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Golda Meir

The story of this interview is quite special. It is the story of an interview that was mysteriously stolen and had to be done all over again. I had met Golda Meir twice, for more than three hours, before the theft occurred. I again saw Golda Meir twice, for about two hours, after the theft had occurred. So I think I can say I'm the only journalist to have talked four times and for a good six hours with this fantastic woman whom you can praise or revile as you like but who cannot be denied the adjective fantastic. Am I mistaken? Am I guilty of optimism, or let's even say feminism? Maybe. But while I admit that I have nothing against feminism, I must add that I will never be objective about Golda Meir. I will never succeed in judging her with the disenchantment I would like to impose on myself when I say that a powerful personage is a phenomenon to be analyzed coldly, surgically.

In my opinion, even if one is not at all in agreement with her, with her politics, her ideology, one cannot help but respect her, admire her, even love her. I almost loved her. Above all, she reminds me of my mother, whom she somewhat resembles. My mother too has the same gray curly hair, that tired and wrinkled face, that heavy body supported on swollen, unsteady, leaden legs. My mother too has that sweet and energetic look about her, the look of a housewife obsessed with cleanliness. They are a breed of women, you see, that has gone out of style and whose wealth con-

sists in a disarming simplicity, an irritating modesty, a wisdom that comes from having toiled all their lives in the pain, discomfort, and trouble that leave no time for the superfluous.

All right, Golda Meir is also something else, something more. For example: for years it was she who could have lighted or extinguished the fuse of a world conflict. For years she was the most authoritative representative of a doctrine that many people condemn and whose tenets I reject: Zionism. But this we know. And I'm not interested in telling what we know about Golda Meir. I'm interested in telling what we don't know. So here is the story of this interview. Or rather my story with Golda Meir, at that time prime minister.

My first meeting took place at the beginning of October, in her Jerusalem residence. It was a Monday, and she had dressed herself in black, as my mother does when she's expecting visitors. She had also powdered her nose, as my mother does when she's expecting visitors. Seated in the drawing room, with a cup of coffee and a pack of cigarettes, she seemed concerned only to make me feel at ease and to minimize her authority. I had sent her my book on Vietnam and a bouquet of roses. The roses were in a vase and the book in her hands. Before I could ask any questions, she began to discuss the way in which I had viewed the war, and so it was not difficult to get her to speak about her war: of terrorism, of the Palestinians, of the occupied territories, of the conditions that she would put to Sadat and Hussein should she come to negotiate with the Arabs. Her voice was warm and vibrant, her expression smiling and jovial. She charmed me at once, without effort. Her conquest was complete when, an hour and a quarter later, she said she would see me again.

The second meeting took place three days later, in her prime ministerial office. Two highly interesting hours. Abandoning political questions, on which I followed her at times with reservations, in the second meeting she talked exclusively about herself: about her childhood, her family, her trials as a woman, her friends. Pietro Nenni, for instance, for whom she feels boundless admiration and a touching affection. At the moment of saying good-by, we ourselves had become friends. She even gave me a photograph for my mother, with the most flattering dedication in the world. She begged me to come back and visit her soon. "But without that thing

there, eh? Only for a chat between ourselves over a cup of tea!" That thing there was the tape recorder, on which I had taken down every sentence, every reply. Her aides seemed astonished; it was the first time she had spoken with such candor in front of that-thing-there. One of them asked me to send him a copy of the tapes to give to a kibbutz that is preserving documents on Golda Meir.

The tapes. As I said at the beginning of this book, for my work nothing is more precious than tapes. There are no stenographic records, memories, notes that can take the place of a person's live voice. The tapes were two minicassettes of ninety minutes each, plus a third of five or six minutes. Of the three, only the first had been transcribed. So I put them in my purse with the care reserved for a jewel, and left next day, arriving in Rome about eight thirty in the evening. At nine-thirty I checked into a hotel. A famously good hotel. And here, as soon as I was in my room, I took the three minicassettes out of my purse and put them in an envelope. Then I put the envelope on the desk, placing on top of it a pair of glasses, a valuable compact, and other objects, and left the room. I locked the door, of course, gave the key to the desk clerk, and went out. For about fifteen minutes: time to go across the street and eat a sandwich.

When I came back, the key had disappeared. And when I went upstairs, the door to my room was open. Only the door. Everything else was in order. My suitcases were locked, the valuable compact and other objects were still where I had left them—at first glance it seemed that nothing had been touched. And it took a couple of seconds for me to realize that the envelope was empty, that Golda's tapes were gone. Even my tape recorder, which contained another tape with a few sentences, was missing. They had taken it out of a traveling bag, ignoring a jewel box, and then had carefully rearranged the contents of the bag. Finally they had taken two necklaces that I had left on the table. To throw us off the track, the police said.

The police came immediately and stayed until dawn. Even the political division came, represented by sad and unpleasant young men who take no interest in ordinary thefts but only in more delicate matters. Even the scientific division came, with the cameras and instruments that are used to find clues in murder cases. But they found only my fingerprints: the thieves had operated with kid

gloves, in every sense. Then the sad and unpleasant young men concluded that it was a political theft, as I myself already knew. What I couldn't understand was why it had been done and by whom. By an Arab looking for information? By some personal enemy of Golda's? By a jealous journalist? Everything had been done with precision, speed, lucidity—à la James Bond. And surely I had been followed; nobody knew I would arrive in Rome that day, at that hour, in that hotel. What about the key? Why had the key disappeared from its pigeonhole?

The next day something strange happened. A woman with two airline bags appeared at the hotel and asked to see the police. She had found the bags in the bushes of the Villa Borghese and wanted to turn them over to the police. What did the bags contain? Some twenty minicassette tapes like mine. She was seized at once and taken to the police station. Here, one by one, the tapes were played. All that was on them were popular songs. A warning? A threat? A hoax? The woman was unable to say why she had gone to look for the police in that particular hotel.

To get back to Golda. Golda learned of the theft the next evening, when she was at home with friends and was telling about our interview: "The day before yesterday I had an experience; I enjoyed being interviewed by . . ." She was interrupted by one of her aides, who handed her my telegram. "Everything stolen repeat everything stop try to see me again please." She read it, they told me, put her hand to her breast, and for several minutes didn't say a word. Then she raised two distressed, determined eyes, and said with careful enunciation, "Obviously somebody doesn't want this interview to be published. So we'll have to do it over. Find me a couple of hours for a new appointment." This is just what she said, they assure me, and I can't believe that any other government leader would have reacted in this way. I'm sure that any other, in her place, would have given a shrug. "So much the worse for her. I already gave her more than three hours. Let her write what she can remember, manage the best she can." The fact is that Golda, before being a statesman, is one of that breed of women that has gone out of style. The only condition she made was that we wait a month, and the new appointment was set for Thursday, November 14. And so it happened. Certainly, returning to her that day, I didn't imagine I would discover how much I could love her in spite

of all. But, to explain such a serious statement, I must tell what moved me still more.

