

*In loving memory of my parents,  
Mordechai and Hannab Halamish (Flint)*



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# Introduction

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The life of Meir Yaari, the leader of Hashomer Hatza'ir, spanned a full nine decades: 1897 to 1987. He headed a movement that encompassed three different, although related, organizations. The first was the *youth movement*, which was founded in Eastern Europe before the First World War. By 1939, it had 70,000 members in hundreds of branches in 22 countries. The second was the *kibbutz movement*, Kibbutz Artzi (KA), established in 1927 as the countrywide framework for the agricultural settlements associated with that movement, which was one of the pillars of collective settlement in Palestine. By the end of the twentieth century, it had 85 affiliated kibbutzim all over Israel. Hashomer Hatza'ir was also a *political party*, known after 1948 as the United Workers' Party or Mapam. In the first national elections (in 1949), it won 19 seats and became the second-largest faction in the Knesset. But by the time of the first general election after Yaari's passing, it won only three seats and was eventually folded into Meretz when the latter was established.

Even though Yaari never stood at the helm of the ship of state, for many years the movement he headed was a partner in fateful and transformative processes. Its disagreements with the central current of the Zionist and Labor movements and its oppositionist positions did not prevent Hashomer Hatza'ir from taking an active part in shaping the history of the people and the land: aliyah, settlement, and defense in mandatory Palestine and then independent Israel, the organization of resistance and revolt in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, and the *berīḥah*—the postwar transfer of Holocaust survivors to DP camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy and their subsequent attempts to reach Palestine.

Before the establishment of the State, Hashomer Hatza'ir was firmly in the political opposition. But the truth is that both then and after independence, it was part of the camp of builders and fighters, a full partner in and contributor to the Zionist enterprise. After that, and within a few years, Mapam was reduced to a small and not particularly influential party; Yaari was left to respond to developments rather than shape them. He frequently expressed his opinion on a broad spectrum of political, social, and personal topics—on the kibbutz, the party, Israel, and the world. The written record he left behind is valuable not only for the study of the movement he headed, but also as a reflection of events in Israel and abroad; it offers instructive lessons and traces key lines in the history of the Jewish people from the end of the First World War until shortly before the first Intifada and the collapse of the Soviet Union (Yaari died in February 1987).

The impact of the Hashomer Hatza'ir youth movement and KA on Israeli society transcends their size and far exceeds Mapam's parliamentary strength. Many Israelis see their period of membership in the youth movement or enrollment in KA educational institutions as a formative chapter in their lives. They recall the stirring years of youth and the high hopes of repairing the world on the personal, national, and societal levels with great nostalgia. Yaari was the paramount leader of this movement for half a century.

Leadership was the main axis of Meir Yaari's life and personality. This book's primary goal is to solve the riddle of his leadership. How did he reach the pinnacle of Hashomer Hatza'ir and how did he maintain his position there for so many years? Why did people remain loyal to him and accept, or even create, an identification of leader and movement that bordered on a cult of personality, while the members themselves minimized their own importance? When did the dissonance between the leader and his flock begin? And once it began—how did Yaari retain his status even after he no longer met his followers' expectations?

This biography's point of departure is that the finished product has a meaning beyond the life story of its protagonist, that reconstructing his life story can help us understand broader phenomena and processes,

and that his story can teach us not only about the man himself, but also about the broader picture—the movement he led, the society in which he lived and worked, and the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. The biography of a leader is also inescapably the story of those he led. The relationship between the hero of a biography and the period and society in which he worked is also related to the eternal dilemma of “personality and history.” It is impossible to understand events exclusively through the lens of historical circumstances or only through that of the individual. The story of Hashomer Hatza’ir is incomplete and in fact meaningless without Yaari. The secret of his leadership cannot be unlocked unless we identify which of his followers’ needs and passions he satisfied. Just as Yaari’s leadership is central to the history of Hashomer Hatza’ir, it is essential to understand the collective he led in order to comprehend the man’s own life. This book does not pretend to recount the full story of Hashomer Hatza’ir, but it does propose—albeit indirectly and implicitly—a factual narrative and interpretation that is different from and complementary to the history of Hashomer Hatza’ir.

