

# **HOPELESS WARS**

Yakov (Yasha) Kedmi

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# Foreword

## Efraim Halevy

The story of Yakov (Yasha) Kedmi's life and personal battles is interwoven with many important chapters in the history of the State of Israel and the Jewish people in the second half of the twentieth century. In some, he was a supporting player, watching events with a sharp and extremely critical eye. In others he had a central role—a trailblazer who, by virtue of his force of personality and talents, reached a very senior rank in the Israeli civil service as head of the government agency responsible for bringing Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel.

But this book is much more than the story of one man's life. It is a panoramic account of a fateful period in the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, as reflected in the experiences of a resolute nonconformist, a Jewish and Israeli patriot who held his own against everyone.

Kedmi, a Jew born in Moscow, fought a vigorous one-man campaign for the right to move to Israel, braving all odds and defying the norms of the mid- and late nineteen-sixties—a struggle made all the more difficult by the fact that the Soviet Union severed diplomatic relations with Israel right after the Six Day War. The first chapters

of the book recount this struggle. Kedmi's success in overcoming all the obstacles by himself, thanks to his intelligence and courage, endowed him with dauntless faith in his abilities and gave him the knowledge that one can win even "hopeless" wars; thus he chose that title for his autobiography.

Soon after his arrival in Israel, Kedmi enlisted in the IDF where he completed Officer's Candidate School in the intelligence track. But the most significant episode of his service came during the Yom Kippur War, when he was attached to a reserve armored battalion commanded by Ehud Barak. Kedmi spent the entire war in the battalion commander's tank. His observations about those weeks and his perspective on the battles, the brave deeds of the fallen (some of them his close friends), as well as his view of the failures, fiascos, and mistakes made by so many—all make this book an important document produced by a fighter in the field, affording a broad canvas of topics and aspects that go far beyond a bare recitation of the events. Through it all we see the dominant figure of the battalion commander, Ehud Barak, as described by Lieut. Yasha Kedmi. This is rare testimony to the man who rose in the pyramid of command to become Chief of Staff and then Prime Minister and Defense Minister. Anyone who is looking for authentic evidence about Ehud Barak, the man and the leader, will find a font of information and unique insights here.

Kedmi has harsh criticism for the IDF and the establishment—the ruling elite on both the right and the left. From the description of his first encounter with them at Training Base 1, continuing through his survey of episodes in Israel's military and political history, the book offers us the perspective of a new immigrant who quickly assimilated into Israeli society but nevertheless missed no opportunity to compare how things work in Israel and in the Soviet Union.

A few years after the war, Kedmi found work as a temporary employee in Nativ (the clandestine Israeli government liaison organization that maintained contact and worked to encourage national sentiment among Jews living in the Eastern Bloc). Kedmi

was referred there by no less than Prime Minister Menachem Begin. From the day of its founding by David Ben-Gurion, Nativ was the inner sanctum of the ruling establishment in Israel. Its first director was Shaul Avigur, Ben-Gurion's personal and political intimate. A heavy veil of secrecy was imposed on the organization's activities and missions, and its operatives were chosen with great care and expected to display maximum loyalty to the country's political leadership. Nativ's mission of bringing Jews to Israel from behind the Iron Curtain and especially from the Soviet Union demanded the greatest sensitivity. This was at the height of the Cold War between the West, headed by the United States, and the Eastern Bloc, headed by the Soviet Union. In those days, Israel identified with the West, ideologically and politically, even though it was the Eastern Bloc that had provided it with weapons in critical stages of the War of Independence.

Nativ had three main missions at its birth. The first was to develop and maintain the strongest possible ties with the large Jewish population of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, estimated at some five million persons. The second was to conduct appropriate operations to bring Jews to Israel. The third was to initiate and develop comprehensive political activity in the West, especially the United States, which would generate heavy political pressure on Moscow to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate.