Golda lives alone. At night there is not even a dog to watch over her sleep in case she feels ill; there is her bodyguard on duty at the entrance to her villa and that's all. During the day, to help her around the house, she has only a girl who comes in to make the bed, dust, and do the ironing. If she invites you to dinner, for example, Golda herself does the cooking, and after cooking, she cleans up: so that tomorrow the girl doesn't find everything dirty. Well, the evening before my appointment, she had guests to dinner and they stayed until two in the morning, leaving a shambles of dirty dishes, dirty glasses, overflowing ashtrays, disorder. So that tomorrow the girl wouldn't find everything dirty, at two in the morning Golda began washing dishes and glasses, sweeping, and tidying, and she did not get to bed before three-thirty. At seven, she got up, as always, to read the papers and listen to the news on the radio. At eight she conferred with certain generals. At nine she conferred with certain ministers. At ten . . . she felt ill. At the age of seventy-four, three and a half hours of sleep are not enough.

When I heard about it, I was ashamed to come in. I kept saying, "Let's put off the appointment, it doesn't matter, I swear it doesn't matter!" But she wanted to keep her engagement: "Yes, poor thing, she came all this way and it's the second time she's come and they stole her tapes." After resting for twenty minutes on the divan in her office, she appeared behind her desk, pale, worn out, and very sweet. I wasn't to worry about the delay; she would give me as much time as I needed. And the interview was resumed—like the time before, better than the time before. In October she had been unable to speak of her husband, of what had been the tragedy of her life. This time she did even this, and since to speak of it is so painful for her, when she found that she couldn't go on, she reassured me: "Don't worry, we'll finish tomorrow!"

Then she gave me a fourth appointment, the splendid hour in which we spoke of old age, youth, and death. God, how alluring she looked when she talked of these things! Many maintain that Golda is ugly and rejoice in doing cruel caricatures of her. I answer: Certainly beauty is an opinion, but to me Golda seems like a beautiful old woman. Many maintain that Golda is masculine and enjoy spreading vulgar jokes about her. I answer: Certainly femi-

ninity is an opinion, but to me Golda seems a woman in every way. That gentle modesty, for instance. That almost incredible candor when you remember how crafty and clever she can be when she swims among the whirlpools of politics. That torment in conveying the anguish of a woman for whom childbearing is not enough. That tenderness in evoking the testimony of her children and grandchildren. That involuntary flirting. The last time I saw her she was wearing a sky-blue pleated blouse, with a pearl necklace. Stroking it with her short, pink-manicured nails, she seemed to be asking, "So do I look all right?" And I thought, a pity she's in power, a pity she's on the side of those who command. In a woman like this, power is an error in taste.

I won't repeat that she was born in Kiev in 1898, with the name of Golda Mabovitz, that she grew up in America, in Milwaukee, where she married Morris Meyerson in 1917, that in 1918 she emigrated with him to Palestine, that the surname Meir was urged on her by David Ben-Gurion because it sounded more Hebrew, that her success began after she had served as ambassador to Moscow in the times of Stalin, that she smokes at least sixty cigarettes a day, that she keeps going mainly on coffee, that her working day lasts eighteen hours, that as prime minister she earns the miserable sum of about four hundred dollars a month. I'm not about to look for the secret of her legend. The interview that follows explains it with all her good and her flaws. I composed it following the chronology of the meetings.

Naturally the police never got to the core of the mystery surrounding the theft of those tapes. Or, if they did get to the core of it, they took care not to inform me. But a clue that soon became more than a clue offered itself. And it's worth the trouble to relate it, if only to give another idea of those in power.

At about the same time as my interview with Golda Meir, I had asked for one with Muammar el-Qaddafi. And he, through a high official of the Libyan Ministry of Information, had let me know that he would grant it. But all of a sudden, a few days after the theft of the tapes, he sent for the correspondent of a rival weekly of *L'Europeo*. The correspondent rushed off to Tripoli and, by some coincidence, Qaddafi regaled him with sentences that sounded like answers to what Mrs. Meir had told me. The poor journalist, need-

less to say, was ignorant of this detail. But I, needless to say, realized it at once. And I raised a more than legitimate question: how was it possible for Mr. Qaddafi to answer something that had never been published and that no one, other than myself, knew? Had Mr. Qaddafi listened to my tapes? Had he actually received them from someone who had stolen them from me? And immediately my mind recalled an unforbidden detail. The day after the theft I had played amateur detective and gone on the sly to rummage in the trash collected on the floor of the hotel where the crime had taken place. Here, and though they swore in the hotel that no Arab had gone up for days, I had discovered a piece of paper written in Arabic. I had given it, along with my statement, to the political division of the police.

That's all. And, of course, I might be mistaken. Of course, the thief might well have been some American tourist or some Frenchman. Qaddafi never granted me the promised interview. He never called me to Tripoli to dispel the shameful suspicion that I still feel justified in nourishing.

About Golda, well, she isn't involved any more in that error of taste called power. She is no longer prime minister. In a sudden, somehow brutal way, history took her off the job and sent her home. But home was the kibbutz where she had been longing to live and, I bet, that brutality was the nicest gift she could dream of. Nobody will ever convince me that she is not much happier now, far from power, than she ever was when I met her. After all, she deserves to end her days as she always dreamed. You will understand it from her own words.

GOLDA MEIR: Good morning, dear, good morning. I was just looking at your book on the war. And I was asking myself if women really react differently to war than men. . . . I'd say no. In these last years and during the war of attrition, I've so often found myself having to make certain decisions: for instance, to send our soldiers to places from where they wouldn't come back, or commit them to operations that would cost the lives of who knows how many human beings on both sides. And I suffered . . . I suffered. But I gave those orders as a man would have given them. And now that I think of it, I'm

not at all sure that I suffered any more than a man would have. Among my male colleagues I have seen some oppressed by a darker sadness than mine. Oh, not that mine was little! But it didn't influence, no, it didn't influence my decisions. . . . War is an immense stupidity. I'm sure that someday all wars will end. I'm sure that someday children in school will study the history of the men who made war as you study an absurdity. They'll be astonished, they'll be shocked, just as today we're shocked by cannibalism. Even cannibalism was accepted for a long time as a normal thing. And yet today, at least physically, it's not practiced any more.

