



Ben-Gurion

Father of Modern Israel



ANITA SHAPIRA

Translated from the Hebrew

by Anthony Berris



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PREFACE

PAULA BEN-GURION STOOD at the entrance to the wooden cottage in Sdeh Boker, blocking the door. “What do you want?” she barked at me.

“I have an interview with Mr. Ben-Gurion,” I replied, embarrassed.

She moved aside to let me pass. “Don’t tire him!” she ordered.

I was working on my first research project, which dealt with the Hashomer (Watchman) organization. I wanted to clarify a point regarding the clash between former Hashomer members and Ben-Gurion, then general secretary of the Histadrut labor organization. So I wrote to the retired leader asking to meet him and discuss this question. I was a completely unknown scholar, a young woman of no consequence. Nevertheless Ben-Gurion replied in his own writing, on a page from his enumerated notebooks with sheets of carbon paper between the pages. He agreed to meet, and even consented to see me on whatever day was convenient for me. I brought my husband and toddler son, and we drove south from Tel Aviv in our small Fiat 600. It took us at least three hours to reach Sdeh Boker over bumpy roads. My son enjoyed chasing birds in the fields, and my husband chased him.

When I crossed the threshold of the famous cottage, Ben-Gurion received me very graciously. He opened his diary to the year in question and talked at length about the Hashomer case. I was overwhelmed by the grand old man. I stayed with him for more than two hours. Then my family and I started the long drive home. It was only when we reached Tel Aviv that I realized that he had not answered my question.

Since then I have researched many subjects, and Ben-Gurion, a central figure in Zionist history, has been a constant presence in my work, but I have not written directly about him before. He was the second most important figure in my biography of Berl Katznelson, his friend and colleague in leadership. He was the person who clashed with the Haganah general command during the War of Independence, who brutally dismissed Yigal Allon—the golden boy, the best field commander in the war—all topics I devoted books to. Only in a few articles did I give him first place, such as one I wrote about his attitude toward the Bible and its role in Israeli culture. So it seems time to finally make him the central figure, here in this biography.

Ben-Gurion attracted many writers and biographers, during his lifetime and after; they include historians, journalists, admirers, and antagonists. As while he lived, so ever after he cast a larger-than-life shadow, and many of these writers could not rid themselves of their sympathy or hatred, old grudges or adulation. Most prominent among his biographers are Michael Bar-Zohar and Shabtai Teveth, whose works I read very carefully and made use of in my own study. Other historians wrote about specific issues in his career, such as his decision to launch the Sinai Campaign, his relationship with intellectuals, his attitude toward the Diaspora, and so on. I have read these works, of course, and made use of them elsewhere, but here I relied mostly on my own past studies. I did much new research into the period after 1948, which Teveth did not cover and Bar-Zohar dealt with only partially. I was given access not only to Ben-Gurion’s archive in Sdeh Boker, which is online, but also to his files in the archives of the Israel Defense Forces, where I found many interesting documents, especially letters.

While Ben-Gurion’s public persona has been the subject of many works, I have tried to sketch his

private persona, as well as the long process of his development into a national leader and one of the most significant figures of the twentieth century. Ben-Gurion tended not to display his feelings, and tracing his inner self is difficult. I hope this work will add a page with a different perspective to the large collection of works dealing with his achievements, failures, and role in history.



Plonsk

IN 1962, a woman from the town of Plonsk, Poland, who had emigrated to Palestine went back for a visit. On returning to Israel she sent a letter to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, also born in Plonsk, describing what she had found: “the destruction of Jewish Plonsk,” as Ben-Gurion put it in his reply.¹ Only three of the town’s Jews remained. The magnificent synagogue and the three Jewish religious schools were completely destroyed, and the cemetery was uprooted. The market was still there, but no Jews displayed their merchandise. With much pain and restrained nostalgia, Ben-Gurion inquired what had become of his father’s house and whether the garden behind it still existed. The rupture between “now” and “then” caused by World War II, the Holocaust, and the subsequent communist regime was total. An entire world had been made extinct and existed now only in memories and images.

In his later life Ben-Gurion used to glorify the memory of his hometown. In his recollections, this small, humble place of some eight thousand souls, of whom five thousand were Jews, became “the most progressive Hebrew city in Poland.”²

Plonsk sat on a minor road off the highway between Warsaw and Gdansk. Although it was only sixty-five kilometers from Warsaw, the journey to the capital took over three hours. In the early 1900s the railway had not yet reached Plonsk, and there was no paved road to the town. It had no running water, and sewage flowed in the streets. The winds of the Haskala (Jewish enlightenment) were blowing in Plonsk, but as might be expected in such a backward place, most of its Jews were piously observant, and progress was only relative. There were three Jewish religious schools and numerous *heders* (Jewish elementary schools), including both traditional schools and progressive, relatively modern institutions that nevertheless did not teach Russian or mathematics, despite the Russian authorities’ demand that the children also be taught secular subjects. The town did not have a *gymnasium* (high school). Plonsk resembled many other shtetls under the tsarist empire’s rule, and despite the ideological storms raging all around, it remained largely conservative, tranquil, and removed from the revolutionary fervor that characterized the Pale of Settlement in Ukraine and White Russia.

David Ben-Gurion was born in Plonsk in 1886, the fourth son of Sheindel and Avigdor Green. Nothing in his origins, his birthplace, or his education hinted at future greatness. The Greens had no notable lineage, no important rabbis or religious arbiters in their history, which they could trace only as far back as the grandparents on both sides. Ben-Gurion’s paternal grandfather was a writer of requests, petitions, and letters for the Polish peasants who came to town on market day and sought to take cases to the local court. Avigdor Green inherited this occupation from his father. His son referred to him as a “lawyer,” although he was more of a pettifogger (*Winkeladvokat*) who sat on the corner outside the courthouse. The family was on a fairly sound financial footing thanks to Sheindel’s dowry: two wooden houses with a garden behind them on a large plot of land. These houses were on the outskirts of the town, on Goat Alley (whose name attests to its character) next to the priest’s house.

The family lived in one and rented out the other, and this rent plus Avigdor's income enabled them to live reasonably well.

