

The Other Gandhi

Uri Avnery

April 23, 2016

IN 1975, I WAS STABBED in the chest at the door of my apartment. The assassin missed my heart by millimeters.

He was caught by my female neighbors and arrested. It appeared he had no political motives—he was upset because I had planted listening devices in his head.

While in hospital, I got a call from London. It was from the representative of the PLO, who conveyed to me the best wishes of Yasser Arafat.

A few minutes later I had a visitor: General Rehavam Ze'evi, known by his nickname Gandhi, an extreme rightist, came to see me. The hospital staff were flabbergasted.

“What gun do you carry?” he asked. I told him it was a Webley, a British service revolver.

“Very bad,” he judged. “The hammer is too exposed. Where do you carry it?” I told him that I generally carried it in my belt.

“Even worse,” he remarked. “Before you can draw it, you are dead.”

He showed me his own gun. It was a special revolver produced for bodyguards—a Colt with a hammer which did not protrude from its body, so you could carry it cocked without the danger of it going off unexpectedly. “You must carry it in your hand at all times, he admonished me.

And so I did. For 15 years I had the revolver in my hand all the time except in my home and office. I developed a special way of hiding it while holding my finger on the trigger. No one ever suspected.

After 15 years, when my magazine, Haolam Hazeh, shut down, I went to the police and gave them my two handguns as a present.

I REMEMBERED this story this week, when a TV program aired an investigation into Ze'evi, disclosing that he was a murderer of prisoners, a serial rapist, an associate of prominent underworld figures and more.

That is very embarrassing, because some years ago the Knesset passed a special law to “eternalize” the “heritage” of Ze'evi.

Why, for God's sake? Well, he was a man of the far-far Right. When Yitzhak Rabin, a man of the moderate Left, was assassinated by a Jew, such a law was passed for him.

The Right wanted to have a martyr, too. They chose Ze'evi, who was assassinated 15 years ago by Arabs.

The TV program causes a headache. What to do now? Continue to “eternalize” a murderer of prisoners and, on top of that a rapist? To annul the law? Nobody knows, and there we are.

ACTUALLY, THERE was little that was new for me in the TV revelations. My relations with the man were always on several different levels. Politically, we were polar opposites. Personally, we belonged to the same group, the fighters of the 1948 war.

The relations between us started in 1953, when a group of youngsters attacked me after midnight in the street in front of my office. I had just got into my covered Jeep when they attacked me with heavy sticks. They did not succeed in dragging me out of the car, but broke the fingers of both my hands.¹

The question was, “Who had sent the attackers?” My first guess was Ariel Sharon, the commander of “Unit 101” which had just committed a terrible massacre in an Arab village called Qibya. My magazine had condemned the act.

Another guess was the Shin Bet, the secret service whose chief had a pathological hatred for me.

But then I got a secret message from Ze'evi, telling me that it was Moshe Dayan who was responsible. He warned me to take care. Ze'evi was the brother-in-law of a member of my staff. Dayan, the quintessential Arab-fighter, was already my deadly enemy.

REHAVAM ZE'EVY was a child of his time. Even his nickname was typical: at a high school celebration he had appeared wrapped in a bedspread, which made him look like the adored Indian leader. The nickname stuck. Ze'evi, a man of violence par excellence, was, of course, the very opposite of Gandhi.

In his teens he joined the semi-secret Zionist underground militia, the Palmach. In the 1948 war he was a combat soldier known for his physical courage but not much more. Later, as a battalion commander in 1951, he took part in the battle of Tel Mutilla against the Syrians, which was a disaster. Since then he did not command

¹This had a happy result. Since I was unable to perform even the most elementary tasks, a girl I hardly knew volunteered to move in with me for a week or so in order to help me. Her name was Rachel and she stayed with me until she died, 58 years later.

troops, but climbed steadily up the ladder of command, primarily, I think, because of his real organizational talent.

He was considered unreliable and undisciplined. Once he was stopped trying to cross the Jordanian border with the aim of freeing a soldier who had been captured there.

He was a member of the outstanding General Staff under the command of Rabin which won the stunning victory of the 1967 "Six-day War", but did not command any troops. But after the war, as chief of the Central Front Command, he took part in many manhunts.

These manhunts became a kind of sport. Arabs from the West Bank, who had fled across the Jordan River during the war, were trying to return home at night. Many were caught in army ambushes. The front commander was not supposed to be there, but Gandhi enjoyed it too much to stay away. He even invited his civilian friends—actors, song-writers and other bohemians—to join him in his helicopter. Those captured were killed on the spot.

When shocked soldiers reported this to me, I wrote to Rabin, who was still Chief of Staff. In an exchange of secret letters, he promised me to intervene.

At the time, I was a Member of the Knesset. When a concrete case of such a murder committed by Ze'evi came to my attention, I submitted a formal "motion for the agenda" against him. It was transferred to a secret committee hearing. Soon after, I received a secret communication from the new Chief of Staff, Haim Bar-lev, who was well respected as a decent officer. He informed me that an investigation had found that the killer in this case was not Ze'evi, but another officer who had since been killed in action.

