

POLITICAL TALENT

Ze'ev-Dov, a forty-four-year-old Zionist, froze as he gazed at his twenty-seven-year-old wife, Chasia, who was lying in a hospital bed staring at their newborn baby girl. It was the summer of 1909, at a hospital in Brisk (Brest-Litovsk). Ze'ev-Dov turned away from the young mother, attempting to hide his disappointment. After a silent moment he pulled himself together: "Let's do it anyway? Let's name her Herzliya?"

Chasia, her face pale and her hair tightly pulled back, refused. Despite her apparent weakness, her eyes were adamant. "We will wait for the next time," she said. Ze'ev-Dov relented, and the eldest daughter was named after her grandmother, Rachel. The local Zionist's dream to name his eldest son after the admired Jewish leader Theodor Herzl had dissipated.¹ Two years later, in 1911, when his second child was born, Ze'ev-Dov fulfilled his dream and named their son Herzl. The youngest child, born two years later, was Menachem, a name taken from the Haftarah (selections from the books of Prophets in the Old Testament), which Ze'ev-Dov and Chasia had read in synagogue a week before he was born.

Menachem's character was shaped within the confines of a home that blended Jewish tradition with the early buds of Zionism. For his father, Zionism was not merely an ideology; Ze'ev-Dov, who was fluent in four languages, earned his living from it, mostly by writing letters on behalf of the Jewish community in Brisk in an attempt to lobby local authorities. Supporting the community and promoting Zionist activities provided his daily bread as well as food for his soul. It was