The most distinguished family in Plonsk was the Zemachs, who were proud of their lineage. Shlomo Zemach and Ben-Gurion were friends from their youth, but there was a big difference between them: the Zemach family genealogy reached back to the seventeenth century, and among its forebears were some eminent Torah scholars. They were wealthy and aristocratic. Shlomo was a tall, handsome young man and a good student in the religious school. Zemach senior was a proud, well-respected Jew, not pleased by his son's friendship with the son of Avigdor Green; there were murmurings in the town about Green because he had exchanged the traditional ultra-Orthodox garb of the long black *kapota* (coat) for a short European jacket, he had a penchant for cards, and he was a Mitnaged (opponent of Hasidism), whereas most Plonsk Jews were followers of the Rabbi of Gur. On one occasion Zemach senior even slapped Shlomo for visiting the Green house. But the youngsters' friendship was firm, and Zemach was forced to accept his son's connection with the dubious Greens.

The Jews of Plonsk were largely Hasidim who were artisans, apprentices, carpenters, cobblers, and small merchants. Above them was a sparse middle class of homeowners, most of whom were "enlightened" (tolerant of modernity and open to Haskala influences such as secular education); these included many Mitnagdim. At the top of the socioeconomic ladder stood a few rich, aristocratic families, also disciples of the Rabbi of Gur. The Greens were a relatively "modern" middle-class family. They joined the Hibbat Zion (Lovers of Zion) movement when it arose in the 1880s, and, following the dramatic appearance of Theodor Herzl, became loyal Zionists. Avigdor Green was a member of Hibbat Zion, and he imparted his beliefs to his eldest son, Abraham, and his youngest, David.

Plonsk did have its political disputes. Some Hasidim, for example, made the life of another Hasid miserable because he was a Zionist, and the father of a young man who intended to emigrate to Palestine hid his clothes, preventing him from leaving the house. But it seems such events were rare, which is why people mentioned them in their memoirs. The intergenerational struggles that typified the first generation of religious backsliders, the soul-wrenching deliberations that recur in the literary descriptions of the time, are absent from the accounts of Ben-Gurion and his friends in Plonsk. There the process of modernization was gentler and less traumatic than that experienced by many of Ben-Gurion's contemporaries. At the time, Pale of Settlement Jewry was torn between the autonomism of Simon Dubnow, which strove for Jewish cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe; the Jewish socialism of the Bund (founded in 1897, the same year as the First Zionist Congress); Russian social democracy; Zionism; and territorialism, a movement that sought a possible territory for the Jews outside Palestine. These stormy ideological struggles barely touched the Jewish youth of Plonsk. There the youngsters deliberated over remaining in Poland and somehow acquiring a higher education, emigrating to the United States, or becoming a Zionist and going to Palestine.

Ben-Gurion attended a heder and then a Jewish religious school, which he left after his bar-mitzvah. Talmudic disputation did not appeal to him, or perhaps he lacked the talent for this type of study. He wanted a higher education, but was unable to obtain a matriculation certificate, either because of the quota by which Russian gymnasia limited the number of Jewish students, or because he could not afford it. Since Plonsk had no gymnasium, attending one meant moving to Warsaw. Like many Jewish youngsters in this situation, he tried to prepare for the admission examinations by studying on his own.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to his son, Avigdor Green wrote a letter to Theodor Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement—a letter Ben-Gurion only became aware of some fifty years later, when it was found in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. In high-flown, archaic Hebrew, Green explained

the man considered “the King of the Jews” that he had a talented, diligent son who wanted to study but was unable to do so. He would like to send the boy to study in Vienna, Herzl’s city, and he sought the advice of the president of the Zionist Organization, and also his financial aid, “for I am unable to support my son, the apple of my eye.”³ The letter reveals the naïveté of the advocate from Plonsk who imagined that he would receive a reply to his letter. But it was also the first expression of the father’s belief that his son possessed extraordinary talents.

The years between 1899 and 1904 are shrouded in mist. Ben-Gurion left school but stayed in Plonsk. He apparently learned Russian, read a great deal, and probably helped his father write petitions and requests outside the courthouse. He still wore the traditional *kapota*. The one ray of light in his life was his activity in Ezra, an organization of Jewish religious school students (the intellectual and social elite of Plonsk), which he founded along with Shlomo Fuchs and Shlomo Zemach after the three decided to speak Hebrew.

Ben-Gurion recalled learning Hebrew from his grandfather at age three. His grandfather would sit him on his lap, point at different body parts, and say what they were in Hebrew; then the child repeated the names after him. He moved on to various household objects, and continued until the boy began chattering in Hebrew. The three friends’ decision to speak Hebrew was quite courageous: although it was the language of the Torah, nobody spoke it at that time.

Written Hebrew was different; modern Hebrew literature was widely read. In fact, its language captivated enlightened Jews. Ben-Gurion always mentioned the first Hebrew novel, Abraham Mapu’s *Ahavat Zion* (Love of Zion), as one of the factors that led him to Zionism, just as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made him a socialist, while Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* had such a powerful effect on him that for a while he became a vegetarian. Young David Green read a great deal of Hebrew literature and poetry. The youngsters at the Jewish religious school used to hide Hebrew literature inside their Gemara books, but Ben-Gurion had no need of these stratagems since his father allowed him to read as much Hebrew literature as he wanted. He read Mordecai Feuerberg, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, and Ahad Ha’am, and knew Hayim Nachman Bialik’s poems, which he loved, by heart. He also loved Judah Leib Gordon’s and Saul Tchernichovsky’s poetry. He read the best of Russian literature: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. In later interviews he stressed that he never learned Polish since he had always known he would emigrate to Palestine and saw no point in learning a language he considered provincial. There is some doubt whether this assertion is true, for he needed Polish to communicate with the peasants who attended the courthouse. Most likely his repudiation of Polish was intended to underscore both his fervent desire to emigrate to Palestine and his connection to Russian, which the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) considered more prestigious than Polish.

In any event, written Hebrew was accepted by the *maskilim* (enlightened, educated Jews) as part of the revival of original Hebrew culture, in the spirit of national movements seeking to return to their nation’s ancient roots or invent a genealogy for themselves. But Hebrew was not a spoken language, even in Palestine. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, compiler of the modern Hebrew dictionary, was well known for speaking Hebrew to his son from the day he was born. But until the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv adopted Hebrew as the language of instruction, and a generation of Hebrew-speaking graduates emerged, spoken Hebrew was a rarity. When Ben-Gurion met the Zionist leader Nachum Sokolov, editor of the Hebrew-language newspaper *Hatzfira* and future Zionist Organization president, in Warsaw around 1904 and addressed him in Hebrew, Sokolov could reply only in broken Hebrew.

