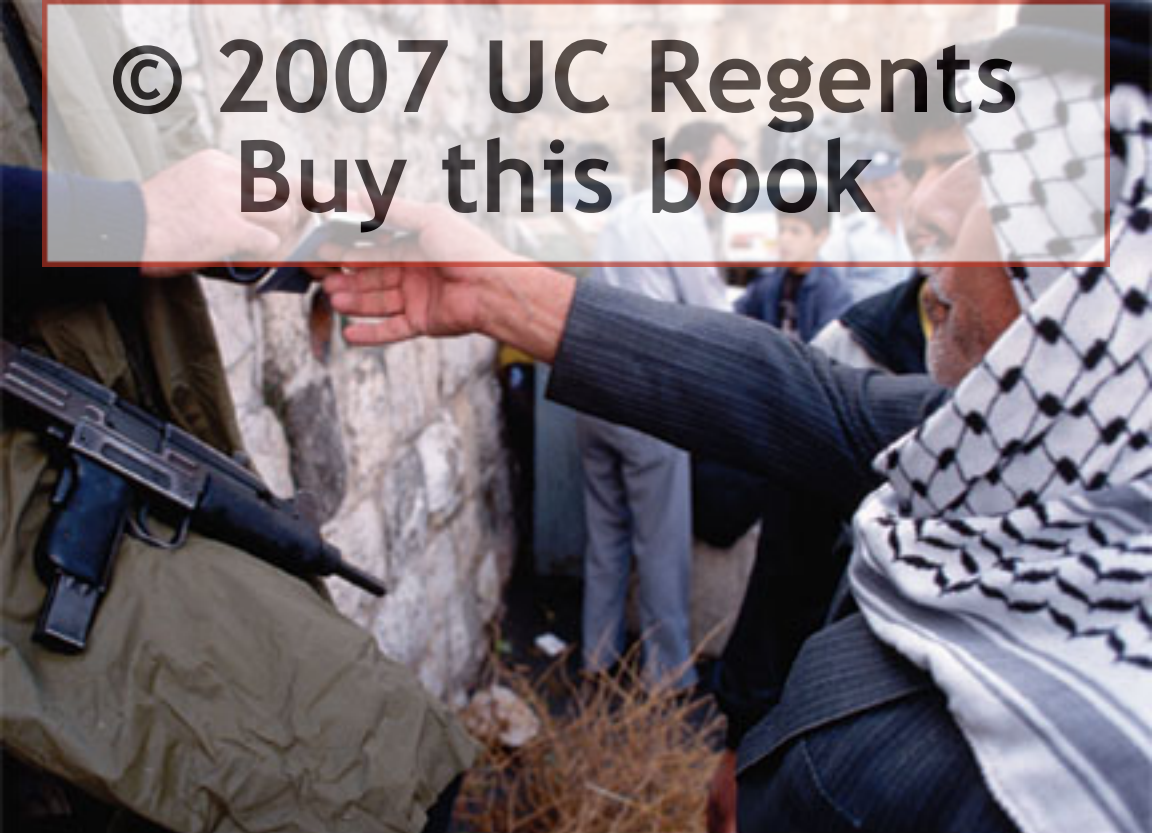


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SON OF THE CYPRESSES

MEMORIES, REFLECTIONS, AND REGRETS
FROM A POLITICAL LIFE

MERON BENVENISTI

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Benvenisti, Meron, 1934–.

Memories, reflections, and regrets from a political life / Meron Benvenisti, translated by Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta in consultation with Michael Kaufman-Lacusta

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-23825-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Israel—Politics and government—20th century. 2. Arab-Israeli conflict—Influence. 3. Arab-Israeli conflict—1993—Peace. 4. Israel—Ethnic relations. 5. Benvenisti, David. 6. Jews—Israel—Biography. 7. Sephardim—Israel—Biography. I. Title.

DS126.995.B46 2006

957.6405092—dc22

2006032386

Manufactured in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A Founding Father

I had long been grappling with the question of where to begin my story. Before even thinking of the story itself, I had pondered where the opening scene should be set. This initial staking out of the narrative territory was important to me, because it would ground events and thoughts in concrete reality. I could begin at a beginning, at my beginning or at my parents' beginnings: in Jerusalem, or in Salonika and Suwalk; in Eretz Israel (Hebrew for "the Land of Israel"), or in the Balkans and the "Pale of Settlement"—but for some reason I was especially drawn to Zichron Ya'akov, where, a few years after his arrival in Palestine, my father had been sent as a teacher, a calling he followed throughout his long life. He was twenty-four when he came to Zichron at the time, an impecunious teacher living "in a room outside the village, whose windows faced the sea and Mount Carmel on one side and the eucalyptuses of the village on the other."

AN IMPECUNIOUS TEACHER

My father was discharged from the British Army late in June 1920, his commander providing him with discharge papers that indicated his "appropriate profession" as "teacher." After a few months substituting at a Sephardic school in Jerusalem, he was sent by the Yishuv's (Jewish community's) education committee to teach at the school in Zichron Ya'akov. He thus began a career that would span more than sixty years.

We shall never know if the decision to send my father to Zichron, “a large, established community boasting a school complete with all grades, wonderful scenery, and a diverse population,” was a result of the enthusiastic letter he had written to the education committee: “Send me to some corner of Eretz Israel,” he wrote, “give me children, and I shall dedicate myself to them with all my heart. I feel I have sufficient energies to dedicate to the education of children.” Writing to a friend a year after his arrival in Zichron, he enthuses: “All my time is spent immersed heart and soul in the world of the children. All my leisure hours . . . are given over to the pupils. I take part in all their games and outings, and in their most trivial interests, etc. Now it is harvest season, and every evening I roll with them from haystack to haystack, as if I had returned to the days of my childhood—as if I wished to collect a debt from my childhood, which passed without harvest and without the fragrance of God’s broad fields. My heart is full of love for the pupils.”

Years later when I was an adult, it seemed to me that the love he had lavished upon generation after generation of pupils was stolen from his own sons, toward whom he remained remote and detached.

My father had indeed completed his studies at a teachers’ seminary in Jerusalem and was a qualified teacher, but his work nonetheless presented numerous difficulties: “It is an unforgivable sin that the Department of Education did not take into account our lack of teaching experience and sent us off to remote areas, without [first providing us with] an opportunity to obtain experience.” “The information,” he continued, “I draw from French books and unorganized notes that I have acquired in the village.” He lacked not only information but also the Hebrew terms for various objects, not to mention concepts in mathematics and the sciences. Only six or seven years had gone by since the “battle of the languages” that had culminated in the gradual replacement of German by Hebrew as the language of instruction at the teachers’ seminary and the Technion. “Even today,” he wrote, “I am groping in the fog and must “row” and “row” until I reach the shore I seek.” For instance, the fourth grade nature studies curriculum included the following subjects: “Lime (chalk, marble, [production of] sulfuric acid), clay, sand (manufacture of glass), shale, salt (crystalline). Onions, bulbs, fava beans, lupine, clover, the rose, the pepper tree, peas, bananas, codfish, the nightingale, the starling, the ant, the fly, the jackal, domestic cattle, ducks and geese, the grapevine, the oleander, the wolf, the scarab beetle, the spider, the gecko, the sprout (dicotyledonous), the structure and function of the root. Zoology: the metamorphosis of insects. . . . I

excel in calisthenics as well as in singing. This Sunday I shall begin teaching musical notation, and I have already prepared several lessons. We shall see how I manage.”

SALONIKA

No wonder he complained, “When shall I tend to my soul, when shall I get the full measure of mental relaxation I require?” And inevitably there arose feelings of homesickness for the city of his birth, Salonika: “The question of travel to Salonika has been reawakened in me. . . . I know that this is only [self-]deception. . . . It would require crossing the sea, purifying myself, and leaving the limited world I have given myself over to.”

The day in the fall of 1913 that my father left Salonika on a Greek vessel, accompanied on the voyage to Palestine by his father, he received a letter in Hebrew, written in the ancient Rashi script used for the Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) language. His close friend Nathan Shalem wrote: “My dear beloved one—My purpose in writing this letter is not to write you a letter on the occasion of your journey, but to bitterly bewail from the depths of my heart your parting from me. . . . I shall find comfort in this, however—that you are walking about in the land of our forefathers, the land we have yearned for, body and soul. I thought I must give you a memento so that you would not forget me; after searching and searching, I could not find a worthy keepsake for you except for a letter bordered with flowers.”

