

“The ultimate insider’s account.” *THE JERUSALEM POST*

# THE PRIME MINISTERS

AN INTIMATE NARRATIVE OF ISRAELI LEADERSHIP

## YEHUDA AVNER

INTRODUCTION BY MARTIN GILBERT



Toby

# Contents

<i>Author's Note</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Principal Characters</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Foreword by the Rt. Hon. Sir Martin Gilbert</i>	<i>xxi</i>

## **PART I: BEGINITES AND ANTI-BEGINITES**

<i>Chapter 1: In the Beginning</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Chapter 2: Desperate Hopes and Savage Defiance</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Esther</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Chapter 4: Independence Day</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Chapter 5: The Rock Harvesters of Galilee</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Chapter 6: The Oxford Union</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Interregnum</i>	<i>97</i>

## **PART II: COALITIONS AND OPPOSITIONS**

### ***Prime Minister Levi Eshkol***

<i>Chapter 7: A Novice in the Foreign Ministry</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Chapter 8: A Greenhorn in the Prime Minister's Bureau</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter 9: A Walk with Harry Truman</i>	<i>115</i>

<i>Chapter 10: A Perfidious Syrian Design</i>	125
<i>Chapter 11: The Gathering Storm</i>	135
<i>Chapter 12: An Uncommon Proposal and a Disastrous Broadcast</i>	145
<i>Chapter 13: A Prayer at the Wall</i>	153
<i>Chapter 14: Deep in the Heart of Texas</i>	165
<i>Chapter 15: An Unlikely Ambassador and a Premier's Passing</i>	179
<i>Chapter 16: Envoy of the Year</i>	187

***Prime Minister Golda Meir***

<i>Chapter 17: Changing of the Guard</i>	201
<i>Chapter 18: Golda and Oriana: A Romance</i>	207
<i>Chapter 19: The Shame of Schoenau</i>	219
<i>Chapter 20: The SAMs of Suez</i>	225
<i>Chapter 21: Once Upon a Sukka Time</i>	233

***Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin***

<i>Chapter 22: The Instant Premier</i>	261
<i>Chapter 23: Yeduha</i>	273
<i>Chapter 24: Collusion at Salzburg</i>	285
<i>Chapter 25: A Presidential Letter</i>	295
<i>Chapter 26: Entebbe – Flight 139</i>	303
<i>Chapter 27: Enter Jimmy Carter</i>	319
<i>Chapter 28: Swansong</i>	331

**PART III: THE LAST PATRIARCH**

***Prime Minister Menachem Begin***

<i>Chapter 29: Upheaval</i>	345
-----------------------------	-----

<i>Chapter 30: A Jew of Many Parts</i>	363
<i>Chapter 31: Yechiel and Begin</i>	381
<i>Chapter 32: The Open House</i>	389
<i>Chapter 33: The Bible Circle</i>	395
<i>Chapter 34: Washington</i>	401
<i>Chapter 35: The Presidential Encounter</i>	409
<i>Chapter 36: The Dinner</i>	429
<i>Chapter 37: To Ignite the Soul</i>	443
<i>Chapter 38: A Duel in the Knesset</i>	451
<i>Chapter 39: The Night Sadat Came</i>	457
<i>Chapter 40: Deadlock</i>	473
<i>Chapter 41: Abie Finegold Saves the Peace Treaty</i>	487
<i>Chapter 42: The Child in El Arish</i>	499
<i>Chapter 43: Begin's Bag and Baggage</i>	503
<i>Chapter 44: Purity of Arms</i>	523
<i>Chapter 45: O Jerusalem</i>	531
<i>Chapter 46: Germany – the Eternal and Infernal Reverie</i>	541
<i>Chapter 47: When Yet Another Holocaust Loomed</i>	551
<i>Chapter 48: Asset or Ally?</i>	565
<i>Chapter 49: Death of a President</i>	573
<i>Chapter 50: Pacta Sunt Servanda</i>	589
<i>Chapter 51: The Sabbath Queen</i>	595
<i>Chapter 52: Waging War, Preaching Peace</i>	603
<i>Chapter 53: "I Did Not Misperceive You"</i>	613
<i>Chapter 54: An Inept Attempt at a Flawed Peace</i>	627
<i>Chapter 55: The Rosh Hashanah of Sabra and Shatila</i>	641

<i>Chapter 56: “To Everything There Is a Season”</i>	651
<i>Chapter 57: “I Cannot Go On”</i>	669
<i>Chapter 58: Journey’s End</i>	693
<i>Afterword</i>	697
<i>Endnotes</i>	705
<i>Bibliography</i>	711
<i>Index</i>	715
<i>About the Author</i>	731

## Chapter 4

# Independence Day

**T**he fourteenth of May 1948 was a Friday, and unbearably hot. A desert wind blew from the east, fanning the countryside like a blow dryer. For three consecutive sun-grilled days and restless nights we had been taking turns hacking trenches out of a chalky Jerusalem mountainside on the city's western edge, overlooking the Arab village of Ein Karem. There were about twenty-five of us, armed with pickaxes, shovels, and a dozen World War I Lee Enfield rifles – an untrained, inglorious bucket brigade of diggers and hackers fortifying a narrow sector of Jerusalem's western front.