Thus the decision by the three boys in Plonsk to speak only Hebrew among themselves and teach it to their families was a real cultural and political statement. As it turned out, they were so successful that conversing in Hebrew became the hallmark of Zionist youth in Plonsk. The Ezra association also set a goal of disseminating Hebrew education among the poorer youth, the social stratum of

apprentices who had barely acquired a little education. The boys devoted themselves enthusiastically to this endeavor, and the local artisans responded by allowing their apprentices to study for an hour and a half a day. It appears that the influence of the Russian “Go to the People” movement was at work here: if the Russians can volunteer in order to advance the people, then so can we! The member of Ezra tried to register as a recognized Zionist association and pay the Shekel membership dues, but their application was rejected because of their age—Ben-Gurion, the youngest of the three, was fourteen at the time, and Fuchs, the oldest, was sixteen.

In 1903, the Kishinev pogrom rocked the entire Jewish world, but there were no reverberations in tranquil Plonsk. What did shock our three youngsters was Herzl’s proposal at the Sixth Zionist Congress that same year to establish Jewish settlement in East Africa, known as “the Uganda Program.” Driven by a sense of urgency over the distress of Jews in the Pale of Settlement, Herzl sought a “night shelter” for them until they could settle in Palestine, where the Turks were doing everything in their power to prevent such settlement. The proposal caused an uproar at the congress. Its opponents, most of whom were Zionists from Eastern Europe where Jewish tradition and culture were still firmly rooted, threatened to split the Zionist Organization. To Ben-Gurion and his friends the proposal seemed a betrayal of Zion. One hot summer day, as they were drying themselves in the sun after a swim in the River Plonka and talking about momentous issues, they decided that the most appropriate response to the Uganda Program was to emigrate to Palestine.

Yet there was still a long road to travel between decision and action. Shlomo Fuchs was the first to leave Plonsk, but instead of going to Palestine he went to London and thence to New York, like millions of other young Jews seeking to free themselves of the stifling atmosphere of a small, remote town where there was no chance of advancement. Fuchs and Ben-Gurion corresponded at length and in great detail, and through these letters we can reconstruct the young Ben-Gurion’s mindset during those years. Fuchs kept Ben-Gurion’s letters for almost fifty years until, almost miraculously, they came into the possession of the editor of Ben-Gurion’s papers. When asked why he had kept the letters so long, Fuchs replied that they had always known Ben-Gurion was destined for greatness. We shall never know if this was the wisdom of hindsight or genuine precognition. In any event, these letters provide contemporaneous testimony of Ben-Gurion’s history from 1904 on.

He was a sensitive, emotional boy, very attached to his friends. His mother died in childbirth when he was eleven and his father remarried, but Ben-Gurion never called his stepmother “mother” and did not feel close to her. The loss of his mother caused him pain that never healed; she dwelt in the mind of the child, the youth, and even the adult as an irreplaceable source of love, devotion, and emotional affinity, for whose loss there was no reparation. David, known as Duvche, was a sickly child, so his mother left her older children for a time and took him to the country where he could recuperate in the healthy air, eating nutritious country food. This episode was etched in the child’s mind as a precious memory of unparalleled devotion. “It seems to me that she was one of a kind,” he wrote to one of his friends whose mother had died; “she had eleven children [most of whom died in infancy] yet she cared for me as if I were her only son. It is hard for me to describe such abundant love. And it is hard for me to forget being orphaned as a child.”⁴ On every occasion when Ben-Gurion, as prime minister of Israel, wanted to console a friend on the death of his or her mother, he always mentioned the loss of his own mother. In a letter to Golda Meir following her mother’s death, he wrote that a mother “is the most intimate of things, second to none,” and with her passing “something unparalleled in love, loyalty, the most intimate bond, is cruelly torn from the soul, the heart, and will eternally be a precious, irreplaceable treasure.”⁵ He would give his age at his mother’s death as younger than it really was—“My mother died when I was ten”—to underscore the misery of the little boy bereft of motherly love.

His idealization of his mother and clinging to her memory suggest that although Avigdor was a devoted father and Duvche his favorite son, relations in the house on Goat Alley were not warm, and the boy lacked love and affection. He first discovered the thrill of love for a member of the opposite sex at twelve, but this seems to have been just worship from afar. It is unclear whether the object of this first love was Rachel Nelkin, the town beauty, for whom he developed real feelings several years later, or another girl. Plonsk Jewish society was very conservative, and attachments between the sexes were usually expressed solely by an exchange of yearning glances.

Ben-Gurion's relations with his Ezra friends seem to have gone deeper, as suggested by his emotional, revealing letters to Fuchs. He was unabashedly sentimental and tried his hand at writing poetry, but in light of his friends' criticism quickly realized he would not gain fame as a poet. He showed an interest in philosophy and believed he had a future as a philosopher. He lectured at Ezra on Baruch Spinoza, hotly disputing the philosopher's concept of the Chosen People—a subject he returned to in his old age. Among the Zionist thinkers he respected Ahad Ha'am as a pure-minded writer and an important critic, but his heart lay with Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, Ahad Ha'am's sworn adversary and the man who introduced Nietzschean ideas into the Jewish milieu. Shlomo Zemach later wrote: "We, the young people of Plonsk, would walk down Ploczk Street with the Nietzschean phrase we learned from Berdyczewski on our lips, and pondered life as death and death as life, not understanding much about it, yet taking in something of it."⁶ The new Hebrew literature and poetry were full of vitalistic ideas that fired the youths and led them to embrace Zionism as an expression of the desire to breathe the instinct of life and willpower into the Jewish people and change their image.

In 1904 Herzl died. It was a terrible blow. The man who by the force of his will and energy had created the Jewish people's national movement and the tools to implement its aspirations, and defined its objective—a Jewish state in Palestine—was suddenly no more. It was as if a comet had flashed in being, burned for less than a decade, then was suddenly extinguished, leaving no one in Jewish public life who might be his successor. Ben-Gurion's letter to Fuchs following Herzl's death reflects the depth of the emotion roused by the leader's passing and hints at young David Green's opinion of the qualities a leader should have. "There will never be another man as wonderful as he who combined the heroism of the Maccabeans with the stratagems of David, the courage of Rabbi Akiva who died with the word 'One' on his lips and the humility of Hillel, the beauty of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, and the fiery love of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi." Courage, cunning, self-sacrifice, humility, and love of the nation—these were the traits he enumerated. Then he added: "The desire to strive for the rebirth delegated us by the man with the will of the gods will burn within us until completion of the great task, for which the great leader sacrificed his illustrious life."⁷ The typically Nietzschean expression he used, "the man with the will of the gods," alludes to a leader's most notable quality—willpower—linking it to the legacy Herzl has supposedly left young people: the task of navigating the ship of Zionism to a safe harbor. And indeed, accepting the mission of realizing Zionism as a personal undertaking was one of the qualities characterizing the people of the Second Aliya (wave of immigration), which began that year.