In the view of the Israeli political leadership in the first quarter-century after independence, the diplomatic arena in which Israel operated demanded special sensitivity in this matter. After two decades of independence, Israel had managed to build a strong strategic relationship with the United States (of which the first fruits appeared just after the Six Day War). For this reason, the political echelons felt a need for caution in all actions vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, so that Israel would not be seen as interfering with Washington's policy towards Moscow. The leaders of the Soviet Communist Party, aware of the rapprochement between Israel and the United States, would not allow

Jews to leave the country if they had even the slightest connection to sensitive domains of Soviet security. Moreover, Israel of the 1950s and 1960s, especially its defense and political establishment, was a priority objective of Soviet intelligence. The espionage cases uncovered in those years involved Israeli scientists and senior members of the country's strategic and political elite.

Consequently, the methods for bringing Jews from Eastern Europe to Israel were saturated with complex national, international, and Zionist considerations. In the view of the Israel leadership of that time, everyone dealing with the matter had to be supremely loyal to the state, both with regard to security and with regard to their political orientation.

This was the situation that the “temporary employee” Yasha Kedmi found himself in. He came to Nativ shortly after the first and most significant change of regime in Israel—the *mahapach* or “reversal” that brought Menachem Begin to power. Begin, of course, did not adhere to his predecessors' ideas that Nativ employees must be loyal to the ruling party. Yet he did feel that the director of Nativ should owe him political allegiance and thought that extraordinary diplomatic caution was still required for dealing with the Jews behind the Iron Curtain.

Kedmi had a totally different approach and believed that there had to be revolutionary changes in how Israel perceived the Soviets and their power as well as in all aspects of the information campaign and political pressure that should be developed in the West, especially in the United States. He fought for his truth and was able to effect significant changes in this policy and to play an important role in the process that led to the opening of the gates for *aliyah* in the 1990s.

In the many chapters devoted to Nativ, readers are exposed not only to the details of events in which Kedmi took part but also to his perception of the Israeli political culture. It is an insider's view of the Israeli administration through Kedmi's prism: tales of the interagency wars and descriptions of the many persons who passed

in the nonstop parade before Kedmi, the civil servant who piled up promotions until, despite his lack of political backing and patrons, he reached the pinnacle of the agency whose task was to promote *aliyah*—the same *aliyah* he had achieved as a lone fighter.

The many battles waged in the last quarter of the twentieth century to open the gates of the Soviet Union for Jewish emigration went far beyond Israeli foreign and defense policy. They were also inextricably linked to Israel's relations with American Jewry and to fierce internal quarrels within the American Jewish community. Should the campaign to open the gates focus exclusively on bringing the emigrants to Israel? Or should those escaping from behind the crumbling Iron Curtain be allowed to immigrate to the United States, that is, to “drop out” en route and select destinations other than Israel?

Kedmi had a strong opinion and clear practical policy aimed at preventing dropouts, by every possible means. His approach was not always in tune with that of the political echelons in Israel and of some American Jewish leaders.

But Yasha Kedmi fought stubbornly for his views. Readers will learn how he views the leaders of Israel and American Jewry in those years.

The Jews who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the last great wave of *aliyah* have drastically changed the face of Israel in the last two decades. Yasha Kedmi, who was the director of Nativ at the start of that period but later resigned his post, sketches out a clear and novel profile of the members of this *aliyah*, including its leaders, unique character, and self-image. Anyone who is looking for a first-hand source to help understand the behavior of the members of this *aliyah* since their arrival in Israel will find information and insights here that perhaps no one else could commit to paper.

What factors have shaped the complex relations between the immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the Israelis whom they met when they reached this country? How do the immigrants see Israel and Israelis? How do the immigrants react to their reception? What is the result of the collision between the pride of Jews who

hail from a vast empire that covered thousands of kilometers, from Moscow and St. Petersburg and Kiev all the way to Vladivostok in the Far East, and the proud Israel that won its independence in bloody battle? How does Yasha Kedmi—the proud Russian Jew—relate to the behavior of law enforcement agencies that, in their perception (or perhaps gross misperception) of the immigrants, identify signs of a strategic threat posed by “organized crime”? Kedmi has a clear and pointed view on this issue, to which he gives unvarnished expression here.

