

By **ARNOLD AGES**
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

IN HIS LONG-TIME CAREER AS BOOK REVIEWER, this writer has always abided by three hard and fast principles.

First: Never use the first person singular (Pascal used to say “*le moi est haïssable*,” — “[the word] I is hateful.”)

Second: Never deploy the word “brilliant”. Its over-use has produced a devaluation of the term.

Third: Avoid (as much as possible) enthusiasm, for that emotion, as the scientists say, distorts objectivity.

Alas: **The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership** by Yehuda Avner (Toby Press, 2010, 731 pp., \$29.95), a unique essay (a strange word perhaps for a 731 page book), has caused me to violate the sacrosanctity of my principles.

This is because I have been overwhelmed with enthusiasm by

the brilliance of Avner’s exposition of the more than 50 years he has spent in the service of the State of Israel as kibbutznik, speech writer, consular official, ambassador and confidant to four Israeli prime ministers: Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin.

Yehuda Avner is unique

among the thousands of writers who have written about Israel.

Born in Manchester, England, he brought with him to Israel in 1947 a fierce pride in his membership in the Jewish people, a deep respect for the sancta of Judaism including the dietary laws, an admiration for the boldness of the Zionist enterprise and a mind full of insights into the human condition.

These qualities were embedded in his DNA and emerged in various ways as he made his way through the

Brilliance in depicting Israel’s leaders

warrens of Israeli politics and international affairs. That he was able to do so without revealing his partisan political loyalties in Israel (other than an embrace of Jewish humanism) is one of the small miracles in his life.

THE AFOREMENTIONED factors, however, are only the foothills in the approach to Avner’s special genius as a writer.

The latter is an amalgam of his trilingual command of English, Yiddish and Heb-



BOOK MARKS



IN THE SERVICE OF FOUR PRIME MINISTERS — Yehuda Avner was the confidant and English speechwriter for Israel’s fourth to seventh prime ministers: Labor leaders Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and Likud leader Menachem Begin.

rew, an impish but acute sense of humor, a mastery of English prose style, an absolutely intimidating recall of events, dates, personalities, memos and letters from yesteryear (photocopies of which he has generously provided).

His most endearing talent is found in the Rembrandt-like thumbnail sketches he provides of hundreds of Israeli and foreign politicians (especially American presidents) who intersected his multi-tasking careers.

Even this attempt to dissect the architecture of Avner’s writing does not do justice to his engaging style, because it does not pay proper homage to his skill as a novelist-historian as he paints powerful word portraits of Israel’s first five decades.

His portraiture begins in England in the late 1940s, when Avner was exposed to the derisive taunts of a teacher who, in the wake of the Irgun’s retaliation execution of two British army sergeants, targeted the young Haffner (Avner’s original surname) as a prototypical Jewish Zionist terrorist and demanded to know where his mother came from in her native Rumania.

Avner had some vague inkling that his mother had come from a nondescript place called Negresht somewhere in the Carpathian mountains, but was not moved to offer that geographical pointer.

Instead, he inexplicably blurted out, “*Gei in Drerd*” (“go to hell”) — a response which apparently placated his teacher, who was obviously not up on the finer points of Yiddish curses.

Within a few years, Avner made his way to Israel as part of a Bnei Akiva contingent, and there metamorphosed into a true *halutz* as a founder of Kibbutz Lavi (today one of Israel’s top resort facilities) in a bleak region of Galilee.

The work there was onerous because the topography was inhospitable, but the political talk among the members was stimulating, if controversial.

Avner found himself defending Menachem Begin (who was being pilloried as the arch Jewish terrorist). Little did he realize that within 20 years he would become Begin’s major English language speech writ-

er, and within the following decade Israel’s ambassador to England.

IN RECONSTRUCTING THE early part of his career, Avner has occasion to revisit topics that are still relevant today (especially if one is familiar with Palestinian polemics).

Thus in 1952, five years after his *aliyah*, Avner, during a visit to England, attended a debate at the famous Oxford Union where a resolution entitled “This House Condemns Zionism as Imperialism” was being debated.

Ali Hussein, of the famous Palestinian Hussein clan, trotted out the 1948 Deir Yassin attack on the Arab village in the Jerusalem corridor by the Irgun as evidence of the brutality and imperialism of Zionism. He embellished his tirade with hyperbolic descriptions of “massacring Israeli criminals.”

Avner must have been very impressed with Dr. Gershon Levy, Ben Gurion’s adviser and respondent at the Oxford Union because he (Avner) quotes verbatim Levy’s magisterial eloquence in refuting Hussein’s charge.

Levy denied that Jews were a warrior nation, and flung at Hussein the real evidence of the massacres that the Palestinians had inflicted on Jews in 1920, 1921, 1929 and between 1936 and 1939 “and in the recent war in which the Arabs set out to massacre and mutilate the Jewish State at birth.”