However, despite the dramatic decision to emigrate made on the bank of the River Plonka, and even after Herzl's death, David Green was in no hurry. He wanted first to acquire a higher education and a diploma in engineering or a similar field. He had his sights set on the Warsaw Mechanical-Technical School, founded by Jewish philanthropist Hyppolite Wawelberg in order to enable Jews to study. But to be accepted he had to study Russian and mathematics, and instruction in these subjects in Plonsk was not at the required level. It is also probable that his father could not continue supporting him. So at eighteen David Green left home for the first time and traveled to the big city, Warsaw. For young Jews, leaving their parents' home was a traumatic experience that entailed leaving behind everything that "home" symbolized—faith, tradition, parental authority—and standing on one's own two feet

without financial support. This crisis usually occurred at a younger age, but Ben-Gurion lived at home until he was eighteen, even though there was no good reason why he did not leave earlier, except possibly his attachment to Rachel Nelkin.

Moving to Warsaw did not mean leaving the tight-knit Jewish society he was used to. In Jewish Warsaw he was surrounded by familiar scenes, so much that he was not particularly impressed by the city. He did exchange his *kapota* for a student's short jacket and peaked cap. Nonetheless, whenever he went back home for a visit he would revert to traditional attire—suggesting that his parting from traditional society was not traumatic, but also not complete. He found a teaching position in Warsaw and was able to support himself. He studied diligently, and although he tried several times to get into Wawelberg's school, he was unsuccessful. In the meantime the quota applied in this school, which was originally intended for Jewish students, became more stringent, so that only those who had graduated from gymnasium stood any chance of getting in. Each time one of his attempts failed, the idea of going to Palestine resurfaced, but he still harbored hopes of acquiring an education first. He explained his stubborn persistence by saying he wanted “to work in a broad framework in our land,” but did not say what this meant.⁸



Ben-Gurion as a youth in Warsaw, beginning of the twentieth century (Courtesy of the Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research)

Meanwhile Plonsk was in a furor: Shlomo Zemach, the Jewish school's most diligent and outstanding student, had taken some money his father had in the house, fled his home, and used the

funds for passage to Palestine. He stopped off in Warsaw, where he could get information on illegal border crossings and catch a train to the Austrian border, and saw Ben-Gurion. Zemach senior soon followed on his heels. Ben-Gurion loved describing a fictional scene in which the father came to his room in Warsaw and pleaded with him to reveal his son's whereabouts, even kneeling and hugging Ben-Gurion's knees. Ben-Gurion's imagination portrayed this proud, distinguished man who opposed his son's friendship with the son of the *Winkeladvokat* being forced to abase himself. But in a letter to Fuchs he described what actually happened: Zemach came to Ben-Gurion's room, and during a courteous conversation tried to get him to reveal Shlomo's whereabouts. Ben-Gurion claimed that Shlomo had already left, and after a further exchange Zemach gave up and returned to Plonsk.

Shlomo Zemach immigrated to Palestine at the end of 1904, one of the first in the wave known as the Second Aliya. Like the other immigrants from Plonsk he was driven not by the pogroms or by existential anxiety, but by the belief that the Jewish people's rebirth would be brought about by returning to their homeland, where they would live a natural life and till the soil. Zemach's immigration had a snowball effect; he was followed by quite a few young people from distinguished Plonsk families and also from poorer ones. The fact that Shlomo Zemach was the hero of the hour in Plonsk was probably not exactly music to David's ears, for there was a persistent, though covert, rivalry between him and his handsome friend. However, he had not yet decided when he would go to Palestine.

In January the Russian Revolution of 1905 began in Warsaw. Ben-Gurion was not involved in the strikes and demonstrations that took place, but during these events the Polish Poalei Zion (Workers of Zion) party was founded in Warsaw. It held its first conference in the home of Yitzhak Tabenkin, Ben-Gurion's future friend and political adversary. Ben-Gurion attended the founding conference and joined the party. It was the first time he had shown any interest in politics. Poalei Zion combined Zionism and Marxist Socialism according to the doctrine of Ber Borochov, a young genius who successfully united internationalism and nationalism, the coming world revolution, and the redemption of the Jewish nation.

It is doubtful that Ben-Gurion was acquainted with the Marxist formulas that Poalei Zion adopted. As far as we know he did not read radical Russian polemical literature as did other young, left-leaning Jews, nor was he familiar with the accepted political style. But he quickly learned the socialist jargon and became a superb debater, even though his grasp of Marxism was probably very shallow. He accepted as self-evident the class war concept, the moral superiority of the revolutionaries and the revolution as opposed to the ruling classes, and the socialist image of the future. But with respect to the realization of Zionism, it is doubtful that he accepted Borochov's perception that historical necessity led the Jews, with ironclad logic, to Palestine of all places. Some fifty years later he claimed that before immigrating to Palestine he had not read even one of Borochov's articles. He was probably prepared to accept Borochov's concept that, because the Diaspora Jews would not be allowed to join the proletariat due to opposition among local populations, they were doomed to be crushed in the future titanic struggle between capitalists and proletariat. Beyond that, however, his perception of Zionism was based not on necessity but on Berdyczewski's concept of will.

Suddenly life had direction and content. He exchanged his student garb for a revolutionary side-buttoned Russian shirt and peaked cap, and he let his hair grow long. He attended meetings, traveled, distributed propaganda materials, and enjoyed the thrill of risking being caught for revolutionary activity. And he was indeed caught and arrested. The first time, his party comrades managed to bribe an official to give them the forbidden material that had been found on him, and he was released due to lack of evidence. On the second occasion his father came to his rescue and persuaded a police officer to let him go.

Revolutionary radicalization brought the Bund to Plonsk, where its members preached their Jewish Socialist ideology among the Jewish workers and the poorer Jews. Ben-Gurion returned to Plonsk in his new character of a Zionist-Socialist activist and embarked on an all-out war against the Bund, which advocated that the Jews remain in Russia and take part in the coming general revolution, which would end their misery. The residents of Plonsk enjoyed seeing their favorite son Duvche tearing a Bundist outside agitator to pieces in debates. Meanwhile, there was fear of a pogrom, and David Green proudly sported a pistol and organized the apprentices to join Poalei Zion and for self-defense. He instructed his Ezra friends in the use of weapons. Arms belonging to the Jews were cached in Avigdor Green's house and miraculously not discovered in a police search. In the spirit of revolutionary foment David successfully organized an apprentices' strike for a twelve-hour day—a change that was eventually willingly accepted by their artisan employers.