OWING TO his special talent for self-publicity, Ze'evi was becoming a celebrity. In this "Time of Folly", as I called the delirious six years between the glorious 1967 "Six-day War" and the disastrous 1973 "Yom Kippur War", high-ranking army officers were treated as demi-gods. Ze'evi's antics were famous. One of them was having a live lioness grace his headquarters, to the delight of famous visitors.

It was then that his sexual relations with soldier-girls became known, without stirring much opposition. In last week's disclosures, these played a mayor role. Ze'evi, several women testified, forced himself on dozens of them, if not more, mostly girls under his command. Some were brutally raped.

The attitude to rape has radically changed in Israel over the years. Among men in the 1950s and 60s, it was considered more as a joke. "When she says No, what does she mean?" asked a famous song. The general view among men was that girls really "want it", but had to pretend otherwise for appearance's sake.

It was generally accepted in the army, that officers had the right to have sex with their female subordinates.

It was one of the privileges of rank. In medieval times, nobles were supposed to enjoy a "droit du seigneur" or "jus primae noctis", the right to have sex with local women on their wedding night. (The accuracy of this story is in doubt.)

Officers believed that they had some such right. A famous saying, coined by the air force commander, ran: "The best men for flying, the best women for the flyers".

When I was in the army, I was struck by the large number of female soldiers who had no real job except making coffee for their officer. Women in Israel are drafted like men. When I became editor of Haolam Hazeh magazine, one of my first articles was to demand the abolition of the female draft. Give them an adequate salary and a nice uniform, I wrote, and you will have enough female volunteers for the real jobs.

When I submitted this article to the military censorship, the Chief of Staff sent the Army spokesman to me, threatening to cut all relations with my magazine if I published it. I did publish, of course, and for the next 40 years the army did not buy a single issue of my magazine (yet it remained by far the most popular magazine in the army).

The general atmosphere in the army explains why Ze'evi could do all the things, many of them revolting, which were recounted by the victims in the TV report. At the time it happened, the women were too afraid or ashamed to tell.

ZE'EVI had no chance at all to become Chief of Staff, so he left the army. He devoted himself to his other great passion: the love of the country.

Generally, "love of the country" is an empty phrase. In Zionist usage, it is an abstract term for nationalism. But for Gandhi it was a very real thing, a devotion to the real country, every single corner of it, its history and its present.

This is where we met, metaphorically. I believe that the common love of this country, whether it be called Palestine or Eretz Israel, can become a strong bond between the two peoples. For this, both sides must learn from an early age to look at the history of the country as a whole, through all the ages—at the Canaanites, Philistines, Israelites, Samaritans, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, Ottomans, Palestinians, Zionists, British, Israelis and all those in between—as a single, consecutive history.

I had a partner in this endeavor: Ze'evi. He was appointed director of a small Tel Aviv institution called "Museum of the Country" which, with his organizational talent, he soon turned into an important site. He also changed its name to "Museum of Eretz Israel". It celebrates all the stages of this country's history.

Ze'evi also wrote a number of excellent books on different parts of the country. He sent me a copy of each with a warm dedication.

A VERY different part of his complex character was his affinity with the underworld.

During the 1970s, the police and the media started to talk about "organized crime" in Israel. It concerned mainly the smuggling of hard drugs. Some of the leaders were also figures in Tel Aviv's bohemian circles. Ze'evi befriended them.

One day, two underworld figures were murdered by rivals. Police had intercepted phone calls made on that evening by the suspected murderers to Ze'evi, asking him to come immediately. He had promised to do so.

A furious debate began about Ze'evi's role in the affair. My magazine was going to write about it, when I got an urgent call from Ze'evi, asking for an immediate meeting. I invited him to my home.

"The truth is that on that evening I was to meet a girl and have sex with her," he confided, "I used my friends as an alibi. But if you publish this, my wife will divorce me."

I did not believe a word.

IN THE end, Ze'evi turned to active politics. His slogan was "voluntary transfer", meaning that one day all the millions of Arabs in the occupied territories, and perhaps in Israel too, would leave the country in return for proper compensation. Since nobody in his right mind could really

believe in this, it was understood by everyone that what was meant was mass expulsion by force.

Before him, the outspoken fascist Meir Kahane had proposed something similar, and was expelled from the Knesset by the Supreme Court. But Kahane was a new immigrant from the US, a foreigner and universally detested. Ze'evi was a real 100% Israeli. His fascist ideas were tolerated.

He served in the Knesset for 12 years and was appointed Minister for Tourism. He chose to live in a hotel in the occupied Eastern part of Jerusalem. As a real he-man, he disdained the bodyguards other ministers had. One day, some Arab employees of the hotel assassinated him.

TAKEN ALL in all, Gandhi was an eternal teenager, a very Israeli version of an adolescent. With his glasses, he looked more like a student than a soldier.

Once I talked about him with Yitzhak Rabin, his former commander. Rabin referred to him with some disdain, but still accepted him as "one of the gang".

The law has turned him into a national hero, with a special "Day of Remembrance", when all pupils in the country are obliged to study his "legacy".

Well, it was ridiculous from the beginning, and now it is absolutely preposterous.