

David Ben-Gurion talks about Israel and the Arabs...

"Peace Is More Important than Real Estate"

by JOHN McCOOK ROOTS

Amid the imponderables of a Middle East thrown violently out of focus by the death of President Nasser, one towering personality remains—Israel's legendary elder statesman, David Ben-Gurion, father of the Jewish state, for fifteen years its iron-handed first Prime Minister, author of its declaration of independence, creator of its incomparable armed forces, and possibly the closest our age has come to the "philosopher-king" concept immortalized by his favorite author, Plato.

Today, when the question of conquered Arab territories has become a key issue, Ben-Gurion's forthright views on the terms and spirit of the final settlement assume a unique importance. Long enough out of office to see beyond the battle, yet intimately involved with the struggle for survival whose guidelines he originally laid down, the architect of Israel's rebirth as a nation speaks from a wealth of experience possessed by none of the current leaders on either side. Most Arab heads of state were figuratively in knee pants when Ben-Gurion first became a world figure. Most of those in the present Israeli cabinet are his pupils.

Recently I spent an afternoon with this remarkable man at his desert retreat—kibbutz Sde Boker—deep in the Negev. With Nasser's funeral rites in Cairo still a vivid memory, I wanted to know how Nasser's long-time rival envisaged the future of the Middle East. I was also anxious to probe the questing mind that, during early Egyptian air raids, immersed itself in the Greek and Chinese classics, to see if

there might be found wisdom to illumine some of the confusions of the world scene.

The omens for peace were not auspicious. Israel's resolute Prime Minister Golda Meir, herself a Ben-Gurion protégée, was still insisting that her country would never re-enter negotiations until the controversial Soviet-Egyptian anti-aircraft missiles had been moved back from the Suez cease-fire zone. Egypt's new President, Colonel Anwar Sadat, now firmly in the saddle, had responded by declaring once more that in that case a fresh round of fighting was inevitable. To Western reporters familiar with the long-embittered fears, frustrations, cynicism, and pent-up fury in both Jerusalem and Cairo, this dismal routine of charge and counter-charge, so happily broken for a few days by Secretary Rogers's summer truce proposal, appeared to offer no hope whatever for the peace both sides longed for so deeply and needed so much.

What did Ben-Gurion think about it all? The stocky figure, encased in a huge, gray turtle-neck sweater against the desert's winter chill, shot upright in his chair. The leonine head, massive atop the sturdy torso and crowned by the familiar aureole of now-thinning white hair, thrust close to mine. The blue eyes blazed as a stabbing forefinger punctuated his fluent, heavily accented English.

"Peace, *real* peace, is now the great necessity for us," he said. "It is worth almost any sacrifice. To get it, we must return to the borders before 1967. If I were still Prime Minister, I would announce that we are prepared to give back all the territory occupied in the Six-Day War except East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights—Jerusalem for history's sake, the Golan for security."

These were startling and controversial views. With the future of his coun-

try at stake, and considering the tough public line of his own government, did he really wish to go on record as strongly as this?

"Certainly," he shot back. "I am a realist and see things as they are. When I think of the future of Israel, I only consider the country before the Six-Day War. We must return to 1967. We should give all gains back, except Jerusalem and the Golan, and these we should negotiate about." Then, as if anticipating the obvious query: "Sinai? Sharm el Sheikh? Gaza? The West Bank? Let them go. Peace is more important than real estate. We don't need the territory. With proper irrigation we now have enough land right here in the Negev to care for all the Jews in the world—if they come. And they certainly will not all come. No, we don't require more land.

"As for security, militarily defensible borders, while desirable, cannot by themselves guarantee our future. *Real* peace with our Arab neighbors—mutual trust and friendship—that is the only true security."

