Be’eri’s residents are gone, but their homes attest to the horrors they endured

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 None of the residents of Be’eri were in the kibbutz when it reopened Wednesday for civilians for the first time since Hamas terrorists perpetrated a massacre here.

Some 400 survivors are staying at a hotel near the Dead Sea. At least 112 are dead, and multiple others are thought to be in Gaza as prisoners of Hamas, which sent over 100 terrorists into Be’eri alone.

But while the 1,108 residents are now gone, the abandoned homes of Be’eri speak volumes about the atrocities that occurred on the kibbutz. It used to be known mostly for its thriving printing shop and budding cultural scene, but is now a tragic testament to the devastation and cruelty of Hamas’s largest-scale attack ever on Israel.

At one home, whose residents this article will not name out of respect for their privacy, a bed stands at an odd angle inside a child’s room. Both feet nearest to the room’s only door are lifted up, suspended there upon a piece of furniture. Perhaps someone, likely a man or two, tilted up the heavy bed to pull out a person hiding under it.

In another house, a kitchen knife still in its plastic sheath lies conspicuously on a sofa, giving the impression that someone kept it near as they waited in their home for terrorists to come in.

At another home, a story is written in blood:

An adult sustained a massive wound in the bedroom, walked over to the seating area before collapsing, then dragged themselves into the bathroom, where the trail ends with a caked pool of blood. On the living room counter, a picture of a toddler, presumably a grandchild, adorns the furniture, whose drawers have been pulled out hastily, possibly by someone ransacking it for keys.

On a small bulletin board, under a medical checkup summary, a green paper greeting from last month’s Rosh Hashanah reads: “To my grandparents, a sweet new year and happy holidays.”

Just as the private homes recount the final moments of families whose lives were shattered, some public spaces attest to the trauma of a tight-knit community where many of the members acted on the instinct to come together. At the Be’eri clinic, a physician and a paramedic treated wounded people and stored bodies until the very second Hamas took them. The paramedic, Amit Man, is presumed to have been abducted. The fate of the physician remains unknown.

“In the same way that Auschwitz is the symbol of the Holocaust, Be’eri is going to become the symbol of the massacre,” said Doron Spielman, a major in the Israel Defense Forces Spokesperson’s Unit, who is on the team that the IDF put together to receive journalists at Be’eri. “The level of inhumanity of Hamas fighters surprised even us, Israelis who had no illusions about what Hamas is,” he added.

The death toll in Be’eri, the largest of the 25 villages that make up the Ramat Eshkol Regional Council, was so high that the space allocated by the government for the survivors ended up with multiple empty rooms. “There’s entire families that were wiped out,” Spielman said.

At the entrance to one home, a ladder stands under an elevated storage area.

Kibbutz members hid in such upstairs nooks after realizing that the terrorists were targeting the sheltered rooms that many residents first went into when the attack started.

The terrorists burned down the houses where the people in the sheltered area wouldn’t come out. Often, they would execute whoever left the sheltered area to avoid suffocating from the smoke.

Several homes with charred exteriors appear to have been given this treatment. Others have whole portions missing, blown up either by the attackers or by Israeli troops in exchanges of fire with terrorists holed up inside.

Adi Efrat’s home was spared a torching because she did not know that she could lock her sheltered room by turning its handle upward. “So they just entered and found me in my pajamas,” Efrat, one of the survivors, told The Times of Israel. The terrorists ordered her to give them a car and she agreed to show them where the keys to the kibbutz’s cars were.

Outside, the terrorists began running with Efrat, 51, after they encountered Israeli soldiers. According to accounts, Shaldag, a special forces unit of the Israeli Air Force, helicoptered about 20 soldiers into Be’eri approximately two hours after the terrorists entered the kibbutz. That Israeli force was overwhelmed shortly after its arrival, according to eyewitnesses.