In contrast with the quietness of the previous years, the almost frenetic activity of the new members of Poalei Zion was particularly notable. Ben-Gurion's energy, which was to become his hallmark, had apparently lain dormant and unexploited until he discovered political activity. He had found his vocation.

In the summer of 1906 Shlomo Zemach, who had reconciled with his father, returned to Plonsk for a visit. On his journey back to Palestine he was joined by several Plonsk Jews, including the wife of Simcha Aizik, the Hasid who had been hounded because of his Zionism and was already in Palestine, and Aizik's beautiful stepdaughter Rachel Nelkin, whom David Green loved. Ben-Gurion joined them having concluded that there was nothing more to look forward to in the Russian Empire. As a Poalei Zion activist, he would be better off in Palestine. His father supported his wishes and even paid for his passage. The parting celebration, held in Rachel Nelkin's home, concluded with the singing of "The Oath," the moving Yiddish anthem of Poalei Zion that had been composed for the Sixth Zionist Congress and spread rapidly throughout the Pale of Settlement and beyond. The immigrants traveled by coach to the railway station at Modlin Fortress, and from there set out for Warsaw, Odessa, and thence by sea to Jaffa. Rachel's and David's feelings for each other were evident, so the girl's mother made sure to sleep between them aboard ship to avoid gossip.



“I Found the Homeland Landscape”

BEN-GURION'S GRAVE stands on a cliff overlooking the ancient desert landscape of Wadi Zin. As he instructed, his tombstone is inscribed simply with the dates of his birth and death and the words: “Immigrated to Palestine in 1906.” When asked what were the three most decisive events in his life, he always included his immigration to Palestine. It symbolized a form of rebirth that soon led him to change his name and adopt a new identity: no longer David Green, son of Avigdor, but David Ben-Gurion, scion of a leader of the Great Revolt against Rome, a courageous fighter described in Flavius Josephus's *The War of the Jews Against the Romans*. When he arrived in Palestine, Ben-Gurion asked his father to keep the letters he would send. When he began publishing articles, he cut them out and pasted them in special notebooks for safekeeping. These actions reflected a feeling that was widespread among people at the time: that they were making history that should be documented.

Ben-Gurion left Plonsk at the end of July 1906 and landed on 6 September in Jaffa, where he was greeted by the usual tumult of this port town. Strapping Arab boatmen rowed out to the ships anchored offshore, loaded the passengers and their belongings onto their boats, and brought them ashore. For many immigrants this was a terrifying encounter. The foreign boatmen seemed menacing, the sea was rough, and the small boats bobbing on the waves seemed about to capsize. But the short trip ended well, and after passing through the Ottoman bureaucracy, Ben-Gurion reached the port gate.

Passing through the gate, he was free to wander as he wished. The contrast with the stifling Russian regime was stark. The atmosphere of Palestine breathed an almost anarchic sense of freedom, in which the dreams of Jewish independence could take shape. Ben-Gurion was thrilled by displays of the nascent Jewish entity: shop signs in Hebrew, people speaking Hebrew in the street, a Jewish boy riding a horse, a Jewish girl riding a donkey. “These are sights of the rebirth!” he exulted.¹ He was unimpressed by Jaffa: the dusty streets, the narrow alleys—perhaps even the Arab residents, whom he does not mention. Together with a group of immigrants he quickly left the town for Petach Tikva, the oldest Jewish *moshava* (colony). The landscape, along with his first encounter with a Jewish village in Palestine, intoxicated him; his childhood dreams were coming true. The nocturnal sounds of howling jackals and braying asses brought to life the biblical verses that mentioned these animals.

At first Ben-Gurion exalted village life and work in the fields. Later, he liked to glorify the title of agricultural worker. Even long after, in the first census taken following the establishment of the state under “profession” he wrote “agricultural worker.” But it was hard work, and he contracted malaria that recurred every few weeks. Quinine, the drug used to combat it, did not help; he often ran a fever of forty degrees Celsius. Living in crowded quarters with only meager food did not improve his health.

The people of the Second Aliya came to Palestine as individuals. They were not members of organizations that could have helped them settle there and had no social resources to cushion the hardships of the place. Ben-Gurion and his companions—young people far from home and family for

the first time in their lives—lived under harsh conditions, feeling terribly lonely.

These immigrants' deepest desire was to build the country, and physical labor in the fields was the only way to do so, contended the members of Hapoel Hatzair (The Young Worker), a party that rejected Marxism and instead made its goal the "conquering of all the labor occupations in Palestine by the Jewish worker." Only by returning to primal labor, to direct communion with nature and farming, would the Jewish people undergo the metamorphosis necessary to reshape their image. Only thus would a broad class of Jewish agricultural workers be formed to become the foundation of the Jewish national entity. A worker's ability to cope with a hard day of tedious agricultural labor in a foreign, hostile climate was therefore the ultimate test. With painful sarcasm, the writer Yosef Haim Brenner described the unfounded dreams of the Jewish intellectual who wanted to till the soil of the homeland but swiftly realized that he had neither the physical nor the mental ability for it.

This was the great crisis of the Second Aliya young people, and the reason many of them left the country—Ben-Gurion estimated the figure at ninety percent. Every ship that anchored in Jaffa Port carrying new immigrants was met by people wanting to return to Russia or Galicia, or go on to London or New York. For many new immigrants, the traumatic encounter with those who were departing—and who justified their decision with stories of the hard reality of Palestine that could thwart any idealist—was a formative experience and formed a common trope in the literature of the period.

Ben-Gurion was careful not to cast aspersions on the country. He scrupulously painted an apparently balanced, unromantic, yet not hostile picture: "In general, potential immigrants to Palestine usually think about and remember only the romance of the country, its beauty, its future, memories of its grand past and the magic of its antiquities, and disregard the real Palestine with its simple, rough, everyday life," he wrote to his father. Instead of their lofty dreams "they find an intimate, naked, prosaic reality—a limited village life and work ... hard, exhausting work," and then comes the crisis. "On a scorching summer day to stand hoeing the *hamra* [hard earth] ... the sweat flows, the hands are covered in blisters and bruises, and it is as if all your limbs are falling apart," he wrote.² His love Rachel Nelkin failed this test, but Ben-Gurion was preoccupied with his own difficulties and did not find the energy to console and make things easier for her. She found another soulmate, Yechezkel Beit-Halakhmi, who helped her through her difficulties, and they were married within a year. Ben-Gurion did not write his father about this, either because of the characteristic reserve of the period—people did not discuss intimate matters, certainly not with their parents—or because it was too painful for him. For many years he tried to get Rachel back, and kept a warm place in his heart for her to the end of his life. Initially he stayed close to his friends from Plonsk, especially Shlomo Zemach, who provided comfort that ameliorated the loneliness of a twenty-year-old who found it hard to make friends with strangers. But they drifted apart after a few months.