ORIANA FALLACI: Mrs. Meir, I'm glad you were the first to bring up this subject. Because it's just the one with which I meant to begin. Mrs. Meir, when will there be peace in the Middle East? Will we be able to see this peace in our lifetimes?

G.M.: You will, I think. Maybe . . . I certainly won't. I think the war in the Middle East will go on for many, many years. And I'll tell you why. Because of the indifference with which the Arab leaders send their people off to die, because of the low estimate in which they hold human life, because of the inability of the Arab people to rebel and say enough.

Do you remember when Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes during the Twentieth Communist Congress? A voice was raised at the back of the hall, saying, "And where were you, Comrade Khrushchev?" Khrushchev scrutinized the faces before him, found no one, and said, "Who spoke up?" No one answered. "Who spoke up?" Khrushchev asked again. And again no one answered. Then Khrushchev exclaimed, "Comrade, I was where you are now." Well, the Arab people are just where Khrushchev was, where the man was who reproached him without having the courage to show his face.

We can only arrive at peace with the Arabs through an evolution on their part that includes democracy. But wherever I turn my eyes to look, I don't see a shadow of democracy. I see only dictatorial regimes. And a dictator doesn't have to account to his people for a peace he doesn't make. He doesn't even have to account for the dead. Who's ever found out how many Egyptian soldiers died in the last two wars? Only the mothers, sisters, wives, relatives who didn't see them come

back. Their leaders aren't even concerned to know where they're buried, if they're buried. While we . . .

O.F.: While you? . . .

G.M.: Look at these five volumes. They contain the photograph and biography of every man and woman soldier who died in the war. For us, every single death is a tragedy. We don't like to make war, even when we win. After the last one, there was no joy in our streets. No dancing, no songs, no festivities. And you should have seen our soldiers coming back victorious. Each one was a picture of sadness. Not only because they had seen their brothers die, but because they had had to kill their enemies. Many locked themselves in their rooms and wouldn't speak. Or when they opened their mouths, it was to repeat like a refrain: "I had to shoot. I killed." Just the opposite of the Arabs. After the war we offered the Egyptians an exchange of prisoners. Seventy of theirs for ten of ours. They answered, "But yours are officers, ours are fellahin! It's impossible." Fellahin, peasants. I'm afraid . . .

O.F.: Are you afraid that war between Israel and the Arabs may break out again?

G.M.: Yes. It's possible, yes. Because, you see, many say that the Arabs are ready to sign an agreement with us. But, in these dictatorial regimes, who is to say that such an agreement would be worth anything? Let's suppose that Sadat signs and is then assassinated. Or simply eliminated. Who's to say that his successor will respect the agreement signed by Sadat? Was the truce that all the Arab countries had signed with us respected? Despite that truce, there was never peace on our borders and today we're still waiting for them to attack us.

O.F.: But there's talk of an agreement today, Mrs. Meir. Even Sadat is talking about it. Isn't it easier to negotiate with Sadat than it was to negotiate with Nasser?

G.M.: Not at all. It's exactly the same. For the simple reason that Sadat doesn't want to negotiate with us. I'm more than ready to negotiate with him. I've been saying it for years: "Let's sit down at a table and see if we can arrange things, Sadat." He flatly refuses. He's not a bit ready to sit down at a table with me. He goes on talking about the difference between an agreement and a treaty. He says he's ready for an agreement, but

not a peace treaty. Because a peace treaty would mean recognition of Israel, diplomatic relations with Israel. See what I mean? Sadat doesn't mean definite talks that would put an end to the war, but a kind of cease-fire. And then he refuses to negotiate with us directly. He wants to negotiate through intermediaries. We can't talk to each other through intermediaries! It's senseless, useless! In 1949 too, in Rhodes, after the War of Independence, we signed an agreement with the Egyptians, Jordanians, Syrians, and Lebanese. But it was through an intermediary, through Dr. Bunche, who on behalf of the United Nations met first with one group, then with another. . . . Great results.

O.F.: And the fact that Hussein is talking about peace—that isn't a good sign either?

G.M.: I've said nice things about Hussein lately. I congratulated him for having talked about peace in public. I'll go further and say I believe Hussein. I'm sure that by now he's realized how futile it would be for him to embark on another war. Hussein has understood that he made a terrible mistake in 1967, when he went to war with us without considering the message Eshkol had sent him: "Stay out of the war and nothing will happen to you." He's understood that it was a tragic piece of foolishness to listen to Nasser and his lies about bombing Tel Aviv. So now he wants peace. But he wants it on his conditions. He claims the left bank of the Jordan, that is the West Bank, he claims Jerusalem, he invokes the United Nations Resolution. . . . We once accepted a United Nations resolution. It was when we were asked to divide Jerusalem. It was a deep wound in our hearts, but still we accepted. And we all know the consequences. Were we maybe the ones to attack the Jordanian army? No, it was the Jordanian army that entered Jerusalem! The Arabs are really strange people: they lose wars and then expect to gain by it. After all, did we or didn't we win the Six Day War? Do we or don't we have the right to set our conditions? Since when in history does the one who attacks and loses have the right to dictate terms to the winner? They do nothing but tell us: restore this, restore that, give up this, give up that . . .

O.F.: Will you ever give up Jerusalem, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: No. Never. No. Jerusalem no. Jerusalem never. Inadmissible. Jerusalem is out of the question. We won't even agree to discuss Jerusalem.

O.F.: Would you give up the West Bank of the Jordan?

G.M.: On this point there are differences of opinion in Israel. So it's possible that we'd be ready to negotiate about the West Bank. Let me make myself clearer. I believe the majority of Israelis would never ask the Knesset to give up the West Bank completely. However, if we should come to negotiate with Hussein, the majority of Israelis would be ready to hand back part of the West Bank. I said part—let that be clear. And for the moment the government hasn't decided either yes or no. Nor have I. Why should we quarrel among ourselves before the head of an Arab state says he's ready to sit down at a table with us? Personally, I think that if Hussein should decide to negotiate with us, we might give him back a part of the West Bank. Either after a decision by the government or parliament, or after a referendum. We could certainly hold a referendum on this matter.

O.F.: And Gaza? Would you give up Gaza, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: I say that Gaza must, should be part of Israel. Yes, that's my opinion. Our opinion, in fact. However, to start negotiating, I don't ask Hussein or Sadat to agree with me on any point. I say, "My opinion, our opinion, is that Gaza should remain part of Israel. I know you think otherwise. All right, let's sit down at a table and start negotiating." Do I make myself clear? It's by no means indispensable to find ourselves in agreement before the negotiations: we hold negotiations precisely in order to reach an agreement. When I state that Jerusalem will never be divided, that Jerusalem will remain in Israel, I don't mean that Hussein or Sadat shouldn't mention Jerusalem. I don't even mean that they shouldn't mention Gaza. They can bring up anything they like at the time of negotiations.