In truth, there was no real frontline where we were, and, other than sporadic sniper fire and an occasional mortar shell, it was quiet. But rumor had it that an offensive would be launched from Ein Karem that night, against besieged Western Jerusalem. We'd heard that Iraqi irregulars were infiltrating Ein Karem to join up with a Jordanian brigade coming up from Jericho. We were supposed to stop them, but nobody knew how, least of all the man in charge, a fellow called Elisha Linder. With twelve obsolete rifles and a motley crew like ours, what was he supposed to do?

One insuperable problem was that he had no means of communication with the outside world – no field phone, no Intelligence, not even a radio. So in the absence of solid facts, rumor piled upon rumor: David Ben-Gurion had capitulated to Washington and would not declare independence; Menachem Begin was planning an uprising; Arab armies were

invading; the United Nations was in emergency session to pass a resolution asking the British to stay.

In truth it was not the Arabs, but thirst, that was our principal foe that day. I was on the water-carrying detail with Leopold Mahler (Jock McAdam had gone off to the Red Cross as an ambulance driver). With the mountainside cisterns contaminated, the nearest water was in an abandoned orchard a mile away. To get to it we had to run a sniper's gauntlet – sprint up a steep zigzag path to the crest of the mountain, and then down to the orchard on the other side. There, in the shade of the trees, was a well, its water grubby but cool. We hauled it back in jerry cans, two to a man. The only way to drink it was through a handkerchief, so as not to swallow the bugs.

Under the noon sun the detail was punishing. Each jerry can seemed to weigh a ton and, dragging them, we stumbled over rocks and tripped through thickets of dry thistles, our half-naked bodies tormented by flies and mosquitoes. Try as he might, Leopold Mahler found it difficult to maintain the pace. He stopped frequently to catch his breath, drink, and put a wet cloth on his blistered hands as he painfully lugged his load, his violin case strapped into the knapsack on his back. Early in the afternoon, as we still were making our way back, a sniper's bullet whistled past Mahler's face and sliced clean through a tree branch just above his head. With a brittle crack, the branch struck his violin case so sharply it forced him to his knees. He looked up at me, dazed. "My violin," he gulped. "It's shattered. I'm finished."

I grabbed him by the shoulders and exhorted him to pull himself together. But he brushed me off, raised himself awkwardly onto a rock, unstrapped the knapsack, and very gently pulled out his wooden violin case. It was cracked. Cautiously, he opened the lid and lifted out the instrument, turning it this way and that, sliding his eyes very slowly over every inch of it. It looked to me as exquisite and delicate as a butterfly. He cradled the violin under his chin and, with closed eyes, meticulously tuned each string. Delicately, he replaced the instrument, returned the case to his knapsack and strapped it onto his back. While so doing he said in an exhausted voice, "My violin is perfect. If I don't survive, give it to the Philharmonic. And do me another favor, too. Tell God in your daily prayers, if there is a God, to save my soul, if we have souls," and he laughed, a thin and bitter laugh.

"That's daft talk," I said, helping him to pick up his load and, together, we stumbled back to the diggers on the mountainside. There, the medic, a retired x-ray technician, checked Mahler over and diagnosed dehydration

and fatigue. Elisha Linder filled us in on the latest batch of rumors to come his way from a nearby emplacement: the Arabs were plundering downtown Jerusalem; a coordinated Arab offensive was under way; the British were siding with the Arabs; Ben-Gurion had put off the declaration of independence; Begin was rallying for a showdown against him.

As proof of the Irgun leader's intentions, Linder showed us an editorial in Begin's underground news-sheet, *Herut*, passed on to him by one of the diggers. It read:

If, on Shabbat, the message goes out: "The Jewish State is hereby established," the whole people, the youth, will rally and fight shoulder to shoulder for our country and people. But if on that day a declaration of shameful surrender is issued, if the leadership succumbs to the tactics of the enemy and Jewish independence is destroyed before it comes to life – we shall rebel.

Grouched Linder, "We have to find out what Begin's up to. We're totally blind up here," and he instructed Mahler to rest up and then hitch a ride into town any way he could, and find out what was actually going on. "Come back with hard news," he commanded.

Daylight was fading fast. Far to the west, the sun's last rays were receding behind the hilltops of Judea, heralding the Sabbath. Grimy, exhausted diggers assembled in the glow of a hurricane lamp hanging on the door of a stone ruin, hidden from enemy view, to recite the Sabbath prayers – *Kabbalat Shabbat*. It was a heavenly pause; Shabbat stillness suddenly seemed to reign over everything. But then, a series of dry, sluggish shots echoed across the hills and, seconds later, an angry rumble growled from Ein Karem and a shell shrieked and blasted the lower reaches of our mountainside, convulsing it into dust. A headlight briefly cut through the cypress trees at the approaches to the village, illuminating a group of Arabs with miscellaneous rifles, dressed in kaffiyehs and khakis. Elisha Linder screamed, "That's an armored car. To the trenches! Fire!"

