

A Classic Zionist Story

Jisr al-Zarqa is a village whose lands were acquired by the Baron de Rothschild and whose inhabitants drained swamps. The only problem is - they were Arabs. Now the residents of this cramped, impoverished locale on the Mediterranean shore are asking for change

Meron Rapoport Jun 10, 2010 8:08 PM

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The tale of Jisr al-Zarqa could open with two scenes. The first takes place on the village's main street. Actually, "street" is probably too fancy a word to describe the asphalt path that has no shoulders or sidewalks, forcing pedestrians, young and old (the young in this village number 4,500, according to the education department) to walk in the middle of the street. A mortal danger, day in and day out, hour after hour, minute after minute. I've seen a lot of Arab villages in Israel, I tell Relli de Vries, the artist and landscape architect who brought me to Jisr al-Zarqa, but I've never seen one that is this densely packed. Even the more neglected villages usually have some space between the houses, a tree here and there, a bit of open space. What one sees here is not a village. It looks just like a refugee camp, like Gaza.



Northern Israeli Arab village of Jisr al-Zarka David Bachar

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As I'm saying this, we pass a large white taxi. Its whiteness, its cleanliness, and the appearance of its passengers make it stand out

here. No words need be exchanged to understand that they are "Israelis" - i.e., Jews. It's clear from their attire, the way they carry themselves, their gaze - which takes in the surroundings with a mixture of astonishment, revulsion and a little apprehension. We stop. What are you doing here, De Vries asks them. We're scouting a location for a film about Gaza, says one of them. We're searching for a place that can stand in for a refugee camp. They've come to the right place. Midway between Haifa and Tel Aviv sits a village that doesn't need to don any kind of costume in order to pass for a refugee camp. The reality is perfectly suited to the purposes of the fiction in this case.

"We actually wanted to get away from Jisr because this is a hard place, with kids in the streets, but the combination of the sea and the impoverished neighborhoods compelled us to film the Gaza scenes here," says one of the people involved in a production that was filmed in the village. A few weeks after our visit, the production staff of another movie set up a military camp on the Jisr beach. Filming from the shore, with army tents in the background, Jisr looked just like Gaza: an occupied city.

The second opening scene takes place in a community center. The second floor. A huge terrace overlooking the sea. Close but not very close. Jisr sits on a gravelly hilltop, a short distance from the shore, and a gentle breeze blows in from the sea, taking the edge off the overall wretchedness, the sight of one house right up against the next, right up against the road, right up against the quarry pits left here thousands of years ago by the Romans, and so on.

Inside the community center, groups of residents are presenting their visions for the future. The plans are naive. On broad pieces of paper, with no real proportions, like children's drawings, the residents have sketched the Jisr of their dreams: new neighborhoods, roads, public squares, a shopping center, schools. Even a neighborhood of luxury villas, "like in Savyon, like in Caesarea," to attract a "strong population" to Jisr so that more people will move to Jisr, not only move away. Someone has even drawn a palm-tree-shaped pier jutting deep into the sea, with a fishing harbor to the south of it and a resort harbor to the north. "We'll dry up the sea, like in Dubai," explains the citizen-planner. "We can dream, can't we?"

The plan presented by high school student Abed Amash was the most detailed. You could actually envision his future Jisr as a living and breathing entity. A modest vision: A soccer field here, a college there. The ruins of Nahal Tananim, which forms the village's northern

boundary, would be re-flooded with water so people could sail in kayaks from the Roman dam all the way to the sea. It would be an amazing attraction. The neglected shoreline would be upgraded with a boardwalk, and the dirt barrier erected by Caesarea residents to separate their town from Jisr would come down. Abed proposed building a new Jewish-Arab school on the site. What would be the language of instruction there, he was asked. "English," he says - half-seriously and half-joking. As far from a refugee camp as you can get.

Like many other people, for years De Vries drove along the coastal highway and passed by Jisr, the only community whose buildings come right up to the road, without really seeing it. "You don't know anything when you drive on the road, all you see are kids making bonfires," she says. But when she needed to write a thesis for her studies in landscape architecture, she chose Jisr as her subject. She is a Tel Aviv artist in her 50s, married to David de Vries, a professor of labor studies at Tel Aviv University, and has one daughter. A decade ago she decided to begin studying at the Technion. The sight of this village gave her an uneasy feeling. She wanted to get to the bottom of it.