His true consolation was party activity, which he was drawn into almost immediately. On 2 October 1906, less than a month after he landed, Ben-Gurion traveled from Petach Tikva to Jaffa to attend the founding conference of Poalei Zion in Palestine. He was elected conference chairman and also to the committee that formulated the party platform at a meeting in Ramla. Party activity offered a legitimate break from physical labor as well as an arena where he felt he was doing something important, and succeeding, which boosted his sense of self-worth. The founders of the Palestine party came from Poalei Zion in Russia and sought an organizational structure suitable to the type of political activity they were used to there. Political work in Russia was built around a party, which required a platform, a leadership, and an organ.

Hapoel Hatzair, the first party founded in Palestine, was local and had no mother party in the Diaspora. Populist in nature along the lines of the Russian "Go to the People" movement, it had no

detailed platform, but simply focused on Jewish workers in general, and agricultural workers in particular. It considered cultural activity extremely important, and making Hebrew the national language was its top priority. Its journal, *Hapoel Hatzair*, was of very high quality, reflecting its somewhat elitist character as the party of the Jewish intelligentsia in Palestine; the members were not only workers but also teachers and writers. Most of the country's intellectuals leaned toward this party, which despised Marxism and refused to define itself as socialist, even though its orientation toward the worker was no different from that of Poalei Zion. Neither was its members' lifestyle.

Ben-Gurion saw no essential differences between the two parties, and later contended that the only difference was in their names. But there were in fact two main sources of disagreement between them. Poalei Zion in Palestine was divided between Hebraists, who wanted to make Hebrew the spoken language, and Yiddishists, who favored Yiddish. It was also just a branch of the party in Russia, which soon founded the World Federation of Poalei Zion, with branches in other countries as well. The two issues of the local party's independence and of Hebrew's precedence over Yiddish were bones of contention between Poalei Zion and Hapoel Hatzair, and also within the local Poalei Zion party itself. Ben-Gurion insisted both that Hebrew be the national language and that the Palestine party be independent. He addressed the Jaffa conference in Hebrew, even though most of his audience did not understand him; some even left the hall.

Even though the majority of the Poalei Zion membership (which numbered only a few score) were "Rostovists"—brash young men from Russia with no Jewish, Yiddish, or Hebrew background, who spoke only Russian and for whom Zionism was secondary to socialism—Ben-Gurion was elected to the committee that formulated what went down in history as "the Ramla Platform." Exactly how this brand-new immigrant, not blessed with any notable qualities, was elected to two important positions is unclear. In the view of Ben-Gurion biographer Shabtai Tevet, it was due to string-pulling by Israel Shochat. Shochat, a man of great personal charm, excelled at behind-the-scenes maneuvering in small conspiratorial groups. He was looking for someone to strengthen the Palestinocentrist trends in Poalei Zion (in order to give priority to Palestinian interests over those of Diaspora communities), who was also familiar with Socialist-Borochovist jargon and had a gift for oratory, which Shochat lacked. Ben-Gurion fit this profile. In accordance with the Russian movement's tradition of conspiracy, the platform drafting committee convened in a remote *khan* (inn) in Ramla, a town without a single Jew. They had yet to internalize the fact that secret meetings were completely unnecessary in Palestine.

In the history of the Palestine labor movement the creation of the Ramla Platform is an uncharacteristic and actually negligible event that likely would never be mentioned in movement history if Ben-Gurion's name had not been connected with it. The Ramla Platform was purely Marxist in the Borochov style. It opens with a sentence extracted from the Communist Manifesto, amended to suit Zionism: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class and national struggles."³ The word "national" was added to legitimize the struggle of the Jewish national movement. Borochov described a spontaneous process that would drive the impoverished, unemployed Jewish proletariat in the Diaspora to Palestine, then subject to what he perceived as a feudal Ottoman regime. A bourgeois society would slowly be built and capitalism would develop, followed by class war, revolution, and the era of socialism. Meanwhile the workers' party would struggle to democratize the regime and for workers' rights—though it would have no responsibility to build the economy. Since immigration would occur quite on its own, neither Zionist propaganda nor efforts to organize immigration would be necessary. Nevertheless the committee recognized the need to assist immigrants by setting up an "information bureau" to direct them to places of work. The party had debated whether to participate in the Zionist Congress, since it represented the scorned Jewish bourgeoisie. The Ramla Platform recognized the need to take part in the congress for the benefit of the workers, but as a counterbalance it also requested membership in the International Socialist Congress.

even though it did not accept parties without a national homeland.

The basic Borochovist premises did not pass the test of Palestinian reality. First, young people came out of nationalist motives, not as a result of unprompted processes. Second, most of the Second Aliya immigrants settled in the towns and had no intention of changing their lifestyle to become proletarians. Third, there was hardly any industry in Palestine. Poalei Zion's target audience was a small minority of several thousand young men and women who were drawn to Palestine by Zionist idealism; it was this group that created the mythology of the Second Aliya. Finally, the Second Aliya workers were willing to undertake economic and social initiatives without waiting for the advent of socialism.

Poalei Zion was not a great success, but for Ben-Gurion it represented an important experience, as well as his first attempt at appearing before a Palestinian audience. He even hoped to be elected as a delegate to the Eighth Zionist Congress in The Hague, where he might meet his friend Fuchs, who had joined Poalei Zion in America. But these hopes were dashed when Yitzhak Ben-Zvi reached Palestine in 1907. Ben-Zvi (who later became president of the State of Israel) was a member of the movement in Russia and had a revolutionary background that included incarceration and exile. He was Borochov's friend and fully conversant with the intricacies of socialist theory. A few years Ben-Gurion's senior, he was a warm, kind, courteous, convivial man who never quarreled with anyone. Ben-Gurion, by contrast, lacked both warmth and the ability to communicate with people; in the harsh circumstances of the Second Aliya period, his difficulty in forming personal relationships was a great disadvantage. On his arrival, Ben-Zvi, who was considered the party's senior member, took over the top position. Ben-Gurion failed by a large margin to be elected as a delegate. Disappointed, affronted and exhausted, he decided to abandon intense political activity. Presumably this was why he decided to move from Judea to Galilee.