O.F.: And the Golan Heights?

G.M.: It's more or less the same idea. The Syrians would like us to come down from the Golan Heights so that they can shoot down at us as they did before. Needless to say, we have no intention of doing so, we'll never come down from the plateau. Nevertheless, we're ready to negotiate with the Syrians too.

On our conditions. And our conditions consist in defining a border between Syria and Israel that stabilizes our presence up there. In other words, the Syrians today find themselves exactly where the border ought to be. On this I don't think we'll yield. Because only if they stay where they are today can they be kept from shooting down at us as they did for nineteen years.

O.F.: And the Sinai?

G.M.: We've never said that we wanted the whole Sinai or most of the Sinai. We don't want the whole Sinai. We want control of Sharm El Sheikh and part of the desert, let's say a strip of desert, connecting Israel with Sharm El Sheikh. Is that clear? Must I repeat it? We don't want most of the Sinai. Maybe we don't even want half of the Sinai. Because it's not important to us to be sitting along the Suez Canal. We're the first to realize that the Suez Canal is too important to the Egyptians, that to them it even represents a question of prestige. We also know that the Suez Canal isn't necessary for our defense. We're ready to give it up as of today. But we won't give up Sharm El Sheikh and a strip of desert connecting us with Sharm El Sheikh. Because we want our ships to be able to enter and leave Sharm El Sheikh. Because we don't want to find ourselves again in the conditions we found ourselves in the other time, when we gave up Sharm El Sheikh. Because we don't want to take the risk of waking up again some morning with the Sinai full of Egyptian troops. On these terms, and only on these terms, are we ready to negotiate with the Egyptians. To me they seem very reasonable terms.

O.F.: And so it's obvious that you'll never go back to your old borders.

G.M.: Never. And when I say never, it's not because we mean to annex new territory. It's because we mean to ensure our defense, our survival. If there's any possibility of reaching the peace you spoke of in the beginning, this is the only way. There'd never be peace if the Syrians were to return to the Golan Heights, if the Egyptians were to take back the whole Sinai, if we were to re-establish our 1967 borders with Hussein. In 1967, the distance to Natanya and the sea was barely ten miles, fifteen kilometers. If we give Hussein the possibility

of covering those fifteen kilometers, Israel risks being cut in two and . . . They accuse us of being expansionists, but, believe me, we're not interested in expanding. We're only interested in new borders. And look, these Arabs want to go back to the 1967 borders. If those borders were the right ones, why did they destroy them?

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, so far we've been talking about agreements, negotiations, treaties. But since the 1967 cease-fire, the war in the Middle East has taken on a new face: the face of terror, of terrorism. What do you think of this war and the men who are conducting it? Of Arafat, for instance, of Habash, of the Black September leaders?

G.M.: I simply think they're not men. I don't even consider them human beings, and the worst thing you can say of a man is that he's not a human being. It's like saying he's an animal, isn't it? But how can you call what they're doing "a war"? Don't you remember what Habash said when he had a bus full of Israeli children blown up? "It's best to kill the Israelis while they're still children." Come on, what they're doing isn't a war. It's not even a revolutionary movement because a movement that only wants to kill can't be called revolutionary.

Look, at the beginning of the century in Russia, in the revolutionary movement that rose up to overthrow the czar, there was one party that considered terror the only means of struggle. One day a man from this party was sent with a bomb to a street corner where the carriage of one of the czar's high officials was supposed to pass. The carriage went by at the expected time. But the official was not alone, he was accompanied by his wife and children. So what did this true revolutionary do? He didn't throw the bomb. He let it go off in his hand and was blown to pieces. Look, we too had our terrorist groups during the War of Independence: the Stern, the Irgun. And I was opposed to them, I was always opposed to them. But neither of them ever covered itself with such infamy as the Arabs have done with us. Neither of them ever put bombs in supermarkets or dynamite in school buses. Neither of them ever provoked tragedies like Munich or Lod airport.

O.F.: And how can one fight such terrorism, Mrs. Meir? Do you really think it helps to bomb Lebanese villages?

G.M.: To a certain extent, yes. Of course. Because the fedayeen are in those villages. The Lebanese themselves say, "Certain areas are Al Fatah territory." So certain areas should be cleaned up. It's the Lebanese who should think of cleaning them up. The Lebanese say they can't do anything. Well, that's what Hussein used to say at the time when the fedayeen were encamped in Jordan. Even our American friends said it: "It's not that Hussein doesn't want to get rid of them! It's that he doesn't have enough strength to get rid of them." But in September 1970, when Amman was in danger and his palace was in danger and he himself found himself in danger, Hussein realized that he could do something. And he liquidated them. If the Lebanese go on doing nothing, we'll respond, "Very well. We realize your difficulties. You can't do anything. But we can. And just to show you, we'll bomb those areas that shelter the fedayeen."

Maybe more than any other Arab country, Lebanon is offering hospitality to the terrorists. The Japanese who carried out the Lod massacre came from Lebanon. The girls who tried to hijack the Sabena plane in Tel Aviv had been trained in Lebanon. Are we supposed to sit here with our hands folded, praying and murmuring, "Let's hope that nothing happens"? Praying doesn't help. What helps is to counterattack. With all possible means, including means that we don't necessarily like. Certainly we'd rather fight them in the open. But since that's not possible . . .

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, would you be ready to talk with Arafat or Habash?

G.M.: Never! Not with them! Never! What is there to discuss with people who haven't even the courage to risk their own skins and consign the bombs to someone else? Like those two Arabs in Rome, for example. The ones who handed the record player with a bomb to the two stupid English girls. Listen, we want to arrive at peace with the Arab states, with responsible governments of the Arab states, whatever their regime, since their regime isn't our concern. But to people like Habash, Arafat, Black September, we have nothing to say. The people to talk to are others.

O.F.: Do you mean us Europeans, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: Exactly. The Europeans, and not only the Europeans, must

decide to stop this business that you call war. Up to now there's been too much tolerance on your part. A tolerance, let me say, that has its roots in unextinguished anti-Semitism. But anti-Semitism is never exhausted in the suffering of just Jews. History has shown that anti-Semitism in the world has always brought on disaster for everyone. It begins by tormenting the Jews and ends by tormenting anybody. To give you a trite example, there was that first airplane that was hijacked. It was an El Al plane, remember? They hijacked it to Algeria. Well, some people said it was too bad, others were happy about it, and no pilot dreamed of declaring, "From now on I don't fly to Algeria." If he had said this, if they had said it, this nightmare of air piracy wouldn't exist today. Instead no one reacted, and today air piracy is a custom of our times. Any madman can hijack a plane to indulge his madness, any criminal can hijack a plane to extort money. You don't need political reasons.