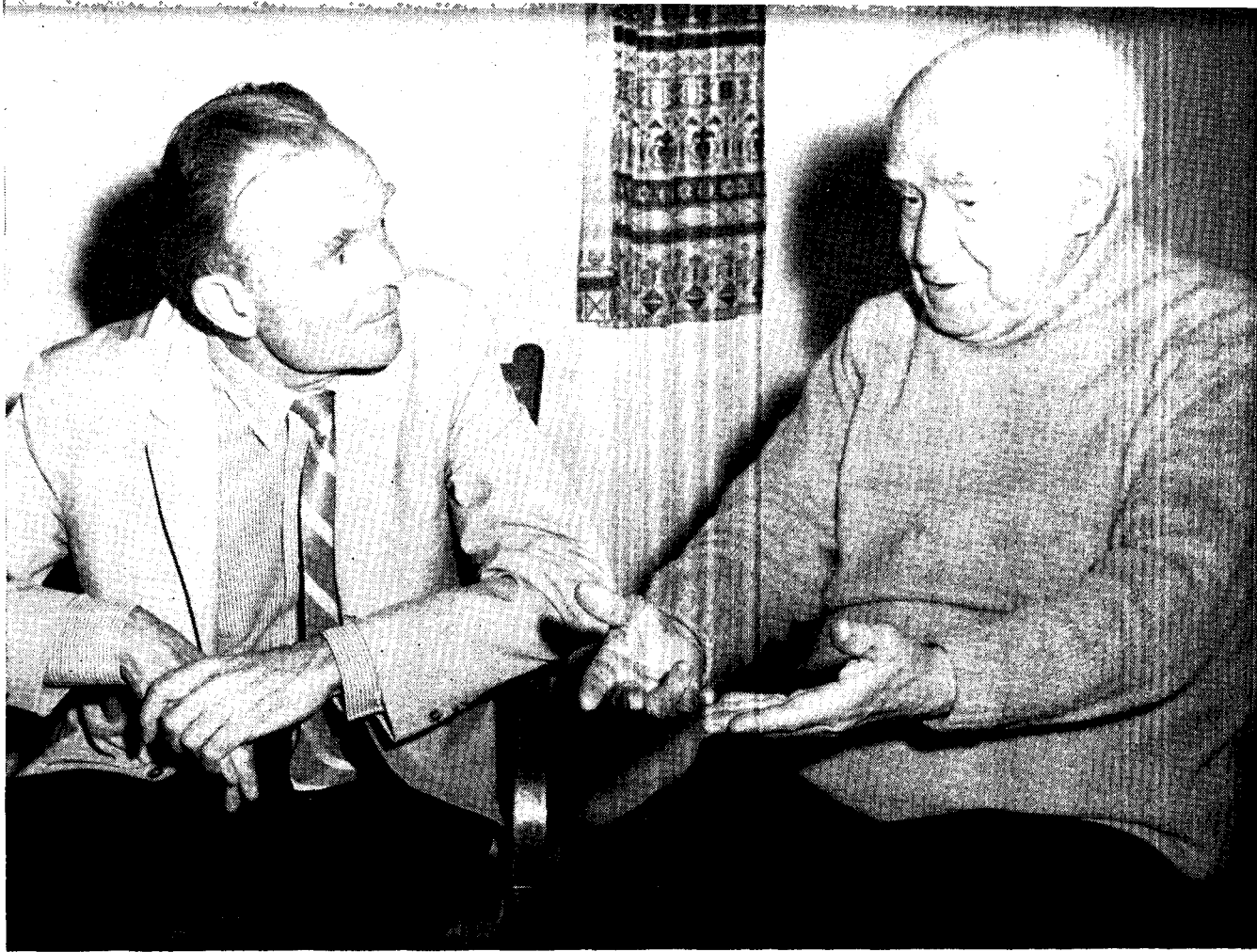
Ben-Gurion, who studiously avoids political discussions, smiled at mention of the Gahal hard-liners whose clamor for even more territory than that gained in 1967 led last summer to their rejection of the American peace plan and resignation from the government.

"Of course," he conceded, gesturing toward a picture of Abraham Lincoln on the wall, "these frontiers I have indicated would be, from our point of view, far from ideal. But a bad peace is better than a good war."

Asked if others in his country now felt the same, he replied, "Yes. Many."

Regarding the question of the Arab refugees, Ben-Gurion believes two things: first, that the Jews cannot be allowed to become a minority in their own country; second, that the refugees clearly have rights which have been

JOHN McCOOK ROOTS, foreign correspondent, author, and editor, has been a close observer of Middle Eastern affairs for more than thirty years.



—Photo E. F. Ilani

Ben-Gurion with the author—"Sinai? Sharm el Sheikh? Gaza? The West Bank? Let them go."

far too long denied and must be justly and promptly dealt with.