Galilee has a special place in Second Aliya mythology. The old orchard-based moshavot in Judea were already well established when the new pioneers arrived. They employed hundreds of Arab workers in seasonal work. Many farmers refused to hire Jews as agricultural laborers. They claimed that doing this work would demean the Jews in the eyes of the Arabs; that Jews did not work as well as Arabs; and that the new pioneers were insolent, demanded respect, and were not religiously observant. They thought that Jewish workers would endanger both the physical and economic security of the moshavot. To the workers, the farmers were traitors driven by selfish economic motives who were hindering the establishment of a working Jewish community.

By contrast, the new moshavot of Galilee were based on field crops. The relative wealth of the Judean moshavot, which had enjoyed the generous support of the French philanthropist Baron Edmond de Rothschild, was nonexistent in Galilee, and the standard of living there was very low. The farmers and their families worked their land themselves, employing one annual worker who lived with the family and shared their food.

Ben-Gurion moved to Galilee in October 1907 and found work at the Sejera moshava in Lower Galilee. "After Judea, Sejera was almost what Petach Tikva was for me after Plonsk and Warsaw. There I found the Palestine I had dreamed about," he wrote in his memoirs. "In Sejera I found the homeland landscape I had yearned for so much."⁴ The beauty of the mountainous Galilean landscape stunned the Second Aliya immigrants who had come from the flat countries of Eastern Europe. In a letter to his father Ben-Gurion waxed lyrical about the amazing light that enabled him to see from afar majestic, snow-covered Mount Hermon. Sejera itself captivated him. He worked at the moshava, plowing, guiding the oxen along the furrow while his mind was occupied with other matters. It was not as fatiguing as hoeing rows of fruit trees, and in the evening he had time for reading, writing, or public activity. Moreover, the cooler Galilee climate was easier to tolerate, and malaria was less common. I

Ben-Gurion's self-created mythology, Sejera was a magical place that justified bestowing on himself the title "agricultural worker." He often recounted his experiences there as seminal events in the life of a worker in Palestine, referring to the three years or so he spent there. But according to Shabtai Teveth's calculations, he was there only thirteen months.

Like many of the Second Aliya pioneers, Ben-Gurion's youthful restlessness sent him wandering all over the country, going from one workplace to another, searching for something intangible that would bring tranquility and happiness. For the young men, enforced bachelorhood was distressing and painful. There were few young women, even fewer who were pretty. And how could a worker even think about a serious relationship with a woman when he could barely make a living? Starting a family was out of the question. As Shlomo Zemach put it, "We were a group of hundreds of young men and six or seven young women, and we did not visit whores."⁵ It was customary to pack up one's few belongings and walk from place to place. Thus, for example, Ben-Gurion walked from Judea to Sejera with Zemach for three days. Between his arrival in Sejera in the fall of 1907 and his journey to Saloniki in 1911, he worked in Zikhron Ya'akov, which he called the most beautiful of the moshavot; went back to Plonsk to report for duty in the Russian army—otherwise his father would have had to pay a fine—then deserted and returned to Palestine; worked on the editorial board of *Ha'akhdut*, his party's new journal in Jerusalem; revisited his family in Poland; and went to Vienna for the World Federation of Poalei Zion conference and saw the wonders of the city, the first big European capital he had visited. Clearly he did not spend a great deal of time working in agriculture.

Despite this seminal experience in Sejera, and even though he called it the crowning glory of his participation in the Second Aliya, at the end of 1909 Ben-Gurion informed his father that he did not see his future in agriculture. "I myself have no inclination or desire to be a farmer." His stated reason was ideological: "I hate the possession of land that binds the owner to it, and I love freedom with all my heart, the freedom of body and mind."⁶ This statement is worthy of a proud socialist, but it conceals a simpler motive: he had had enough of agricultural work. Shlomo Zemach contended that Ben-Gurion was miserable doing this work, and did it poorly. And indeed, many prominent Second Aliya personalities abandoned agriculture. Those who could became editors or teachers, or took up any other profession that freed them from backbreaking labor in the burning sun. Ben-Gurion was no exception, but more than others he turned his past in Sejera into his calling card.

In that same letter to his father he hinted that what interested him was political activity and explained that to prepare himself for this he needed to travel to Istanbul to study law. A few months later he told his father that he intended to dedicate his life to working on behalf of the Jewish worker in Palestine. If he could, he would do so as a lawyer; and if not, as an agricultural worker. "This is the essence of my life, and I shall devote myself to it under any conditions."⁷

Sejera was divided into a colony (moshava) on a hillside, and a farm established by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) on the summit of the hill. Ben-Gurion worked for a farmer in the moshava. The farm employed quite a few members of Poalei Zion, among them Manya Wilbushewitch, a well-known revolutionary from Russia who fled to Palestine and was captivated by it (she later married Israel Shochat). She managed to persuade the Sejera farm manager to set up a "collective" whose members organized their own work, without a manager, and shared their pay. Twenty pioneers, mostly Poalei Zion members, joined the collective, which was connected with Bar-Giora, a clandestine organization that had been founded by Israel Shochat at the Poalei Zion conference in September 1908 to serve as the nucleus of a Jewish self-defense force in Palestine. The collective included a number of Bar-Giora members, for whom it provided a way to make a living while hiding their organization within it. Ben-Zvi was invited to join Bar-Giora; Ben-Gurion was not.

After the Young Turks' revolution of 1908 under the banner of freedom and a constitution, the

authority of the Turkish government in Palestine was seriously weakened, exposing the latent tension between Arabs and Jews. During the Purim festival in 1908 there was a clash between Arabs and Jews in Jaffa. During Passover of 1909 the Poalei Zion conference was held in Sejera, and a Jewish photographer on his way there was attacked and robbed. He shot his assailant, and there followed a suspenseful few days of waiting to see whether the man would die. When he did, it was clear that the Arabs would seek to avenge him, and the Sejera conference was held amid great tension. In his memoirs Ben-Gurion described how one worker was killed in an Arab ambush, and how, during another attack, he and two other Jews went out to drive off the attackers, and one of his comrades was killed. In yet another incident, he was attacked on the road from Sejera to Yavne'el by an Arab shepherd who struggled with him and tried to take his Browning pistol. The robber got away with the basket containing Ben-Gurion's few possessions, but Ben-Gurion held on to the pistol.