We rolled, crawled, and scrambled wildly through the thistles, searching for cover, and everyone with a gun fired blindly into the night. I have no idea how long this went on for. Eventually, a command was passed from trench to trench to hold fire, and we all wondered what had happened. Was it just another skirmish, another probe, or an ignoble retreat? Nobody had an answer.

The Sabbath silence resumed, broken only by the crunch of rushing



feet, panting breath, and the winded cry of Leopold Mahler running out of the blackness into the light of the hurricane lamp, shouting, "I have news! I have news!"

To a man, we raced back toward the flickering glow. Elisha Linder grabbed Mahler and snapped, "Well – talk. What did you find out? Is Begin rebelling? Has Ben-Gurion declared statehood? Are Arabs plundering downtown Jerusalem – what?"

Mahler wheezed that he had heard nothing about Begin. And as for the Arabs taking over downtown Jerusalem, the opposite was the case. The Jews were in control of the whole area. And to substantiate his claim he opened his shabby coat wide and displayed a Union Jack tied around his waist. He then began pulling from his bulging pockets forgotten luxuries; triangles of Kraft cheese, Mars Bars, and Cadbury chocolate. Then he unstrapped his knapsack, and from its side pockets spilled out cans of peaches, jars of Ovaltine, and a bottle of Carmel wine.

We watched, eyes popping, as Mahler told how he had come by his booty: it was from the abandoned officer's mess of the British police headquarters near Zion Square. The English had evacuated the area that morning, and the Jews had simply walked in without firing a shot. Moreover, he had heard with his own ears on the radio at Café Atara that all Union Jacks across the country had been hauled down at ten that morning when the British High Commissioner, Sir Alan Cunningham, reviewed a farewell guard of honor outside the King David Hotel. Cunningham had then been flown from Atarot airport, north of Jerusalem, to Haifa, where he boarded a cruiser that was due to cross the three-mile limit into international waters at midnight, formally ending the British rule of Palestine.

"Has Ben-Gurion declared independence, yes or no?" asked Elisha Linder, beside himself.

Mahler took a deep breath and solemnly said, "David Ben-Gurion declared independence this afternoon in Tel Aviv. The Jewish State comes into being at midnight."

There was a dead silence. Even the air seemed to be holding its breath. Midnight was minutes away.

"Oh, my God, what have we done?" cried one of the women diggers, fitfully rubbing her chin with the tips of her fingers. "What have we done? Oh, my God, what have we done?" and she burst into tears, whether in ecstasy or dismay I will never know. And then the air exploded in joyful tears and laughter. Every breast filled with exultation as we pumped hands and embraced, and roared the national anthem at the tops of our voices.

“Hey, Mahler!” shouted Elisha cutting through the hullabaloo. “Our state – what’s its name?”

The violinist stared back blankly. “I don’t know. I didn’t think to ask.”

“*You don’t know?*”

Mahler shook his head.

“How about Yehuda?” suggested someone. “After all, King David’s kingdom was called Yehuda – Judea.”

“Zion,” cried another. “It’s an obvious choice.”

“Israel!” called a third. “What’s wrong with Israel?”

“Let’s drink to that,” said Elisha with delight, breaking open the bottle of wine and filling a tin mug to the brim. “*A l’chayim* to our new State, whatever its name!”

“Wait!” shouted a Chasid whom everybody knew as Nussen der chazzan – a cantor by calling, and a most diligent volunteer digger from Meah Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox area of Jerusalem. “It’s Shabbos. Kiddush first.”

Our crowd gathered around him in a hush, as Nussen der chazzan clasped the mug and, in a sweet cantorial tone began to chant “*Yom hashishi*” – the blessing for the sanctification of the Sabbath day.

As Nussen’s sacred verses floated off to a higher place of Sabbath bliss his voice swelled, ululated, and trilled into the night, octave upon octave, his eyes closed, his cup stretched out and up. And as he concluded the final consecration – “*Blessed art thou O Lord who has hallowed the Sabbath*” – he rose on tiptoe, his arm stiffened, and rocking back and forth, voice trembling with emotion, he added the triumphantly exulted festival blessing to commemorate this first day of independence – “*shehecheyanu, vekiyemanu vehegyanu lazman hazeh*” – Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time.

“*Amen!*”

Not a squeak came out of Ein Karem throughout the rest of that night, and by morning we were replaced by a batch of trained fighters, relieved for a twenty-four-hour rest. We returned to a town that was bursting with excitement. As Sabbath noon became afternoon, and afternoon became evening, the mood grew from excitement to tumult. Despite the threat of shells, clusters of people roamed the streets, rejoicing. In the giant crater that had been blasted into the top of Ben Yehuda Street by a bomb a few weeks before, a bonfire was ablaze, and youngsters were leaping around it in a feisty folk dance – the *horah*. One young man, alight with the joy of the day, cartwheeled over to Mahler and me and slapped our backs. In