My father answered this letter from Jerusalem five weeks later—also in Rashi script—with a fall flower that he had picked and dried affixed to the top: “I read your letter, which, at first sight and without digging too deeply, gladdened my sad soul, without my even endeavoring to see the signature of the writer of those lines, the flowers fastened round about it tell me . . . it is the hand of Nathan Shalem. . . . Your bitter cry at my parting from you and your joy that I journey to Eretz Israel are only two sentences, but I prize them greatly. You are sad that I have parted from you, and my answer is that I, too, am sad. But who is the more bereft? You have been separated from one friend and I from all of them at once. Today I feel the word ‘parting’ everywhere I go, in everything I do, and all thoughts of childhood go straight-straight to this city that I have left . . . to that home, to that Nathan Shalem like unto whom there is no other, and then my tears flow from my eyes and I weep.”

Not many months passed before the two friends met again, with the arrival of a group of young Salonikans who had come to study at the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv, but ended up settling in Jerusalem.

Salonika. Perhaps, after all, the story should have begun there.

More than eight years after my father had left his home and “gone up to Jerusalem” (he defined his goal thus, and not as “Eretz Israel”), his longing for his family (who had remained in Salonika) and his city—“which embodies for me the best memories of the happy days of my youth”—was powerful and persistent. On his first visit to Tel Aviv in September 1916, three years after his *aliya* (immigration to the Holy Land), he muses: “It is pleasant with its handsome, tall buildings and with the Jewish atmosphere palpable everywhere. I swam in the waters of the sea, and the sight of the sea awakened many memories of Salonika in me, and I greatly wished to cross this sea. Who knows when this desire of mine will be fulfilled?”

My father’s motivations for “going up” to Jerusalem to study there were similar to those impelling Jewish young people in Poland or Russia in those days: a blend of nationalist longings, personal motives, and reaction to external political events such as wars, revolutions, and persecutions. But their experience of the transition from Occident to Orient differed greatly in depth. The *oleh* (immigrant) from eastern Europe was thrown, unprepared, into the colorful, dusty tumult of the port of Jaffa: the physical surroundings—so different from the landscape of his northern homeland—and the unfamiliar human landscape. For my father and grandfather, by contrast, arriving in the land was like returning home: “We were surrounded by tarboosh-wearing Turkish customs officers and clerks. . . . With the aid of the pure Turkish that we spoke and our familiarity with Turkish etiquette, we speedily negotiated the various official procedures as full-fledged Ottoman citizens.” One must remember that Jewish Salonika was not a marginal element in the Ottoman city; it was its heart.

The customary Zionist distinction between “exile” and “homeland” was less acute, to my father’s way of seeing things. After all, he came from a city the majority of whose residents were Jews, who dominated the realms of finance, commerce, the port and fishing, culture, and education. My father proudly states: “The city of Salonika acquired a worldwide reputation for its Jewish ‘color’ and for its autonomy in all branches of the economy—a kind of ‘state within a state.’ During that era, a person did not experience the reality of exile.”

His picturesque descriptions of public and private life in Salonika, of his education and Zionist activism, and particularly of his family's lineage, are full of pride in belonging to the Sephardic Jewish tribe that settled in the ancient Macedonian-Byzantine-Ottoman city founded in the fourth century B.C.E. The city was named after a half sister of Alexander the Great, Thessaloníki, whose name commemorated the victory (*niki*) of their father, Philip of Macedon, in Thessaly.

In 1913, the year my father left his hometown, a census showed that the Jewish community of Salonika was the predominant ethnic group. Out of 157,000 residents, the Jewish community numbered 62,000, the Greek, 40,000, and the Muslim (Ottomans), 46,000 souls. My father's renowned teacher, Dr. Yitzhak Epstein, who had come in 1908 from Palestine to minister to the Salonika Jewish community's educational institutions, wrote:

It is as if this community has given the lie to reality, to exile, to the dominant environment—different from it in religion, language, and way of life— . . . not only in the synagogue, Talmud Torah [Jewish religious elementary school], on the Sabbath and holidays, but on every workday and in the essence of everyday life. In the marketplace and the port, in the artisanship and in manufacturing, Salonika had become a small island where a sort of Jewish autonomy prevailed, spiritual and economic at one and the same time, . . . effacing in great measure, the imprint of exile. Here Jews of stature arose, imposing in appearance and endowed with grandeur, whose faces displayed courage, self-assurance, and self-knowledge.

Father left Salonika in the autumn of 1913. Exactly one year prior to that, in October 1912, the city had been occupied by the Greek army. Thus had commenced an inexorable decline in the fortunes of the Jewish community, which suffered from the measures employed by the Greek government in its efforts to bolster the position of Salonika's Greek inhabitants and to decrease the economic influence of the Jews. My father and those of his friends who immigrated at about the same time to Jerusalem worriedly followed from afar the misfortunes that plagued their birthplace during World War I, especially the great fire of 1917, which destroyed most of the Jewish homes in Salonika (and all our family's ancient archives). But the fate of Jewish autonomy in Salonika was sealed in the aftermath of the war, when hundreds of thousands of Greek refugees expelled from Asia Minor settled there and in the surrounding area. My father's friend Yosef Uziel wrote in 1929: "The hallucination of a Jewish city in the diaspora has evaporated. . . . But even should this

nightmare be fully realized, and Salonika sees the back of the last of its Jews, hundreds of years of history will not be erased.”

SMOLDERING HEAPS OF ASH

Only fourteen years later, the nightmare had become reality. The entire Jewish community of Salonika, including my father’s sister Sara and three brothers: Benvenisti (first name), Abraham, and Jacob, and scores of family members, perished in the Holocaust. Returning to the city of his birth in 1956, after more than forty years, he writes: “You turn this way and that and the streets shun you. Where are the dwellings of your brothers? Where the synagogues of olden days, which preserved the names of glorious communities in magnificent Sepharad? Where is my father’s serene and tranquil home? All of this went up in flames in 5677 [the great fire of 1917].” He continues, referring to the more recent catastrophe:

On the smoldering heaps of ash an alien city was built. . . . But before I could begin to comprehend the Holocaust that befell a city that had been “a mother in Israel,” . . . I said to myself that I would go and stretch myself out on my ancestors’ graves and bitterly lament what the Nazi foe did to the nation it exterminated. . . . Let your eyes glance here or there, all has been wiped from the face of the earth. “The house of the living” [the cemetery] is a plowed field, and beyond are new houses just recently built, and beyond them a grove of trees in bloom, and in the distance—the halls of higher learning of the youthful inhabitants of Salonika [the University of Salonika]. . . . From amongst the foliage sometimes sprout fragments of gravestones . . . upon which sacred [i.e., Hebrew] letters stand out. And it is as if they are crying out for retribution from us all. As for the dead, so for the living, one fate for both together.

Only a fraction of the gravestones in Salonika’s Jewish cemetery (2,500) have been studied and their inscriptions recorded and published. From the data on these gravestones, my father was able to reconstruct his family history, and this constituted his final piece of research in the year of his death, 1993. The records of these inscriptions in old and new books, along with stories handed down from his ancestors, enabled him to trace his family’s genealogy for almost five hundred years, from 1500 to the present. According to his findings, the family had its beginnings in three branches, two of which originated in southern Italy, whereas the third arose in Spain. With undisguised pride my father quotes the chron-

icles and the lives of his distant forebears: rabbis, judges (in religious courts), and community leaders.

Take, for example, Rabbi Chaim Shabtai (1551–1647):

Foremost of the sages and teachers of teaching, who by virtue of his wisdom enhanced the reputation of the rabbis of Salonika in the world. . . . A distinguished and greatly respected rabbi, who inspired many disciples. . . . He permitted forty prosperous conversos [Sephardic Jews coerced into converting to Christianity] who had returned to Judaism to settle in Salonika. . . . He suffered greatly from ailments of the stomach and kidneys.

Rabbi Shabtai died at the age of ninety-two.

And here is Rabbi Yosef David (1660–1736), who was called Tsemach David (Branch of David) after his most famous book:

He inspired many disciples, and they too were great Torah scholars. He lived to a ripe old age, leaving his mark on the lives of two generations of Salonika's Jews. . . . His posthumously published book of responsa on the four sections of the *Shulhan Aruch* [*Beit David* (Salonika, 1740–46)] is among the most famous such works. . . . Rabbi Yosef David's piety and holiness were celebrated even beyond the borders of his country. He revered Nathan of Gaza, the prophet of the false messiah Shabtai Zvi. Most of his writings were published after his death. On his gravestone is inscribed: "Called to the heavens above: a light in Israel, the right-hand pillar, the glory of his generation, his magnificence, the great rabbi, fortress and bastion, our teacher and rabbi, Yosef David. Blessed be his memory."