These clashes arose out of the Jews' attempts not only to work at Sejera, but also to replace the Arab guards there. Employing Arab guards on a Jewish farm was equivalent to paying protection, since the guards were also the thieves. Aside from this humiliation, the pioneers aspired to defend themselves and their property as befitted the tradition they had brought from Russia, where Jewish self-defense had emerged following the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. Ben-Gurion recalled how he and his comrades enthused like children when they were given weapons, and how he himself became a guard. The romance of using arms to protect life and property plays a starring role in his portrayal of confrontations with the Arabs from the villages surrounding Sejera. It seems that the purpose of this description of heroism was to alleviate the pain and insult he experienced at the Sejera conference. At its end, the members of Bar-Giora and other workers invited by Shochat and Ben-Zvi gathered to found the Hashomer (The Watchman) organization, intended to take over guard duties from the Arabs to the extent that the farmers would let them. They even hatched grandiose plans to settle in border villages, in the manner of Cossack villages in Ukraine that combined agriculture and military operations.

Hashomer was not a clandestine organization, but like Bar-Giora it was conspiratorial, with a core leadership that rejected the authority of both the party and "civilian" public bodies. Although he was a member of Poalei Zion and an active guard, Ben-Gurion was not invited to join Hashomer. His good friends Rachel Yanait (later Ben-Zvi) and Ben-Zvi never explained how the relatively senior Ben-Gurion, who worked in agriculture and even bore arms, was not chosen, whereas they, two teachers new to Palestine, were. Shochat needed a connection with the party, which he already had via the easygoing Ben-Zvi, and it is possible that he did not want another "intellectual" in Hashomer. Its members were all simple, uneducated, yet dedicated people who accepted Shochat's authority as if he were a sort of rabbi or Cossack *ataman* (chief). Ben-Gurion did not fit into this setup. To Ben-Gurion being excluded from Hashomer was an unforgettable, unforgivable insult, and ever after he bore a grudge against all kinds of military or underground organizations that did not accept the authority of civil institutions. Many years later, in 1957, Israel Shochat wrote to him personally and invited him to attend a ceremony commemorating Hashomer's fiftieth anniversary. As a belated apology he added: "That you were not a member is, in our opinion, just an accident."⁸

This exclusion from Hashomer was one reason why Ben-Gurion incorporated his clashes with the Arabs at Sejera, as well as the attack on the road between Sejera and Yavne'el in which he retained his pistol (the symbol of self-defense) into his self-mythologizing. The message was: even though he was not a member of Hashomer, he knew how to use a weapon and had shown great courage.

In 1907, despite Ben-Gurion's opposition, the party had decided to publish a Yiddish journal, to be called *Der Anfang* (The Beginning). In an attempt at conciliation, Ben-Zvi suggested that Ben-Gurion write for it in Hebrew. Ben-Gurion angrily refused and went to Galilee instead. *Der Anfang* was a

failure and published only two or three issues. In 1910 the party leaders decided to publish a Hebrew weekly in Jerusalem, where they were located, to be called *Ha'akhdut* (Unity). The editors were meant to be experienced party loyalists, including Jacob Zerubavel, who had just arrived from Russia, other personalities from abroad, and, of course, Ben-Zvi and his future wife Rachel Yanait.

Ben-Gurion was not invited to join the editorial board. After a few weeks, however, when it became clear that no editors from abroad were coming, an approach was made to him, then working in Zikhron Ya'akov. In his memoirs Ben-Gurion played down his pleasure at this invitation, claiming that he was surprised and did not understand why they approached him, who had never written or edited anything in his life. We can assume that he was invited because his Hebrew was fluent, unlike that of other editorial board members whose articles he had to translate from Russian and Yiddish, and also because he was the only one who had been an agricultural worker and could credibly address the problems of labor, as befitted a workers' paper. In any case joining the editorial board was a big improvement in his life; it released him from digging holes in the soil of Zikhron Ya'akov and marked the end of his engagement with physical labor.

Ben-Gurion's work at *Ha'akhdut* did not make a great impression on either his colleagues or the public. His articles were tedious and written in a didactic style with a great deal of data and very little soul. Although he worked with the writer Yosef Haim Brenner, there was no chemistry between them. He stayed in contact with Ben-Zvi and kept his distance from the Marxist Zerubavel, who annoyed him as well as Brenner by trying to insert his nationalist rhetoric into their articles to make them more to his liking. All in all, Ben-Gurion's presence at *Ha'akhdut* was barely significant.

Meanwhile, he hatched with Ben-Zvi a plan to go to Istanbul to study law. For a while after the Young Turks' revolution, the Ottoman Empire seemed to be moving toward democracy. In a parliamentary regime, the people's elected representatives are important, and Ben-Gurion's idea was to study law in order to organize the Jews of the Ottoman Empire into a political force that would be represented in the Turkish parliament. Poalei Zion had a far-reaching political vision. The idea of Hashomer as the nucleus of a Jewish defense force, for example, could only have come from within its ranks, not from other circles in the Yishuv. Another example was its alignment with the world Jewish labor and world socialist movements.

At the same time, there was something rather pompous—not to say ludicrous—in Poalei Zion's interminable preoccupation with ideological matters encompassing the whole world, at a time when it had fewer than two hundred members. Inhabiting the ill-defined territory between visionary political concepts and groundless pretensions was characteristic of both Hashomer and Poalei Zion. In the same way, Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zvi's venture trod the fine line separating the lofty from the pathetic. They did not try to seriously examine its feasibility in advance. If they failed to blaze a trail for their party to the Jewish masses in Turkey and the Balkans, they thought, perhaps they would at least be able to get Jews from Palestine into parliament, where they could counterbalance the anti-Zionist propaganda disseminated by the Arab representatives. In any event, acquiring an Ottoman legal education seemed to them a very efficient path toward large-scale political activity—the kind Ben-Gurion dreamed of.

To enter a university in Istanbul, Ben-Gurion had to surmount several hurdles. First, he did not have a matriculation certificate. Ben-Zvi used his revolutionary contacts in Poltava to obtain a forged certificate for his friend, solving that problem. Second, Ben-Gurion spoke neither Turkish nor Arabic. He therefore went first to Saloniki to learn Turkish. He chose Saloniki because there were many Jewish workers there (the port was closed on Saturdays, in fact), and Poalei Zion hoped to organize these workers and lead them to socialist and Zionist awareness. The Jews of Saloniki, however, spoke Ladino, not Turkish, and the lingua franca was Greek, so Ben-Gurion was unable to set up a channel of communication with them—another example of the doubtful feasibility of Poalei Zion's grand plans.

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