Levy then added data about the Palestinian murders of the doctors and nurses en route to the Hadassah Hospital, as well as the murder of 35 members of a convoy on the way to the Etzion Bloc in 1948.

THE AUTHOR’S GIFT FOR reproducing conversations, speeches and communications he had half a century ago is quite extraordinary, as noted above, but in the case of the prime ministers he worked with, the result is doubly engaging.

Levi Eshkol is resurrected in this book through Avner’s recollection of the pithiness of Eshkol’s proletarian Yiddish. During one exchange with Eshkol, Avner was treated to a definition of Jewish disputatiousness. “*Boychik*,” he told Avner,

“we’re a stiff-necked people. Shouting at each other keeps us together. Argument is our nationality.”

There was a great deal of argument in Israel, reports Avner, over Eshkol’s disastrous speech on radio just before the Six Day War.

Avner, for the first time from his perspective as speech writer, explains why Eshkol blundered so badly in reading the message that was supposed to buoy up the Israeli nation as war seemed to loom on the horizon, but which instead plunged it into despair.

The speech in question was hurriedly prepared, and Eshkol was reading from a hand-written text that had numerous erasures and substitutes and which was practically illegible!

Eshkol’s apparent indecisiveness came from his text, not from his character.

IN HIS WIDE-RANGING chronology of Israel’s history, Avner has a great deal to say about other peoples’ character.

Golda Meir’s address to troubled Israeli soldiers she met with on the battle fields of the 1973 Yom Kippur War was demonstrative of her honesty, sincerity and personal integrity.

Yitzhak Rabin’s personality, in Avner’s view, was, while calculating, mostly indecipherable.

Ronald Reagan Avner describes as an old charmer who needed cue cards to keep track of his discussions with the man he called “Menakem” Begin.

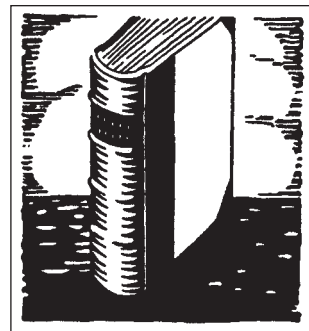
Caspar Weinberger, the American defense secretary in the Reagan administration, was, for Avner the *éminence grise* who could barely conceal his disdain for Israel.

General Alexander Haig, Reagan’s military adviser, appears on Avner’s canvass as a genial figure.

Avner has many positive things to say about Margaret Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth and Princess Diana and her sons, all of whom he met during various visits to England.

His investiture as ambassador (obviously a high point in his career) prompted a question from the Queen when he was presenting his credentials to Her Majesty.

She asked him to explain the anomaly of an English-



BOOK BRIEFS

NOW IN PAPERBACK — Books on the Holocaust — fiction and non-fiction — have recently been made available in paperback.

Prisoners: A Jewish Guard in a Nazi POW Camp, by Burt Zollo (Academy Chicago Publishers, 304 pp., \$18.95) is a debut novel by this Chicago writer, originally published in 2003 and now reissued in paperback.

American Jewish soldier Stuart “Sandy” Delman is assigned as a guard at a POW compound housing Germans who know he’s Jewish and take every opportunity to curse him.

Delman can’t always contain his own responses, and is punished for it. Ironically, circumstances lead the young soldier, who had enlisted to fight Germans, to devise a plan to save these prisoners.

The Holocaust and today’s Middle East are the backdrop for **Blue Nude** by Elizabeth Rosner (Gallery Books, 210 pp., \$15). It is about consequences, about the influence of the past on the present and about reconciliation.

Danzig, a painter born in post-war Germany, and Merav, an Israeli who is the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, bring past and present together as artist and model, their lives intersecting in San Francisco.

They are both separated and united by the past and their different perceptions of it. Yet in the end the author, who is herself a child of survivors, offers hope.

The true story of a Polish Jew who posed as an Aryan and succeeded in saving Jewish lives is told in **Who Shall Live: The Wilhelm Bachner Story** by Samuel Oliner and Kathleen Lee (Academy Chicago Publishers, 277 pp., \$18.95), first published in 1996.

Thanks to an engineering degree from a German university and an excellent command of the German language, Bachner was hired by a German firm, where he managed to hire Polish Jews and secure fake identity papers for them.

The authors interviewed Bachner in 1983, as well as those he saved.

NOW ON DVD — For a delightful 90 minutes, take a look at the documentary **Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg** by filmmaker Aviva Kempner (\$29.95).

In his review when the film opened here last year, JEWISH STAR film critic Michael Fox called it “an exceptionally valuable feel-good film” (July 24, 2009).

The two-disc DVD also includes episodes of “The Goldbergs”, interviews and other extras.

Kempner, who wrote, produced and directed the documentary, tells the story of Gertrude Berg, creator of the fictional Molly Goldberg



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BOOKS

Prime Ministers

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born individual being sworn in as an ambassador from another country. Avner beautifully replied that while he was physically born in England, he had been spiritually born in Jerusalem 3,000 years before.

