

Chapter One

A Man Named Begin

I first heard the name Menachem Begin as a teenager in the displaced persons (DP) camp where my family was housed immediately after the Holocaust. We had survived the mass destruction of our people as refugees in Kazakhstan, and now, in 1945, we had returned to Europe to try to pick up the pieces and restore our lives. But it was a vastly different world we found. Our idea of seeking to create a Jewish nation moved from dream to necessity. It was in this environment of energized Zionism in which I became a devoted admirer of Menachem Begin.

The political milieu in the DP camps was characterized by layers of complexity and competing crosscurrents. The youth group I had originally joined in Wloclawek, Poland, called Hashomer Hatzair, like the socialist group Dror, was aligned with the leftist ideologies advocating a binational state in Palestine. While this faction represented the majority, I soon switched to Betar, the youth group of Jabotinsky's right-wing Revisionist Party. Betar (an acronym for Brit Trumpeldor, named after the Russian martyr who gave his life defending the Land of Israel against Arab attack) believed that Jews needed to reclaim the ancient land from whoever held it, be it Arab or Englishman, in order to establish a modern Jewish state.

It was at this point that I first heard about a man named Begin. His name was whispered with reverence throughout the alleyways and backrooms of all the Jewish DP camps. Menachem Begin was the leader of Etzel—the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the National Military Organization, or simply the Irgun. The Irgun, along with the Haganah, comprised the core of Jewish resistance to the British Mandatory government in Palestine. Jabotinsky was among the founders of the Haganah and headed it till 1920, when he was arrested by the British.

After World War II, both groups—the Irgun and the Haganah—were illegal in Palestine, but since the Haganah, whose Jewish Brigade had served under the British during the war, was viewed as the less extreme of the two, its activities were somewhat tolerated by the authorities. The Irgun, however, was viewed by the British as an underground terrorist organization. During the war, the Haganah had advocated restraint and cooperation in dealing with the British and the Arabs. The Irgun, on the other hand, adopted a more militant posture and vocally called for an immediate revolt against Britain while the war against the Nazis was still being waged.

The Irgun was founded in Palestine by Jabotinsky in 1931 as a non-socialist military arm of the Revisionist Party, whose policies called for the creation of a Jewish state, by force if necessary, on both sides of the Jordan. Despite their calls for liberation from the British, the Irgun had worked secretly with the British against the common Nazi enemy. In fact, one of the

Irgun's first leaders—the mysterious military genius David Raziel—was killed while conducting an underground mission to Iraq on behalf of the British Army. The death of the Irgun leader Raziel in 1941, shortly after Jabotinsky's death, took a heavy toll on the Irgun, as did the split led by Avraham Stern. Yaakov Meridor was chosen to head the organization, but soon relinquished command. Meridor was disliked by the Haganah, who eventually turned him over to the British for arrest. Begin, a charismatic Polish/Czech Betar leader who had just recently arrived in Palestine was persuaded to take the reins from Meridor in December 1943. He immediately undertook a tactical campaign of revolt and resistance, which eventually succeeded in driving the British out of Palestine.

During the critical years of 1946 and 1947, the British had placed a price on Begin's head, and this fact only made him more of a hero to our Betar group. Begin and the Irgun were soundly whipping the British in Palestine. Stories of his activities filled us with an entirely new emotion: Jewish pride, or what Jabotinsky referred to as "hadar." While I was brought up by my father and grandfather with a strong sense of pride in the history of the Jewish people, this was different. My newfound pride arose from what my fellow Jews were doing in Palestine right now ... not two thousand years ago.

Begin's voice was an inspiring call to arms to all the displaced and dispossessed young Jews of Europe. "You are the Hebrew soldiers," he would declare. He would often repeat Jabotinsky's well-known admonition: "The blood of the Maccabees flows in your veins!" Begin's words held a resonance that went beyond mere youthful romanticism. There was a flavor to his rhetoric that transcended our recent history and tapped into the most basic ancient roots of the Jewish people.

On February 1, 1944, Begin's well-known "Proclamation of the Revolt" was first distributed by leaflet throughout Palestine, after having been broadcast over the Irgun's clandestine radio station. Betar groups like ours circulated the proclamation throughout the DP camps. With my glue bucket and "Rak Kach" (the Irgun motto: "Only thus") posters, I became known as a prolific pamphleteer. I would often show up in class with hundreds of such leaflets stuffed under my shirt. An excerpt from the proclamation:

Hebrews!

The establishment of the Hebrew Government and the realization of its program is the sole way to rescue our people, to save our existence and our honor. We will go in this path, because there is no other. We will fight. Every Jew in the state will fight.

Hebrews!