De Vries says that at first she couldn't even figure out how to get to Jisr. It's easy to see why. There is no exit from the coastal highway to Jisr. Nor is there a bus stop or even a parking area near this town, which has a population of more than 12,000 according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. "Just type in your destination," says the Egged bus company website. It won't do you any good to write in Jisr. "Egged has no service to Jisr al-Zarqa" will be the answer. At the otobusim.co.il site, "the public transportation information center," the answer is more original - a picture of a pedestrian next to a bus. Meaning: In order to get to the nearest bus stop, you have to walk over to Highway 4 (the old coastal highway), near Moshav Beit Hanania, two kilometers away. Nothing to it.

But De Vries eventually found the way to Jisr - by passing beneath the coastal highway through a concrete underpass that is just barely wide enough for a single car, and whose ceiling is covered with scratches made by trucks or buses whose drivers mistakenly thought they could drive through unscathed. Since the first time she came to the village, five years ago, she has been returning time and again. Back to the "collision" as she refers to Jisr: literally, in terms of the dozens of local residents who have been killed over the years trying to cross the coastal highway, which they call "the street of death"; a demographic collision, in that it is the lone Arab village left near the Mediterranean coast, an impoverished and terribly crowded bone in

the throat of two of the country's most affluent communities - Caesarea and Ma'agan Michael; a geographic collision between the modern highway and the villagers, nomadic people by origin who were permanently settled in one place against their will; and an embodiment of the collision of the modern state with those who lived here before the advent of modernity.

All of this has helped make Jisr one of the most densely populated communities in the country. Almost like Tel Aviv. Only cities like Bat Yam, Bnei Brak or the Krayot near Haifa surpass it by this measure; but Jisr is a rural community. For comparison's sake, the jurisdiction of nearby Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael is almost five times that of Jisr: 7,000 dunams to Jisr's 1,500. The population of the kibbutz is 10 times smaller, though: Only 1,400 in Ma'agan Michael compared to more than 12,000 in Jisr. The population density in Jisr is nearly 40 times higher: 7,500 people per square kilometer, compared to just 200 people per square kilometer in Ma'agan Michael. And the poverty completes the picture. Jisr ranks at the bottom of the penultimate cluster on the socioeconomic index. Caesarea, just to the south, sits at the high end of the top decile.

One more lethal collision forever linked Jisr with the sole Jewish casualty of the October 2000 riots: Jan Bechor, who was killed by a rock thrown by a minor from the bridge above the coastal highway. The bridge was built not long before that, after years when the only entrance to the village was via the narrow underpass, which still serves as the main entry to Jisr. Several more rock-throwing incidents followed, and now a high fence atop the bridge keeps those who traverse it separate from the cars passing below. The stigma stuck to the village.

Jisr arose out of a swamp. The Kabara swamp, the largest swamp on the coastal plain, 6,000 dunams with Nahal Tananim at the heart of it, stretching from Binyamina in the south to Zichron Yaakov in the north, between the rocky hills to the west, where the coastal highway now runs, and the Carmel. "It was all water, all the way to the Carmel," say the village elders. It was here that the ancestors of today's Jisr residents lived for hundreds of years, earning their livelihood off the swamp: herding buffalo, weaving straw mats from the reeds. There was no real agriculture to speak of.

Council head and local historian Izzedin Amash says that, according to documents he has found, when the Turks arrived in Palestine in the 16th century, people were already settled in the Kabara swamp area. They were known as Arab al-ghawarna, "the people of the

valleys"). A field study conducted by the Israeli Interior Ministry in 1963 also reports that the village elders said their ancestors had come to the swamp around the year 1500. The people who lived by these swamps had no written history, but the narrative they tell about themselves is substantially different from the accepted lore - for which verification is difficult to come by - that village residents are descendants of slaves who were brought from Egypt or Sudan, or fled from there, in the 19th century. It's possible this is nothing more than a malicious rumor coming from the mouths of both Arabs and Jews. Everyone has political objectives in the stories they tell.

"They didn't need slaves here, because there was no work," laughs Khaled Jurban, 65, son of Jisr's first mukhtar, or chief, who was put in charge of the village when it was founded in the 1920s. Slaves - no, but refugees - yes. People who fled from blood feuds, or were forced to leave their villages because of a shortage of land. Some came from the Jordan Rift Valley, some from the Hula Valley, some perhaps even from Iraq. The swamps were land that belonged to no one, and so anyone could settle there, find refuge there. Over the years, other groups of people who for various reasons hadn't found their place anywhere else joined "the founding families" - Amash and Jurban. An alliance of outsiders that existed in the shelter of the swamps.