The presence of the Benvenisti family in Spain is noted first in Catalonia in the early eleventh century and subsequently in Castile. Don Yehudah and his son Don Avraham Benvenisti were leaders of those Spanish Jews expelled in 1492 who settled in Salonika. Yehudah's father Avraham had been treasury minister to Juan II, king of Castile, and was the author of the Valladolid Statute, which regulated the lives of the pre-expulsion Jewish communities of Spain. Accounts of the Spanish patriarchs of his family and their descendents fill the pages of various encyclopedias and were a source of pride for my father, even as he stressed that the family had two other, Italian branches, which had perhaps arrived in Italy even before the destruction of the Second Temple, and thus "had not gone into exile in the accepted sense of the word." One way or the other, my father could claim that his family had never left the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, but had only circled it until they returned to their homeland, Eretz Israel.

ELDER RABBI

The last rabbi in the line was my great-grandfather Elder Rabbi Benvenisti—Shmuel Yosef (1833–1912). In his last days, my father penned these lines about his grandfather:

I was privileged to grow up in close proximity to my grandfather and my grandmother. The loss of my mother when I was three brought about a change in my status among the members of the family; my grandfather and grandmother set me apart from my father's household in order to bestow upon me the love and mothering that I had been robbed of. The intent of this care and nurture was to groom one of his grandsons to be his "heir" in continuing, from this generation to the next, the family tradition of serving the community in religious/public office. He called me David in honor of Rabbi Yosef David (Tsemach David).

I used to accompany Grandfather to the religious courts in the offices of the Jewish community, and on Friday mornings I went with him when he set out for Jarashi, the street of the great houses of commerce, to meet there with the most prosperous merchants and be apprised of current goings-on in the mercantile world. People passing by, especially on the streets near the *mahala* [quarter], where we lived, would greet him with great respect, and some even approached and kissed his hands, while he smilingly inclined his head toward them; women peeping from windows would send their sons to kiss his hands, and grandfather would stand still for a short while, rest his hand on their heads, and bless them: "May the Lord bless you and keep you." In the synagogue, the worshippers rose to their feet upon his entry and remained standing until he had walked to his permanent place beside the *halachah* [the holy ark]. More than once, these expressions of respect seemed to him to inconvenience the congregation, and he would keep out of sight of those entering the synagogue and would go in through a side gate and straight to his place. Whenever he arrived at the rooms where the religious court sat, the square in front of the building would be thronged with widows and other unfortunates. My grandfather's calming and comforting words could be heard amid the cacophony of crying widows with their orphaned children in tow.

The larger Jewish community of Salonika was subdivided into autonomous communities according to the countries, cities, or regions from which their members had come, with each community having its own synagogue and religious and welfare institutions. Every household belonged to one of these communities, thus facilitating the tracing of family origins. Our family, for example, was affiliated with two communities, New Italy (which had split off from the original Italian community early in the eighteenth century) and the Castilian community. Among the city's numerous Jewish congregations, which included those iden-

tified with Lisbon, Catalonia, Portugal, southern Italy, Aragon, the Maghreb, new and old Sicily, and Provence—there was also the community of “Ashkenaz.” These were descendents of Ashkenazi Jews who over the years had intermarried with Sephardi families; their Ashkenazi character was now recognizable only in their prayer service.

SEPHARDIM AND ASHKENAZIM

This subdivision according to ethnic group, however, did not prepare my father for the yawning chasm between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Jerusalem: “In the Salonika community, I did not know the Ashkenazim at all. On coming to Eretz Israel, I sensed that a great abyss lay between these two elements of the community. The simple masses of Ashkenazim despised the Sephardim and saw the Sephardi as an inferior being, like ‘an Arab,’” he writes in 1917. “The hatred is passed on from father to son, and even the intelligentsia is not unsullied by this sin—perhaps out of lack of familiarity.” He describes a “distressing incident” on a seminary outing to the Ayalon Valley: “Our Ashkenazi brothers sang songs in Russian and ‘jargon’ (i.e., Yiddish) the whole time and peppered their conversation with Yiddish jokes and words. This, of course, greatly upset us and provoked a raging argument between us. Here we see the effect of the diaspora, which has divided brothers.”

The affront was at times unbearable, and the resultant anger sometimes triggered fistfights. But my father concludes by exhorting his fellows, “not to be drawn into the negative phenomena of factionalism and feelings of discrimination, but to delve more deeply into the literature of the Jews of Spain and the study of the history of the Salonika Jewish community down through the generations, that we may become worthy of the name ‘Sephardi’ with which we were labeled upon our arrival in Eretz Israel.” My father persisted in this approach all his life and was greatly angered by those of his friends who expressed their frustration and outrage at the ethnic discrimination they experienced with verbal outbursts and belligerent articles in the Sephardi press. He also decried those who would exploit Ashkenazi guilt feelings over discrimination against Sephardim for their own personal gain. In spite of this, his sense of Sephardi *grandessa* (pride) gave him an attitude of superiority and arrogance toward other Mizrahi (oriental) communities. When a man of Kurdish Jewish origin was chosen to be chair of the Council of the Sephardi and Oriental Communities, my father stopped attending, saying, “If I cannot enjoy a joke in *Judeo-Espagnole* [Ladino], why go to the meetings?” My

mother also told me that he treated every setback in his professional advancement as evidence of ethnic discrimination, and that his anxiety and feelings of outrage actually made him physically ill.

Interethnic tensions also affected relations between men and women. My father writes in his journal that he had overheard “few kindergarten teachers speaking about Sephardi youngsters, saying that all the Sephardim were hated because of their base characters, and only because there are no Ashkenazi boys were the girls forced to go with Sephardim (i.e., with us) against their will.” He continues: “Their attitude greatly disturbed us. . . . I spoke with my friends about this matter, saying that we have no way to respond except by dissociating ourselves from these spoilt girls and renewing the activities of our group so we might more effectively make our case against all who offended the honor of the tribe of our origins.”

MY MOTHER

How did it happen, then, that my father, unlike his friends, chose an Ashkenazi woman as his wife? His journals and letters provide neither answer nor clue. He apparently hid or destroyed his letters to my mother and hers to him, despite the fact that he retained personal letters to other women and theirs to him from the years preceding his marriage. At the age of nineteen, he penned the following lines to his lady friend Ts: “Ho! Innocent heart and innocent soul! From me you have concealed your heart! And you have not given me the opportunity to share the burdens of your soul. The truth is that we were both distant and close. . . . Arouser of emotions, you aroused my heart and gave me a fever of ardor, a fever to worship you; and do not think that these emotions are the fleeting feelings that a young woman might arouse in a young man. . . . You have stirred up in me a storm wind, but have not granted me comfort and pleasure. . . . Perhaps you will laugh at my words. . . . It is a pity that we have remained both distant and close as we have.”

He conducted intimate correspondence with other women, and there is no doubt at all that he did so with my mother as well, especially since it is known that they lived in separate cities for an extended period, when my mother worked in Tiberias and my father taught in Jerusalem. Father had met Mother’s sister and brother-in-law, Gila and Eliezer Beloch, back in 1922 when they were living in Zichron Ya’akov, but when Mother immigrated in 1924 and lived with her sister in Zichron, Father had gone to teach at an educational institution for girls in Shfeiya

(near Zichron) and then to a *kfar yeladim* (“children’s village”) near Afula, in the Jezreel Valley. My father and mother finally met on one of the outings of the Ramblers’ Society (about which more later), apparently in 1927. By that time, Father’s personal wanderings had come to an end, and he had settled down in Jerusalem. There he taught at the Beit Hakerem School, where he was to work for more than forty years. Mother, meanwhile, had completed her studies at the Hadassah Nursing School and had begun to work as a school and public health nurse, a career she pursued until close to her death at the age of ninety-six.

This is a fitting place to weave the figure of my mother, Leah, into the story. When she arrived in Palestine, she was twenty-four years old, the third of six children of Chaim (Menachem) Mendel Friedman and his wife, Marie, née Mevzos, to immigrate. The seventh, Kopl, remained in their hometown of Suwalk, on the Lithuanian-Polish-Prussian border, having taken it upon himself to continue to assist his aging parents in their diverse business endeavors. Kopl and his wife and daughter perished in the Holocaust.

