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978-0-521-10373-2 - Bert: The Biography of a Socialist Zionist - Berl Katznelson 1887-1944

Anita Shapira

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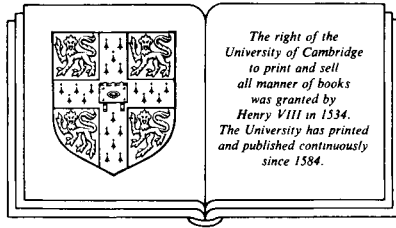
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Some technical remarks. Most of the source material used for the book was in Hebrew. Readers with a knowledge of Hebrew would do well to use the Hebrew edition for references. In the English version I have given references only when direct quotations were used. However, a list of archival sources can be found here in the bibliographical note. Spelling of Hebrew names has been in accordance with the practice of the individuals in question. In transliterating the Hebrew we have adhered to the practice of lower-casing the definite article.

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PROLOGUE

On a sweltering morning in mid-August 1944, the streets around the complex of national institutions in Jerusalem filled with a dense crowd. In the lobby of the Jewish National Fund building lay the coffin of Berl Katznelson, wrapped in a blue-and-white flag with a crimson ribbon across it. The most prominent figures in the Yishuv – heads of institutions, university professors, writers and intellectuals, party workers and movement leaders – thronged around it. Outside thousands of people milled in the streets, waiting to pay their last respects to the deceased. David Ben Gurion, Eliezer Kaplan, David Remez and Yitzhak Gruenbaum were the pallbearers. The procession wound its way slowly through King George Street and Ben Yehuda Street. No eulogies were delivered. The ceremony was simple and unostentatious, in accordance with the request of the deceased. He had hated flowers confined in bouquets. He had also hated flags and ribbons at funerals, Christian customs borrowed by the Jews. And, as in his lifetime so in his death, his will prevailed. Hushed and silent, without the relief and the consolation which people find in mourning customs, the thousands joined the long funeral cortege, which began to make its way towards Tel Aviv.

The first Hebrew city ceased its labors. It seemed that all its inhabitants were out in the streets. The funeral procession wound its way endlessly, as tens of thousands stood in silence along the route. The balconies and rooftops were black with people. The sun, which meanwhile reached its meridian, beat down on their heads, and the heat was unbearably oppressive. But the crowds continued to flock. In an eerie silence, with mournful expressions, the people of Tel Aviv awaited the man ‘whom you adored even if you had no wish to. You were in awe of him as a man is in awe of his conscience.’¹ As never in his lifetime, everyone now united around his image. Members of his own party, Mapai, and of the opposition, all came, sharing the sense of great loss.

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The convoy of cars crept forward slowly. It halted for a moment in front of the Histadrut offices on Allenby Street, and the great crowd fell still. And then, making its way laboriously through the sea of mourners, estimated at one hundred thousand, the convoy continued on its journey to the Great Synagogue. Here the cantor recited the prayer for the dead, 'God, full of compassion' and the mourners intoned Kaddish. And the cars moved on towards Arlozoroff House, party headquarters. Here the scene was repeated: at a given signal the crowd stood at attention in silence. Then they were asked to disperse to enable the convoy to proceed. But it was hard for them to take leave of the man to whom they had come to pay their last respects, and for a long time, in the noonday heat, they clustered in the streets in quiet, pained grief.

He had selected his place of burial while still a young man. On the shores of Lake Kinneret, in the little cemetery by the mound overlooking the lake, lay the grave of the woman with whom he had shared the pain, the joy and the torment of youthful love. Though twenty-five years had gone by since her death, her fascination and the lure of Kinneret still drew him. He wanted to complete the circle and to end his personal and public life in Palestine in the place where he had begun it. Few of the thousands who accompanied him knew the secret of Kinneret, or had experienced the captivating romanticism of the Second Aliyah days, and those who knew carefully guarded their knowledge. Only the poet delicately alluded to it:

'He is mine' softly whispered Kinneret
 'And to me he returns in a dream
 Though his words bore great deeds and great echoes
 He is mute when he comes to my shore
 It is I who return him full circle
 With a stone and his name simply etched
 Yes, he's mine' softly whispered Kinneret
 'And has been since those days long ago.'

Nathan Alterman

There were workers who wondered why a man who was a public figure with every fiber of his being would choose, at death, to distance himself from his public? But again his will prevailed, and his private wishes were observed.

A long line of cars, two kilometers long, crept along the road from Tel Aviv to Hadera, from there through Wadi Ara towards Afula, cross-

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ing the Jezreel Valley and the Beisan Valley on its way to Kinneret.

It appeared that the whole of Labor Palestine stood guard as he passed. Outside each settlement, large or small, there awaited him comrades who had shared his path for thirty-five years, their hair graying and their faces seamed by life and by toil. There were others, young people who had heard him as teacher, educator or adversary, and small children lining the roadside. This was the sole public funeral to remain etched on their memories. In the fields all work ceased. Here a solitary farmer could be seen watering crops. But as the cortege drove by, work ceased and the figures stood at attention till it had passed. At every settlement, cars joined the convoy – at first, only representatives of the settlements, but as it came nearer to Kinneret, more and more local people joined it, men and women of the communal settlements, to whom Berl was now returning.

