Episode Book

EPISODE #5530

Jerusalem's Pencil Line: 1948–1967

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SYNOPSIS

In November 1948, Moshe Dayan and Abdullah el-Tell met in an abandoned house in Musrara and drew a ceasefire line through Jerusalem by hand — Dayan in green wax pencil, el-Tell in red. They never drew the same line, and the gap between the strokes became no man's land. What was meant as a temporary truce hardened into a binding international border that split neighborhoods, families, and a village in two for nineteen years. This episode walks the seven-kilometre City Line — the Mandelbaum Gate, the Mount Scopus exclave, the Pope's Road, the cemeteries that needed contingency plans — and asks why so little of it survives in the record. The answer involves deliberate erasure: walls torn down after 1967, and classified 1967 resolutions to remove the Green Line from official maps. The Museum on the Seam, a 1932 family home turned military post turned art museum, anchors the story.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Most coverage of the 1948 border through Jerusalem treats it as a curiosity. A line on a map, a footnote to the armistice, nineteen years of nothing much, and then 1967 happens. That framing gets it exactly backwards.



Herman

It gets it backwards because the line wasn't a footnote. It was the whole apparatus. Seven kilometres of hand-drawn pencil that ran through the middle of a city and dictated where people could sleep, shop, pray, and be buried for nineteen years.



Corn

And Daniel sent us something about this. He wrote in that this period has been of interest to him for a long time. He says it's historically under-reported, and he's careful about that claim. It's not that there aren't accounts and photographs. There are both. They're just thin on the ground relative to the scale of what happened.



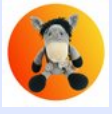
Herman

He's right about that, and the thinness is the interesting part.



Corn

He also makes a confession. In the ordinary course of things, he wouldn't call himself a history buff. He's been taken to museums in Israel, looked at Byzantine exhibits, and struggled to stay awake. But a museum documenting this particular period, he says, would have him glued to every centimetre.



Herman

Every centimetre. That's the line that matters.



Corn

So he's asking a few things. Why is fascinating material fascinating to one person and excruciating to another. How professional historians divide between broad interest and one very specific focus, which he says is more his version of history. How archives and national archive services gather material that might only be of partial interest, through very different lenses. And then the big one. When there's a specific confluence of place and subject, a period becomes a vantage point on how the world works at large. He calls these periods snapshots in the laboratory of life.



Herman

That's a lot packed into one message, and all of it is answerable if we start with the actual line.



Corn

Then let's start with the line. Because the story of how it got drawn is almost too strange to be true.



Herman

The City Line, Ha-Kav Ha-Ironi, was a seven-kilometre segment of the Green Line dividing Jerusalem between Israel and Jordan from 1948 to 1967. West Jerusalem Israeli. East Jerusalem, including the entire Old City, Jordanian. That's the shape of it.



Corn

And the origin. November 30, 1948. Two commanders meet in an abandoned house in the Musrara neighborhood. Moshe Dayan for the Israelis, Abdullah el-Tell for the Jordanians.



Herman

They agree what the record calls a complete and sincere ceasefire. And then they draw the line. By hand. On a map at one to twenty thousand scale. Dayan in green wax pencil, el-Tell in red.



Corn

Two men, two pencils, one afternoon, and a city's next nineteen years.



Herman

Here's the detail that does all the work. They didn't draw the same line. There was a gap between Dayan's green line and el-Tell's red line. And the pencils were wax, so the strokes themselves had physical thickness. The gap plus the thickness became no man's land.



Corn

The width of a pencil stroke became a place where you could not go.



Herman

And both men assumed it was temporary. That's the crucial thing. They attached no significance to the inaccuracies, the deviations, the overlapping segments. This was a ceasefire line. It was supposed to last until the next round of talks sorted out something better.



Corn

Then April 1949, the Rhodes talks. And this is where the accident becomes permanent.



Herman

The rough hand-drawn map turned out to be the only official document both parties had actually agreed to. So it became the binding international border. Not a negotiated boundary with surveyors and benchmarks. A sketch on a one to twenty thousand map that both sides had already signed off on by accident.



