

Holocaust survivor dismayed by Oct. 7

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Associated Press

ASHKELON, Israel — Gad Partok was 10 years old in 1942 when Nazis stormed his street in the coastal Tunisian town of Nabeul. He saw them going door to door, hauling out his neighbors, shooting them and burning down their homes.

Like so many Jews who moved to Israel after the war, Partok believed Israel would be a place where he would finally be free from persecution.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a steady reminder through the decades that safety is not absolute, and security comes at a cost. But Oct. 7, 2023 — the day Hamas committed the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust — shattered his belief in Israel as a haven.

The 93-year-old watched from his living room as TV news played videos of Hamas militants tearing through communities just a few miles from where he lives in the southern Israeli city Ashkelon. As rockets fired from Gaza boomed overhead, Partok saw footage of the militants killing, pillaging, and rounding up hostages.

“I thought — what, is this the same period of those Nazis? It can’t be,” Partok said, clenching his fists as he spoke.



MAYA ALLERUZZO, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Gad Partok, 93, a Tunisian-born Holocaust survivor, poses for a portrait Friday in his home in Ashkelon, southern Israel.

Saturday is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which commemorates the killing of 6 million Jews and many other groups by the Nazis and their collaborators. In Israel — a country with roughly half of the world’s Holocaust survivors — the day carries extra weight because of the recent trauma of Oct. 7.

Hamas militants blew past Israel’s vaunted security defenses that day, killing roughly 1,200 people and dragging some 250 hostages to Gaza. For many, that rampage revived memories of the horrors of the Nazis.

Partok was shocked by the militants’ brazen trail through the farming cooperatives and small towns of his adopted country. As he watched the onslaught, he wondered where the country’s defenses had gone.

“Where is the army? Where is the government? Our people?” he recalled. The feeling of abandonment brought back the disturbing memories of his youth.

“The dragging of the people of Be’eri, Nir Oz, Kfar Aza, Kissufim, Holit, it’s the same thing. It reminded me of the same thing,” he said, ticking off the names of

affected communities. “I was very, very unwell. I even felt a feeling, it’s hard to explain, of disgust, of fear, of terrible memories.”

The plight of Tunisia’s small Jewish community is a lesser-known chapter of the Holocaust.

Over six months of occupation, the Nazis sent nearly 5,000 Tunisian Jews to labor camps, where dozens died from labor, disease and Allied bombing campaigns, according to Israel’s Yad Vashem museum. Allied forces liberated Tunisia in 1943, but it was too late to save many of Partok’s neighbors.

Partok said his family was only able to escape because his father, a fabric dealer who spoke Arabic, disguised the family’s Jewish identity. The family left Tunisia and moved to what would become Israel in 1947, a year before the country gained independence.

As an adult, he taught photography and owned a photo shop in Ashkelon. His home is full of yellowing photographs; pictures of his late wife and parents adorn the walls. He has grandchildren and great-grandchildren living throughout Israel.

Partok’s home is less than 15 miles from the Gaza border, and

so he lives with the sounds of the war all around him — Israel’s relentless bombing campaign in Gaza, as well as Hamas rockets launched into Israel.

Israel’s war against Hamas has claimed more than 26,000 Palestinian lives, according to health officials in Gaza. It has prompted international criticism, widespread calls for a cease-fire and even charges of genocide by South Africa at the International Court of Justice.

Despite the scope of death and destruction in Gaza, many Israelis remain focused on Oct. 7.

News channels rarely air footage of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, instead oscillating between stories of tragedy and heroism on Oct. 7 and the plight of more than 100 hostages still being held by Hamas.

Warning sirens blare regularly in Ashkelon when rockets are fired into Israel. Partok keeps the television on, tuned in to news about the war. Stories continue to emerge — a hostage pronounced dead, a child without parents, a survivor’s story newly told.

“I’m sitting here in my armchair, and I’m looking, and my eyes are staring, and I can’t believe it,” he said. “Is it true? Is it so?”



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The Boothill Cemetery, located near the Sixth Avenue Bypass in Billings, served as the cemetery for the short-lived town of Coulson.

Boothill

From A1

“This entire area was sacred land for a number of Indigenous peoples. Many of them have oral histories that we don’t really know and we’ve never had the opportunity to catalog,” said Dave Wanzenried. “It would be wonderful to be able to get those stories included as a part of this.”

Wanzenried, a former educator and Montana state representative, is spearheading the preservation initiative. This isn’t his first philanthropic passion project, either. He took a major role in instigating the improvements made to a historic site north of Laurel dedicated

in memory of the Canyon Creek Battle as well.