HOVEVEI ZION

It was no coincidence that almost all the Friedman children made *aliya*. Their father, Chaim (Menachem) Mendel Friedman, was an ardent Zionist, a founding member of the Hovevei Zion, who owned a citrus grove in Hadera and sent his children to be educated at Hebrew day schools. He himself spoke Hebrew fluently, with Sephardi pronunciation, as favored by many proponents of the revival of the ancient tongue. Chaim Mendel Friedman was, in the words of one of his eulogizers, “a very learned man, philanthropic merchant, and dedicated businessman.” He was a graduate of the Volozhyn Yeshiva in Lithuania in the days of its glory, when it produced many of the country’s great rabbis, as well as the famed poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. Friedman was a wholesaler, an importer of coffee, tea, and tobacco, a lumber merchant, and owner of a soap factory. He also served for many years as head of the Community Council, the self-governing body of the city’s Jews, which had been set up under Polish law in 1919, on the basis of the minorities’ treaties imposed upon Poland and other countries by the Versailles Peace Conference. The council had the authority to provide services of a religious nature, maintain cemeteries and schools, and dispense welfare. To finance its operations, it was empowered to levy taxes on all the Jews in its jurisdiction.

All of the Jewish political factions took part in the council elections, including the Zionist parties. Chaim Mendel Friedman, who represented the Mizrachi religious Zionist movement, was elected chair, “because he was acceptable to all the religious groups in the city and even to many who defined themselves as non-religious, such as those affiliated with the Zionist Left and members of the Jewish intelligentsia whose opinion carried considerable weight in the city’s Jewish community.”¹ It was a great honor to serve as a leader of this community, which included rabbis, educators, and such personalities as the deputy finance minister in the first Bolshevik government, Aharon Scheinman (uncle of the wife of Ch. M. Friedman’s son Zorah), and the man who was to become the third finance minister of the state of Israel, Pinchas Sapir, as well as Avraham Stern (whose nom de guerre was Yair), future commander of LEHI (widely referred to by English speakers as the Stern Gang).

SUWALK

The Jewish community of Suwalk could not boast of origins as ancient as those of many in the Pale of Settlement. The first Jews had settled there only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but by mid-century the proportion of Jews in the city already exceeded 60 percent. It was a well-established community that knew how to take advantage of Suwalk’s status as the commercial and administrative center of a large district, as well as of its location on the route of the Saint Petersburg–Warsaw Railroad, whose construction had been completed in 1899. The demarcation of the Polish-Lithuanian border following World War I brought Suwalk under Polish sovereignty, along with only a quarter of the surrounding district; the remaining three-quarters of the district was granted to Lithuania. The city was thus stripped of its economic hinterland, as well as of its position as a commercial and transportation crossroads. This precipitated an acceleration in the rate of emigration from the city, partly to Eretz Israel to join in the Zionist pioneering effort and partly to the United States. This emigration did not include the more comfortably established of the city’s Jews, despite the fact that many of them were active Zionists. Even the leaders of the Zionist parties made no effort to immigrate to Eretz Israel. They were supportive of their children who did so, but they themselves continued to believe that no evil would ever befall them in their home.

Chaim Mendel Friedman was among those who encouraged their offspring to make *aliya*, but first he made sure that his children finished

gymnasium (secondary school), and that the boys received an academic education. My mother, Leah, graduated from the Hebrew Gymnasium in Grodno, the big city adjacent to Suwalk. Her diploma, dated June 1919, states that she studied “French Language and Literature, German Language and Literature, Russian Language and Literature, Latin, Jewish History, Algebra, Geometry, Physics, Chemistry, General History, and Psychology.” Her niece Shoshana recalls that Mother’s education and her continuing interest in philosophy and psychology led to difficulties in her relations with her fellow nursing students who had been born and raised in Palestine, and whose education was “grade-school only, and [whose] attitude to the profession was primitive.” Her rebellious nature did not make relationships any easier for her either: “She had been a rebel since childhood and always acted in accordance with her own ideas, even when this meant swimming against the stream.” Thus, recounts her niece, my mother decided to appear at her marriage to my father in October 1931 wearing not a white bridal gown but a flowered red dress! Unlike her brothers and sisters, she refused to return to visit Suwalk after she emigrated. Her father, who became a widower in 1930, carried on with his private business ventures and public activity and according to family members, “did not make *aliya* despite his desire to do so, because he could not bear to desert the Jewish community. He felt this was his responsibility, and the other community members felt likewise.” Ch. M. Friedman died in 1938, one year before the outbreak of World War II.

In the months immediately following the German conquest of Poland, it became clear that Suwalk’s Jewish community was doomed. In October 1939, the city was occupied by the German army, and after a short time in Soviet hands (between October and December 1939), all the Jews were expelled, some to Lithuania, some to Soviet-held territory, and some to the south. Most ultimately went to their deaths in the extermination camps.

ALIYA

The lives of the Friedman siblings who settled in Palestine were typical of those led by the not very large group of immigrants—no more than a few ten thousand—who had chosen *aliya* for Zionist ideological motives and had not immigrated after fleeing pogroms and other forms of persecution. The eldest sister, Frieda-Gila, arrived in 1919, but was deported along with some of her friends who were not allowed into the country.

They returned to Trieste, from whence they had sailed to Palestine, and remained there an entire year until, in 1920, they received permission to immigrate. Gila's friends went to Kibbutz Ein Harod, while she worked first as a nurse in Hadera, then planting trees on Mount Carmel; she subsequently joined the group that founded the village of Binyamina. She married Eliezer Beloch, a hydraulic engineer engaged in draining the Kabara marshes near Zichron. Eliezer later established a well-drilling company that specialized in deep wells, locating water in places where no one believed there was any to be found. When the company went bankrupt, he found work as a surveyor. The family moved to Pardess Hannah and later to Haifa. Gila worked in the field of immigrant absorption until the end of her days in 1961.

The eldest brother, David Aryeh, made *aliya* in 1925, served as ophthalmologist of the Herzliyya Gymnasium, and also ran a flourishing private clinic. He continued the literary activities he had begun while in Russia, and belonged to the circle of writers that included, among others, Sha'ul Tschernichovsky and Ya'akov Fichman. He edited the Jewish Medical Association's professional journal, *Harofeh*, from 1929 until his death in 1957 and wrote articles and essays in the field of medicine, as well as literary and art criticism. He was one of the earliest curators of the Tel Aviv Museum and a patron of the arts. Many of the artists he supported became, in the fullness of time, among the most prominent in the country.

My mother graduated in 1926 and was sent to work in a *tipat halav* (drop of milk) mother-and-baby clinic run by Hadassah in Tiberias and then to a tuberculosis sanatorium in Safed. When the disturbances referred to as "the 1929 incidents" began, my mother was already in Jerusalem working at a *tipat halav* clinic in the old city. Despite the fact that she was a midwife and hospital nurse, she decided to dedicate herself to the job of school and public health nurse. These were dubbed "green nurses" because of their green uniforms with a red Star of David on their triangular white collars. The green nurses cared for mothers and babies at clinics where they weighed and examined the infants, treated their illnesses, and prepared hot cereal and soup for them. The nurses also made house calls, taught mothers how to maintain a hygienic environment, and brought them modern ideas of what constituted a suitable menu for young children. In the primitive conditions that prevailed in the areas of the "old Yishuv" (pre-Zionist Jewish community), the nurses' work was quite demanding, and consisted primarily of battling health problems that were a product of inadequate sani-

tation, such as ringworm, trachoma (which, if untreated, can lead to blindness), and serious diseases affecting the digestive tract, including various forms of typhus and dysentery. In the harsh living conditions in the older sections of Jerusalem, especially in the damp cold of that city's winters, diphtheria and rheumatic fever were also endemic. My mother loved working among the *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) women of Mea Shearim, especially in the section called Batei Ungarn. These women, often the mothers of as many as six to eight children, had especially hard lives, and they reminded Mother of her own mother, with her black dress, her wig, her modest smile. Over the decades that she worked at this job, my mother cared for thousands of young families in Jerusalem's northern neighborhoods: Geula, Kerem Avraham, Mea Shearim, and others. In Jerusalem they used to say: "He who did not pass by way of Nurse Leah Friedman must have fallen into the hands of the teacher David Benvenisti."

After they married, my parents rented a two-room apartment in the Bucharan Quarter. The kitchen was a shack in the yard, at the far end of which stood the outhouse. After two years, they moved to roomier accommodations on the border of Geula, where I was born in 1934—but I am getting ahead of myself.