Corn

The Jerusalem Post put it well. They said the lines over time expanded from the heat and blurred, yet they were accepted as the final borders between Jordan and Israel in Jerusalem.



Herman

Expanded from the heat. That's a description of a border behaving like something in a kitchen, not something in international law.



Corn

So that's the shape of it. Now let's walk the line. What it actually did to the city and the people living on it.



Herman

The first thing to understand is that it didn't cut through empty space. It cut through neighborhoods, streets, and individual houses. The village of Beit Safafa was split in two. Clans and families separated by a line that ran through their own village.



Corn

Abu Tor divided. The Street of the Prophets partitioned. West and central Israeli, east Jordanian.



Herman

And Mount Scopus. That's the one that's hardest to picture. Mount Scopus was an Israeli exclave inside Jordanian territory. Hebrew University had been there since 1925. Hadassah Medical Center since 1939. Both had to relocate. Both were inaccessible for years.



Corn

Commentary magazine in 1952 described the university as forced to carry forward its work in makeshift quarters and under heartbreaking handicaps.



Herman

Jordan permitted a twice-monthly supply convoy to that enclave. Twice a month. And an annual Christmas crossing for Israeli Christians to make the pilgrimage to Bethlehem. That's the entire access regime for a university campus and a hospital.



Corn

And the crossing point itself. The Mandelbaum Gate. The only way between the two halves of the city.



Herman

A fifty-yard gateway, named after Simcha Mandelbaum's three-story house. Built 1927. Destroyed by the Jordanians in July 1948 with thirty-five Haganah members inside. Part of its front wall stood until 1967 as a memorial.



Corn

So the one gate between two halves of a city is named after a house that no longer exists, and the remnant of that house is the monument.



Herman

The gate wasn't what people imagine when they hear border crossing. It primarily served diplomats, UN personnel, and Christian pilgrims at Christmas. Jordanian officials allowed only one-way passage for non-official traffic. And anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport was denied passage.



Corn

A stamp in a passport as a permanent bar. That's not a border, that's a grudge with a queue.



Herman

The last person through was the American journalist Flora Lewis, shortly before the Six-Day War.



Corn

What about just living there? On either side.



Herman

West Jerusalem neighborhoods along the line, Shmuel HaNavi, Mea Shearim, Musrara, Mamilla, Yemin Moshe, were considered dangerous. They became slums. The phrase used is poverty and neglect.



Corn

The border didn't just divide the city. It sorted it. The neighborhoods closest to the line became the ones nobody wanted to invest in.



Herman

In Abu Tor, there were no Arabs left on the western side. Their abandoned homes were occupied by Jews who then lived very close to their Arab neighbors across the border. Close enough to hear them.



Corn

And the small absurdities. Those are what make the period vivid for me.



Herman

Mount Zion was in Israeli territory but had no road leading to it. Until 1964, when Israel and Jordan jointly built what became known as the Pope's Road, for Pope Paul VI's visit.



Corn

Two countries that couldn't agree on a border cooperated on a driveway.



Herman

The Jerusalem Old Town Hall still bears bullet holes from the period. The Sanhedria Cemetery was established by Israelis as an alternative to the Mount of Olives cemetery, because the Mount of Olives was under Jordanian control.



Corn

So even the dead needed a contingency plan.



Herman

That's the texture. A city where burial, pilgrimage, university, hospital, and the road to a holy site all had to be renegotiated around a pencil line.



Corn

So that's what the border was. The harder question is why we know so little about it. And that turns out to be a story in itself.



Herman

Daniel's framing is that the record is thin. And the easy explanation is that fewer people wrote things down. That's not what happened here. The thinness was partly manufactured.



Corn

Manufactured how.



Herman

Three ways. Physical erasure, cartographic erasure, and the fact that nobody was treating it as a permanent thing worth documenting.



Corn

Start with physical.



Herman

Immediately after 1967, fences, concrete walls, fortifications, and mines were torn down. The Israeli Jerusalem Municipality, in the words of the accounts, has made great efforts to obscure and hide the scars of the former city line.



Corn

Deliberately. Not neglect. Effort.



