me to read *The Good Soldier Švejk*, which I did not want to, then – I thought it was a stupid book. How stupid I was not to understand his good advice that I should do my best to become a jobnick and a Švejk from the outset.²¹ But I did not find any "honor" in becoming a Švejk.

I'm not saying that there weren't any other reasons for my breakup with Michal. Youth loves are almost bound to end sometime. But I know in my heart that "what I did" – who I was, and who I couldn't be – surely hastened the end of that relationship. Today, as a married person who is loved by his spouse without her expecting me to be apologetic for my past, as a father myself, who can see how important my dad's support was then (*my* children love hearing about Švejk's antics), and as an established scholar of politics, I can look on the whole thing with some irony. In 1990, though, I was at a loss. The break up with Michal shattered my self-image as a young man for many months to come, and splinters of it stayed in my heart for years.

After the breakup, the next week I returned to the Tegart fort. The bus that took me there was stoned at Imad's town on the way to Hebron. I ducked under the window of the bus, covered my head with my backpack, and wept out of sadness, mourning, fear, and anger. I could not stop thinking about Imad, the young Palestinian man who threw stones out of love and hatred, and about my Michal who wanted me to be someone I truly could not have been.

²¹ See in this context: Hana Cervinkova, "The Phantom of the Good Soldier Švejk in the Czech Army Accession to NATO (2001–2002)," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (2009) 22, pp. 359–371.

Loving Yif'at in my room at the Tegart fort

During the first weeks of my “service” (whom did I serve anyway, and for what purpose?) at the fort, I was sent to share a room with the cooks. The cooks’ military credentials were even more miserable than mine. Nonetheless, they all wore the red shoes of the paratrooper brigade, had red paratrooper caps, and some of them were even decorated with parachute wings which they bought at some army memorabilia store in downtown Jerusalem. Of course, they were the laughing stock of the whole base for that. But the cooks were only the most overt imposters in the base. Many other male soldiers who were “refugees” like me from fighting units, continued to wear the tags and symbols of their “true units” when they left the fort for a home leave. I also often changed my unit tag to the artillery corps’ once on the bus and kept the black cap that I “earned” in one of the “stretcher marches” of my unfinished basic training (instead of wearing the olive-green – and derogatory – cap of the “general corps” to which I belonged now). And of course, there was the thing with the rifles: the longer the rifle, the lesser one’s status. Long American M-16 rifles were the clear signifiers of one’s lower status within the fort. After that, Long Galil rifles [an Israeli-made mimic of the Russian AK-47], Short Galil rifles, and the most desired – a Short M-16. That one was a “sexy”, lightweight rifle. Only the officers had them. And the cooks, who always knew how to “get around.”

For most of the time, I had a long M-16, and only after more than a year at the fort, I received a Long Galil, which was as long as the Long M-16, and heavier, but at least one could fold its stock and thus make it less cumbersome and easier to carry around. It also helped my camouflage enterprise: soldiers from the unit I was supposed to be sent to originally – the artillery battalion, the unit tag and cap of which I continued to wear outside of the Tegart fort – were issued Galil rifles ... Yet I never fired this rifle, and it was mainly a weight I carried on me when going home to Jerusalem. It did provide me, though, some measure of self-respect and confidence.

With the cooks, however, things did not go well. We lived in what was actually a separate apartment in the southern wing of the fort, overlooking an internal courtyard in which the sickbay and the vehicle workshop were located. The cooks hated me on first sight, due to racial and ethnic tensions and prejudices like those I had with the Master Sergeant. Increasingly the tension grew because, they thought, I was an “Arab lover.”

Part of my job was to escort Palestinian detainees from the shed in which they were kept at the fort’s entrance to the dining room, once the soldiers finished their meal, and to watch over them while they ate. The cooks did their best to provide the smallest and most unappetizing servings to the Palestinian detainees. When they served the food, they also added swearing and tried to intimidate the detainees by pretending to be just about to shoot them with their shortened M-16s, or by throwing the food on the table and forcing the detainees to collect and eat the fallout from the floor. At one of these times, I felt I could not take it anymore and stood between the abusive cook and a Palestinian detainee at whom he was aiming his rifle, toying with him.

“Take this away,” I commanded him. The cook couldn’t believe it, and shoved me away. I returned and shoved him back. “I’ll kill you,” he threatened. “Go ahead and try,” I replied and held my Galil. He looked at me and saw that I was serious. A few seconds lapsed. Everyone – the other cooks and the Palestinians – was completely quiet. He then backed off, muttering all kinds of threats.

