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COLUMNISTS OPINION

REAL ISRAEL: Kibbutz pioneer survives to tell Hamas horror

The once-peaceful kibbutz is now a chilling crime scene, filled with the scent of death and destruction, echoing memories of New York City after 9/11, writes Yoyo Yan.

By **Yoyo Yan** Yorkregioncom

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Shlomo Margalit recounts the terrifying Hamas attack on Kibbutz Nir Oz, a small Israeli community nestled close to the Gaza Strip.

Yoyo Yan Metroland

In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre in Israel that reignited the ongoing year-old war, a wave of antisemitism has rippled through Canadian communities and schools. This October, I joined an Exigent Foundation's media mission to Israel, eyewitnessing what has happened, what is unfolding, and what the future holds for this lone Jewish state — arguably one of the world's most misunderstood nations.

From the Gaza Envelope to the Lebanese border, Israel's spirit of nationalism and heroism, galvanized by the Oct. 7 attacks, remains visibly indomitable.

The events of that day marked the bloodiest single day for Jews since the Holocaust, as Hamas carried out the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel's history.

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NOW PLAYING

At a stone's throw from the Gaza Strip, Kibbutz Nir Oz now stands as a grim memorial to the horror that unfolded. Shlomo Margalit, an 87-year-old pioneer of the kibbutz, shared his harrowing story.

"This community was basically taken over by Hamas for about eight hours, from 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.," recounted Margalit, who has family in Canada.

"They took hostages, burned homes, and looted whatever they could. They came here to turn this place into rubble — and they did, quickly."

An estimated 700 Hamas militants, including elite Nukhba forces, attacked the small tight-knit community of 400 people. They killed or kidnapped 117 residents and destroyed most of the homes.

"We have about 220 apartments here. They left only six untouched; the rest were either burned or desecrated," Margalit explained.

"They took whatever they could. When they finished, they didn't just leave — they returned with the entire village, women, children, hundreds of them. They looted and even offered rewards: $1,000 and an apartment for each hostage."

The once-peaceful kibbutz is now a chilling crime scene, filled with the scent of death and destruction, echoing memories of New York City after 9/11.

Among those abducted were four-year-old Ariel Bibas, his eight-month-old brother, Kfir, and their mother, Shiri Bibas. The fate of the youngest hostage is still uncertain, Margalit said.

The Siman Tovs were a picture-perfect family who called Kibbutz Nir Oz home — until all five were killed.

Yoyo Yan Metroland

Another family, the Siman Tovs, were tragically killed — all five members perishing in a blaze ignited by terrorists.

Hamas also torched 250 vehicles, ensuring that those not immediately murdered or taken captive had no way to flee.

Margalit and his wife were spared, hidden in their safe room for 12 hours. “We survived to tell the stories. That’s why I’m here — to share what happened with the world.”

Once a sanctuary with a flourishing education system, Nir Oz was an oasis of freedom, marred only by sporadic rocket alarms that gave residents a mere 15 seconds to reach safety.

“It’s 95 per cent paradise and 5 per cent hell,” Margalit reflected. “We’ve lived with that for the last 20 years.”

In Kibbutz Kfar Azza, the young adults' neighbourhood saw especially brutal attacks. Some Palestinian workers, who had painted and tended gardens, are believed to have shared sensitive information with Hamas.

Eilon Kotler recounts the heroic acts of the civilian guards who lost their lives defending Kibbutz Kfar Azza.

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"The act of coexistence was turned against us," said Eilon Kotler, who survived the attack on a pyjama party at Kfar Azza.

"That's a war-opening act," he said, while recalling the vibrant young community as "the happiest place."

Politically, most kibbutzim lean left, with many members viewing Gazans as neighbours and advocates for peace as the only viable solution.

Margalit still sees a two-state solution as the only answer to the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Gaza could be the Singapore of the Middle East," he said, wistfully.

Yoyo Yan is a former reporter for YorkRegion.com.

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