Herman

Then the cartographic side, which is the one that surprised me. In October and November 1967, the Israeli security cabinet passed classified top secret resolutions to remove the Green Line from official maps. With a media blackout. The Survey of Israel began omitting the line.



Corn

How do we know that, if it was classified.



Herman

The Akevot Institute documented it, and Haaretz's Adam Raz reported it in 2022. So the decisions sat in archives for decades before surfacing.



Corn

A border erased from the maps that were supposed to record it. That's a particular kind of forgetting.



Herman

And then the structural reason. The line was never meant to be permanent, so there was less institutional investment in documenting it as a real border. And it was a militarized, restricted zone. No man's land, landmines, one heavily controlled crossing. Ordinary civilian life and photography were constrained by the physical facts of the place.



Corn

You can't photograph what you can't reach, and you don't archive what you assume is temporary.



Herman

Which brings us to the literature. The historian Kobi Cohen-Hattab, writing in Middle Eastern Studies in 2017, notes that existing literature on the Mandelbaum Gate is primarily popular literature. Focused on its military status and the Mount Scopus convoy, rather than daily life.



Corn

So the record that does exist is skewed toward the dramatic and the military. Convoys and guns. Not the dry cleaner's receipt.



Herman

And that's where the Museum on the Seam comes in, because it's the case study that ties everything together.



Corn

Walk me through the building.



Herman

It was the Baramki family home. Built 1932 by the Palestinian Christian architect Andoni Baramki. The family fled after a stray bullet nearly killed the architect's wife in her own living room.



Corn

In her living room.



Herman

The house then became an Israeli military outpost called Tourjman Post, overlooking the Mandelbaum Gate. The window arches were filled with concrete to form turrets.



Corn

A family home converted into a firing position, with the windows literally bricked into gun emplacements.



Herman

Then 1981, it becomes the Tourjman Post Museum, commemorating the reunification of the city. With exhibits of guns and mortars. Then 1999, a tolerance museum. Then since 2005, a socio-political contemporary art museum.



Corn

Four institutional identities in one building. Family home, military post, reunification museum, tolerance museum, art museum.



Herman

Five, if you count the military outpost separately. And the artists who've shown there are serious. Anselm Kiefer, Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola, Christian Boltanski, Sophie Calle, Wim Wenders, William Kentridge. Its COEXISTENCE poster project in 2000 traveled to more than thirty-five cities.



Corn

And the family.



Herman

After 1967, the Baramkis crossed over with their keys and their title-deeds and were rebuffed. All their court efforts failed. They were classified as absentee property owners.



Corn

They had the keys. They had the deeds. They were classified as absent.



Herman

Gabi Baramki, who was longtime President of Birzeit University, was allowed only one visit. He calls it stolen property.



Corn

And here's the line that I think should sit at the center of this whole episode. In 1967, when the remains of the Mandelbaum House were being demolished, someone asked the Mayor of Jerusalem who Mandelbaum was. Teddy Kollek said, some German doctor, I think.



Herman

Nineteen years. That's how long it took for the man whose name was on the only crossing point between two halves of the city to become a vague guess.



Corn

Not a century. Nineteen years. Within the lifetime of the people who used the gate.



Herman

And that's the historiographical payoff. The absence of material isn't just a gap. It's evidence. The thinness was partly manufactured, by bulldozers, by classified map decisions, by the simple fact that everyone assumed it was temporary.



Corn

And the line persists. It no longer exists as a political border, but it continues to exist, dividing the city along ethnic and cultural lines. It's commonly called the Seam line.



Herman

Which may be part of why the 1948 to 1967 period feels less museum-able. It never fully became the past. It just changed form.



Corn

Let me come back to Daniel's actual questions, because we've now got the material to answer them properly.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

First one. Why does a tiny geographic detail cascade into decades of lived consequence. The thickness of two pencil strokes became no man's land. The gap between two lines became a place where a family's house sat on the wrong side of a decision nobody had thought through.



Herman

The answer is that borders don't stay on maps. The moment you draw one, it starts interacting with streets, houses, water pipes, cemeteries, and school districts. A pencil line is an instruction, and the city has to obey it.



