

pushing further

Peter Goldman

There was a cemetery on the island. For generations its inhabitants were laid to rest there. It likely was – as most cemeteries are – a place of reverence and memory, of history and rootedness.

My family's roots begin at the water's edge. I have no idea who my ancestors were or where they lived their lives. My grandparents emigrated to the US and my parents, first-generation Americans, were born here. I know of no family history beyond the place where my grandparents settled.

I have always envied the rooted. A rooted people has history, traditions handed down from one generation to the next. A rooted people has community.

At Malaga a community was severed from its roots by a duly established government, the government of this state. Malaga's inhabitants were uprooted and forcibly resettled. Even the dead were disinterred and reburied, unnamed, in pits in another part of the state on the grounds of a state "school" for the "feeble minded."

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It is said these days that the people of Malaga were “evicted.”

Yet words matter. An eviction means that the owner is legally forcing the person from the owner’s property. Eviction may not be pretty but it is lawful. Forcible resettlement is another story. Under international law, forcible resettlement is a crime against humanity.

Malaga calls upon us to ask, What does it mean to dig up a cemetery? What does it mean to dig up the remains of the dead? To cart off the remains to a place having no connection to the past and the history of the community where these people were born, lived and died? Separated from their community, the remains of the dead are transformed into bones and rags. What does it mean when strangers do these things, dumping the bones of the dead in some alien hole in the ground, in a place to which these dead had no connection?

The responsibility falls to us to push further. What does it mean to fill in the holes in the island cemetery with dirt and rock, wiping away all traces of the beings whose rest once made this place a holy ground?

The meaning of these acts must be described for what it was, and is:
Obliteration.

The society and culture of Malaga were obliterated. The citizens of Maine did this to the people of Malaga.

Malaga and its story haunt me.