

5 November 2005

Israel's Living History Book: An Interview with Shmuel Katz

By Naomi Klass Mauer

Sitting with Shmuel Katz is like being in the presence of a living history book. In his more than 90 years he helped found the Herut party, was a member of Israel's Knesset, and played an important role in the Begin government. He is a prolific writer with many books to his credit, and he continues to write op-ed articles, many of which appear in *The Jewish Press*. Whenever we visit him in his retirement home in Tel Aviv, we leave enriched beyond words. It was no different this time.

Jewish Press: How would you describe the expulsion that took place in August?

Katz: The evacuation of Gaza and Northern Shomron was a national tragedy.

Jewish Press: Were you surprised that it was Ariel Sharon who came up with this plan?

I was shocked. I had consistently defended Sharon for years during the Lebanon War and during Sabra and Shatilla. I also defended him against the charge that he had deceived Menachem Begin during Camp David. That was pure nonsense, since Begin was not a simple-minded person who could be easily misled. In retrospect I guess I shouldn't have been shocked. People who know Ariel Sharon well don't seem to be surprised at all.

Jewish Press: You were with Begin when he went to Camp David with Jimmy Carter and Anwar Sadat to try to work out a peace treaty with Egypt.

I accompanied Prime Minister Begin to Camp David as an adviser. Begin showed me a statement that President Carter wanted him to sign which included a clause regarding Israel's commitment to solving the Arab refugee problem. I objected and said that any mention of refugees had to say Jewish and Arab refugees to the statement, in which case I advised the prime minister to remove the entire statement about the refugee problem.

And that is exactly what happened and that statement was not part of the eventual agreement.

Jewish Press: I was actually referring to the fact that Begin gave up the Sinai. Did that surprise you?

No. When Begin left the government of Levi Eshkol, The Land of Israel Movement wanted to issue a statement that Judea, Shomron, the Golan and Sinai would stay part of Israel forever. Begin objected to including Sinai. He said that Jabotinsky never included Sinai in Israel, nor was it part of the biblical borders of Israel.

Therefore it was no surprise to me that for “peace” with Egypt, he gave up the Sinai. In fact it was actually Begin’s overture to Sadat, offering him the Sinai, that prompted Sadat to come to Israel and sign a peace treaty. I never understood why Begin let Sadat take all the credit.

Jewish Press: Sharon is suddenly the darling of the world media, whereas in the past they vilified him.

No one was ever vilified as much as Menachem Begin when he became prime minister. The media were calling him a terrorist and worse. Begin asked me to go to the U.S. to try to counter the negative image. Within 10 days of my arrival in America, the anti-Begin rhetoric died down. In my three weeks there I made 140 appearances. I went alone and addressed all of their questions.

At my meeting with *Newsweek*, I charged them with “intolerable and unacceptable words” about the new Israeli prime minister, words that they would not use to describe the head of any other ally. When I went to Washington, I had lunch with columnists. George Will had always been very positive about Israel, but he had written an article charging Begin with trying to set a theocratic tone to politics. I immediately neutralized this argument.

At the end of the luncheon, one of the correspondents from NBC asked me to walk with him in the garden. From his questions I understood that he was trying to understand what kind of people we were – we who had been part of the Irgun. After my meetings on that trip, all of these arguments just evaporated.

Israel has a big problem with disseminating information to explain its position. Our information ministry falls very short of the goal. Our young people do not know how to answer questions. Under those conditions, the left-wing media are happy to put out whatever they wish. I would have a half-dozen spokesmen in the U.S. at all times, to set the record straight.

Jewish Press: Is there anyone, in your opinion, capable of leading Israel today?

I don’t see any. Unfortunately, competent and decent people, people with integrity, avoid going into politics. And then there is also the old story of American pressure which is usually at work. Very few politicians can resist that. When you’re afraid of American power, you just give in. One of the changes I am in favor of is direct representation in government; we should not be perpetuating an old inefficient system of government.