By the time of my birth, my father already held firm opinions regarding what he referred to as his "life's objective," a concept that encompassed his professional, national, and political aspirations. He had originally come to Eretz Israel with the intent of studying at a rabbinical college in Jerusalem. When he arrived, a sensitive young man of sixteen, he was greatly moved by the fact of actually being in the Holy City. Reflecting on his first Seder night spent outside the family circle and away from the city of his birth, he wrote: "Far am I, far from them, but where do my feet stand? In Jerusalem. And upon hearing this name, the obstacles recede, the homesickness vanishes." My father's *aliya* to the land was an expression of Zionist aspirations that had been nurtured by "emissaries" from Palestine—foremost among whom was the esteemed pedagogue Yitzhak Epstein—and also via direct contact with the Zionist institutions that were springing up throughout eastern and central Europe. But in my father's case, the religious component dominated. A journal entry dated April 1914 reads: "My initial education I received from my grandfather, N'Vinisti Shmuel [*sic*], at whose knee I was raised. With him I learned Torah, and his influence on me was immeasurable. He inspired me to appreciate all the religious points of view and to become a future bearer of the banner of religion, and to that end, I came

to Eretz Israel.” His original intent in coming to Jerusalem was “to carry the banner of religion in one of the places in the Balkans,” and he did not flinch from writing the following sentence: “To Eretz Israel I am not bound; the Diaspora calls to me, and it is my duty to go there.”

A short stay in Jerusalem caused him to rethink his “life’s objective.” The rabbinical college did not live up to his expectations: “The institute is not of a high level.” He was unable to understand “how I had exchanged a religious social atmosphere full of wisdom and spiritual activity in my city (Salonika) for this institute in Jerusalem cut off from the life of the community.” He decided to leave the rabbinical college and to enroll in the Hebrew Teachers’ Seminary (where the language of instruction was Hebrew), joining his group of friends from Salonika who had arrived together in 1914. This was a hard choice, since he had long seen his vocation as studying for the rabbinate. Thus, at first he represents the decision as not binding: “At the present time I wish to complete my studies, and as time goes by, the objective of my life will become clear.” But on the same day, he writes, “I am entering the Hebrew Seminary because I view it as the most important institution where the Hebrew spirit prevails, which is essential to a Hebrew youth who has set as his objective in life an involvement in intellectual pursuits.” Elsewhere he elaborates: “The rabbinate and teaching have common characteristics. Their shared goals are to educate the younger generation in national and human values and to provide guidance for a decent life.”

His decision to transfer to the secular-nationalist teachers’ seminary came three months before the start of World War I, and the events of the war reinforced my father’s inclination to devote his life “to furthering his studies in a pure Hebrew spirit in accordance with Zionist and nationalist values.” Hence, he gave himself fully to the struggle for the exclusive use of Hebrew as the language of instruction and everyday use, and his journal abounds with references to the so-called language war. He also enthusiastically participated in the founding of a “group of Sephardi young people whose objective would be to dignify the image of the Sephardim,” and he viewed the imparting of the history of those expelled from Spain as being of utmost importance.

His visits to the new Jewish villages filled him with pride and joy, but these emotions were tempered with criticism: “I imagined that the villages would be more nationalistic, but in all of them corruption is rampant; the essence, the inwardness is lacking. No longer are they animated by the ideal, but by materialism instead. Even the Hebrew language is not

dominant in village life, the farmers' meetings being conducted in 'jargon.' Only the younger generation, the small children in particular, speak Hebrew. If striving for material things were accompanied by the aspiration to return to spiritual-nationalist deeds, then would we be able to boast about our villages. Now we have only a pretty exterior, but the soul is lacking." Nevertheless, in one place he writes appreciatively: "Boys are sitting on their land and breathing in its pure air. In the villages a new, free life is being fashioned, and the first foundations for the great edifice of the People of Israel have already been erected."

THE JEWISH LEGION

My father's commitment to the service of the Jewish people reached its peak following the liberation of Jerusalem in December 1917, when he participated in an event aimed at recruiting volunteers for the Jewish Legion of the British Army (Royal Fusiliers, 38th battalion; later 40th). For him, volunteering for the Jewish Legion had been a supreme act of pioneering, vital to the fulfillment of Zionism. In his journal, he quotes Berl Katzenelson (a leading figure in the socialist Zionist movement and one of the foremost advocates of Jewish enlistment in the British war effort): "The Jewish Legion adds a new meaning to our life in Eretz Israel; it is the need of the hour, just as the introduction of the principle of 'Hebrew labor' to our settlement policy was in the past." In a letter to a friend who had not enlisted, my father writes in October 1918: "The days were days of stormy heart and uplifted spirit, and the idea that captivated us before we undertook any concrete action, this idea has been actualized. With great diligence, we have continued our military studies in order to be prepared at the earliest possible opportunity to take part in a war for the liberation of our country."

He identified with the sentiments of one of the volunteers, who declared: "Our national soul has sunk in the mud and slime; we need to cleanse it, to bring to it atonement, and this atonement will come by the spilling of our blood; we need to spill our blood. We must show that we are not in the least an abject and contemptible people that accepts charity. We must show that we know how to spill our blood for the liberation of our land." Of the moment when he was handed the recruitment papers to sign, my father writes: "They gave me ten minutes to decide. These ten minutes were sacred to me, and I shall never forget them as long as I live. . . . In the end I came to the realization that I must volun-

teer *unconditionally* [underlined]. The nation calls and [we] must rally 'round the flag. . . My hand trembled when I wrote my name. . . . Here I am, now a Hebrew soldier, a son of my people. At that moment I dedicated my life to the liberation of my homeland."

His military service was a long process, which nurtured his nationalist and patriotic values and was rich in formative experiences that influenced the course of his life. In the last piece in the "Legion Journal" that he kept, he writes thus: "A period pregnant with adventure . . . unforgettable experiences . . . has come to an end. . . . We shall yet be aided by the military knowledge we acquired in the Legion in our role of defending the land. As for my friends and myself, we are today giving up the sword for the book."

But here lay his great disappointment: "Eretz Israel was liberated from the Turks, and we, though schooled in war, were not able to participate in her liberation. . . . Our primary function was fulfilled by others." The Jewish battalions played hardly any part at all in the fighting for Palestine, and my father's military activity was limited to guarding headquarters and camps for Turkish prisoners of war and escorting military trains. But despite everything, he continued to believe that the Jewish Legion had "another role that was as important as the first . . . to serve as the basis for a future Jewish militia. . . . Thus, many think that our battalion will act as a garrison force in the land." But this hope, too, rapidly faded; the soldiers of the battalion were not even permitted to go to the defense of Jerusalem's Jewish population, which was under Arab attack in April 1920, and ultimately it was disbanded.

KNOWING THE LAND

There was no stage in my father's life that was not infused with devotion to nationalist goals. His dedication to education and to imparting *Yediat Ha'aretz* ("Knowing the Land") to the general public frequently impelled him to reiterate his commitment to Zionist ideals when expressing himself on these matters, whether in writing or orally: "How severe the labor pains of our land," he writes to the schoolgirls he taught in 1928. "The way is full of obstacles, and sometimes the ground drops out from under our feet; many are the failures and many the affronts, and yet there is something here that you can rely upon so [that] your feet will not stumble and that, in spite of everything, accompanies you all along your way: . . . you know that there is a point to all this suffering—the sense of creation is palpable in everything."

My father's attitude toward our Arab neighbors was typical of his generation. It was characterized by almost complete disregard for their existence, with their being mentioned only in the context of acts of violence. The first such reference in his journal was in the winter of 1915: "Even in our land there is no rest. Among the Arabs there have arisen men who are inciting the simple masses to attack the Jews. Jewish youths have gathered in secret to set up self-defense for when it may be required and have sworn to sacrifice their lives for the peace of the land."

It was especially important to him that he be remembered as a member and officer in the Haganah, and in his archives he kept the papers announcing his appointment as "secretary of the Haganah committee" in Zichron, and as "commander [of] the detachment guarding the northern front (beside the hospital)." In a letter dated May 1921, he writes: "I was devoted body and soul to the defense of the village. At night I did guard duty, and I slept under the open sky outside the village, gun in hand and prepared for any eventuality. While on guard duty at night, and particularly on those nights when we anticipated an attack and prepared ourselves for battle, how happy I was. I did not think of death. My heart filled with joy, not because this might be my opportunity to fight and die for the homeland (I do not believe that a man is happy in anticipation of death, even for the sake of the homeland), but simply because I thought that this was a means by which I might resolve all of life's questions, and that all the struggles of my soul might come to an end, as well as all ephemeral strivings and hopes." He deleted his reflections on death from the letter as quoted in his autobiography.