“When I found the Boothill Cemetery as I found Canyon Creek, they were both diamonds in the rough,” said Wanzenried.

Various community members and organizations have come together to make Coulson Cemetery Park a top priority. Partnerships between Billings’ Parks and Recreation Department, the Friends of Coulson Cemetery Park, the Billings Community Foundation and Our Montana have helped to drive this project forward.

Total cost of the project is estimated at roughly \$45,000. With about \$22,000 raised from private individuals and foundations so far, Wanzenried hopes to break ground on the project by March.

“It’s a work in progress right now, but my goal is to have it be a polished gem that can be improved upon,” said Wanzenried. “It’s a gift that we will leave, that tells the story of the past for future generations.”

Those who would like to donate to the restoration project can donate online at billingscommunityfoundation.org, or send a check to Billings Community Foundation, located at 404 N 30th St, Billings, MT 59101.

For those interested in getting involved with the preservation of this historic site, can join the Friends of Coulson Boothill Cemetery Park by contacting Dave Wanzenried at 406-546-9442 or friendsofcoulsoncemetery@gmail.com.



AMY LYNN NELSON, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Large stones have been placed to block a side entrance to the Coulson Boothill Cemetery to deter camping and parking outside of the designated parking lot.

Gaza

From A1

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed back Saturday after the International Court of Justice ruling to limit death and destruction in the military’s Gaza offensive, declaring that “we decide and act according to what is required for our security.”

Among the first deaths reported since the ruling, witnesses said three Palestinians were killed in an airstrike that Israel said targeted a Hamas commander.

Israel’s military is under increasing scrutiny now that the top United Nations court has asked Israel for a compliance report in a month. The court’s binding ruling on Friday stopped short of ordering a cease-fire, but its orders were in part a rebuke of Israel’s conduct in its nearly 4-month

war against Gaza’s Hamas rulers.

At least 174 Palestinians were killed over the prior day, the Health Ministry in Gaza said Saturday. It does not distinguish between combatants and civilians in its tolls, but has said about two-thirds are women and children.

Israel holds Hamas responsible for civilian casualties, saying the militants embed themselves in the local population. Israel says its air and ground offensive in Gaza has killed more than 9,000 militants.

Israel’s military said it had conducted several “targeted raids on terror targets” in the southern city of Khan Younis in addition to the airstrike in nearby Rafah targeting a Hamas commander.

Bilal al-Siksik said his wife, a son and a daughter were killed in the Rafah strike, which came as they slept.

He said the U.N. court ruling meant little since it did not stop

the war. “No one can speak in front of them (Israel). America with all its greatness and strength can do nothing,” he said, standing beside the rubble and twisted metal of his home.

The case brought by South Africa to the U.N. court alleged Israel is committing genocide against Gaza’s people, which Israel vehemently denies. A final ruling is expected to take years.

More than 1 million people have crammed into Rafah and the surrounding areas after Israel ordered civilians to seek refuge there. Designated evacuation areas have come under airstrikes, with Israel saying it would go after militants as needed.

In Muwasi, a narrow coastal strip once designated as a safe zone but struck in recent days, displaced Palestinians tiptoed on sandaled feet through garbage-lined puddles in damp and chilly weather. Walls of sheets

and tarps billowed in the wind. A mother wept after rain leaked in and soaked the blankets.

“This is our life. We have nothing and we left (our homes) with nothing,” said Bassam Bolbol, whose family ended up in Muwasi after leaving Khan Younis and finding no shelter in Rafah.

The court ordered Israel to urgently get aid to Gaza, where the U.N. said aid entering the territory remains well below the daily average of 500 trucks before the war. The U.N. also said access to central and northern Gaza has been decreasing because of “excessive delays” at checkpoints and heightened military activity.

The World Health Organization and the medical charity MSF issued urgent warnings about the largest health facility in Khan Younis, Nasser Hospital, saying remaining staff could barely function with supplies running out and intense fighting nearby.

Israelis again gathered in Tel Aviv and outside Netanyahu’s residence in Jerusalem to call for new elections, frustrated with the government’s failure to bring all hostages home.

More mediation lies ahead in search of a deal to secure the release of remaining hostages in Gaza after 100 were released in a swap for Palestinian prisoners during a weeklong cease-fire in November. An unspecified number of the remaining 136 are believed to be dead.

The U.S. CIA director will meet in Europe with the head of the intelligence agencies of Israel and Egypt and with the prime minister of Qatar, according to three people familiar with the matter who insisted on anonymity.

Hamas has said it will only release the hostages in exchange for an end to the war and the release of large numbers of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.