

# Letters from Latrun

Moshe Sharett, Israel's first foreign minister and second prime minister, left behind millions of written words, in diaries, memos, reports, and letters; only David Ben-Gurion wrote more. So many were the words that they both wrote – including poems and translations – that it is hard to see when they had time to build the state.

In contrast to Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin, Sharett (1894-1965) was not accorded his own "presidential library," but his political and personal legacy is well preserved, thanks to his son and daughter-in-law, Yaakov and Rina, who ardently publish his writings. They work out of a small apartment in Tel Aviv, doing nearly everything themselves, from tracking down the material and editing, explicating, indexing and laying it out, to packing the printed books and delivering them to the post office.

Yaakov Sharett is around 84 years old. Over the past 13 years he has published together with his wife nine hefty volumes of his father's writings, meticulously edited: The clarifying notes and indexes that accompany them give them a superior academic quality. They join the Sharett diaries that were published in the past, as well as a series of other books written by him. Now the 10th volume has come out, containing letters that Sharett sent his colleagues from the detention camp in Latrun, where he was held along with several other Jewish Agency leaders from June 29 to November 5, 1946. Many of these letters are fascinating to read even today ("Yerahim Be'emek Ayalon" – "Behind Barbed Wire in the Ayalon Valley" – with explications by Pinhas Ofer).

Sharett was arrested as part of a comprehensive plan of action that was designed to break the resistance to British rule; the day it was carried out became known in Hebrew as "Black Shabbat." At the time Sharett was serving as head of the Jewish Agency's political department, and was the most prominent Zionist leader in the country; Ben-Gurion was staying in Paris.



Yaakov Agor  
Sharett. A man of words.

Prison conditions at Latrun were fairly comfortable. They had radios and newspapers and were allowed to receive their food from outside. The food was brought in pots with double sides, which made it possible to keep in steady contact.

"I am like an old warhorse that was taken out of line," Sharett wrote, but in fact he carried on his political work. Over the course of his 130 days in custody he wrote and smuggled out more than 350 letters, about 90 of them to his wife. These were previously published as a separate volume.

Sharett's time in detention at Latrun was part of a particularly dramatic period in the history of the state in the making, which included the

pre-state underground, in which more than 90 people were killed. When Sharett heard about this he was shaken to the depths of his soul; he termed the terror attack "a holocaust." Decision time was nearing on the future of Palestine: Sharett sent Eliyahu Sasson to Egypt to persuade that country's prime minister, Ismail Sidqi, to agree to partition. Sharett offered to give up any Jewish claim to territories east of the Jordan – in other words, to establish the Jewish state on all of the land west of the Jordan, including the West Bank. He described the arrangement as an Israeli concession of "half of the whole loaf of bread." He also promised the country's Arabs full equality but stated that whatever the Arabs had already lost to Jewish settlement – they would not get back.

Sharett was considered one of the more moderate and cautious statesmen, but his letter to Sidqi was worded in cold political language, with an occasional threatening tone. By all signs it was not meant for Arab eyes alone, but rather was also meant to withstand all political criticism should the letter become public. The establishment of a Jewish state would cause the Arabs "minuscule damage," and they would do well to accept reality, lest the Jews demand more, he wrote.

Amid the plethora of political issues that preoccupied him, Sharett also took the time to deal with Paula Ben-Gurion's request that he arrange a job for her son Amos. Sharett was hardly keen on the idea but ruled that there was no choice in the matter. "If we let him in, tongues are sure to wag – but we will have to take that," he wrote.

Sharett's letters are all written in code, in one case in Rashi script. It was an almost childish attempt to disguise people's names, usually by translating them, as in the case of Golda Meir: She was dubbed "Pazit" and sometimes, to further confuse the enemy, "Zehava" – paz and zehav being Hebrew words for gold. Here and there you find more inspired codenames: Suzy Eban (wife of Abba Eban), who was born in Egypt, was called "Shoshanat Goshen" – the rose of Goshen. One British official was dubbed "Shakespeare."

The British knew about Sharett's letters. Years later, copies of dozens of them were found stashed in the former Mandatory Government Printing House. It turned out that the British had had a mole in the Jewish Agency offices who passed on copies of Sharett's letters from Latrun. His son does not write who the traitor was.

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