He devoted considerable thought to the name by which Arab violence should be known: "incidents," "pogroms or massacres," or "war." A 1920 journal entry refers to "pogroms in Jerusalem"; however, in 1929, he writes to a friend: "On Friday the war began, and under no circumstances shall I agree to the word 'pogroms.' Use of this name is justified only in Hebron [where Jews were murdered with shocking brutality]." In his letter, he approvingly quotes the wondering question of little Ra'aya from the second grade, "What did we do to them [the Arabs] that they're attacking us?" In 1936, he pens the following description to a friend abroad: "The land is immersed in darkness, blood, fire, and clouds of smoke. 'Children are playing before us' [a biblical expression referring to the actions of irresponsible persons], destroying property, disrupting transportation; and the authorities, in their folly, stand idly by. When they locate the leaders, they do not harm, or even warn, them. And of course, we have to pay for all this. It should

be noted that the Arab village is quiet, and the rioters are primarily rabble. The Jewish Yishuv calmly goes about its business, bites its tongue, and despite everything, continues its efforts and builds.”

In the partition dispute of 1937, which saw the Jewish community split between those who supported the Peel Commission’s report recommending the partition of Palestine and those who opposed it, my father stood with the latter: “There are rumors afoot regarding cantonization,” he writes to a friend, “and we, where do we come down on this question? Will we permit them to divide our land? Will we hand the [Judean and Samaritan] hills over to them? How right you were,” he continues, “when you spoke out against the leaders who sent us to settle on the Shephela [coastal plain] and kept us away from the hills.”

Teaching Knowing the Land had always been an activity requiring patriotic commitment, and the school subject *moledet* (homeland) was an important vehicle for indoctrination. In my father’s words, it “was not like the mere study of geography but [was] like a course of studies embodying important nationalist-educational values.” The hiking clubs that my father founded along with his childhood friend Nathan Shalem and others were much more than a simple leisure-time pursuit. The minutes of the Founding Assembly of the Ramblers’ Society, held on 20 November 1927, quote Dr. Shalem:

We may have a variety of objectives; however, the principal one is to know our homeland, and the principal means—hiking. And besides the primary objective of knowing the homeland, the athletic side of hiking is important as well. I visualize our society as taking the form of the alpine societies that exist in Europe and the rest of the world. This latter objective may have great importance. Take, for example, the fact that only with the help of Italian alpinists was Italy able to occupy the Tyrol, etc. [after World War I].

Nathan Shalem had studied at an Italian university and had been influenced in his thinking by the Italian nationalist movement and its hero, Gabriele D’Annunzio. My father, on the other hand, had a less heroic vision. “We must hike and that’s all. . . . Experience has taught me to shun publicity and large crowds. In order to even approach the realization of Shalem’s program, we would have to hike for at least a year and know our strength.” He did not, however, cease to emphasize the nationalistic objectives of the society, whose official name was the Eretz Israel Ramblers Society and whose motto was “Who shall give me leave to ramble in places that G-d has revealed to thy prophets and thy messengers?” (Yehuda Halevi).

THE RAMBLERS

In an article about the Ramblers Society published in 1933 in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, the writer—identified only by the initials B. E.—describes the society's activities:

Two young teachers, Dr. Nathan Shalem and David Benvenisti, founded the society, and for the past few years their enterprise has been growing quietly and without fanfare. This society, begun by a handful of Jerusalemites, has become a nationwide federation with numerous members and many branches; and from time to time, hundreds of young people leave behind our cities and villages, the conflict and arguments of political parties, uniforms and slogans, or the cafes, and journey to the wilderness of Judea, ascend the mountains of our land and descend into its valleys, come to the villages of our [Arab] neighbors and are guests in the tents of the Bedouin, and find their way to every forgotten corner and every place where no Jewish foot has trodden in our lifetimes. Thus do the Ramblers combine the beautiful with the effective: they enjoy the glories of nature and the fresh air, and at the same time, they are learning the lay of the land by "seeing it with their own eyes." . . . And to what the Ramblers are seeing with their own eyes is added an enormously powerful emotion: love—a deep love for the homeland, which contains within it the yearnings of countless generations of Jews.

At the seventh general meeting (or assembly, as it was called) of the Ramblers, in 1934, there was a lengthy discussion regarding the distinctive character of the society, its goals, and its bylaws. The question of acceptance of non-Jewish members arose. A member named Yanover proposed adding the word "Hebrew" to the society's name. My father pointed out that it was permissible according to the existing bylaws to bring in Arabs, as well as Jews. However, another member, Ben-Zion Lurie, stated that theirs was a Hebrew national society, and that therefore non-Jews should not be admitted. My father insisted that "non-Jews should not be denied the possibility of joining. . . . A person should not be denied this right because of his nationality." A vote was taken, and the decision was twelve to three in favor of having the society be open to everyone. However, the subject came up once more, this time in the context of the drafting of the membership application. In the first draft, it was written that members would be accepted who were known "for their proper relationship to the values of society and the nation." Nathan Shalem asked that this requirement be omitted, "because many and various are the doctrines of the parties and the different political currents, such that there is no objective criterion for the notion of society or nation." Y. Yisraeli requested that the words "values of Zionism"

be added. In the end, the wording of the original draft was retained, with the proposal to omit the requirement regarding “national values” being defeated seven to five.

Some of the society’s hikes were easy and short, but some were long treks that traversed remote and hazardous regions. The worsening security situation (e.g., the 1929 disturbances and the Arab Revolt of 1936–39) had a deleterious effect on the society’s activities, but did not bring them to an end. One obvious result of the intensification of Jewish-Arab enmity was a sense that “[w]e must reexamine our relationship with the Arabs and particularly with the Arabs of the desert.” This reexamination was of practical import for the society, since the Ramblers employed Bedouin as guides on their desert hikes and relied upon them. The most famous of these was Haj Abdallah al-A’ayan, a member of the Ta’amreh tribe, who lived in a cave near Herodion (east of Bethlehem) and had guided teams of English and German researchers even prior to World War I. He and my father were close friends, and Haj Abdallah often came to our home to visit with him.

With the outbreak of hostilities in 1929, my father was attacked for this policy: “What do you say about these Arabs of yours?” it was asked, meaning, my father writes, “about these guides from the Ta’amreh tribe with whom we were friendly on our desert trips and who had taken part in an attack on the Talpiot neighborhood [in Jerusalem] and looted homes there.” His conclusion was the same as that arrived at by the Yishuv’s leaders on every occasion that disturbances erupted—and especially when they were at their peak in 1937 and 1938: separation. “We need not always be dependent upon them for guidance along the trails of this country. We must reach all the hidden corners of the land, become familiar with every path, every mountain. The day will come when guides familiar with the country’s trails will be common among our members.” And indeed, within a relatively short period of time, the Ramblers’ leaders had succeeded in freeing themselves from the necessity of employing Arab guides.

The importance they attached to doing their own guiding resulted in their investing a great deal of effort in collecting the details of their excursions in notebooks and subsequently editing them to produce a book that would be available to “ Rambler, teacher, and tourist,” as the title page proclaims.² The observations in the notebooks were informative, descriptive, and even occasionally written in a flowery style. For example, a hike to the Lower Galilee on the thirteenth and fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Nisan, 5691 (April 1931):

EVENING IN THE VILLAGE (SAFURIYYA—TSIPORI)

The sun sinks behind the Carmel Hills. The Beit Netofa Valley is slumbering and the Shazor Mountains stand guard over it. The muezzin calls to the faithful with flourishes of his beautiful voice. The village prepares the evening meal. The crescent moon spills its light onto the face of the village as it sleeps. The villagers' voices fade. Fog spreads over the Beit Netofa Valley.

We left the village at 7:15. The comrades were in good spirits. One commented, "Another day to stand in the open." He wished thereby to turn our attention to the pleasant scenery visible on every side. . . . At 8:10 we reached Khirbat Roma. It stands on a hill [whence the name Roma, *ram* being a height]. All around are beautiful valleys. To the north of Roma is Tel Wawiyat, about which people would say: All the vicinity is valley and there is only one *tel*; the jackals climb up [it] and begin to howl; that is why they call it the Tel of the Jackals [*wawi*, *wawiyat*, jackal, jackals]. At 9:40 we reached the foot of the mountain. Here there is a fork in the road. The path winding to the right on the mountain goes to Arraba, and the path that goes to the left turns toward Yodphat [Jotapata]. We arrived at Khirbat Cana, at the entrance to Wadi Daidaba, which descends to the West. We passed in front of the *khirba* and turned westward in a wadi separating the mountains of Daidaba and the mountains of Yodphat. We marched through the wadi and entered a beautiful world. The wadi is covered with an abundance of trees. To the left, the mountainsides are covered with plentiful trees, a bushy forest, carob trees, oaks, and blooming hawthorn: the farther we advance, the more tangled the forest. Wild almond trees, the kandoul, brilliant with shades of yellow, anemones, and even cyclamens. . . . At about 11:00, our feet brought us to Yodphat. . . . Encircling the summit of the mountain are large natural caverns that serve as enclosures for sheep and cattle, descending to the west are steps cut into the rock-face. . . . During our descent from the mountain, one of our members found two Hebrew coins: on one a date palm and on the other a star. At nightfall, we returned to Tsipori.