It was afternoon, and the heat grew heavier and more oppressive. Yet nobody budged from the roadside until the convoy had passed. It stopped at each settlement, amidst the same deep silence, and the atmosphere of communion with an irreparable loss.

At six o'clock the procession reached Kinneret. Some seven thousand people gathered in the modest little cemetery, overlooking the lake. It was there, at her request, that the poetess Rachel had been buried, amidst the anonymous heroes of the Second Aliyah. Now she was followed by the man whose image symbolized this Aliyah, come to dwell with them under the shade of the trees on the mounds. An elderly woman, Aliza Shidlovsky, said a few brief words of farewell. It was not the great leaders of the Yishuv, who bore his coffin, who eulogized him, but she, a member of Kinneret, who had known him at the beginning. David Bader, another Second Aliyah veteran, recited Kaddish, traditionally recited by the son. But Berl had died childless. Again there was a hush as each of the mourners communed alone with the man who had left them. As the sun set, the ceremony ended.

In the years which have elapsed since then, many of the best and the brightest have gone the way of all flesh; but that profound grief and sense of irreparable loss has never been repeated. Years later a writer, who was then a young man,² said: it was the last funeral where people truly grieved.

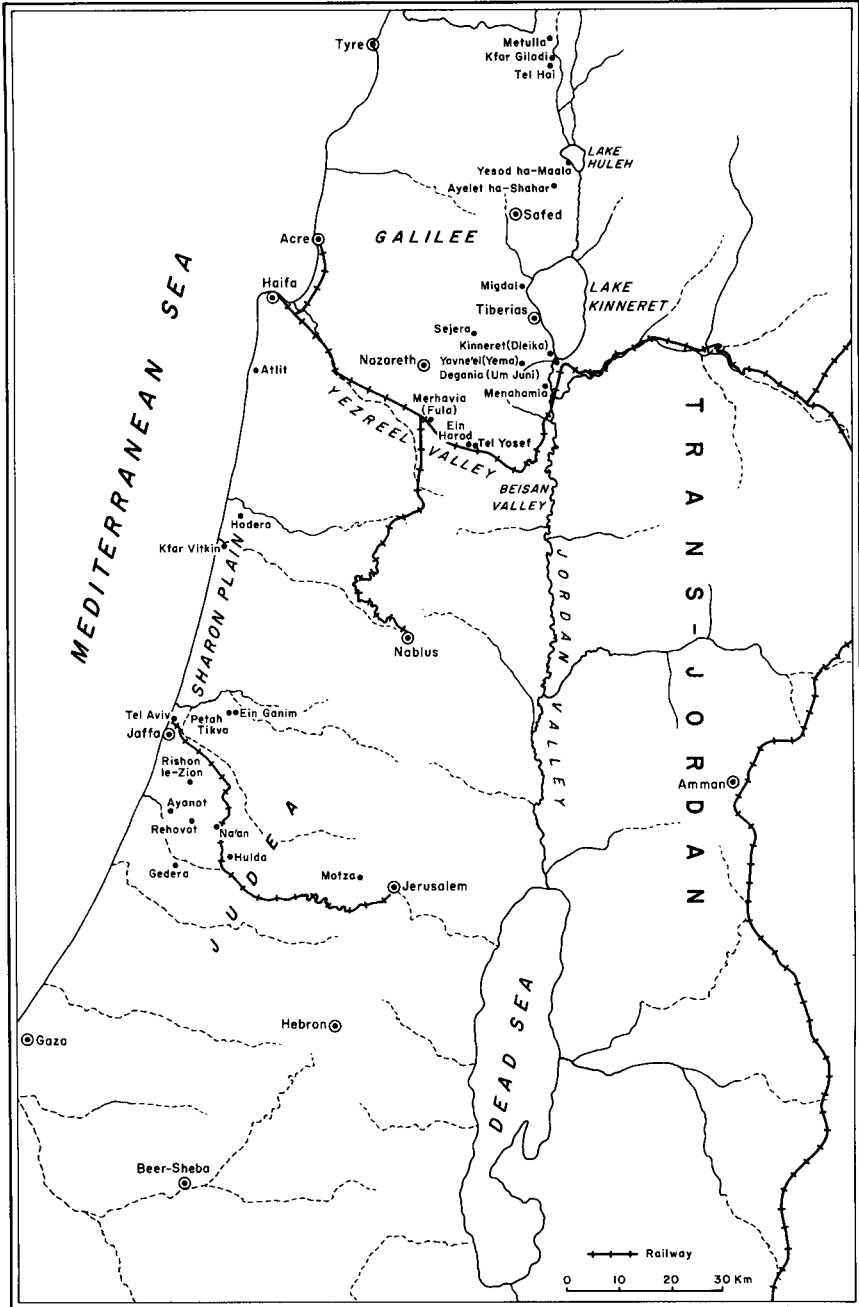
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Map of Palestine showing the principal places mentioned in the text.