The fighting youth will not be deterred by victims, blood, and suffering. It will not surrender, it will not rest, as long as our days have not been renewed as of old, as long as our people is not assured of a state, freedom, honor, bread, righteousness, and

justice. And if you will surely aid it, then your eyes will soon see in our time the return to Zion and the renaissance of Israel. This and more may G-d grant us!

—*Excerpt from the Proclamation of the Revolt, 1944*



The Insignia of the Irgun Zvai Leumi

We shared a certain bravado and toughness born from not only recent experiences but also an unnatural selection process. We were the only Jews from our town who had the wherewithal to pack up and flee the advancing Nazis. Those who did not share this tenacity were gone. Similarly, while survival during the Holocaust was mostly a matter of luck, to survive also required toughness and resilience. Most young people in the camps shared these qualities, for those who did not—those who had complacently failed to recognize the impending Nazi onslaught—had mostly been lost in the crucible of the Holocaust. We admired these qualities in Begin and in his philosophy. He was my hero, and I was prepared and eager to follow his leadership.

This admiration was shared by my older brother, Mark (*z"l*) who, like me, underwent training by the Irgun, and who eventually sailed to Israel aboard the ill-fated *Altalena*. Our dedication at this time was so great that we were prepared to lay down our lives in behalf of the noble cause championed by Menachem Begin.

Another factor that contributed to our toughness was that the Betar leadership was training us teenagers in weapons combat. Carrying a pistol, I regularly engaged in target practice and small arms drills in the forests near the camp. We knew we were being molded into Irgun soldiers, trained to fight the British, the Arabs, and anyone else that stood in the way of a Jewish nation in Palestine.

While our family never fit the stereotype of the eternally victimized *shtetl* Jew—we had too much Jewish pride for that—I felt that Begin and Betar represented a metamorphosis. A tough new Jew was emerging from the ashes—one filled with pride and a love of Zion, ready to fight to reclaim and defend our nation, not bound by the tired, failed ideologies of socialism, and no longer willing to suffer the blows and insults of the bigot and antisemite. This was the Jew of the future. Thanks to Menachem Begin, this was the Jew I became in the DP camps, and the Jew I remain to this day.

Chapter Two

Meeting Mr. Begin

My parents and I immigrated to the US in 1951 when I was nineteen years old. Thanks to the opportunities to be found only in America, I was, by the late 1960s, in the process of building a successful business and a wonderful Jewish family. But, throughout those years, I never abandoned my admiration for my hero, Menachem Begin. I observed for years the honorable manner in which he led the loyal opposition in Israeli politics. When I had reached the point where I was able to substantially support the State of Israel, it afforded me the opportunity to finally meet my hero face-to-face.

One of the first Jewish causes with which I became involved—as soon as I was in a position to do so—was Israel Bonds. The Israel Bond movement was started in 1951 by David Ben-Gurion, among others, as a means of raising revenues badly needed by the young Israeli government. The idea was to build a “bond” between Israel and its supporters around the world through the creation of a financial instrument. Investors, in addition to earning a market rate of return, would have a stake in the future of Israel. If enough bondholders could be created, the effort would yield far-reaching political, as well as economic, objectives. Money raised through the sale of Israel Bonds is typically used to finance the many nonmilitary projects carried out by the Israeli government, such as highways, bridges, canals, power plants and the like. But unlike other types of foreign securities, Israel Bonds are not sold through brokerage houses. Instead they are marketed using a fund-raising model. Bond dinners, where investors are encouraged to stand up and publicly announce their purchase of Israel Bonds, are commonplace. Israel Bonds offices operate in major cities across America handling transactions and working with lay volunteers to organize bond drives. It was in my capacity as an Israel Bonds leader that I was afforded the opportunity to meet, in person, the man who had been my lifelong hero, Menachem Begin.

Since Israeli independence in 1948, Begin had served as the leader of the largest non-Labor political party in Israel. As discussed earlier, Begin’s Irgun Zvai Leumi Jewish underground was a key factor in the establishment of the State of Israel. During the revolt against the British Mandate, Begin had ordered the Akko (Acre) prison breakout and the destruction of the central British administrative offices at the King David Hotel.

After Israeli independence, Begin, as leader of the Herut Party, served as head of the loyal opposition during the long tenure of the prevailing Ben-Gurion Mapai Party. It was in this capacity that he led the movement against the acceptance of German reparations for the Nazi

Holocaust. In 1965 Begin merged the Herut Party with the Liberals to form Gahal, which would later serve as the foundation for the Likud Party. The crisis atmosphere of 1967 saw the creation of a national unity government that brought Begin to the cabinet table. It was in this role that he visited Chicago in 1969 as the keynote speaker on behalf of Israel Bonds.

When I got word that Begin would be speaking at the Chicago bond dinner, I immediately made plans to attend. I was hoping to listen to the hero of my youth and perhaps shake his hand. As I moved through the reception line at the black-tie soiree, I introduced myself and offered a few words in Yiddish:

“I’ve waited all my life to shake your hand, Mar Begin. You were a hero to all of us in Betar when we were stuck in the DP camps,” I said eagerly.