That night, the Master Sergeant moved me from the cooks’ rooms. He sent me to the

apartment of the operation sergeants, in the old quarters of the British officers at the northern wing. The operation sergeants were the persons who staffed the War Room – the “nerve center” of the brigade, as they proudly defined it. From there the forces in the sector received their instructions and to the War Room they reported what happened in the sector. There was always high pressure and stress in the War Room, and the operation sergeants spent their time either there or asleep when off-shift. They were quite indifferent to me joining their apartment, and I settled in a small room with only one roommate who was discharged a few months later, and somehow, miraculously, no one was sent to replace him in the room.

I filled the room with posters from the National Geographic magazine to which my father had a subscription – mainly posters of astronomical objects, such as maps of the Moon and Mars, an illustration of the Milky Way Galaxy, a picture of the space shuttle. I also hung a poster of a red ferocious Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) dragon and brought some D&D miniatures to stand on my night cabinet. On that cabinet, I also put *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Master and Margarita*, books that gave me hope. I had a private balcony overlooking the *Muskubia* – the Russian church in Hebron (with its beautiful three silver domes and blue-roofed tower), and a hill slope on which Palestinian kids played soccer in the afternoon, flew kites, and hunted birds with elaborate traps. It was good to sit there on the balcony and watch the city below me, to enjoy the sight of the kites in the sky, and to read in my room.

She became curious about me, she said, because of the room. When she came in to look for one of the operation sergeants under her command, and who was late for his shift, she entered my room mistakenly, and felt that she stepped into some other universe. I was idling on the balcony, watching the kites, and did not notice her entering. When she saw me and realized she was in the wrong room, she apologized and left. But she returned after dinner, to take a closer look at the room and its occupant.

It didn't take much time for us to fall madly in love. Yif'at (pseudonym), the junior officer at the War Room, was thirsty for stories, so she told me, and when I read to her from my notebooks the urban fantasy pieces I was writing then about the adventures of the red-haired cat Intifada in the mazes of the Military Government Building of Hebron (there was really such a cat there ... although, I admit I was inspired by Bulgakov's Behemoth), she was bewitched. And beyond that, she said she felt I needed protection. Protection from the cooks, who still gave me the evil eye, literally; protection from the “dog” [aka, deputy] of the Master Sergeant [Hebrew: *Kelev Rassar*] who enjoyed teasing me while his master was away; protection from the horrible and stupid brigadier, who never missed an opportunity to deny my Sabbath leave for petty offenses but really for the contempt I felt for him after he forbade me from taking part in a radio show of the Military Radio station [*Galei Tzahal*], a radio show in which writer-soldiers were invited to read from their stories. He was afraid that I would tell about what I saw in Hebron. And so, Yif'at and I spent hours together and made passionate love in that room, and I no longer cared about being denied my Sabbath leaves. With Yif'at, the fort became my home. How can I not miss that Tegart building when thinking about my Yif'at?

A few weeks after she first came to my room, she asked the Master Sergeant to “borrow” me, and made me her personal driver. She had a small American jeep [surplus from the US army], which she used to drive among the various outposts in the city, “to get a feeling of the terrain” and to know the “sector” firsthand. Yet, she was fed up with the sexist remarks of the soldiers who manned these outposts. Having me with her helped in that regard, she said. And she, for her part, returned me to life. Amidst the evil of the Occupation, amidst the stupidity,

boredom, and humiliation of my military life, in the bleakness of the Tegart building/jail, she was the embodiment of beauty, power, freedom, and splendor, the personification of hope and goodness. Our tours in the occupied city, which for the Palestinians who saw our jeep were perhaps just another military patrol, were for me freedom and release from the prison of the citadel. Strangely enough, I can't remember that we were ever stoned when we drove together in her jeep in the streets of Hebron. Perhaps it had something to do with our love and perhaps not. But I always felt safe with her.

We spent almost a year together. One week, when I returned from a home leave, I found a note from her. She had gone to the headquarters of the "Judea and Samaria Division" at Ramallah, to another Tegart fort, which within a few years, during the period of the Oslo peace process, would become Yasser Arafat's headquarters. Back then, in 1991, hardly anyone could imagine this. At any rate, Yif'at received an urgent promotion offer at that base, and she decided to leave at once.

Yif'at always wanted to excel. Excellence in the military, or at least excellence as it is perceived in the military, was a strange concept to me (to be honest, much of the excellence discourse in academia is also foreign to me today). While I was happy to keep reading and writing in my room and driving Yif'at around Hebron, she wanted to contribute to the state [Hebrew: *litrom la-medina*], as she used to say, and prove her value as a woman officer, and therefore she looked for more challenges. She was so flattered when one of the senior officers of the Ramallah division once told her: "until I saw you in action, I did not believe in women in the War Room." No love words, stories, or poems that I ever told or wrote her went so deep into her heart as this chauvinistic saying that was no different in essence from the sexist remarks she encountered in Hebron on her tours among the outposts. With the same suddenness in which she entered my life, she disappeared.