Writing the biography of a leader requires finding the proper balance between the stories of the subject and of the collective he headed. Further, a balance must be struck between the public sphere—the man as leader—and the private space of his personal life and intimate relationships, while avoiding the trap of slipping into voyeurism. More details of Yaari’s personal life and his intimate thoughts and statements on erotic matters are in the public record than those of just about any other Israeli leader; they are crucial to understanding his leadership. His written and oral legacy includes intimate personal details that cannot be ignored because of their importance regarding the big picture, even though, in isolation, they are liable to come off as juicy morsels that the writer could not resist. There is another dilemma with regard to the boundary between the private and the public: Yaari was beset by illness from his twenties, and there is no avoiding the impact of his health on his ability to function and his status as a leader.

Due diligence requires me to state that I come from a family that was wholly Mapam in body and soul. I was a member of the Hashomer Hatza’ir youth movement, of Mapam, and of Kibbutz Lahav, which

belongs to Kibbutz Artzi. I believe that my own biography allows me to live in both worlds. On the one hand, I know the movement from the inside, with its ideological, social, and cultural codes. On the other hand, the passage of time has given me enough emotional distance to preclude the suspicion that this is the work of a “court historian” or—perish the thought—just the opposite, someone with accounts to settle. I will not deny, however, that I approached this project with a fond feeling for the movement, along with a curiosity that was not only professional.

Hashomer Hatzza’ir is one of the most intensively researched topics in the history of Zionism, the Yishuv, and the State of Israel. There is no shortage of studies, mainly about the youth movement and Kibbutz Artzi—in large measure thanks to the movement’s rich archives, with its cordial and highly capable professional staff. Entering a field that has already been plowed many times over has some advantages, but also poses some difficulties. You can draw on previous works, but frequently must also correct inaccuracies and wrestle with presentations and interpretations you cannot accept. This biography breaks new ground in areas that have never been addressed, adds depth and dimensions to familiar topics, and offers previously unknown details and new interpretations. It also expands the prevailing understanding of the kibbutz. Many English-language studies and books on the kibbutz consider its sociological, anthropological, economic, and educational aspects, but there is an unfortunate dearth of works on the kibbutz written with a historical perspective and methodology.

I vacillated about interviewing people who knew Yaari—relatives, members of Kibbutz Merḥavia, coworkers and colleagues—and ultimately decided against it. By the time I began my research, there were no longer any living witnesses to Yaari’s childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—periods from which almost no authentic materials remain. This meant that I had to rely mainly on his memoirs to reconstruct the events of those years. There were only a few survivors from the pre-State years, and I was afraid that biology might dictate history and the content of the biography. The balance was further tipped by the interminable hours that would have been necessary to collect testimonies and conduct interviews, and by my own experience, and that of my colleagues, that the fruits of this effort tend to be meager and problematic, due to the



intrinsic weakness of retrospective interviews and memories of times long past. Moreover, I frequently discovered that the testimonies my colleagues relied on contradicted the written record, or that the information elicited in these interviews was already available and more vivid (and, in my opinion, more reliable) in documents contemporary with the events themselves. The other, and most important, reason for my decision was the ample materials already available: documents in archives and texts written and/or printed in real time, including many intended as no more than innocent chatter. This effectively eliminated the need to rely on testimonies dimmed by the distance of time. Yaari himself left behind abundant materials and deserves special thanks for his assistance in the writing of his biography.

The time has come to enrich the impressive scholarly mosaic of the history of Hashomer Hatzza'ir with the biography of its most important leader (the life of Yaakov Hazan, Yaari's partner at the head of the movement, has already been written by Zeev Tzahor). Biographies have become an important, perhaps even the primary, source of historical information for the public at large and seem to be enjoying a new vogue on bookshelves around the world.

Like most biographies, this book moves along the time axis, from the early years of the twentieth century in Galicia through the mid-1980s in Israel. In addition to telling the story of Yaari and his movement, this book is also a narrative, one of many, of the history of the Jewish people in the twentieth century. It discusses pivotal issues in the development of the Yishuv and Israeli society, such as the friction between Zionism and socialism, including the successive incarnations of the attitude towards the Soviet Union, the Arab question, foreign and defense policy, the class struggle, the absorption of new immigrants in towns and kibbutzim, generation gaps and conflicts, and the symbiotic and painful relationship between the Diaspora and the Yishuv. Throughout, the biography blends the individual and collective perspectives and never loses sight of the tension between ideology and reality.