The concluding chapters are under the sign of Yasha Kedmi’s last war, as the head of Nativ—a conflict with strong forces in the corridors of Israeli power, who aspired to terminate the organization on the grounds that since its goals were fulfilled, it had no further *raison d’être*—or, at least, to sharply curtail its size and mission. As the head of the Mossad (the Israeli national intelligence agency) in those years, I was privy to various aspects of this last battle and remember my meetings with Yasha Kedmi, which always took place in a cordial atmosphere. At the height of this campaign he resigned his position and Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed his replacement. I am sure that Yasha Kedmi would agree with me that Nativ has changed greatly since his departure; some would say its luster has been tarnished.

The decision to publish this book stemmed from two main considerations: first, to allow Israeli readers a glimpse of the soul of a Jewish freedom fighter, a lone wolf who realized his dream of *aliyah* and was then able to return to the arena of his personal battle as the head of a national organization with no parallel anywhere in the world, equipped with his own insights and extraordinary abilities, to fulfill his mission. Second, to permit Jewish readers of Russian origins to contemplate their community’s *aliyah* enterprise with immense pride, through the eyes of a hero, while at the same time allowing non-Russian Israeli readers to look in the mirror and see themselves in previously unknown hues. Anyone who reads this book carefully cannot remain indifferent to its message.

I close on a personal note. Some of the individuals described in this book in unflattering terms are well known to me from our joint endeavors. I see them in a very different way than Kedmi does, and my experiences of them involve glorious chapters in the history of Israel. My impression of people like Simcha Dinitz, whose important posts included service as the Israeli Ambassador to the United States during the Yom Kippur War, and Zvi Barak, the head of the Finance Department of the Jewish Agency during the daring campaigns for aliya from countries of distress, is not the same as Kedmi's. My experience of working alongside Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein on many and diverse matters, is very different from the picture presented by Kedmi and I am happy to be numbered among Rubinstein's many friends. But this is Yakov Kedmi's book, not mine, and the style is his style. Kedmi's contribution and merits justify (some might even say require) that his story see the light of day and be read with all due respect.



## Introduction

This book is not autobiographical. It should be described instead as a collection of memories that I have chosen to set down on paper. Over the course of my life I became accustomed to saying only what was essential and permitted, and that is what I have done in my book.

I wrote strictly from memory. I have never kept a diary, nor did I rely on documents or other written material to produce this book. So it is possible that inaccuracies have crept in here and there. I preferred not to draw on the archives of Nativ or of other agencies or individuals.

Although I wrote this book in Hebrew, which is not my native language, I found it easy to express myself on most topics. My goal has been to describe how a young Soviet Jew from Moscow, part of the generation born right after the most terrible of all wars, discovered his Jewish identity and himself, decided to make *aliyah* (*immigration to Israel*), and fought to turn this resolution into reality, all alone, against the entire world and against all odds. And how his fight for the truth, which he made his way of life, continued.

Because I had the good fortune to be involved in important and meaningful events—not only in my personal life, but also in the history of my people and my country—I thought it appropriate to recount what happened, and especially the reasons and circumstances and how I saw and understood them as they were taking place. Some of this information is known only in part to the public.

I also wanted to present certain matters from my own perspective, which is uncommon, to say the least. What is unique about my perspective derives from my biography, from the fact that for almost forty years, I was involved in the life of the Jewish people in almost every way possible. I was among the first activists at the dawn of the struggle for *aliyah* from the Soviet Union. After I reached Israel, I enlisted in the public struggle, outside the establishment and against the establishment, to change official Israeli policy, in accordance with my own outlook and perceptions. Finally, I pursued this as my life's work for twenty-two years within one of the most wonderful and successful government agencies—which I had the honor not only to be associated with, but also to run. This gave me the opportunity not only to determine the nature and fate of *aliyah*, but also to exert significant influence on the destiny of the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

Because of security constraints and my focus on the main issues, I have described only events I was directly involved in, with no intention to analyze in depth any of the topics covered in the book. Nor do I claim to have written a full survey of the history of the struggle of Soviet Jewry, but only, as stated, my personal account of the events I took part in.