We stayed in touch after she left, but eventually the relationship waned. She deeply internalized the hegemonic discourse of "contributing to the state" through performing a more demanding and high-pressure role, and she was fascinated by the atmosphere of "combative action" in the War Room of the division in Ramallah. There, she worked directly with the Division Commander and even the general who was the Head of the Central Command and their staff officers (*my* job, on the other hand, was to repaint the corridors of the Hebron Tegart fort or to shine the entrance to the building every time there was a chance that these officers, or even the Minister of Defense himself,²² would appear for an unannounced inspection. At the beginning, she used to tip me whether there'll indeed be a surprise visit or not, but gradually she started to believe that these unannounced inspections are really necessary, and eventually she ceased to even hint whether the spot check will occur or not. I wonder whether any of those involved – the inspecting officers, Yif'at, myself, the Master Sergeant, the Hebron brigadier – would take these visits so seriously had we known at the time that the end of the game is near,²³ that within a few years the fort will be handed to the Palestinian Authority and, eventually, completely destroyed by the IDF in 2002 ... In a sense, the whole thing was a sad joke – the time I "served" there, the Occupation of the Palestinian city, the vigorous preparations to these surprise inspections, the never ending need to "improve" one's appearance). Eventually, Yif'at started seeing an officer

²² Interestingly, in Hebrew, the term translates literally: minister of *security*, not defense.

²³ On the play (but not playful) dimension in war see: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970).

from some elite infantry unit, and we officially broke up.



Image 1: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Defense Minister Shimon Peres, and their party conclude their visit at the Hebron Tegart fort, Oct. 15, 1976 (on their way to the helicopter landing). Photographer: Saar Yaacov. Source: The State of Israel – The National Photos Collection, The Governmental Press Bureau, picture #12334 [the photo is presented here under the General Terms and Conditions of the Collection]. My room, which I shared with Yifʿat, was on the third floor, close to the watchtower.

For months after Yifʿat left, I wandered in the Tegart fort, searching for any traces of her: her handwriting on the aerial photo of Hebron in the War Room, her name on her room’s door, her jeep, her scent in my bed. The fort returned to a dark and somber British citadel, and there was no splendor in the city below it (Yifʿat thought that there was splendor in Hebron [what a wonderful word, “splendor,” *Yifʿaa*, in Hebrew, when she said it]). The loneliness I felt in the fort without her was painful, bodily. So, I just passed the time, idling as much as I could, doing my best to get as many sick notes from the doctor in the fort, and presenting every sign for “zero motivation.” Eventually, the Master Sergeant decided to send me to work in the quartermastership, and there I waited for the “military clock” to tick toward the end of my incarceration in the fort. I read a lot of science fiction and prepared myself for the psychometric exams for university. February 1992 eventually came and I was discharged. I never returned to Hebron and did not meet Yifʿat again.

Loss

More than a decade later, on November 6, 2003, my cousin, Eran, killed himself while being a soldier in the IDF.²⁴ He was nineteen years old – a bright and good-hearted boy, solemn and full of a need to “serve” and “excel,” desperately seeking societal recognition and respect. When my

²⁴ In a previous publication, I called him “Meir,” in order to avoid hurting his family by disclosing his real name. They could not admit publically that he killed himself. Now, some years after that article of mine came out, I believe that Eran deserves to be known in his true name.

In the year 2003, 43 IDF soldiers committed suicide. Eran, as it turns out, was one of these who became the “data” for this article: Heymann et al. “Differences between Soldiers ...”

sister called before dawn to tell me the terrible news, somehow I was not surprised.

They found his body, shot in the head, inside a shelter of one of the Kibbutzim close to the Gaza Strip borderline. He was a medic in the armored corps but he could not tolerate the humiliation of being disqualified from the IDF naval commando basic training. He wanted to “truly contribute” and “prove” himself a man. When it did not work out the way he wanted, when he was ashamed of his “poor performance” and new posting, this factor joined other issues in his life that made him feel a failure and a defeated person, and he decided to kill himself.

A few weeks before he pulled the trigger we met in Jerusalem, while he was on a home leave. He said that he was so upset and sad, and that he could not find his place among his new comrades in the tanks’ battalion headquarters he was posted to. They were just miserable “jobnicks,” he said. He wanted to be either a “real fighter” or be released altogether, but not bear the shame, as he saw it, of being a medic in the battalion’s H.Q., wasting his time in “giving Tylenol to malingerers.” Yet, while he contemplated leaving the army by going to the mental health officer and declaring that he was not fit to serve, he feared the societal costs that he thought might ensue: he feared his parents’ and their friends’ response; he was also worried that he might not receive good job offers, that women would find him unattractive, and he even thought that “they,” whoever they might be, would take away his driving license. I tried to talk him out of his fears and worries, but I did not do a good job at it. It was not that the counter-arguments I brought up didn’t make sense or were invalid. I told him that because he is such a talented person, and because he is so smart and sensitive, I am sure that he will have a great job, that many women will adore him, and that no one will take his driving license from him. I also told him that I wish that when I was a soldier I had applied for earlier exemption through this channel. All this was in vain.