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It is a great pleasure for me to express my heartfelt appreciation of all those who assisted me during the long journey of research, writing, and publication of this work, first in Hebrew and now in the English edition.

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I dedicate this book, with boundless gratitude, esteem, and love, to my parents, Hannah (*née* Maass) and Mordechai Halamish (Flint).



## CHAPTER 1

# Reisha

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Meir, the second son of Frieda and Chaim Wald, was born on April 25, 1897 (or perhaps a day or two earlier), in Kańczuga, a small town in western Galicia.<sup>1</sup> Most of its 6,000 residents were Jewish. When he was about six months old, Meir's family moved to Rzeszów, about 35 kilometers west of Kańczuga and closer to Krakow. Rzeszów, known as "Reisha" in Yiddish, had about 7,000 Jews at the time, who made up more than a third of its population.<sup>2</sup>

Rzeszów lies in the heart of a broad and level valley that surrounds the winding Wisłok River. The distant horizon is marked by the Carpathian Mountains to the south and by gently rolling wooded hills to the north. Many buildings erected before the Second World War survive; some have been extensively renovated. Two impressive synagogues still stand in the center of town, but their interiors have been modified so extensively that their original purpose is no longer evident. Today they house the municipal archives and are used for cultural activities. In the early twenty-first century, there are no Jews in Rzeszów.

Galicia came under Austrian rule in 1772, after the First Partition of Poland. The San River separated its western section, whose metropolis was Krakow and which had a largely Polish population, from the predominantly Ukrainian eastern half, whose capital was Lwów (also known as Lemberg and today referred to as Lviv). Substantial Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> His tombstone at Kibbutz Merḥavia bears the dates 21 Nisan 5657 and April 25, 1897, which actually fell two days apart. On the official Knesset website, his birth date is given as April 24. See [http://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mk\\_eng.asp?mk\\_individual\\_id\\_t=433](http://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mk_eng.asp?mk_individual_id_t=433).

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Rzeszow"; Yaari-Wald, *Qehillat Reyshe*, 58.

minorities lived in both parts of Galicia. The Jews enjoyed equal rights in some domains, including the right to vote, after Austria granted Galicia limited autonomy in 1861; public education was open to Jews at all levels. The official language was German, but the local vernaculars—Polish in the west and Ukrainian in the east—enjoyed a similar status.

The Wald family home, a one-story structure with a roof of wooden tiles and tar, comprised living quarters, a kitchen, and a shop. Meir Yaari's earliest memory took place there. He was two years old, lying in his cradle. His brother Moshe, who was four, rocked him so vigorously that the bed arced from wall to wall and the toddler almost died of fright.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of an older brother, with all that this implied in a Jewish family in Eastern Europe, was the single greatest influence on the development of the Wald family's second son. At family meals, both on weekdays and festive Friday night dinners, the food was served in a fixed order. The mother dished out the finest portion to the father and the next to the oldest son; younger siblings had to be satisfied with a smaller and less filling portion.<sup>4</sup> This preference for the firstborn son and Meir's resentment of that favoritism clouded the relations between the two brothers. When they were temporarily forced to share a bed, they did not exchange a single word for more than a year. Their relationship was marked by estrangement, misunderstandings, and poor communications for many years, until they were both old men. Meir always saw Moshe as a rival and never stopped begrudging him the preferential treatment he received from their parents.

Meir had a much closer relationship with his brother Tuvia, ten years his junior. This relationship was characterized by Tuvia's lifelong admiration of his older brother. The Wald family was completed by a daughter, born when Meir was about 15. Somehow the event did not

3 This section is based on the memoirs that Yaari wrote or dictated at various times in his life. They are, in chronological order: (1) interview with Meir Yaari, Oct. 18, 1975, HHA, 95-7.3(1); (2) Yaari, "Memoirs" (1980), KMA, MYF, 8(3); (3) Yaari, "Memoirs" (1981), *ibid.*; (4) Yaari, "Memoirs" (autograph manuscript), *ibid.*; (5) Natan Shaham interview with Meir Yaari, Sept. 3, 1983 (presumed date), Yad Yaari; (6) Yaari's oral remarks, Feb. 27, 1984, KMA, MYF, 8(2); (7) Zait and Shamir, *Meir Yaari*, 13-26.