But let's get back to Europe and the fact that terrorism has its headquarters in Europe. In every European capital there are offices of so-called liberation movements, and you know very well it's not a matter of harmless offices. But you do nothing against them. You'll be sorry. Thanks to your inertia and your indulgence, terror will be multiplied and you'll pay the price of it too. Haven't the Germans already done so?

O.F.: Yes, you were very hard on the Germans after they released the three Arabs.

G.M.: Oh, you must try to understand what the Munich tragedy meant to us! The very fact that it happened in Germany . . . I mean, postwar Germany is not Nazi Germany. I know Willy Brandt; I always meet him at socialist conferences; he was once here too, when he was mayor of Berlin, and I'm well aware that he fought the Nazis. Not for a moment did I think that he was glad to release those Arabs. But Germany . . . You see, I've never been able to set foot in Germany. I go to Austria and can't bring myself to enter Germany. . . . For us Jews, relations with Germany are such a conflict between mind and heart. . . . Don't make me say such things. I'm prime minister, I have certain responsibilities . . . Look, let

me conclude by saying that my harsh judgment couldn't be helped. The statements made by the Germans were like adding insult to injury. After all it was a matter of Arabs who had participated in the killing of eleven unarmed Israelis and who now will try to kill others.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, do you know what many people think? That Arab terrorism exists and will always exist as long as there are Palestinian refugees.

G.M.: That's not so, because terrorism has become a kind of international evil—a sickness that strikes people who have nothing to do with Palestinian refugees. Take the example of the Japanese who carried out the Lod massacre. Are the Israelis occupying any Japanese territory? As for the refugees, listen: wherever a war breaks out there are refugees. Palestinian refugees aren't the only ones in the world; there are Pakistani, Hindu, Turkish, German ones. For heaven's sake, there were millions of German refugees along the Polish border that's now inside Poland. And yet Germany assumed the responsibility for these people, who were its own people. And the Sudeten Germans? Nobody thinks the Sudeten Germans should go back to Czechoslovakia—they themselves know they'll never go back. In the ten years I attended United Nations meetings, I never heard anyone talk about the Sudeten Germans who were thrown out of Czechoslovakia. Why does everyone get so emotional about the Palestinians and no one else?

O.F.: But the case of the Palestinians is different, Mrs. Meir, because . . .

G.M.: It certainly is. Do you know why? Because when there's a war and people run away, they usually run away to countries with a different language and religion. The Palestinians instead fled to countries where their own language was spoken and their own religion observed. They fled to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan—where nobody ever did anything to help them. As for Egypt, the Egyptians who took Gaza didn't even allow the Palestinians to work and kept them in poverty so as to use them as a weapon against us. That's always been the policy of the Arab countries: to use the refugees as a weapon against us. Ham-

marskjöld had proposed a development plan for the Middle East, and this plan provided first of all for the resettlement of the Palestinian refugees. But the Arab countries said no.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, don't you at least feel a little sorry for them?

G.M.: Of course I do. But pity is not responsibility, and the responsibility for the Palestinians isn't ours, it's the Arabs'. We in Israel have absorbed about 1,400,000 Arab Jews: from Iraq, from Yemen, from Egypt, from Syria, from North African countries like Morocco. People who when they got here were full of diseases and didn't know how to do anything. Among the seventy thousand Jews who came here from Yemen, for example, there wasn't a single doctor or a single nurse, and almost all of them had tuberculosis. And still we took them, and built hospitals for them, and took care of them, we educated them, put them in clean houses, and turned them into farmers, doctors, engineers, teachers . . . Among the 150,000 Jews who came here from Iraq, there was only a very small group of intellectuals, and yet today their children go to the university. Of course, we have problems with them—all that glitters is not gold—but the fact remains that we accepted and helped them. The Arabs, on the other hand, never do anything for their own people. They make use of them and that's all.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, what if Israel let the Palestinian refugees come back here?

G.M.: Impossible. For twenty years they've been fed on hatred for us; they can't come back among us. Their children weren't born here, they were born in the camps, and the only thing they know is that they must kill Israelis, destroy Israel. We found arithmetic books in the Gaza schools that put problems like this: "You have five Israelis. You kill three of them. How many Israelis are left to be killed?" When you teach such things to children of seven or eight, there's no more hope. Oh, it would be a great misfortune if there were no other solution for them but to return here! But there is a solution. It was demonstrated by the Jordanians when they gave them citizenship and called on them to build a country called Jordan. Yes, what Abdullah and Hussein did was much better than what the Egyptians did. But did you know that in the good old days

in Jordan, Palestinians were holding office as prime minister and foreign minister? Did you know that after the partition of 1922 Jordan had only three hundred thousand Bedouins and that Palestinian refugees were in the majority? Why didn't they accept Jordan as their country, why . . . ?

O.F.: Because they don't recognize themselves as Jordanians, Mrs. Meir. Because they say they are Palestinians and that their home is in Palestine, not Jordan.

G.M.: Then we have to understand what we mean by the word Palestine. We must remember that when England assumed the mandate over Palestine, Palestine was the land included between the Mediterranean and the borders of Iraq. This Palestine covered both banks of the Jordan, and was even governed by the same high commissioner. Then in 1922 Churchill partitioned it, and the territory west of the Jordan became Cisjordan, and the territory east of the Jordan became Transjordan. Two names for the same people. Abdullah, Hussein's grandfather, had Transjordan and later he also took over Cisjordan, but, I repeat, it was still the same people. The same Palestine. Before liquidating Israel, Arafat should liquidate Hussein. But Arafat is so ignorant. He doesn't even know that, at the end of the First World War, what now is Israel wasn't called Palestine: it was called Southern Syria. And then . . . after all! If we must talk about refugees, I'll remind you that for centuries the Jews were refugees par excellence! Dispersed in countries where their language wasn't spoken, their religion not observed, their customs not recognized . . . Russia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Germany, France, Italy, England, Arabia, Africa . . . Shut up in ghettos, persecuted, exterminated. And yet they survived, and they never stopped being a people, and they came together again to found a nation. . . .

O.F.: But that's just what the Palestinians want, Mrs. Meir: to form a nation. It's just for this reason that some people say they should have their state on the West Bank.