And the Jews came and settled on Mount Carmel and the low-lying areas around it. In 1882, Zichron Yaakov was founded to the north; in 1903, Givat Ada was founded and in 1922, Binyamina. Up to then, the Jewish pioneers had stayed away from the Kabara swamp area, deterred by malaria. But the founding of Binyamina signaled a change in approach. Baron de Rothschild's PICA (Palestine Jewish Colonization Association) received a license from the British government to drain the swamp - for the sake of converting it to agricultural land, but mainly to eradicate malaria.

The draining of the Kabara swamps was a massive Zionist project, second only to the draining of the Hula swamp 30 years later. This project was overseen by a Jewish engineer, but very few Jews took part in it. Even for the enthusiastic pioneers of those days the work was too hard and too dangerous because of the disease risk.

According to an article by Yehudit Ilan, a resident of Ma'agan Michael, which was established after the swamp had been drained, only 50-60 of the hundreds of workers who drained the swamp were Jews. The rest were the people who lived around the swamps, the Arab al-ghawarna, plus laborers from nearby Tantura. Their bodies were already immune to malaria, said the Jews. But one of the Arab

workers who took part in the draining of the swamp said in a documentary that was filmed in the 1970s: "People died and nobody knew why, because there was only one doctor, in Zamarin (Zichron Yaakov)." In any event, the people of the swamps drained the swamps from which they scratched their livelihood.

In return for clearing the swampland, PICA purchased a rocky, pitted hill that was once the site of a Roman quarry used to build the famous aqueduct that brought water to Caesarea, and gave it to the swamp dwellers, registering it in their name in the Tabu land registry. In exchange for the thousands of dunams of the swamp and its close environs, they got 1,200 dunams of rocky hilltop land. And upon this hill, Jisr al-Zarqa was built - essentially the sole Arab village established by the Zionist movement. "We are one of the Baron's communities," Amash, the council head, says with a smile. In a 1963 Interior Ministry field study, Jisr is described with the Mapai term "laborers' village." Jisr, then, is a classic Zionist story: a village whose lands were acquired by the Baron de Rothschild and whose inhabitants drained swamps. The only problem is that they were Arabs.

Amash says that Jisr's troubles, or the first "collision," to borrow De Vries' term, started there - with the hasty move from the swamp to the hill. "People herded buffalo for 500 years and overnight they had to find another source of livelihood," he says. Since PICA had not acquired farmland for the Jisr residents, they had to look for work outside, in agriculture or cleaning in the Jewish colonies. To this day, almost all employed people in Jisr work outside the village. There are institutions whose cleaning staffs are made up almost exclusively of women from Jisr.

Amash says that from a social standpoint, too, the swamp dwellers were not prepared to move to a permanent settlement, because they did not have a clear governing hierarchy in place. He believes this transition is the source of "the culture of chaos, the culture of poverty," that reigns in Jisr even now. A culture in which trash is thrown in the street, "one big garbage-producing enterprise," as Amash describes his village.

The second "collision" happened in 1948. Perhaps because its lands were purchased by the Baron, or perhaps because Jisr residents were ostracized by their Arab neighbors due to their inferior origins and therefore did not feel like they were a part of the Arab national struggle, or perhaps because of the connection with the Jewish colonies ("We were the slaves of Binyamina in '48, their reservists,"

says Amash. "Their men went to war and the Jisr men worked in the fields in their place") - Jisr stayed put. Its residents did not flee and were not expelled. But it remained an isolated Arab island on the Mediterranean coast. Kaisariyeh (a fishing village settled by Bosnians during the Ottoman empire on the site of Caesarea) and Tantura, two big neighboring villages, ceased to exist. Jisr remained alone on the shore, stuck between two communities that were founded after the war, Caesarea and Ma'agan Michael.