For it was my shame of my own “performance” in the military that still lingered in me then that did not give the full candor and self-confidence to my voice. Even though his story reminded me so much of my own, I think that my words lacked the internal *security* that he needed to hear. No, it was precisely *because* his story was so similar to mine that I could not support him in the manner he needed. I recalled how Michal and Yif’at broke up with me, partially due to my inability and unwillingness to fit into a model of the IDF fighter. Internal doubts and conflicting feelings of belonging and regret prevented me from fully helping him see that there is a light at the end of this darkness of military life. I am not blaming myself for what he did later. I know he found many other reasons besides the military service to kill himself (so I read in his diaries after he died). But I also know that I could have told him with pride in my voice that *I* was released from a fighting duty in the IDF by a mental health officer, and that eventually, none of his worries materialized for me: I loved and was loved, developed a career in academia, and nobody, at any time, even mentioned my driving license. Despite all this, I still sensed even then this shadow of shame, and did not possess the peace with myself to tell him resolutely and without any qualms that he should “go for it.” I should have told him that the real insane thing is to let this militarism become part of who you are on the inside. Perhaps, had I felt that confidence in myself then, if I had the internal security needed to be at peace with myself, with who *I* was, he would have reconsidered his decision to kill himself. True, he might have been beyond the point of listening and perhaps his depression was too deep. But he did want to open his heart to me. I wish I had then the inner security that he needed from me.

Healing

I wanted to write this story for years now, but there was always something supposedly more important to write and do. Even after writing the piece, for long months, I left it on my computer and grappled what to “do” with it – to send it for publication or not, and where. How would readers – in Israel and overseas – respond to this narrative? I have written already three autoethnographic works, but this one was the most personal and revealing. I felt that this work is the one that makes me the most vulnerable, perhaps too vulnerable. I also did not find a good way to conclude the piece. Often, in previous works I’ve written, I ended with some general conceptual conclusion or a broad theoretical lesson for (political) life. Here, I felt, I really can’t conclude with any such “noble lesson,” which is the academic norm I was raised upon. Nonetheless, I felt that this story must be told. It lay like a stone on my heart for years. I needed to share this story. Something in me insisted that I could not have this black hole of three years of military service in my life anymore. But even though I am a tenured professor now and even though I am well beyond the army’s reach anymore (at age 44, they cannot re-recruit me, and yet I often have nightmares that they try), I was still worried about relating my story. Not that I had any concrete fear now – “they” will not, cannot, fire me, take my driving license, and so on (at least, for the time being – who knows what will be in Israel in a few years as ultra-nationalism takes deeper and deeper roots here). But I imagined the looks on the faces of some of my colleagues and students. I thought about the gossip they will tell about me, about their sneer. Doesn’t he have anything better to write about than his inability to conform to military life, to finish basic training? Why does he have to tell us about his love life and his personal losses? I think that my answer to these questions is that, eventually, perhaps there is a more general conclusion from my story: usually, we academics do our best to hide or ignore our vulnerabilities and wounds, and to present an image of a coherent and linear history of personal and intellectual development. But real life, of course, is full of bumps, pitfalls, crises, and other irregularities, so to speak. Political systems, especially in militarized societies like the one I grew up in, usually conceive themselves as smooth, linear, and continuous in this regard, that is, as “normal,” and attributing any irregularities to the individual, not to something structural in the system itself. In this way, while it is the state of Israel that should apologize to me for failing to achieve peace with the Palestinians, for maintaining the Occupation and hence for maintaining the military as such a dominant factor in society, the societal expectation is that it is I who should be apologetic for “failing” to complete the basic training of the artillery corps; it is I that should hide the fact that I was found to be psychologically “faulted” after being physically and mentally abused in the military; and it is I who should not be proud for being a jobnick at such a miserable place like Hebron’s Tegart fort. The state, which recruited me and sent me to this strategic outpost, only to give it back to its former enemy and to bomb it to bits a few years later, is certainly not to blame. If there is a lesson or a conclusion nonetheless for my narrative here, it is this deep internalization of this stupid and cruel militant governmentality, the difficulty of sharing the story with others, the efforts to evade or lie about it, the fear of becoming too vulnerable, and, yet, *and yet*, the never relenting need to narrate this story and to challenge the militant State of War governmentality. It is twenty-three years now since I was discharged from the military. Michal and Yif’at loved me and then left. The Tegart fort was demolished. Eran killed himself eleven years ago. It is time for me to stop resisting my need to tell this story. It is time, finally, to heal.