Corn

But here's what I keep coming back to. Dayan and el-Tell were experienced commanders. They weren't naive about what a line on a map does. So why didn't either of them say, wait, let's get a surveyor in here before we sign anything?



Herman

Because the assumption on both sides was that this was round one of a negotiation that would continue. The ceasefire was urgent. The dead were still being counted. Getting a surveyor in would have taken weeks, and neither side wanted to be the one holding up a



Herman (continued)

ceasefire over a few metres of Musrara. They made a rational decision under time pressure, and the time pressure is what made it permanent.



Corn

So the accident wasn't carelessness. It was speed.



Herman

It was speed plus the fact that neither side thought the document would survive the next round of talks. And then the next round of talks never came, at least not in a form that revisited the line.



Corn

Second one. How do archives gather the same object through very different lenses. And here the Baramki house answers it directly. The same building is a family home in Baramki family records. A military outpost in Israeli military records. A reunification exhibit in Israeli civic memory. A socio-political art museum now.



Herman

Each lens captures a partial truth. None of them is lying. They're just answering different questions about the same walls.



Corn

And the third one, the confluence of place and subject. Why does a specific intersection of a place and a period become a vantage point on how the world works at large.



Herman

I'll be honest with you, and with Daniel. The research doesn't settle the question of how professional historians divide between broad interest and one very specific focus. That's a question about people, not about the border. It's the kind of thing you'd want a working historian to answer, not two of us extrapolating from one case study.



Corn

Fair. But we can say what the case study shows. A niche isn't a smaller version of history. It's a different instrument for looking at it.



Herman

A microscope and a telescope aren't competing. They're for different distances.



Corn

And that question about archives, what gets kept and what gets thrown away, is exactly where Hilbert has something to say.



Hilbert

I agree with all of that.



Hilbert

I worked a short stint as a cataloguer's assistant at a municipal archive. The kind of place that takes in boxes from estate sales and has to decide what stays. Most of it doesn't stay.



Corn

What came in.



Hilbert

One box was 1950s and 60s Jerusalem ephemera. Bus tickets. A dry cleaner's receipt. A folded map with a line drawn on it in what looked like crayon. I spent weeks on that box. I threw out the receipts. I kept the map.



Herman

Why the map.



Hilbert

I've never been able to explain it to anyone. It wasn't valuable. It wasn't signed. It just had a line on it, and somebody had drawn it by hand, and I couldn't put it in the bin.



Corn

Do you know what the line was.



Hilbert

No. I never checked. And the archive's been reorganised since, so I couldn't tell you where it is now. I'm not sure I want to know.



Herman

Hilbert, that map could have been a piece of the City Line.



Hilbert

It could have been a bus route.



Herman

But if it was.



Hilbert

Then I handled it for about four minutes and put it in a folder, same as everything else.



Corn

Daniel's question about archives just got answered from the inside.



Hilbert

That's what I came out to say. The reason the record is thin isn't only that people didn't write things down. It's that somebody, somewhere, decided not to keep it. Every archive does that. I did it for an afternoon, with somebody's whole life in a box, and I reduced it to one object.



Herman

And that decision is itself a historical event.



Hilbert

It's the historical event. The rest is just what survived it.



Hilbert

Anyway. I'm expecting a phone call and I'm not taking it in here.



Corn

Understood.



Herman

The archive isn't a neutral container. It's an active filter, and the filter has a person in it.



Corn

Which brings us back to Daniel's original question. Why some periods grab us and others don't.



Herman

If the thinness of the record is partly manufactured, by bulldozers, by classified map decisions, by an archivist's judgement call on a Tuesday, then the obvious next question is what else we're missing. Not because nothing happened. Because someone decided it wasn't worth keeping.



Corn

The laboratory of life idea holds up. A niche isn't a smaller version of history. It's a different instrument for looking at it. Two pencil strokes on a one to twenty thousand map are a lens on how borders, memory, and archives actually work.



Herman

If you've been listening and this one landed, a review helps other people find the show. Hilbert Flumingtop produces it.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. We'll be back soon.