The title of the book—*Hopeless Wars*—expresses, I believe, the motto of my life. Here I tell how it was born and in what circumstances.

I would like to thank Reuven Miran, Dubi Shiloah, and Yonadav Navon, whose advice was of great assistance while I was writing the book. I am eternally grateful to my family and relatives who encouraged me, assisted in the writing, and supported me throughout the life I have described here.

Yasha Kedmi

August 2008

# Chapter 1

A black dog, giant, immense and terrifying, much larger than me. A dog everyone's afraid of. But I am not afraid of the dog—we're friends. We're both three years old. His name is Julbers and he's my dog. I don't understand why people are afraid of him. He does anything I tell him to. I even ride him.

These are my first memories. I guess it's from that memory that I derived the feeling, or the ability, not to be afraid of what frightens other people. I can control it, just as I controlled my Caucasian dog.

Julbers was taken from me suddenly. They said he was dangerous and would make a good watchdog. I cried and felt very sad, so my dad brought me a different dog. We called him Pirate. He was a beautiful German shepherd, as big as Julbers, and he, too, quickly became my friend. I rode and harnessed him to my small sled, and everyone but me was afraid of him, too. To this day, big dogs are my great love and perhaps even part of my personality.

Another vivid childhood memory is of the first time I was cursed for being a Jew. I was small, so of course I didn't understand what it meant, but I sensed it was something bad. When I got home, I asked my parents, "What's a Jew? The children cursed me and said I'm a Jew. Why are they cursing only me?"

My dad looked at me, looked at my mom. Mom looked at Dad and sighed heavily. And then he explained it to me. "It's not a curse. The

children simply have no manners and are trying to insult you. ‘Jew’ is the name of a people, and we belong to that people. Just like there are Russians, Ukrainians, French, there is also a people like that.” What else could he have said to a three-year-old child? Should he have explained what a Jew is and how I was supposed to deal with anti-Semitic slurs? After all, I had no clue what anti-Semitism was.

Later, I kept running into my Judaism in a way that was unique to the Moscow of those years. I was almost six, and Stalin was ill. A few months before my birthday, on the anniversary of the October Revolution, my dad took me to a demonstration in Red Square. He put me on his shoulders and walked with me past the mausoleum where I saw Stalin and the entire Soviet leadership. Like any son of intelligent parents, I recognized most of the people standing on the mausoleum balcony—Molotov, Beria, Budyonny with his walrus moustache. But one person in particular caught my attention: “Who’s that funny man, the bald one, who keeps waving his hat?” My dad looked around. “No, no, he is not funny,” he told me. “He, too, is an important man. His name is Nikita Khrushchev.” All the while, Stalin stood and looked at us from the mausoleum balcony. That’s how I remember him.

I also remember my preschool and the two women there, Russians in white smocks. I remember one of them telling her friend, “The Jews are killing us, murdering our Stalin—it’s all because of them. The Jews and the Jewish doctors are a plague and will bring disaster upon us.”

I have remembered this episode ever since; even then I understood that their words referred to me as well, and I was filled with a sense of danger and fear. A few days later, I was talking with one of the other children in the preschool, a Russian boy, and he said, “Maybe Stalin will die?”

“Stalin can’t die!” I burst out furiously. “He will live forever. We will all die, but he will go on living, because he’s Stalin.” That was what many believed. A total belief in the cosmic order of the country and the environment in which we lived. A truly religious belief in an

orderly and organized system, more just than any other, with Stalin at its head. Despite the atheism of the Soviet Union, he was its God.

Stalin died two days later. It was the first time, but not the last, that the worldview I had constructed and thought was correct and perfect, which I believed in with complete and absolute faith, with extraordinary passion, collapsed. It was an important lesson for a six-year-old child. Stalin died on my sixth birthday, March 5, 1953.

