



BEHIND THE WALL

DISPATCHES
FROM A
DIVIDED
LAND

URI
AVNERY

ColdType



URI AVNERY created a sensation when he crossed the lines during the battle of Beirut and met Yassir Arafat on July 3, 1982. Several Israeli cabinet ministers called for Avnery's indictment for high treason, while peace activists hailed the meeting as a historical breakthrough. It was the culmination of an effort started by Avnery many years earlier.

Avnery was born Helmut Ostermann on September 10, 1923, in Beckum, Westphalia. His father, a banker and veteran Zionist, took his family to Palestine upon Hitler's rise to power (1933), becoming a labourer after later losing his wealth. Avnery (he changed his first and second name on reaching the age of 18, adopting a Hebrew name, as was usual at that time) joined the Irgun underground in 1938 to fight against the British colonial regime, serving for three years, before quitting in protest against its anti-Arab and reactionary social attitudes and terrorist methods.

In September 1947, on the eve of the Israeli-Palestinian war, Avnery published a booklet entitled "War or Peace in the Semitic Region", which called for a radically new approach: An alliance of the Hebrew and Arab national movements in order to liberate the common "Semitic Region" (a term coined by Avnery in order to avoid the colonialist term Middle East) from imperialism and colonialism, and create a Semitic community and common market. At the outbreak of the war, Avnery joined the army (Giv'ati brigade) and later volunteered for "Samson's Foxes", a commando unit on the Egyptian front. He was severely wounded during the last days of the fighting, and after several months of convalescence was discharged in 1949 with the rank of squad leader.

Throughout the war, Avnery reported on his experiences as a combat soldier for the Ha'aretz newspaper, his items being published after the war as a book, "Bisdoth Pleshet 1948" ("In the Fields of the Philistines, 1948"), which became a bestseller.

In 1949, Avnery joined Ha'aretz as an editorial writer, but quit after a year because he was not allowed to express his opinions on the expropriation of Arab lands by the Ben-Gurion government. A year later, he bought a moribund family magazine and turned it into a unique Israeli institution. Haolam Hazeh was a combination of mass-circulation newsmagazine, similar in style to Time Magazine and Der Spiegel, and mouthpiece of aggressive political opposition to the establishment, with exposes of political and economic corruption and proposals for a radically different national policy.

For 40 years, Haolam Hazeh attracted an unusually large dose of admiration and hatred because of its untiring opposition to the official "consensus". At the base of the controversy was Avnery's opposition to the nationalistic, theocratic Jewish state created by Ben-Gurion, and his advocacy of a modern, liberal state, belonging to all its citizens, irrespective of ethnic, national or religious roots.

The chief of the secret service in the 50s, Issar Har'el, later testified that the Ben-Gurion establishment considered Avnery and Haolam Hazeh to be "Public Enemy Number 1". Attacks on Haolam Hazeh were often violent: Its editorial offices and printing facilities were bombed, Avnery was ambushed and both his hands broken after he criticized the infamous Kibieh massacre (1953). In 1975, he was the victim of an assassination attempt by a person officially declared mad. Avnery escaped with severe knife wounds.

The most resolute attempt to silence him came in 1965, when the government enacted a special press law, aimed mainly against "that certain magazine" (as Haolam Hazeh was always called by Ben-Gurion, who would not utter its name.) This provided the final push for the creation of a new political party to fight for the principles advocated by Haolam Hazeh: separation of state and religion; equality for the Arab minority, oriental Jews and women; social justice; support for the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza (at that time not yet under Israeli occupation) and an Israeli-Arab alliance throughout the whole region.

The new party (which adopted the name of the magazine and called itself "Haolam Hazeh – New Force Movement") came into being on the eve of the 1965 elections as a citizens' volunteer movement and astounded the establishment by winning a seat in the Knesset. In the 1969 elections it gained two seats.

During his first eight years in the Knesset, Avnery made more than 1,000 speeches in the Knesset plenum. He was probably most popular as a fierce critic of the establishment, causing Golda Meir to declare: "I am ready to mount the barricades in order to get Avnery out of the Knesset!" A book about his activities in the 120-member Knesset ("1 against 119") appeared in 1969.

On the fifth day of the Six-Day War, Avnery addressed an open letter to Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, calling upon him to make a dramatic gesture and offer the Palestinian people the opportunity to create an independent State of Palestine on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which had just been occupied by the Israeli Army. His proposal for a "two-state solution" was, in 1970, attacked by a book published in Beirut by the PLO in Arabic and French under the title "Uri Avnery and Neo-Zionism".

However, in 1974, with the beginning of the change in the PLO line, Avnery established contact with senior PLO officials. At the beginning these contacts were at secret, but Avnery reported on them to the then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. In the summer of 1975 Avnery called for the creation of an Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, which was founded officially in December of that year and took over the still-secret dialogue. The fascinating story of this dialogue, with its many ups and downs, forms the subject of Avnery's book "My Friend, the Enemy", which was also translated into several languages.