G.M.: Look, I've already explained that to east and west of the Jordan you find the same people. I've already explained that once they were called Palestinians and later were called Jordanians. If they now want to call themselves Palestinians or Jordanians, I couldn't care less. It's none of my business. But it is my busi-

ness that they don't set up another Arab state between Israel and what is now called Jordan. In the stretch of land between the Mediterranean and the borders of Iraq, there's room for only two countries: one Arab and one Jewish. If we sign a peace treaty with Hussein and define our borders with Jordan, whatever happens on the other side of the border won't concern Israel. The Palestinians can come to any arrangement they like with Hussein; they can call that state what they like, give it any regime they like. The important thing is that a third Arab state doesn't emerge between us and Jordan. We don't want it. We can't allow it. Because it would come to be used as a dagger against us.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, I'd like to take up another subject. And here it is. When one has a dream, this dream feeds on utopia. And when the dream is realized, one discovers that . . . utopia is utopia. Are you satisfied with what Israel is today?

G.M.: I'm a frank woman. I'll answer you frankly. As a socialist, no. I can't say that Israel is what I dreamed. As a Jewish socialist who has always laid great stress on the Jewish component in her socialism, well, Israel is more than what I dreamed. Now I'll explain. For me, the realization of Zionism is part of socialism. I know that other socialists won't agree with me, but that's how I think of it. I'm not objective about this, and I think there are a couple of gross injustices in the world: the one oppressing black Africans and the one oppressing Jews. And besides I think these two injustices can only be corrected by socialist principles. To see justice for the Jewish people has been the purpose of my life and . . . to cut it short, forty or fifty years ago, I had no hopes at all that the Jews would have a sovereign state. We do have one now, so it doesn't seem to me right to worry too much about its faults and defects. We have a soil where we can put our feet, where we can realize our ideals of socialism that before were just hanging in the air. That's already a lot. Of course, if I were really to examine my thoughts . . .

O.F.: What is it you don't like in Israel? What is it that's disappointed you?

G.M.: Oh . . . I think that none of us dreamers realized in the

beginning what difficulties would come up. For example, we hadn't foreseen the problem of bringing together Jews who had grown up in such different countries and remained divided from each other for so many centuries. Jews have come here from all over the world, as we wanted, yes. But each group had its own language, its own culture, and to integrate it with other groups has been much more difficult than it seemed in theory. It's not easy to create an homogenous nation with people so different. . . . There was bound to be a clash. And it gave me disappointment and grief. Also . . . you'll think me foolish, naïve, but I thought that in a Jewish state there wouldn't be the evils that afflict other societies. Theft, murder, prostitution . . . I thought so because we had started out well. Fifteen years ago in Israel there were almost no thefts, and there were no murders, there was no prostitution. Now instead we have everything, everything. . . . And it's something that breaks your heart; it hurts more than to discover that you still haven't created a more just, a more equal society.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, but do you still believe in socialism as you did forty years ago?

G.M.: Essentially, yes. That's still the basic idea. . . . But to be honest, one must look at things realistically. One must admit that there's a big difference between socialist ideology and socialism as put to a practical test. All socialist parties that have come to form governments and assumed the responsibilities for a country have had to stoop to compromise. Not only that, ever since socialists have been in power in individual countries, international socialism has declined. It was one thing to be an international socialist when I was a girl, that is when no socialist party was in power, and quite another now. The dream I had, the dream of a just world united in socialism, has gone to the devil. National interests have prevailed over international interests, and the Swedish socialists have shown themselves to be first of all Swedes, the English socialists first of all Englishmen, the Jewish socialists first of all Jews. . . . This I began to understand during the war in Spain. In a lot of countries there were socialists in power. But they didn't lift a finger for the Spanish socialists.

O.F.: But what socialism are we talking about, Mrs. Meir? I mean, do you agree with Nenni when he says that he's come to prefer Swedish socialism?

G.M.: Of course! Because, you see, you can have all the dreams you like, but when you're dreaming, you're not awake. And when you wake up, you realize that your dream has very little in common with reality. To be free, to be able to say what you think, that's so necessary. . . . Soviet Russia isn't poor, it isn't illiterate, and yet there the people don't dare speak. And privilege still exists. . . . At the United Nations I never saw any difference between the foreign ministers of socialist countries and the foreign ministers of reactionary countries. A year ago, by abstaining from voting, they even let a resolution pass calling us war criminals. And I told my socialist colleagues when I met them at the Vienna Conference: "Your country abstained from voting. So that makes me a war criminal, eh?" But you were speaking of Pietro Nenni . . . Nenni is something else. Nenni's a separate chapter in the history of socialism. Nenni's one of the best individuals existing in the world today. Because he's so honest, there's such rectitude in him, such humanity, such courage of his convictions! I admire him like no one else. I'm proud to be able to call him a friend. And . . . of course I think the same as he does about socialism!

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, do you know what I've been thinking, listening to you? I've been wondering if so much sadness hasn't made you cynical, or at least disillusioned.

G.M.: Oh, no! Me, I'm not at all cynical! I've lost my illusions, that's all. For example, forty or fifty years ago, I thought that a socialist was always an honest person, incapable of telling lies. Now I know instead that a socialist is a human being like anyone else, capable of lying like anyone else, and behaving dishonestly like anyone else. That's sad, of course, but it's not enough to make you lose your faith in man! Not enough to conclude: man is fundamentally bad. No, no! Look, when I meet someone, I always think that this is an honest person and I go on thinking so until I have proof to the contrary. If later I do have proof to the contrary, I still don't say that that person is bad. I say that he or she has behaved badly with me. After all, I'm not suspicious. I never expect the worst from people.

And . . . I don't know if I'd call myself an optimist. At my age, optimism is too much of a luxury. But, look, in my long life I've seen so much evil, that's true. In return, I've also seen so much good. So very much. . . . And if in my memory I go over the many individuals I've known, believe me, there are very few I can judge in a completely negative way.

O.F.: But are you religious, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: No! Oh, no! I never have been. Not even when I was a little girl. No, this attitude of mine doesn't come from a religious faith. It comes from my instinctive faith in men, from my stubborn love for humanity. Religion . . . You know, my family was traditional but not religious. Only my grandfather was religious, but with him you go very far back in time, you go back to the days when we lived in Russia. In America, you see . . . we spoke Hebrew among ourselves, we observed the holidays, but we went to temple very seldom. I only went for the New Year, to go with my mother and find her a place to sit. The only time I've followed the prayers in a synagogue was in Moscow. And you know what I say? If I'd stayed in Russia, I might have become religious. Maybe.

O.F.: Why?