The highway to Haifa that was paved in the 1960s and 1970s, says De Vries, amounted to the third "collision." The highway used up 300 dunams of Jisr's limited land, even though the lands to the east of it, which belong to the Jewish towns, are not cultivated. The highway also turned Jisr al-Zarqa into a besieged village: To the north are Nahal Taninim and Ma'agan Michael, in whose territory the old Jisr cemetery is located; to the south, Caesarea is now separated from Jisr by a dirt barrier erected by people from Caesarea a few years ago; to the northwest, between Jisr and the sea, is a nature reserve; and to the east is asphalt, fences and a (lethal) highway that passes less than 100 meters from the village's main street.

"One could say this is all coincidence," says De Vries. "That whoever planned the road didn't think Jisr would grow so much, that they just wanted to save money, and so they built the road on Jisr's stony land and not on the swampy land to the east of it; but there are too many coincidences here. They 'bent' the road so it would pass next to Jisr, they deviated from the historic Roman 'sea road' just so Jisr wouldn't be connected, they were even prepared to 'trample' the Roman aqueduct and have the road pass over it just for this purpose."

Amash has a different theory. "I don't think it was done intentionally," he says. "Nobody sat down and planned to choke off Jisr. They just didn't take us into consideration. They drew a line and that was it."

Would you agree that Jisr's misfortunes are like a bad road collision?

"Yes, but the problem is that nothing was done after the collision. The injuries weren't treated, there was no rehabilitation."

In De Vries' film, a woman from the village, Amana Ayat, says: "Before the road was here, it was free. Anywhere someone wanted to cross, he could cross. Anywhere someone wanted to come from, he could come from. Now we're under siege with this road, now it's dangerous." The words "refugee camp" and "ghetto" pop up in just about every conversation with Jisr residents. De Vries' interviewees

gaze at Mount Carmel, which used to be part of their world and now is only visible behind concrete barriers and the highway, far-off and inaccessible.

To De Vries, the encounter between Jisr and the highway is no mere geographic accident. "The highway is modernist, it is purposeful, it overcomes obstacles, it represents the time of the state that is moving forward and leaving the village behind," she says. "The road looks down on the villages from above. They see it but have no chance of reaching it." De Vries argues that the road represents the south-north movement of the Israeli state, which clashes with the east-west movement that is the traditional motion of this land: the movement of the streams that flow to the sea, of the people who come into and leave the land. Jisr is part of the primal landscape of this land, which the state wants to hide.

Even the various theories about the Jisr inhabitants' origins coincide with this desire. "When the state wants to tell a story, it knows how," says De Vries. "Behind the multiplicity of stories about Jisr, there is an agenda, a desire to create fear." She sees a similarity between today's separation fence and what was done to Jisr: the same technique of control and exclusion was already there back in the 1970s, she says, long before the separation fence.

De Vries, an artist and landscape architect, tackled the challenge posed by Jisr with both of these skills. As an artist, she created the sculptural installation "Orientation," which was exhibited two months ago at the Artists House in Tel Aviv. The sculpture, 15 meters long, is composed of layers depicting something like a geological cross-section of the mountain and strip of coastline near the village. The layers are made of materials De Vries found in the area - rubber air mattresses, sand, reeds, seashells and other things.

Art curator Tali Tamir describes De Vries' work as follows: "'Orientation' is a work of art that turns on directions - not only the north/south to east/west, but also from architecture to sculpture, and from art to politics - and back. A socially contextualized art has been given - in Israeli society of all places - bad public relations. The argument against it is that when it expounds a political idea it defies good and interesting art. Relli De Vries - an installation artist, sculpturist and landscape architect - totally defeats that argument." Tamir also notes that "De Vries succeeds in instilling a human dimension into the geological section despite the total absence of the human figure."

As a landscape architect, De Vries made a practical proposal for alleviating Jisr's misery: Transform it from a ghetto to an island and connect it to the state, as the women with whom she took long walks around the village requested. Put more simply: Move the highway several hundred meters to the east, using the former swamplands, which are still deserted, and put it up on a bridge. Under the bridge, the residents would be able to move freely eastward, as was done, incidentally, with the new route of the old coastal highway, a few kilometers to the east.

Everyone would benefit, says De Vries, who also presented her plans at the Architects' House in Jaffa: Jisr would be extricated from its current choke hold and would also gain several hundred dunams, which it desperately needs; the Roman aqueduct could be fully exposed in all its glory and be developed as a tourist attraction, including the part that passes through the tunnel beneath Jisr; and even the drivers on the road would enjoy a better view. "Today, when you drive on the road, you don't see anything: Not the tip of the Carmel, or the remnants of the swamps, or the streams, or the aqueduct."