4 Conversation with Yaari's daughter, Rachel Grol-Yaari, Merḥavia, Feb. 2, 2000.

leave much of an impression on him. He failed to mention her birth in his memoirs and I have not found a single document in which he refers to her by name. When he did talk about her many years later, and then only as an afterthought, he could not even remember her exact age. This sister, whose name was Esther, joined the Hashomer Hatza'ir youth movement. When Yaari visited Rzeszów in the 1920s, he found her to be a fine and diligent girl with a strong character. After his efforts to help her obtain an *aliyah* certificate proved fruitless, she emigrated to the United States in the early 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Meir and Esther did not remain in close contact. After their mother's death, they waged a fierce quarrel over her estate, leading to a total rift between them.<sup>6</sup>

During Meir's early childhood, only his grandmother showered him with a love that was not dimmed by the shadow of his elder brother. She was an imposing woman, full of self-confidence. Young Meir bonded to her with every fiber of his being. She often took her favorite grandson into bed with her, to help him fall asleep. One night, when he was four, she woke him up. Between her groans she told him to run to the neighbors and tell them that she was dying. The panic-stricken child jumped out of bed, ran as fast as he could, and started banging on the neighbors' doors: "Jews, save us! Grandma is dying!" By the time he returned to her house, it was full of people and she was no longer among the living. Meir cried bitterly for many hours.<sup>7</sup>

This terrifying experience continued to haunt the boy. More than once, while walking down the street, her image suddenly appeared in front of him, and Meir swooned in horror as she approached. Passersby would call his parents, who tried to revive him by slapping his cheeks and patting him on the back. At his mother's initiative (his father was not enthusiastic about the idea), his parents contacted the local Hassidic rebbe, who lived not far from them, to see if he could help their child. Rabbi Eliezer'l, a handsome man who somewhat resembled Tolstoy, with an impressive and carefully trimmed beard and shining blue eyes, took the child on his lap

5 Yaari to the central office of Hashomer Hatza'ir in Galicia, Jan. 7, 1932, KMA, MYF, 1(2).

6 Meir to Anda, Nov. 8, 1933, KMA, MYF, 5(2).

7 Yaari, interview in *Al Hamishmar*, undated, in HHA, 95-7.3(2); "Memoirs" [1979], KMA, MYF, 8(3).

and issued a firm decree: “You will never see your grandmother coming towards you again and you will not faint.” And so it was! The rebbe of Reisha had never heard of psychoanalysis, hypnosis, or suggestion, but nonetheless—that is how Yaari explained it many years later—his luminous and suggestive personality healed the child’s complex.<sup>8</sup>

The Wald family home was situated at the end of a side street, in front of a two-story building that also belonged to the family. The latter was rented out to various tenants, mainly merchants and artisans, some of whom were alcoholics and given to violence. Another source of income was the shop attached to their home, which was patronized by both Jews and Gentiles. All of them trusted “Pan Wald;” according to Yaari’s childhood memories, his father’s appearance reminded his Christian neighbors of popular illustrations of Jesus. Frieda managed the store, while Chaim saw to the difficult household tasks, such as chopping wood, repairing the roof, and so on.

Chaim Wald had enjoyed the reputation of a Talmudic prodigy. As such he was considered a good match by Rabbi Yankel Holoshitzer, who wanted a scholar for his daughter Frieda. She, in turn, had an impressive lineage, tracing back to Rebbe Elimelech of Lyzhansk (1717–1787), author of the Hassidic classic *Noam Elimelech*. Yaari often mentioned, with pride, that Rabbi Elimelech was his great-great grandfather, a family connection that, being matrilineal, is difficult to trace. In a moment of candor, Yaari admitted that he could neither confirm nor deny the relationship. After his brother Moshe, the family (and town) historian, told him that there was insufficient documentation of their descent from Rabbi Elimelech, Yaari stopped boasting of it.<sup>9</sup>

Chaim was a handsome man, his beautiful eyes soft as velvet and somewhat dreamy.<sup>10</sup> He took meticulous care of his hair and beard and made sure that his shirt collar was always clean and ironed. He was observant, but not a Hassid. Along with a group of high school, university, and yeshiva students, all younger than him, Wald senior

8 Zait and Shamir, *Meir Yaari*, 21.

9 Natan Shaham interview with Meir Yaari, Sept. 3, 1983; Yaari to S. Atir, July 9, 1978, HHA, 7-95.1(1); Yaari, *Al Hamishmar*, Aug. 28, 1970.