“You? You were in Betar?” He looked a bit confused. Finding an “Etzelnik” here among these American fat cats appeared to catch him off guard. “Where are you from? Where were you during the war?”

“I’m from Galicia, and we survived the war in Kazakhstan.” I didn’t want to hold up the line, so I answered hurriedly and made to move on. “Wait! Let’s have a word afterwards,” he called as I nodded gladly.

Begin’s remarks that night were stirring and succeeded in motivating the assemblage to new heights of Israel Bonds investment. Sometimes when a person meets a hero in the flesh, there is a sense of disappointment as the legend becomes humanized. There was none of that with Begin. I was enthralled with his powerful message. He spoke in English with heartfelt passion about the recent unification of Jerusalem and its impact on the future of Israel. He was still something of a firebrand, but his current role as cabinet minister had seemed to mellow his rhetoric a bit. True to his word, he graciously approached our table afterwards and engaged me in an extraordinary chat.

Begin was curious about my family, and when I told him that my brother was aboard the *Altalena*, he seemed very pleased. I shared stories about how we distributed his words in the camps and how they provided hope and pride to our shattered numbers. I recounted my personal history to Begin, and he was quite moved. I recall a couple of Israeli VIPs coming over to our table to greet Begin, who immediately introduced me and said:

“You must meet my friend, Mr. Hasten. Do you know what this kid went through during the Shoah? He had next to no chance of survival, and yet he made it!” Over the years Begin would retell my story repeatedly whenever he introduced me to someone new. I was amazed at how he always got the details exactly right, and I became convinced that he enjoyed a truly photographic memory.

The genuine warmth I felt from this man reminded me so very much of my own father. The friendship we developed over the next twenty-five years, I can proudly say, was every bit a “father and son” relationship. We developed an immediate and lasting linkage that night in Chicago, and as the conversation wound down, Begin pressed my arm and leaned closer: “You must look me up the next time you’re in Israel.” He gave me his home address and phone number and bade me good night.

Although I had not mentioned it to Begin, at this point, I had yet to set foot on Israeli soil. I made up my mind that night, however, that I would travel there as soon as possible. I signed up for the next UJA (United Jewish Appeal) mission to Israel in January of 1970.

Of course, being in Israel for the first time was a transcendent experience. It felt strangely dreamlike and yet spiritually charged with the electricity generated by thousands of years of Jewish yearning. It was a homecoming to be sure, and yet I was too excited to feel at home. The sight of thousands of Jews, strolling down boulevards, emerging from Jewish shops—simply living normal everyday lives—caused my heart to overflow.

The moment that has stayed with me, as I’m sure it has for many Jews, was my first glimpse of the Kotel, the Western Wall, in Jerusalem. I rushed there as soon as I entered the city, and my emotions overcame me as I observed the ancient edifice. Gazing through my tears, I was permeated with a strange feeling of having somehow been here before. It wasn’t simply a *déjà vu*, but rather a sense of wholeness or completion in the pit of my psyche. After over a hundred journeys to Jerusalem in the past fifty years, a visit to the Kotel is still my first stop.

I phoned Begin as soon as I arrived at my hotel in Jerusalem, and he suggested we meet for breakfast. When I asked where, his answer gave me pause. He suggested we meet at the King David Hotel. Begin, of course, had been wanted by the British when, as head of the Irgun, he had ordered the bombing of this hotel, which housed the British administrative offices.

“Don’t you feel odd coming here?” I inquired after we had taken our seats.

“Actually, I like to come here ... but not for the reason you think,” he replied with a hint of a smile. “When I first arrived in Palestine as a private in the Polish Army, I attempted to come in the front door of this hotel. I was stopped by a Polish officer, who informed me that enlisted men could not enter this way and that I was obliged to employ the back door. The front door was only for officers. I kept trying, but I was always stopped. I think about that every time I visit here and enter through the front door with no problem.” He made no further reference to the bombing and I left it at that.

Begin was absolutely fascinated with my story. He probed me and devoured every detail. As we spoke, I could sense a kinship being forged. This man had been my hero since my youth, and now here I was, relating stories from that period to him face-to-face. “We admired you because

you fought back,” I explained. I believe he could also sense that I had attempted to pattern my life to encompass many of the same traits I had observed in him. Tenacity, courage, direct action. These were values I learned from my father and observed in Begin years ago. But our discussions also centered on the here and now. As leader of the minority Herut Party, Begin was in constant need of support, both political and financial. I sensed that Begin viewed me as someone who could be groomed for leadership in advancing his current political agenda in the US. It was these forces that formed the foundation of our lasting friendship.