

Mourning in Zion

Having spent his early years in Warsaw, Benzion Netanyahu joyfully emigrated to Palestine-Israel, the land of his forefathers—and played with friends on the white-hot sands of just-born Tel Aviv, only a few years before Hitler began his menacing hunting of Jews in Europe.

When Benzion Netanyahu died Sunday at his Jerusalem home, aged 102, he left behind a lifetime of work toward the Zionist cause. His legacy and his joy was that he was gathered unto his people in the Holy City, in the Jewish state he loved and helped found.

Father to three fine men—Yonatan, who fell leading the astonishing raid at Entebbe in 1976; Benjamin, Israel's current prime minister; and Iddo, a writer and physician—Benzion was also married to his beloved Cela for 56 years. A historian of international renown, his home was what one would expect from an academic: orderly, but stuffed with books.

I met him when he was 95 and working on what would be his last book (the soon-to-be released *The Founding Fathers of Zionism*, from Balfour Books). I'd read an account of the famous hostage rescue in the heart of Africa, where the legendary Yonatan was killed just as the raid began, and through that met Iddo. Perhaps more like his father in temperament, Iddo is a brilliant writer. He also has the distinction of having served in the same elite counter-terrorism unit (Sayeret Matkal) as his brothers.

Benjamin "Bibi," of course, has gone on to great fame as the leader of a country that has been America's staunch ally in the Middle East. He and his brothers were raised on a firm understanding of Zionism, while sitting around the family dining room table.

Today, in the same room, is an imposing bust of Lt. Col. Yonatan Netanyahu. Each year, the family made the trek to Mt. Herzl, Israel's military cemetery in Jerusalem, to remember Yoni, and today they will gather to lay to rest the man who mourned his son's death for 3.5 decades.

In the years just before modern Israel was founded, Benzion was a key leader in the United States, garnering support for the creation of a Jewish homeland. His work with Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky cemented his reputation as a champion for Zion.

That one family could contribute so much to such a nation ... this is an emotional time for millions of pro-Israel activists the world over. We have lost a great man, but marvel at his uncompromising legacy.

Benzion, professor emeritus at Cornell, did landmark research in Jewish history. The evenings I spent talking with him at the family home have left an indelible mark on me. I was also able to talk with two of the commandos who went with Yoni to Entebbe. They are—all of them—something beyond the rest of us, and I don't mind saying so publicly.

In his foreword to *The Letters of Jonathan Netanyahu*, a collection put together by the fallen commander's brothers, the novelist Herman Wouk said of "Yoni" that he was like "an ember of sacred fire."

And so he was. So is the Netanyahu family, I think.

It began with their patriarch, Benzion Netanyahu.

Jim Fletcher is an Israel activist who writes for a variety of publications, including *The Jerusalem Post*, *WorldNetDaily* and *OneNewsNow*. He can be reached at jim1fletcher@.