Concerning the first factor, Ben-Gurion recalled how Chaim Weizmann in 1931 lost his position as head of world Zionism "because he said that Jews would not need a majority in Israel." He quickly added, "Hitler changed his mind." As for the second, Ben-Gurion repeated again and again: "Remember, this land belongs to two peoples—the Arabs of Palestine and the Jews of the world." Undoubtedly, in his view, the unequivocal return of Gaza and the West Bank would contribute to a climate of conciliation in which this extremely thorny issue might be resolved.

Still ruddy and fit after nearly three-quarters of a century devoted to the Zionist cause, Israel's former leader has lived quietly at Sde Boker since his retirement from the government in 1963. The death of his wife Paula two years ago was a searing personal loss. But he maintains close touch with events, keeps in trim with a three-mile walk twice a day, and devotes most of his time to work on his memoirs. Only Friday afternoons are available for friends and visitors. Appointments are rigidly controlled through the Tel Aviv

office of his one-time aide Defense Minister Moshe Dayan.

The memoirs will be his legacy to the nation he brought into being. The first volume, now complete, covers events to 1933. "But so much happens after that," he quips, "that from then on it may have to be a volume a year!"

The former Prime Minister, long known as the country's leading "hawk," sees no conflict between his present advocacy of territorial withdrawal and his handling of the traumatic Suez crisis of 1956. At that time, in defiance of world opinion, he invaded Sinai, wiped out the hostile fedayeen bases at Gaza, secured the Red Sea outlet by seizing Sharm el Sheikh, and clung to his gains against massive pressure from the United States and the U.N. "If you offer me a choice," he had explained, "between all the ideals in the world, however attractive, and the security of Israel, I would unhesitatingly choose the latter."

Finally, at the last possible moment, after he had made his point and upon receipt of "assurances" from Washington that there would be an easing of the implacable Arab hostility toward his new state, there were a graceful yielding to the inevitable, a general

withdrawal order, and an appreciative word from President Eisenhower.

Much of Israel's seeming intransigence today derives from the aftermath of this first withdrawal from conquered Sinai. A senior Foreign Office official in Jerusalem will cite you chapter and verse why Mrs. Meir, then Ben-Gurion's Foreign Minister and chief U.N. spokesman, feels her country was betrayed at that time by the Americans.

"These 'assurances' and 'assumptions' on which our 1956-57 withdrawal was based," he remarks bitterly, "proved meaningless. There was no change in the Arab attitude. Our ships continued to be banned from the canal. The U.N. force at Sharm el Sheikh, it is true, gave us for a while free passage through the gulf. But exactly ten years later U Thant, on Nasser's demand, suddenly pulled his men out, and we had no alternative but to reoccupy Sinai. Then, following the Six-Day War, came the 'Three No's' of the Arab summit at Khartoum—'no recognition of Israel; no negotiation with Israel; no peace with Israel.'"

That position has now changed dramatically. Last spring Secretary Rog-

ers launched his peace initiative. In July President Nasser, confounding the skeptics, accepted the Rogers formula. By so doing, the Egyptian leader executed a spectacular reversal of the Arab position. He disavowed by implication all three "no's," repudiated his own repeated refusal to negotiate while his country was under occupation, risked personal assassination at the hands of the enraged Palestinian commandos, and, at his death in September, left as a legacy to his successors the reluctant but firm Arab acceptance of a permanent Jewish state in the Middle East.

Nasser thus introduced a new factor into the current deadlock. Ever since the three-year-old U.N. resolution stipulating *both* Israeli withdrawal from its 1967 war gains *and* Arab recognition of Israel, the heart of the Middle East problem has been a simple matter of trust. In essence, it has been the problem of achieving simultaneous compliance with the terms of the resolution by antagonists who hate, fear, and deeply distrust each other and who therefore each insist that the other act first.

The late Egyptian President's contribution to resolving this dilemma was what amounted to a declaration of intent: If Israel withdrew, Arab recognition would follow. First stated publicly in May to Professor Roger Fisher of Harvard in a little-noted television interview, the declaration was officially confirmed by Nasser's "yes" to Secretary Rogers in July. On December 23, in a talk with James Reston of *The New York Times*, President Sadat repeated in substance the Nasser formula, and during a *Newsweek* interview in February, Sadat made the offer of a peace treaty explicit.