Efrat was taken to a room with other women. At one point, terrorists pushed in a 2-year-old boy who was crying for his father. A badly wounded woman and an 8-year-old child were also brought in. The woman told Efrat that terrorists had killed her baby daughter and shot her husband.

Efrat was saved because the terrorists took her outside to get something for them in an attempt to avoid going out into open terrain and risk getting shot. Israeli troops, possibly from Shaldag, killed the terrorists guarding her in a bloody battle where the Israelis had multiple casualties, she said. She does not know what happened to the wounded woman and her child.

Multiple gunfights occurred in Be’eri.

In one row of houses, a terrorist’s body lies in the rubble covered with a white bag. The ground reeks of rotting blood from the bloodbath that occurred on the scene, which is strewn with bullet casings.

Zaka, a first-response organization that also collects bodies and body parts, works in Be’eri only in the daytime. Only armed soldiers remain on the charred kibbutz grounds overnight for fear of a second penetration or the discovery of holed-up terrorists, Reuven Reuven, a volunteer from the Jerusalem area, told The Times of Israel in Be’eri.

Efforts to collect and identify all the bodies are ongoing in Be’eri and beyond. A few kilometers north, Times of Israel reporters encounter two bodies, apparently of terrorists, lying roadside at the scene of a gunfight between them and Israeli troops. Coincidentally, a Palestinian rocket hit near the bodies on Wednesday, setting one of them on fire.

In Be’eri, houses that remained intact afford a glimpse of life before the attack, which some kibbutz members have said will never be the same.

One such house has a colorful and manicured display of ceramic mushroom statues decorating a Japanese-style pebble garden. “Do not touch!” the owner wrote in a red-ink sign next to the display.

The living quarters of foreign workers, most of them from the Far East, are an eerie sight: Dozens of shoes line the shoe rack; all the lights are on; several ventilators swivel around in ghostly fashion and sauce remains inside a large mortar and pestle.

From behind the foreign workers’ housing unit, the smell of rotting blood wafts in. It occurs in mass execution areas, where blood drenched the ground. Hamas is believed to be holding multiple foreign workers. How many were killed remains unknown.

Be’eri came under attack even as journalists visited it Wednesday. Explosions far and near were heard, only sometimes preceded by a siren. Some are so near they sent up a confetti of foliage that rained down on the visitors in the kibbutz.

The IDF allowed the pool of about 50 journalists to walk around the kibbutz freely, which is unusual for a battleground still under fire containing fresh evidence of atrocities.

“Walking through here is like Eisenhower walking through Bergen-Belsen and seeing the destruction and carnage. The world needs to witness this firsthand,” Spielman says.

One journalist, from AFP, asks Spielman why there are still bodies of Hamas “militants” lying around when the bodies of all the victims have been removed.

This prompts Spielman to correct the AFP reporter on her terminology. “Militants don’t shoot babies. Terrorists do that,” he says. He continues to say that “our first priority is to move away all the Israelis. And after that, we will do it for the terrorists. We will show their dead bodies a lot more respect than they showed the living.”

At the Dead Sea retreat where Be’eri’s survivors are staying, the trauma is making some members doubt whether they want to or could return.

Idan Gad, who was born in Be’eri, wants to return here, he told Haaretz at the Dead Sea retreat. Gad, 35, proposed to his wife Anastasia while they were on vacation in Amsterdam, where they went to recover from Operation Protective Edge, a 2014 round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel during which terrorists had fired hundreds of rockets and mortar rounds on Be’eri and beyond.

He and his parents survived the massacre in the sheltered area of his parents’ home, where he ran because he was nearby when the shooting started. Anastasia and their two daughters also survived holed up in the sheltered area of their own home, on the other side of the kibbutz. Idan attempted to join them during the massacre but had to retreat after coming under fire. They all survived.

Anastasia now wants to leave Be’eri, Idan told Haaretz, but he feels differently.

“Nowhere is safe from hostilities in this country,” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, if I’m not living in the kibbutz, it’s like I’m not living in my own country.”