Because he was observant of the Jewish dietary laws, Avner often found himself in awkward situations when Israeli colleagues on foreign jaunts partook (without hesitation) of all the culinary fare offered by hosting dignitaries (many of whom, like Lady Bird Johnson, were unaware of the complexities of the Levitical food prohibitions).

His unapologetic Jewishness also brought him into occasionally abrasive contact in England with the genteel anti-Semitism which pervades certain of the English upper classes.

Once during a social gathering in London, Avner was forced to contend

with the unsubtle anti-Semitic barbs of several Colonel Blimp types who, upon being informed by Avner that they were engaging in anti-Semitic canards, expressed astonishment at his observation and hurried to deny his accusation.

In the repartee, Avner pointed to half a dozen Jewish cabinet ministers in the Thatcher government who were also present at the soirée and asked why, if Jews were so repugnant, Margaret Thatcher had appointed so many of them to her cabinet?

"Because," replied his interlocutors, "Margaret is more comfortable with the lower classes."

IN HIS CHOREOGRAPHY OF the years which he spent with Menachem Begin, a section with some of the meatiest commentary in the book, Avner is extremely judicious in making judgments about the man who served as Israeli

prime minister during the Jimmy Carter presidency, the tumultuous days of Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, the bombing of the Osirak atomic reactor in Iraq, the grounding, by Knesset decree, of El Al aircraft on Shabbat and major Jewish holidays, the invasion of Lebanon, the enactment of the Golan statute, and the slow decline of Begin in the wake of a disastrous hip breaking fall at home and subsequently the death of his wife at age 62.

When Jimmy Carter greeted Menachem Begin for the first time, he said, "Welcome to Washington D.C." — to which Begin responded, "Greetings from Jerusalem D.C."

Begin explained that "D.C." in this case referred to "David's City."

Readers will not be surprised to learn that discussions between Carter and Begin were often hardball exercises but will indeed be surprised by Avner's revelation that Begin went out of his

way to placate Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's adviser, who was thought to be an anti-Israel hard liner tinged with a patina of anti-Semitism.

Begin met Brzezinski by publicly acknowledging that his, Brzezinski's father, had been an important Polish diplomat who had done much to save Jews through his contacts in Germany.

Begin's praise, effusive yet sincere, produced an unanticipated effect on the young Brzezinski, who according to Avner, burst into tears on hearing the pronouncement.

Whether this *ha'karat ha'tov* (expression of gratitude) on Begin's part actually softened Brzezinski's strident defense of American interests above everything else is, of course, questionable, but it did ease the tension in the talks.

ONE OF THE LEITMOTIFS in Avner's reconstruction of Begin's career is the lengths to which the prime minister would go to dismiss talk about the legitimacy of Israel's existence.



YEHUDA AVNER / BY PRESS PHOTO

with the Torah sages in Israel and elsewhere (the Lubavitcher Rebbe, for example). With one exception — the representatives of the Neturei Karta, the violently anti-Zionist group.

A BOOK REVIEW OF A FEW hundred words cannot possibly encompass the grandeur of Avner's compendium of wisdom and reportage about Israel's prime ministers.

But it cannot end without a comment on why Menachem Begin resigned his post as prime minister.

Everyone knows the conventional reasons — disappointment over the repercussions of the 1982 Lebanon invasion, the friction between Begin and Sharon over that event, the death of Aliza, Begin's wife, the debilitating physical and emotional condition in the wake of his broken hip — all these have been rehearsed to explain Begin's sudden and sad departure from office.

However, Yehuda Avner adds a new and highly plausible reason.

Menachem Begin was a man haunted by the Holocaust. He had barely survived it but it took many close members of his immediate family. The tragedy of the *Churban*, as it was expressed in Yiddish, became part of his psychological-spiritual make-up and it was reflected in his attitudes towards Germany.

This reviewer was present in Jerusalem in 1958 when Menachem Begin led a powerful demonstration against the Ben Gurion government over an arms deal with West Germany.

As prime minister he was "correct" in his diplomatic relations with West Germany but never warmed up to the Bonn government.

According to Avner, shortly before Begin resigned, Israel was about to receive an official visit from the German chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Avner says that Begin could not, as prime minister, envisage shaking hands and welcoming the German head of state to Israel. And so he took the gracious way of avoiding that act — by resigning.

Perhaps, but we will never know the real reason.

What we do know is that henceforth no one will be able to write anything about Israel between the years 1947-1982 without availing him/herself of Yehuda Avner's monumental work on Israel. □

BOOK BRIEFS

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and her family, first as a radio show and then as a television show, "The Goldbergs", which ran from 1949 to 1955.

Molly Goldberg entered the American mainstream as a Jewish mother whose experiences resonated beyond their Jewish roots (please see "Looking Back", this issue, page 11).

And what could be bad about a documentary that the filmmaker dedicates, in part, to the "viability of newspapers"? □



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