Occasionally the description is completely straightforward:

We leave the village and walk on a road bounded by *sabra* plants. Ten minutes later, the road divides, with one [fork] going to the right. We walk along the left fork among the olive trees (the right-hand fork follows the ridge), and after 35 minutes, we enter Sahel Safuriyya, a beautiful plain, and the road there is convenient for carts and small cars. The road passes between two stone walls, and most of the plain is to its left.

The material that had been gathered in the numerous notebooks was transferred to a two-volume book totaling more than 850 pages. This guidebook describes twenty excursions by car and by boat on the Dead Sea, eight tours of Jerusalem, and 162 hikes (including some in Trans-

jordan, on Mount Hermon, in the Hauran, and in the Sinai). It includes introductory chapters designed to furnish the reader with general information about the country, its inhabitants, its natural features, climate, and history, as well as a Hebrew-Arabic conversation guide. The authors contributed material from their personal experience regarding preparations for a hike, guidelines for behavior while on the road, first aid, photography, map-reading, and also “etiquette and customs when visiting in Arab villages.” For example:

The hike’s leader is to make sure that the hikers do not violate local customs nor make demands upon the village’s inhabitants. . . . Should villagers come to welcome the visitors, the leader of the hikers converses with them about work, planting and plowing, harvesting and threshing. One may inquire as to the names of the mountains, places, and ancient ruins in the vicinity, and especially discuss historical matters. One does not speak about religion and belief, much less politics, except if the head of the household wishes it.

In their foreword to the guidebook, the authors define the objective of the hikes:

Today, when we set out to educate the complete Jew, it is not sufficient to open to him the wellsprings of the spirit of Israel; rather, it is incumbent upon us to bring him into direct contact with nature, which has blessed our land with lovely vistas. . . . And you should be aware that love of the homeland is acquired also via the exertions of wandering and wayfaring, and the more hiking a person does, the more feeling for the homeland will take root in his soul. . . . And just as the earth serves as the foundation for the renaissance of the nation, so an acquaintance with the land provides the foundation for the renaissance of the nation’s spirit. Because of this, the hikes must not be limited solely to the Hebrew settlements and readily accessible routes, but the entire land must be revealed to the eye of the Hebrew—with all its villages, settlements, and ruins.

This reference to “the entire land” took on special significance soon after the publication of the book, with the announcement of the Peel Commission’s recommendations regarding the partition of Palestine. The authors’ response was to write:

The completion of the book took place at a time when the Hebrew public in this country was alarmed to hear the royal commission’s recommendation to establish a Jewish state within very narrow boundaries. At that time, many were of the opinion that our work, as well, must be restricted to within the boundaries of the proposed state. Nevertheless, the authors have not deviated from the course that they laid out at the beginning of their work, out of a clear recognition that never in its life-

time have the Jewish People had but one land, which was set aside for them in its historic and natural boundaries, even though it has become a land of gentiles.

DISEMPOWERED

My father was fifty years old when the 1948 war began. He joined the National Guard, a unit of older soldiers who manned the major checkpoints that were set up along the borders of the Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem, and he was wounded in May 1948 by shrapnel. He and his middle-aged comrades, who had for decades hiked the trails of the land and knew every hamlet and valley, sat at home and mourned former students of theirs serving in the Haganah who had been killed on their way to carry out missions, often simply because they were unfamiliar with the terrain and had lost their way. My father was especially pained by the deaths of “the Lamed-Heh” (“the 35”), thirty-five young soldiers who had set out from the school building in Beit Hakerem one day in January 1948, headed for the besieged Ezion Block, not far from Hebron—many of whom he had taught. His frustration is evident in an exchange of letters with his good friend Pinchas Cohen: “Here you are, sitting at home, powerless to go and join these youngsters. . . . It would be better to take up one’s walking stick and backpack and to walk ahead of these patrols, for why should they fall whose whole lives and all the future are before them?”

“I knew at the time that the young fellows had gone astray in the wilds,” Cohen writes in his reply, “and you came forward, and you said that that was what had occurred. How right we were in our day and in the struggle we carried on—when we brought our school-age young men and women up to the hills to familiarize them with the trails of the homeland. I did this, and so did you, but we knew it was just a drop in the bucket. How many young people were around even at the best of times? The youth in general did not hike, and maps alone are not enough. Our cousins [the Arabs] follow their noses like a hunting dog sniffing the wind. . . . This matter is worsening apace, but that is what we anticipated from the beginning. We must not despair.”

Then my father volunteered to lecture to soldiers—many of them new immigrants drafted straight off the boat—about the landscape and the communities where they bivouacked before and after battle. His descriptions of those days, though somewhat bombastic, are also almost euphoric.

In those days (before the war), when we used to ramble in the Judean hills, we would plunge into a sea of recollections of the past—of the days when Judah surely dwelt in his land. . . . sensing the echo of the footfalls of our prophets. . . . and the presence of generation upon generation of Israel's heroes, who fought valiantly to restore the nation's freedom. However, upon arriving—after a lengthy trek—at villages built on mountaintops and hillsides and coming in contact with plowman and shepherd from the stock of Ishmael, we would be brought back to bitter reality. We would realize that only the smallest portion of the nation of Judea was now in these hills—how the times have changed. . . . And now it appears as if a sorcerer had touched the hills with his wand. The shadows of the past are brought back to life. . . . The descendents of the Hasmoneans—each man with weapon in hand, standing guard—grasping in their trusty hands the heritage of our forebears—the Judean hills. Judah dwells in his mountains, and the sons have returned to their borders.

The abandoned Arab villages and fields he describes thus:

Vineyards and orchards with trees laden with earth's blessing of fruit; occasional farm plots are visible—plots of standing corn just ready for harvest, the whole crop bowing its head as if embarrassed by the weight of its load of kernels, which would not have the privilege of benefiting man or beast. . . . The ruins of the large houses that had been nests of murderers are testimony to the great battle that raged inside them. . . . After fighting bravely, the inhabitants scattered to the winds. . . . The enemy fled, leaving behind many casualties on the battlefield.

Pinchas Cohen, in a letter written in December 1948, gives a description of my father guiding an excursion in the vicinity of Lod. A friend of Cohen's had returned from the hike and told him: "A short little guy was describing the places there, and he knew every stone and every wadi [dry river bed] and every village and every valley.' I asked, 'And did he go around without a hat?' 'Yes.' 'And he wore glasses?' 'Yes.' 'And does his hair blow wildly in the wind?' 'Yes.' 'And does he speak as if knowledge of all the land is on the tip of his tongue?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'He is my good friend David. You will see that is so—one of these days we shall meet while helping numerous groups find the information they seek, and all the land shall be overflowing with knowledge like water.'"

ALWAYS UNDER SIEGE

In a lecture that he gave on the eve of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) in October 1948, my father detailed the stages of Jerusalem's growth and development and described how the hostile British authorities and their Arab cronies had devised a "satanic plan" to hem in the

city's Jewish population and to confine it to certain parts of town. The Arab neighborhoods, he contended, were being built as a "military operation" whose objective was to isolate the Jewish population living in the south of the city from their brothers in the city center. After the construction of the residential neighborhoods, "They [the Arabs] also commenced a systematic takeover of the Jewish commercial centers, which had acquired land in choice locations the length of Jaffa Road [Jerusalem's main street in British Mandate times] and the streets adjacent to it; Jewish merchants subsequently left Mamilla Street, the greater part of the [old] Commercial Center on Julian's Way [beside the King David Hotel], and the area from the Jaffa Gate [of the Old City] to the Russian Compound. Even in West Jerusalem, the people of the village of Lifta drove wedges of construction between Jewish homes, and on the Mount Scopus Road, rich Muslims built palatial mansions—in order to cut off our 'palaces of culture' [i.e., the Hebrew University] on Mount Scopus."