10 I have been unable to locate a photograph, so the description is based on his son’s recollection.



established a prayer hall for “the progressives.” They did not hire a professional cantor. Instead, he filled the position and regaled the congregants with his sweet voice.<sup>11</sup> He was a charismatic leader; the local Jews would come listen to him speak in the city square and tell him their troubles. He engaged in dialogue with his Christian neighbors, published a Yiddish newspaper, the *Reisher folks-tzaytung*, and was active in Zionist circles. This involvement began in the time of the Hovevei Zion, before Herzl arrived on the scene. In the early years of the twentieth century he aligned himself with the “Zion Zionists” who opposed the Uganda scheme.<sup>12</sup> Yaari admired his father, appreciated his liberal attitude towards his sons, and respected his work as a Jewish civic leader. But all his stories and memories over the years were shadowed by the gnawing and painful complaint that his father had favored the eldest son, Moshe.

Chaim Wald was only 51 when he succumbed to tuberculosis of the throat in 1924. The town paid him impressive last honors.<sup>13</sup> At three in the afternoon, a large crowd gathered in front of the synagogue for the eulogies. At the mayor’s orders, the streetlamps along the route of the funeral procession were draped in black crepe and stores were shuttered. Many people walked behind the coffin, led by the widow, the youngest son Tuvia, and the daughter, Esther. Moshe and Meir were both already in Palestine at this time. Chaim was buried next to his father, Rabbi Joseph Wald, who had passed away in 1881. The funeral remained a topic of conversation in the town for weeks. On the first anniversary of his father’s death, Meir visited Rzeszów and made his mother happy by leading the services wrapped in a *tallit*.<sup>14</sup>

Meir was enrolled in a *heder* when he turned three. Between ten and fifteen children were crowded into a small room where the educational focus was rote memorization, with no attempt at understanding the text. The teacher maintained discipline with blows from a

<sup>11</sup> Zait and Shamir, *Meir Yaari*, 22 and 207.

<sup>12</sup> The Uganda scheme was a plan to give a portion of British East Africa to the Jewish people as a homeland. The plan was supported by Theodor Herzl, who proposed it to the Zionist Congress as a temporary refuge for European Jews facing antisemitism.

<sup>13</sup> Undated letter in Yiddish from Chaim Fish; trans. by Avraham Goren, KMA, MYF, 5(4).

<sup>14</sup> Sadan, *Alufi u-meyuda'i*, 204.

stick. One day, gathering his courage, Meir broke the stick and sent it flying. Even though he was expelled from the *beder*, his parents did not scold him for this act. He had fonder memories of his other teachers. Meir's particular favorite was the man who taught him the Torah with Rashi's commentary and the Aramaic translation (Onkelos), as well as Mishnah. The child walked home alone at the end of the school day. In the winter, when it got dark early, he walked slowly, lighting his way with a lantern.

Meir kept his side locks until he was eight, even though they were a source of much grief. He tried tucking them behind his ears as he walked to school, but the non-Jewish bullies discovered the ruse and beat him up. When he attended public school, he faced more trials as a Jew. For example, when his class was taken to visit the estate of Count Potocki, not far from Rzeszów, the pupils were treated to a sumptuous meal, with delicacies that included roast pork. It was the first time Meir had tasted this forbidden food. He was immediately overcome by nausea and ran outside to vomit.

Because Meir was not a brilliant student, his father decided that the boy would continue his education in a vocational setting rather than an academic high school. His mother's words on this occasion were like a dagger in his heart: "One doctor in the family is enough!" she said, referring to her older son, Moshe.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, when Meir reached bar mitzvah age he was sent off to a technical school in Krakow, where he boarded with a tailor's family. The location had one advantage in his view: it was situated above the Jewish theater. When he could not sleep because of the romances being conducted by the landlord's two daughters and the fleas in the bedclothes, Meir would go downstairs, stand outside the window looking into the theater, and watch the performances. He did not do well in school. A constant tremor in his hands prevented him from sketching or engaging in the various crafts that required manual dexterity. His living conditions made matters worse. After several frustrating months, during which he lost weight, the young boy gathered his things and started walking home, 180 kilometers away. When he passed through the town of Bochnia, an acquaintance of his father recognized him and sent a telegram

<sup>15</sup> Zait and Shamir, *Meir Yaari*, 25.

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