Ya'aqub Jurban, the council architect, is convinced that unless its territory is expanded, Jisr faces a bleak future. "If we remain with just the present area," says Jurban, "by 2030 we'll have a density of 10,000 people per kilometer, similar to the Krayot. But we're a rural community, we can't build the Azrieli Towers here. About 500 families have no land for houses. The cost of a lot in central Jisr is up to NIS 1,000 per square meter, like in central Binyamina, almost like Caesarea. People who earn NIS 4,000 a month can't afford those prices. Instead of building on 40 dunams, I had to build the high school on 20 dunams, with no yard, no playing fields. This is no way to live. Without expansion the situation will become catastrophic. Jisr is a ticking bomb, and when it detonates it will impact all the surroundings."

"A guy living in Baka al-Gharbiya (in Wadi Ara) looks at his neighbor in Jatt," says Amash. "I see the lawns of my neighbor in Caesarea. And it's eye-popping. In Caesarea you have the people who run the country - Benjamin Netanyahu, Uri Messer, Dan Shilon, Moshe Shahal."

Have you ever had any contact with Netanyahu?

"Last summer, the police chief in Or Akiva called to say that the prime minister was complaining about hearing gunfire from a wedding here."

Did you talk to him?

"Netanyahu was on the line. I heard him. I'm not sure he heard me."

Even the Interior Ministry has begun to realize that the situation in Jisr cannot continue as it is. In 2009, a steering committee was formed to prepare a new plan for the village to be achieved by the year 2030, which would "examine the need to expand its jurisdiction, the scope of the expansion and its location," according to a statement from a ministry spokesperson. The ministry confirms that the Jisr council has submitted a request to expand the village's area to the east of the coastal highway and to the north of Nahal Tananim. The ministry's Borders Committee will discuss the request "once an alternative for the community's development is selected."

A desire to live

In other words, the plan for Jisr's expansion, perhaps even moving the highway eastward, is on the table of the planning authorities. Its chances of coming to fruition are hard to gauge. There will likely be plenty of opposition. De Vries was told by some in the Interior Ministry that the main issue is that "they" - i.e., the village buildings, "don't reach all the way to Highway No. 4 (the old coastal highway)."

The Jewish villages near Jisr aren't too keen on the idea either. Not Ma'agan Michael nor Moshav Beit Hanania, situated east of the coastal highway, meaning close to the area where Jisr seeks to expand. De Vries says she was contacted by people from Beit Hanania after her plan was presented at the exhibition in Tel Aviv. "One of the people from Beit Hanania told me: 'I came here from Tel Aviv in order to live a quiet life, and you're not helping me.'"

Beit Hanania committee chairman Gideon Eckstein was rather wary when he heard that I had already spoken with De Vries. "We're not interested in responding, especially now that there are committees examining the matter in a professional manner. Sometimes silence is best."

But would you confirm that you (the moshav committee) objects to Jisr's expansion across the coastal highway?

"That is correct, but I'm not interested in fueling this debate in the pages of the newspaper."

But you are aware that the situation in Jisr is very difficult. It's right near you.

"We'd be glad to see their budget for culture and education boosted as much as possible. But we don't want to see them encroaching on us. We're in favor of the village being developed on the land where it presently sits."

Jurban the engineer tries to be optimistic. "Meetings will be held to try to soften the neighbors' positions, to reach an understanding," he says. "I hope they'll understand and consent to let Jisr expand by taking agricultural lands. I hope they'll be man enough to say: We're ready to let Jisr live."

You're speaking in professional terms, but you know that in Israel it's no simple task to transfer territory from a Jewish community to an Arab one.

"It's no secret that Jisr is located in the middle of a beautiful area that's worth millions. I know that it's not wanted here by its neighbors. I know that we're not wanted. But Jisr isn't going anywhere. Jisr wants to live."

Maybe that's really the whole story: In the case of Jisr, its very desire to live a normal life is an act of defiance against all the restrictions that have been placed on it, all the attempts to suppress it, to hem it in, to hide it. Abed Amash, the high school student who dreams of kayaking on Nahal Taninim and of a Jewish-Arab school with children from Caesarea, is the real subversive. Just because he wants this "laborers' community," which contributed to Zionism almost against its will, to enjoy a normal life, to stop being a refugee camp.

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