

by Jonathan Cook in Canada Park

As spring sets in early, Israelis have been pouring into one of the country's most popular leisure spots. Visitors to Canada Park, a few kilometres north-west of Jerusalem, enjoy its spectacular panoramas, woodland paths, mountain-bike trails, caves and idyllic picnic areas.

A series of signs describe the historical significance of the landscape, as well as that of a handful of ancient buildings, in terms of their Biblical, Roman, Hellenic and Ottoman pasts. Few, if any, visitors take notice of the stone blocks that litter sections of the park.

But Eitan Bronstein, director of Zochrot (Remembering), is committed to educating Israelis and foreign visitors about the park's hidden past – its Palestinian history.

"In fact, though you would never realise it, none of this park is even in Israel," he told a group of 40 Italians on a guided tour this past weekend. "This is part of the West Bank captured by Israel during the 1967 war. But the presence of Palestinians here – and their expulsion – is entirely missing from the signs."

Zochrot also seeks to remind Israelis of the Nakba, the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during Israel's creation in 1948.

Its tours are not popular with most Israelis, suggesting, he says, how far they still are from understanding the territorial compromises needed to reach the kind of peace agreement with the Palestinians currently being promoted by the new US administration.

An impressive building a short way into the park, signposted as a Roman bathhouse, is all that is recognisably left of a Palestinian village once known as Imwas, itself built on the ruins of the biblical village of Emmaus.

There are traces of a cemetery, as well as scattered rubble from the village's houses, a coffee shop, a church, two mosques and a school.

The 2,000 Palestinians living there, along with the 3,500 inhabitants of two other villages, Yalu and Beit Nuba, were expelled as the Israeli army captured this area of the West Bank from Jordan. Today, they and their descendants live as refugees, mostly in East Jerusalem and near Ramallah.

In place of the three villages, a park was created by an international Zionist organisation, the Jewish National Fund, paid for with \$15 million in charitable donations from Canadian Jews.

The park entrance is only a minute's drive from the busiest motorway in the country, linking Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Similar parks across Israel have been established on the ruins of other Palestinian villages but, in those cases, the destruction was a result of the war of 1948 that founded Israel. Ilan Pappé, an Israeli historian, has referred to this massive erasure of Palestinian history as state-organised "memoricide".

But Canada Park is far more sensitive for Israel because it lies outside the country's internationally recognised borders. The Palestinian inhabitants' expulsion, Mr Bronstein said, was a premeditated act of ethnic cleansing of villagers who put up no resistance.

"We have photographs of the Israeli army carrying out the expulsions," he told the group of tourists, holding up a series of laminated cards.

Yosef Hochman, a professional photographer, captured scenes that included columns of fleeing Palestinians carrying possessions on their heads, army officers arguing with an elderly woman who refuses to leave her house and bulldozers moving in to destroy the villages.

According to Mr Bronstein, the wrecking spree can be explained by the Israeli army's failure in the 1948 war to capture the area, which juts out into what is today Israel and was once known as the Latrun salient.

"In 1948, Israeli commanders regarded conquest of the salient as vital for widening the safe passage from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. They were desperate to make amends in 1967 when they got a second chance."

Uzi Narkiss, a leading general in the 1967 war, vowed that the Latrun salient would never be returned. Establishing Canada Park was Israel's way of secretly annexing the territory, Zochrot says.

Since 2003, Mr Bronstein has been demanding that the Jewish National Fund post additional signs highlighting the park's Palestinian history.

The Roman bathhouse, he notes, is visible only because the foundations were subsequently excavated. For centuries, the structure – a shrine to Obeida Ibn al Jarah, an Arab warrior who helped conquer Palestine in the seventh century – served as an important Palestinian holy place.

The Jewish National Fund and the Civil Administration, the military government in the West Bank, agreed to post two new signs, marking the centres of Imwas and Yalu, only after Zochrot petitioned the courts. The experiment in openness was shortlived, however. After a few days, black paint was used to conceal part of the sign at Imwas, and soon afterwards both signs disappeared.

"We were told that scrap-metal dealers were probably responsible for stealing the signs," Mr Bronstein said. "That's a little hard to believe, since the official signs close by are there to this day."

Zochrot is considering widening its campaign by alerting Canadian donors to the fact that their money has been used – in contravention of international law – effectively to annex a

section of the West Bank to Israel. Mr Bronstein believes many are unaware of the use their donations have been put to.

He is preparing to take the Jewish National Fund back to court to demand it replaces the missing signs and erects similar signs in parks inside Israel to commemorate the Palestinian villages razed by the army after the 1948 war.

According to Zochrot, 86 Palestinian villages lie buried underneath JNF parks. A further 400 destroyed villages had their lands passed on to exclusively Jewish communities. Zochrot's several hundred activists regularly select a destroyed village, taking Palestinian refugees with them as they place a handmade sign detailing the village's name in Arabic and Hebrew. Within days, the signs are removed.

But Mr Bronstein said he believes signs erected by official bodies may have a greater impact in opening Israeli minds.

"In a recent newspaper interview, a senior JNF official admitted that it would be hard to stop our campaign," he said. "Slowly we believe Israelis can be made to appreciate that their state exists at the expense of another people. Only then are Israelis likely to be ready to think about making peace."

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jkcook.net](http://www.jkcook.net).