I was born to a typical Soviet Jewish family. My mother was a Muscovite whose parents had moved to Moscow from the Ukraine in the late nineteenth century. Moscow was outside the Pale of Settlement (the region where Jews were permitted to live in Imperial Russia), but her family received permission to settle there. My father was born in Smolensk. His father, my grandfather, came to Smolensk from the Samara region of Russia. His mother, my grandmother, came from western Belorussia. In 1945, my father finished the foreign language school for officers, majoring in German. He had to pass through Moscow on his way to his unit which was stationed in Austria. Among the passengers on the crowded Metro, he spotted a beautiful young Jewish girl. She was just nineteen years old. He started talking to her and they made a date. Within a few weeks they were married and my father went on to his unit.

I attended the same school that my uncle, my mother's brother, had. A third of the students in his class were Jewish. All but one of the boys who graduated with him on June 21, 1941 (the day before the Nazi armies invaded the Soviet Union), were killed in the war. My uncle volunteered for the armored corps and served as a tank crewman. Barely twenty, he was killed in battle not far from Moscow. My brother Shurik was named for him. My paternal grandfather, Jacob, for whom I am named, was also killed in the war. His widow, my grandmother, had four sisters who remained in Russia (the rest of the family immigrated to the United States during the First World War). My grandmother and her sisters didn't manage to get out while

they could. All of them married Jews, and none of their husbands came home from the war. They all had sons. All those who were of age served in the army. My mother's father, my other grandfather, was a captain.

My mother, of blessed memory, joined in the defense of Moscow at age fifteen. As the Germans neared the city, hundreds of thousands of residents fled on foot. My mother and grandmother stayed behind; they never considered leaving, even if the Germans managed to conquer the city. When I asked my mother about this, she explained that they hadn't known about the Nazi atrocities. At night, my mother ran around the rooftops with other teenagers to put out the fires started by incendiary bombs dropped during the German air raids. They also tried to locate German agents who signaled the bombers and directed them towards their targets. My mother earned the Moscow Defense medal for her activities.

About a year and a half later in 1943, when she was almost seventeen, my mother was called in for an interview at the special school of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, and offered a chance to enlist. The recruiters wanted to train her in explosives and wireless communications and to parachute her behind the German lines as part of an intelligence and sabotage commando. She considered the proposal and rejected it. When I asked her why, she said she didn't think she was suited for that kind of work.

This is the environment I was raised in. This was my family heritage.

The next strange story in my mother's life took place just before I was born. One day, when she was pregnant with me, a group of gypsies passed the house. A woman came up to her and said, "Let me tell you your future." My young mother, a member of the Komsomol who did not believe in such superstitions, said no.

"Don't go," the gypsy coaxed her. "Listen. What do you care?" In the end, my mother gave in.

"You're pregnant," the gypsy told her. "You will have a boy. If he survives his first year and grows up, this boy will take all of you to a distant land across the sea."

My mother listened in total disbelief and dismissed her: “What utter nonsense!” This was the USSR of 1946, where it was enough for someone to inform on you for the mere thought of leaving the country to get you sentenced to ten years in prison.

My mother remembered the gypsy woman when I began my struggle to leave for Israel, but she didn't tell me the story until after she reached Israel herself.

## Chapter 2

Mine was a typical childhood in an assimilated Jewish family in Moscow of the 1950s.

My mother understood but did not speak Yiddish, but my father was fluent and spoke it to her on occasion. I was raised in Soviet Russian society. I knew that I was Jewish, but my Judaism and the State of Israel were far in the background.

In 1957, my father told me that he had seen the Israeli delegation to the World Festival of Youth and Students and was strongly impressed by its members' young, confident, and cheerful appearance. The State of Israel had also been in the news previously, during the Sinai Campaign of 1956. Other than that, I encountered no references to it until the Adolph Eichmann trial.

As I grew older, I became curious about Judaism. I met very few Jews in my school, and if Jews were mentioned in newspapers it was usually in a negative context. I was nineteen when, in a conversation with a Jewish acquaintance as we were walking to our exams in the institute where we were studying, he said, "I have a pamphlet—maybe you'd like to see it?" And without waiting for my answer, he handed me a small booklet with information about Israel and a Hebrew calendar on its cover. The calendar was in Russian, printed in the State of Israel, and brought to the Soviet Union by Nativ (also known as the "Liaison Bureau," a clandestine Israeli government agency responsible for