The Lydda Death March 1948: 70,000 Expelled on Foot Under the Sun



On 13 July 1948 occupation forces compelled some 70,000 people of Lydda, Ramla and neighbouring towns to leave their homes within half an hour and walk a rugged road towards Ramallah, under the July sun and without water; hundreds died on the way of thirst and exhaustion. Palestinian memory calls this journey “the death march.” [1] [2]

The march came two days after the Lydda massacre and the Dahmash mosque. It was one of the largest mass expulsions of the Nakba, and one of the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people.

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The death march at a glance

Item	Details
Date	13 July 1948 [1] [2]
Expelled	About 70,000 from Lydda and neighbouring towns, including Ramla [1] [3]
Time to leave	Half an hour [1]
Destination	Ramallah, on foot along a rugged road [1] [2]
Water	The expelled were not allowed to carry water [2]
Deaths on the road	Hundreds died of thirst and exhaustion [1]

Item	Details
The order	Ben-Gurion: “Expel them”; Rabin: “expel the inhabitants of Lydda quickly, without regard to age” [1]
Who remained	About 1,000 Palestinians in Lydda and Ramla combined [4]

“Expel them”: the decision

On 12 July 1948, after the two cities were occupied in Operation Dani, Palmach commander Yigal Allon asked David Ben-Gurion what was to be done with the people of Lydda and Ramla. Ben-Gurion answered with a firm wave of his hand: “Expel them.” Yitzhak Rabin immediately signed a military order: “The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without regard to age.” [1]

In Ramla soldiers pounded on doors with rifle butts and shouted through bullhorns: “Yallah Abdullah! Go to Abdullah, go to Ramallah!” even though the city’s surrender document had allowed its people to stay. [5] the Ramla massacre

On the road of death

On 13 July residents were forced to leave within half an hour and take a rugged road to Ramallah. [1] They were not allowed to carry water. [2] They walked in a long line under the sun while a small military aircraft flew low overhead to force them onward, and hundreds died on the road of thirst, dehydration and exhaustion. [1]

The occupation army intelligence officer Shmarya Guttman described the scene, as the Interactive Encyclopedia quotes from historian Benny Morris (translated from the Arabic): “Great masses of residents walking one after another, women burdened with loads on their heads, mothers dragging their children; from time to time warning shots are heard, and from time to time you meet a piercing look from one of the young men in the column, a look that says: we have not surrendered yet, we will return to fight you.” [1]

George Habash: a doctor by the roadside

George Habash was a medical student at the American University of Beirut. In June 1948 he cut short his studies and returned to his hometown of Lydda, where he joined a clinic as assistant to the surgeon treating wounded civilians and defenders of the town. [3]

He was then expelled with his parents and siblings in the death march, and along the way he treated the elderly, the women and the children who fell by the roadside. [3] The Interactive Encyclopedia says the Nakba was the real turning point in his life; he later founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. [3]

Ismail Shammout: “Where To?”

Ismail Shammout was born in Lydda on 2 March 1930. He was eighteen when his family was forced to leave the city on 13 July 1948 and walk to Ramallah, without being allowed to carry water. [2] [6] His little brother Tawfiq, aged two, died of thirst before they reached the village of Ni’lin near Ramallah. [2] [6]

In 1953 Shammout painted his famous “Where To?”, which became one of his best-known works. [2] [7] It shows a father walking with three children through a barren land: he carries the youngest on his shoulder and holds the second by the hand, while the eldest follows with his head bowed; nothing else is in the scene but a bare tree, and the question the title asks: where to? [7]

After the march

After the expulsion only about 1,000 Palestinians remained in Lydda and Ramla, out of tens of thousands. [4] Together with the victims of the massacre inside Lydda, the dead of those days numbered close to 1,000. [1] The expelled became refugees in Ramallah, the West Bank, Jordan and beyond. Read about the two cities before the Nakba: Lydda and Ramla before the Nakba.

Conclusion

Half an hour, then a long road without water under the July sun. That is how seventy thousand people were uprooted from their homes in Lydda and Ramla, and hundreds died on the road, among them a two-year-old named Tawfiq. From that march came a doctor who became a leader, and an artist who painted the question Palestinians still carry: where to?

Frequently asked questions about the death march

What was the death march?

The expulsion of some 70,000 people of Lydda and Ramla on foot towards Ramallah on 13 July 1948; hundreds died on the road.

Who ordered the expulsion of Lydda and Ramla?

David Ben-Gurion, saying “Expel them,” and Yitzhak Rabin signed the expulsion order.

How long were people given to leave?

Half an hour, and they were not allowed to carry water.

How is Ismail Shammout connected to the death march?

He was expelled in it at eighteen; his brother Tawfiq died of thirst; in 1953 he painted “Where To?” about exile.

What was George Habash’s role in those days?

He returned from Beirut to Lydda to treat the wounded, was then expelled with his family, and treated those who fell by the roadside.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. “Lydda, 9–13 July 1948,” Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, Institute for Palestine Studies.
2. “Ismail Shammout,” Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, Institute for Palestine Studies.
3. “George Habash,” Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, Institute for Palestine Studies.
4. “‘Mixed Cities’ in Israel: The Product of Plunder, Looting and the Expulsion of Palestine’s Coastal Cities,” Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 6 June 2021.
5. Sandy Tolan, “The Fall of an Arab Town in 1948,” Al Jazeera English, 19 July 2008.
6. “Ismail Shammout,” Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut.
7. Ismail Ghazali, “Ismail Shammout’s ‘Where To?’: A New Reading Amid a Renewed Nakba,” Al Majalla, November 2023.