Israel, however, had not been heard from beyond the references to "safe, secure borders." Official definition of these borders is of course virtually impossible to achieve outside the conference room. Yet the absence of some declaration of intent, coupled with an Israeli occupation of Arab soil already nearly four years old, had fed deep-seated fears in Arab capitals. Speaking on American television in December, the moderate King Hussein of Jordan put the matter briefly: "What are Israel's real aims? They have not said what they will do. Do they plan to expand? Our position is very simply that they can have peace *or* territory, but not both."

Now for the first time Hussein has an indication. Technically, Ben-Gurion's views are unofficial. But they come from Israel's greatest statesman. And they carry a special authority of their own. They mean that the man who as Prime Minister ordered the

first withdrawal from Sinai is now willing, despite his earlier disillusionment with the Arab response, to risk withdrawal a second time, believing that in the altered circumstances of today it is an essential prerequisite to peace. What are those altered circumstances?

Undoubtedly the most compelling development has been the shift in the Arab posture brought about by the late Egyptian President before he died. Ben-Gurion spoke of it with amazement. "We have had to live for so many years," he explained, "under the threat of Nasser's hostility. I think I understood how he felt, and the pressures he was up against. And when he accepted the Rogers plan in July, it came as a complete surprise. I was frankly astounded. Perhaps he finally came to realize that Israel was here to stay. He must have changed his mind. And it takes a really big man, a really courageous man, to do that."

Related to this new factor—that responsible Arab opinion no longer expects to "push Israel into the sea"—is another. It is a dawning consciousness among many Israelis that their nation's long and agonizing fight for political identity has essentially been won, that Israel's physical survival over the short term is not now at issue, and that the chief question today concerns the country's relations with its neighbors, the Arab states, which alone can give it the lasting peace and security it craves. This realization is bound to induce a greater sensitivity to Arab desires regarding the final frontiers. It clearly conditions Ben-Gurion's approach to the settlement.

Then there is Russia. Ben-Gurion, like all Israelis, is greatly concerned about the increased Soviet presence in Egypt. He knows that Russia, unlike America, is a Middle East power—that in a showdown in the Mediterranean America would be at a disadvantage roughly comparable to that of Russia in the Caribbean during the Cuban missile crisis. Hence, the urgency about stopping the war on which this Soviet presence feeds.

Finally, there is his own highly developed sense of timing. At certain crises in Israel's brief history, fateful actions were ordered by Ben-Gurion on the authority, in the last analysis, of his inner conviction that "the moment" had arrived.



Clearly, today, Ben-Gurion senses once more that the hour of fate has struck. "In every conflict, there comes a time when to settle is more important than to get everything you want," he said. "And the time has come to settle. Today, above all else, as Jews and as humans, we must have an end to destruction and bloodshed. We must look to the future. The moment has come for peace, and we must seize it."

"One reason I feel so strongly about the need for bold steps now toward a settlement is that I am certain eventual Arab-Israeli cooperation is inevitable. In fact, an Arab-Israeli alliance. Geography and history make it so. The Arabs of the Middle Ages were the most civilized race in the world. They have much to give us, and I believe we in turn have much to give them."

"History has proved the absurdity of regarding traditional enmities as eternal. Nations which have been at each other's throats today may fall on each other's necks tomorrow. Look at France and Germany. Now, with the pace of change so rapid and radical, Arab-Jewish partnership may come faster than we think, and together we could turn the Middle East into one of the garden spots and great creative centers of the earth."

The former Prime Minister spoke again of President Nasser. He spoke with respect. There was a wistful note as he asked about the funeral in Cairo. "I often felt," he recalled, "that if he and I could have sat down together, we might have settled everything between us. He was by far the greatest of the Arabs. He was the one man, and Egypt the one Arab state, strong enough to make peace." Turning to the window, he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "And now he's gone," he said with emotion. "What a pity he had to die."

Ben-Gurion, a voracious reader whose long experience with men and affairs enables him to view Israel's dilemma with more detachment than most, then responded to questions on a broad variety of themes, ending with his favorite—world peace.

"The Middle East is not alone in being desperate for peace. Every nation needs it. We need to finish with wars and armies. Our Jewish prophets said: 'Nation shall not rise against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.' Not only should we not make war, we should not *learn* war. It's nonsense to kill people. What is achieved? Why do it?"

"Those who say that abolishing war is impossible forget that not long ago it was considered impossible to abolish slavery. Now it is slavery, not abolishing it, that is considered impossible. And war is worse than slavery."