G.M.: Because in Russia the synagogue is the only place where Jews can express themselves. Listen to what I did when I was sent to Moscow in 1948 by my government, as head of the diplomatic mission. Before leaving I gathered all the people who were going with me and said, "Take all your prayer books, prayer shawls, yarmulkes, everything. I'm sure we'll meet Jews only in the synagogue." Well, that's just how it happened. Of course, the first Saturday no one knew I'd go to the synagogue and I found hardly two hundred people there. Or a little more. But for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, they came in thousands. I stayed in the synagogue from morning to night, and at the moment when the rabbi intoned the last sentence of the prayer of atonement, the one that says "*Leshana habaa b'Yerushalaym*, next year in Jerusalem," the whole synagogue seemed to tremble. And I, who am an emotional woman, prayed. Really. You understand, it wasn't like being in Buenos Aires or New York and saying, "Next year in Jerusalem." From

Buenos Aires, New York, you take a plane and you go. There in Moscow, the invocation took on a special meaning. And while praying, I said, "God, make it really happen! If not next year, in a few years." Does God exist and did he listen to me? It's really happening.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, don't you feel some sentimental tie with Russia?

G.M.: No, none. You know, many of my friends who left Russia as adults say that they feel attached to that country, to its scenery, its literature, its music. But I didn't get time to appreciate those things. I was too little when I left Russia; I was only eight, and of Russia I only have bad memories. No, from Russia I didn't take with me even a single moment of joy—all my memories up to the age of eight are tragic memories. The nightmare of pogroms, the brutality of the Cossacks charging down on young socialists, fear, shrieking—that's the luggage I packed in Russia and carried to the United States. Do you know what's the first memory in my life? My father nailing up the door and windows to keep the Cossacks from breaking into our house and killing us. Oh, that sound of the hammer pounding nails into the wooden planks! Oh, the sound of horses' hoofs when the Cossacks are advancing along our street!

O.F.: How old were you, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: Five or six. But I remember everything so vividly. We lived in Kiev, and the day my father left Kiev to go to the United States . . . We were very poor, we didn't even have enough to eat, and he thought of going to America for a year or two, saving a little money and coming back. In the early 1900s, to the Jews America was a kind of bank where you went to pick up the dollars scattered on the sidewalks and came back with your pockets full. So my father left Kiev, but Kiev was a city forbidden to Jews who didn't have a job, for example a job like my father's, he being a craftsman, and once he had left, we had to leave too.

And we went to Pinsk, I, my mother, my two sisters. That was in 1903. We stayed in Pinsk until 1905, when the brutality of the czarist regime reached its height. The Constitution of 1905, in fact, was a dirty lie—a trick to gather the socialists together and arrest them more easily. And my elder sister, who

was nine years older than I, belonged to the socialist movement. Her political activities kept her out late at night, and it used to drive my mother crazy because our house was next to a police station where they brought the young socialists they'd arrested and . . . They beat them to death and every night you heard such cries! My mother always thought she could recognize my sister's voice. "It's she! It's she!" Oh, we were so happy when my father wrote us to join him in America because in America things were good!

O.F.: You're very attached to America, aren't you?

G.M.: Yes, and not only because I grew up in America, because in America I went to school, and lived there until I was almost twenty. Because . . . well, because in America I lost my terror of Pinsk, of Kiev. How can I explain the difference for me between America and Russia? Look, when we arrived, I was a little more than eight years old, my elder sister was seventeen, and my younger one four and a half. My father was working and belonged to the union. He was very proud of his union, and two months later, on Labor Day, he said to my mother, "Today there's a parade. If you all come to the corner of such and such a street, you'll see me marching with my union!" My mother took us along, and while we were there waiting for the parade, along came the mounted police to clear a path for the marchers—do you see? But my little four-and-a-half-year-old sister couldn't know that, and when she saw the police on horseback, she began to tremble and then to cry, "The Cossacks! The Cossacks!" We had to take her away, without giving my father the satisfaction of seeing him marching with his union, and she stayed in bed for days with a high fever, repeating: "The Cossacks! The Cossacks!" So, look, the America I knew is a place where men on horseback protect a parade of workers, the Russia I knew is a place where men on horseback massacre Jews and young socialists.

O.F.: That's not exactly how it is, Mrs. Meir, but anyway . . .

G.M.: Oh, listen! America is a great country. It has many faults, many social inequalities, and it's a tragedy that the Negro problem wasn't resolved fifty or a hundred years ago, but it's still a great country, a country full of opportunity, of freedom! Does it seem to you nothing to be able to say what you like, to

write what you like, even against the government, the Establishment? Maybe I'm not objective, but for America I feel such gratitude! I'm fond of America, okay?

O.F.: Okay. We've finally come to the figure of Golda Meir. So shall we talk about the woman Ben-Gurion called "the ablest man in my cabinet"?

G.M.: That's one of the legends that's grown up around me. It's also a legend I've always found irritating, though men use it as a great compliment. Is it? I wouldn't say so. Because what does it really mean? That it's better to be a man than a woman, a principle on which I don't agree at all. So here's what I'd like to say to those who make me such a compliment: And what if Ben-Gurion had said, "The men in my cabinet are as able as a woman"? Men always feel so superior! I'll never forget what happened at a congress of my party in New York in the 1930s. I made a speech, and in the audience there was a writer friend of mine. An honest person, a man of great culture and refinement. When it was over, he came up to me and exclaimed, "Congratulations! You've made a wonderful speech! And to think you're only a woman!" That's just what he said, in such a spontaneous, instinctive way. It's a good thing I have a sense of humor. . . .

O.F.: The Women's Liberation Movement will like that, Mrs. Meir.

G.M.: Do you mean those crazy women who burn their bras and go around all disheveled and hate men? They're crazy. Crazy. But how can one accept such crazy women who think it's a misfortune to get pregnant and a disaster to bring children into the world? And when it's the greatest privilege we women have over men! Feminism . . . Listen, I got into politics at the time of the First World War, when I was sixteen or seventeen, and I've never belonged to a women's organization. When I joined the Zionist labor movement, I found only two other women—ninety percent of my comrades were men. I've lived and worked among men all my life, and yet to me the fact of being a woman has never, never I say, been an obstacle. It's never made me uncomfortable or given me an inferiority complex. Men have always been good to me.

O.F.: Are you saying you prefer them to women?

G.M.: No, I'm saying that I've never suffered on account of men because I was a woman. I'm saying that men have never given me special treatment but neither have they put obstacles in my way. Of course I've been lucky, of course not all women have had the same experience, but be that as it may, my personal case doesn't prove that those crazy women are right. There's only one point on which I agree with them: to be successful, a woman has to be much more capable than a man. Whether she dedicates herself to a profession or dedicates herself to politics. There aren't many women in our parliament, something that bothers me a lot. And these few women, let me assure you, are by no means less capable than men. In fact, they're often much more capable. So it's ridiculous that toward women there still exist so many reservations, so many injustices, that when a list is being drawn up for the elections, for example, only men's names get chosen. But is it all the fault of men? Wouldn't it be, at least partly, the fault of women too?

