
INTERVIEW: Oved Ben Ami

Founding father describes the pioneer days: 'how we made cities from swampland'

Interview with Oved Ben Ami, founding father of Israel, builder and former mayor of the city of Netanya.

EIR: Mr. Ben Ami, you count yourself among the founding fathers of Israel, having built two of her cities, Netanya and Ashdod. Can you tell us how this began?

Ben Ami: I am actually one of the few real natives of Israel, coming from a family of colonists who never left Israel. I was born in Petah Tikve, which was the first Jewish settlement at the beginning of the century. I remember the story told about purchasing the land from the Arab sheik owner. When he finally agreed to sell the land, despite fear of reprisals, he quoted a very high price for what was then essentially swampland. When asked why the price was as high there, east of Jaffa, as it was in the cities, he replied: "Well, we have been holding this land for you for almost 2,000 years, you know!" The land was settled by 60 families, who turned its 150 acres into farmland for orange growing.

EIR: What about your own role?

Ben Ami: Later, I became a close friend of Hamar Ben-Avi, the son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who was the man responsible for shaping Hebrew into a national language. He and I traveled abroad together in search of funds to expand the existing settlements, and to build new cities. This is how we met Edmond de Rothschild, who did a great deal to build Israel. I remember Rothschild, when I first met him in his enormous Parisian office. There he was, hunched over a huge map of Palestine laid out on the floor pointing to various sites and saying, "Let's build a settlement here, that will be the eastern boundary; another settlement there, and that will be the southern boundary," and so on.

EIR: Is that the kind of settlement policy you followed?

Ben Ami: When I built my first city, Netanya, I did not think of it as a settlement only. Already back in 1929 and 1930, when I built it, I conceptualized it as a city capable of housing 200,000 people. On the 25th anniversary of the founding of Netanya, I received a letter of congratulations from Ben Gurion who told me I should not only be a patriot of Netanya, but should also think of doing something for the southern part of the country. I made an agreement with the govern-

ment, that if it would agree to build a second deepwater port (the first being Haifa), I would agree to build a city around it. Ben Gurion presented the plan to the cabinet, immediately gaining its approval, and the work began. I wanted to call it City of David, but he refused to have anything named after him, so I called it Ashdod.

EIR: How do the two cities compare?

Ben Ami: I learned from my first experience and tried to improve on it. Ashdod is built around the port, which now handles as much traffic as Haifa. I tried to ensure better traffic facilities, with wide avenues, commercial centers in every neighborhood, and plenty of park areas for children.

EIR: What kind of industry is there?

Ben Ami: In addition to the citrus fruit production, I introduced the diamond industry to Netanya, which has become the center of it in Israel. I had good relations with the British High Commissioner, who gave me advice in 1939 and 1940, on how to help people from Antwerp to leave the war-endangered area and emigrate to Israel. Since it was war-time, it



Oved Ben Ami, in front of the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv.

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