Holding the Fort On Audubon Terrace

"The National Institute of Arts and Letters has the quaint belief that literary distinction is something apart from current listings on the stock exchange."

by MALCOLM COWLEY

In John Updike's cycle of stories *Bech: A Book*, the hero is a talented New York Jewish writer—and the author persuades us of his talent, no trifling achievement—who has published three novels, more esteemed than sold, and finds himself unable to start a fourth. At this moment of personal crisis, and in the last story, Bech enters heaven, as Updike puts it sardonically. That is, he is invited to a ceremonial on Morningside Heights and is there inducted into an organization, name not revealed, that is unmistakably the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Updike himself belongs to the Institute; in fact, he was its youngest member when elected in 1964. He now seizes on Bech's *Himmelfahrt* as an opportunity for being good-humoredly but extravagantly funny at the expense of his colleagues. Through his hero's eyes he presents them as, for the most part, doddering old novelists and poets who will never write another line and who snore through the ceremonial; one reviewer calls them "the living dead."

The same reviewer is one of several who mistook the unmistakable object of Updike's humor. Another is Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who said of Bech in *The New York Times* of June 10, "He swings in London, and is at last honored at home with admission into what sounds like the American Academy of Arts and Sciences." That happens to be a different academy, one with more than 2,000 members or fellows, mostly from the academic world. These are not inducted at a ceremonial such as Bech attended, and the headquarters of this other organization are just outside of Boston.

MALCOLM COWLEY is the current chancellor of the Academy of Arts and Letters; his latest book, *A Many-windowed House: Collected Essays on American Writers and American Writings*, was published last fall by the Southern Illinois University Press.

The *Times* Sunday reviewer, Thomas R. Edwards, says that Bech is "eminent enough to be elected to something like the American Academy of Arts and Letters." Here he comes closer to the mark without quite hitting it. The Academy is affiliated with the National Institute; they share the same buildings on Audubon Terrace and are joint hosts at the ceremonial. The purpose of both organizations, as stated in their separate charters, is "the furtherance of the interests of literature and the fine arts." Members of the Academy, never more than fifty in all, are chosen from the somewhat larger membership of the Institute, which by charter may not exceed 250. Thus, Bech could not have been elected to the Academy, or even nominated, without first having been inducted by the Institute.

It is true that proposals for uniting the two organizations have been discussed time and again. At present, the Academy serves largely as a senate or council of elders for the Institute (as well as being a consolation prize to its members for having grown old in servitude to their arts). To confuse it with the Institute is hardly a crime, but there is less excuse, I think, for confounding them both with the respected academy in Boston, which devotes itself chiefly to scientific and scholarly pursuits.

The mistakes in these and other reviews of Updike's book reinforced an older impression of mine: that the National Institute and the Academy of Arts and Letters are little known even to the lettered public. They are mildly resented or less mildly ridiculed in some quarters, to do so being a tradition of the literary life. "Down with academies!" is a cry as old as academies. The two bodies are mildly admired or envied in other quarters, but chiefly they are ignored. More should be said about them. Since the beginning of this century, they have played a modestly important part in furthering "the interests of literature and the fine arts."



Entrance (designed by Herbert Adams) to Art Gallery of the Academy/Institute.

The Institute was founded in 1898, partly on the model of the Institut de France; it goes back to a time when Americans emulated and hoped to rival the French in cultural matters. There are five sections in the Institut de France, one of which is the French Academy. The American organization started out with three departments, Art, Literature, and Music, into which it is still divided. In 1904, once again on a French model, it undertook to organize an American Academy, to be composed of members from all departments chosen for special distinction. Both bodies received Congressional charters after intensive lobbying: the Institute in 1913 during the last days of the Taft administration, and the Academy in 1916 under Wilson, who was one of its members.

Meanwhile, both bodies had been looking for private endowments. They found a benefactor in Archer M. Huntington, a member of the Academy who was, by coincidence, the stepson and principal legatee of a railroad magnate. Huntington endowed both organizations and built a home for them, though he was much more generous to the Academy, which holds title to the buildings on Audubon Terrace. There was a good deal of bickering in the 1920s and 1930s, chiefly over the election of new members: Should they be genteel and idealistic, or rebels in art? It was a period of warfare in the literary world, and the Academy in particular was dominated by representatives of the genteel tradition—by such men as Henry Van Dyke, for example, who uttered a famous blast against Sinclair Lewis as a traducer of American literature. (Continued on page 41)