The Jews, a definite majority in West Jerusalem, were always "under siege" in my father's opinion, always cut off, always threatened. The Arabs, whose building activity was, in actuality, a matter of private, individual initiative, were supposedly acting according to a master plan in coordination with the British authorities. Conversely, in this scenario, the Jews were depicted as the passive victims of a fiendish plan of conquest, although nearly all Jewish building was initiated or supported by public or community bodies and motivated by the desire to dominate territory and secure transportation routes.

Everything, of course, fell into place with the liberation of Jerusalem during the 1948 war. "The detached islands, which had until then suffered at the hands of the cruel enemy, now served as a springboard for the conquest of the adjacent Arab-populated neighborhoods, and the work was completed. . . . Many tens of thousands of Arab residents fled at gunpoint, abandoning their homes, their possessions, and their magnificent and prosperous commercial establishments." "But," my father cautions, "the work will only truly be completed when we have restored the holy places that were lost to us and Israel's dwelling place in the Old City, as well as all our beloved shrines that were occupied, looted, destroyed, and burnt down by impure people." One can easily imagine my father's feelings when I came and told him that we had captured the Old City (the accomplishment of the occupation was still a secret at the time). In his view, the 1967 war was the final battle in a 2,000-year struggle: "Some 1,830 years had passed since the fall of Jerusalem—

with its cherished shrines—into the hands of enemy and foe in the days of Simeon Bar Kochba, ‘president of Israel’ [who led an unsuccessful revolt against the Romans 132–35 C.E.], until its restoration to Jewish rule,” he writes. “With the pure blood of its courageous warriors, the IDF liberated the Western [Wailing] Wall and joined together the two halves of Jerusalem.” In the guidebook that he hastened to publish, he meticulously inscribed the date: “Year 1 of the Redemption of United Jerusalem.”

LIBERATION OF “THE ENTIRE LAND”

Throughout the 1948 war, and with the partition of the land in its wake, my father aired no extremist political views and was a loyal member of the ruling Israel Workers’ Party (MAPAI), even becoming a candidate for the Knesset, although not high enough on the party’s list to realistically expect to be elected. But his yearnings for those regions of the country that remained outside the borders of the new state reemerged immediately following the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank and territories under Syrian and Egyptian control. He wrote in July 1967:

Before the Six-Day War, the most important parts of our land were outside the jurisdiction of the state of Israel. Our not being able to move about them freely meant that our appreciation of the significance of many chapters in our history was imperfect. Our victory in the war has broadened our horizons. Now we are able to journey the length and breadth of the land, to enjoy its abundance of sublime natural vistas, and to breathe its air in all kinds of weather. . . . Colonization of the land, and especially in the areas that have been recovered from foreign rule, forges—through creative labor—our national bond to it [i.e., the land] and transfers to us the right of ownership. . . . Hiking is also an effective means for establishing proper relations with the Arab population that has possession of stretches of the liberated territory of Eretz Israel.

LATE RECOGNITION

For many years my father felt that the true value of his achievements had not been publicly acknowledged. All the honors he had received, including having been named Worthy of Jerusalem (*Yakir Yerushalayim*) in 1969, did not satisfy him. And then, at the age of eighty-five, out of the blue, he won the 1987 Israel Prize, the country’s highest civilian award, for his life’s work “in imparting Knowing the Land and love for the

homeland.” The judges’ rationale for awarding him the prize included the following:

From the very beginning of his active career, he strove to form devotees of Knowing the Land into an organized body and with friends founded the Ramblers’ Society, which was the first group in Eretz Israel to deal on a permanent and ongoing basis with the organization of excursions and lectures and with conveying knowledge of the homeland. . . . Many are the outstanding scholars on the subject of Eretz Israel, and many the guides who are conversant with its trails; however, there walks among us today one man who has dedicated his life to the education of educators and has fostered generations of lovers of Eretz Israel. This is David Benvenisti—for his life’s work in imparting Knowing the Land and love for the homeland, he is a worthy recipient of the Israel Prize.

My father’s “life objective” of imparting Knowing the Land and love for the homeland found its most complete expression in the textbooks he wrote, in which an abundance of geographical, zoological, botanical, historical, geological, hydrological, ethnographic, and folkloric information is organized in strict accordance with the principle that he laid out when he described the methods for teaching Knowing the Land as “a course of studies embodying important nationalist-educational values.”

My father published a series of textbooks about the various regions of Eretz Israel, designed for student and hiker alike, called *Our Land* and *Israel*, as well as maps and guides. In the opening pages of a booklet devoted to the hills of Samaria (1946), he writes:

When our nation returned to the land [i.e., in the early days of Zionism], they remembered also the hills of Samaria—especially their northernmost region—scoring the earth with their plows and reviving the forests. However, the greater part of these hills—the good and fertile portion—still awaits redemption. Let us examine the natural conditions of the Samaritan hills that are the source of their fertility. . . . Let us take note of the efforts made by our brothers to redeem the hills from their desolation, and let us celebrate the epoch of our courageous first pioneers.

At the beginning of the booklet on the Judean hills, he writes enthusiastically:

In our day, when the People of Israel have gained control of our land and have set their plows to renew the face of the land, the Judean hills were privileged to be the first of the hills to be redeemed, even if not on a large scale. . . . Let us go up to the Judean hills; we shall walk their length and breadth and observe their structure and crops and their inhabitants, and we shall learn how we can restore their glory as in ancient times.

The information on the Arab population that my father saw fit to impart to the student of Knowing the Land was minimal. Moreover, he consciously and systematically ignored this large sector of Israel's citizenry. Of the city of Nazareth, he wrote: "It is the principal city of the Lower Galilee. . . . The towers of Christian churches are visible among the houses. Christian pilgrims visit there. According to their tradition, Nazareth was where Jesus had his home . . . Since the War of Independence, the Jewish community there has grown apace, and a new town called Upper Nazareth was built." The student does not even learn that the inhabitants of Nazareth are mainly Arab, not to mention anything about their way of life and their problems.

Regarding the 1948 war and its impact, my father wrote: "In the War of Independence, when the Arab armies were scheming to totally annihilate the Jewish population of Safed, and along with it the agricultural communities of the Western Galilee, the most courageous of Israel's warriors hastened to the aid of the city. After fierce battles, the entire city was reoccupied." The reader has no cause to suspect that Arabs lived in Safed and were, in fact, the majority of the population. After fleeing or being expelled outright in the wake of the war, they were uprooted from history as well—as if they had never been there: "In the old part of the city live painters and artisans . . . and they draw pictures of the vicinity's beautiful landscape and of interesting places inside the city." The homes of the Arabs and their mosques—now turned into art galleries—have been purged of any relationship to their original inhabitants. "On the western ridge of the Upper Galilee, the Jewish communities of S'as'a, Elkosh, Hosen, Parod, Kfar Shamai, Meron, [and] Peqi'in, were established, as well as others. On the Heights of Gush Halav . . . stand the villages of Safsufa, Kerem Ben Zimra, 'Alma, Bar'am, and others." The only reference to the Arab villages that were destroyed and in whose place Jewish communities were established is indirect: "The Arab villages retained the ancient Hebrew names from the era of the Second Temple and later." The Arab villages of Sa'sa', Deir el-Qasi, Suhmata, Faradiyya, Kufr Suma'i, Meroun, Safsufa, Alma, Ras al-Ahmar, and Bir'im—upon whose ruins and lands Jewish communities were built—sank into oblivion without a trace, and even their names, as my father tells it, were nothing more than bastardizations of the authentic Hebrew ones, an aberration of sorts, which was rectified with their "liberation," the expulsion of their inhabitants, and their repopulation with Jewish immigrants.

In early 2000, I published a book entitled *Sacred Landscape*, in which I describe the fate of the Arab-Palestinian landscape that was destroyed in 1948, its remnants having been covered over by the present-day Israeli landscape.³ This book was a kind of challenge aimed at the cult of Knowing the Land—the cornerstones for which were laid, as described above, by my father and others. In a critique of the book, the Jewish American neoconservative orientalist Daniel Pipes, whose Israeli patriotism is evidently stronger than my own, wrote:

This Israeli writer finds innovative new ways to injure his country—the introduction to *Sacred Landscape* may be the book's most interesting section. In it he recounts accompanying his father on mapping trips that played a major role in establishing "a Hebrew map of the land," then admits hating his father's success: "His map triumphed and I, his dutiful son, was left with the heavy burden of the fruits of victory." So that's it; Benvenisti's bizarre politics are symptoms of delayed filial rebellion. How pathetic.⁴