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, you've just said that to be successful a woman has to be much more capable than a man. Doesn't that perhaps mean it's more difficult to be a woman than a man?

G.M.: Yes, of course. More difficult, more tiring, more painful. But not necessarily through the fault of men—for biological reasons, I'd say. After all, it's the woman who gives birth. It's the woman who raises the children. And when a woman doesn't want only to give birth, to raise children . . . when a woman also wants to work, to be somebody . . . well, it's hard. Hard, hard. I know it from personal experience. You're at your job and you think of the children you've left at home. You're at home and you think of the work you're not doing. Such a struggle breaks out in you, your heart goes to pieces. Unless you live in a kibbutz, where life is organized in such a way that you can both work and have children. Outside the kibbutz, it's all running around, trying to be in two places at once, getting upset, and . . . well, all this can't help but be reflected on the structure of the family. Especially if your husband is not a social animal like yourself and feels uncomfortable with an active wife, a wife for whom it's not enough to be only a wife. . . . There has to be a clash. And the clash may

even break up the marriage. As happened to me. Yes, I've paid for being what I am. I've paid a lot.

O.F.: In what sense, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: In the sense of . . . pain. Because, you see, I know that my children, when they were little, suffered a lot on my account. I left them alone so often. . . . I was never with them when I should have been and would have liked to be. Oh, I remember how happy they were, my children, every time I didn't go to work because of a headache. They jumped and laughed and sang, "Mamma's staying home! Mamma has a headache!" I have a great sense of guilt toward Sarah and Menahem, even today when they're adults and have children of their own. And still . . . still I have to be honest and ask myself, Golda, deep in your heart do you really regret the fact that you behaved as you did with them? No. Not deep in my heart. Because through suffering I gave them a life that's more interesting, less banal than the ordinary. I mean, they didn't grow up in a narrow family environment. They met important people, they heard serious discussions, they took part in big things. And if you talk to them, they'll tell you the same thing. They'll tell you: "Yes, Mamma neglected us too much, she made us suffer by her absence, her politics, by not paying attention to us, but we can't bear her a grudge because, being the way she was, she gave us so much more than any other mother!"

If you knew how proud I felt the day that . . . In 1948, the time when we were fighting the British, I was writing the handbills that the boys and girls in the movement pasted on the walls at night. My daughter didn't know I was the one who was writing those handbills, and one day she said to me, "Mamma, I'll be back late tonight. And maybe I won't come back." "Why?" I asked, alarmed. "I can't tell you, Mamma." Then she went out with a package under her arm. Nobody could know better than I what was in that package, and putting up handbills at night was very dangerous. I stayed up till dawn waiting for Sarah, cursing myself in the fear that something had happened to her. But at the same time I was so proud of her!

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, that sense of guilt that you feel toward your children, did you also feel it toward your husband?

G.M.: Let's not talk about that . . . I don't want to talk about it . . . I never talk about it . . . Well, all right, let's try. You see, my husband was an extraordinarily nice person. Educated, kind, good. Everything about him was good. But he was also a person who was only interested in his family, his home, his music, his books. He was aware of social problems, of course, but when it came to his home and the unity of his family, they lost whatever interest they had for him. I was too different from him. I had always been. Domestic bliss wasn't enough for me, I had to be doing what I was doing! To give it up would have seemed to me an act of cowardice, of dishonesty with myself. I would have become set in my discontent, in sadness. . . .

I met my husband when I was just fifteen. We got married very soon, and from him I learned all the beautiful things like music and poetry. But I wasn't born to be satisfied with music and poetry, and . . . He wanted me to stay home and forget about politics. Instead I was always out, always in politics and . . . Of course I have a sense of guilt toward him too. . . . I made him suffer so much, him too. . . . He came to Israel because I wanted to come to Israel. He came to the kibbutz because I wanted to be on a kibbutz. He took up a way of life that didn't suit him because it was the kind of life that I couldn't do without. . . . It was a tragedy. A great tragedy. Because, as I say, he was a wonderful person and with a different woman he could have been very happy.

O.F.: Didn't you ever make an effort to adapt yourself to him, to please him?

G.M.: For him I made the biggest sacrifice of my life: I left the kibbutz. You see, there was nothing I loved so much as the kibbutz. I liked everything about the kibbutz: the manual work, the comradeship, the discomforts. Ours was in the valley of Jezreel, and in the beginning it had nothing to offer but swamps and sand, but soon it became a garden full of orange trees, fruits, and just to look at it gave me such joy that I could have spent my whole life there. Instead he couldn't stand it,

neither psychologically nor physically. He couldn't stand eating at the communal table with the rest of us. He couldn't stand the hard work. He couldn't stand the climate and the feeling of being part of a community. He was too individualistic, too introverted, too delicate. He got sick and . . . we had to leave, go back to the city, to Tel Aviv. It was a feeling of pain that still goes through me like a needle. It was really a tragedy for me, but I put up with it, thinking that in the city the family would be more tranquil and more united. But it wasn't like that. And in 1938 we separated. Then in 1951 he died.

O.F.: Wasn't he proud of you, at least in the last years?

G.M.: I don't know . . . I don't think so. I don't know what he thought in the last years, and besides he was so withdrawn that nobody would have been able to guess it. Anyway his tragedy didn't come from the fact of not understanding me—he understood me very well. It came from the fact that he did understand me, and at the same time realized he couldn't change me. In short, he knew I had no choice, that I had to be what I was. But he didn't approve, that's it. And who knows if he wasn't right.

O.F.: But you never thought of getting a divorce, Mrs. Meir, you never thought of getting married again when he died?

G.M.: Oh, no! Never! Such an idea never entered my head, never! I've always gone on thinking of myself as married to him! After the separation we still saw each other. Sometimes he came to see me in my office. . . . Maybe you haven't understood one important thing: even though we were so different and incapable of living together, there was always love between us. Ours was a great love; it lasted from the day we met till the day he died. And a love like that can't be replaced.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, is it true you're very modest? How should I say it . . . very puritanical, very concerned with morality?

G.M.: Look, as I said before, I've always lived among men. And never, never has a man allowed himself to tell a dirty joke in my presence, to say anything disrespectful or proposition me. Do you know why? Because I've always said that if I'm given a glass of water, that water must be clean. Otherwise I don't drink it. That's the way I am; I like things to be clean. A dear

friend of mine once said to me, "Golda, don't be so rigid. There are no moral or immoral things. There are only beautiful or ugly things." I suppose he was right. What's more, I suppose that the same thing can be beautiful and ugly. Because to some it looks beautiful and to others ugly. However . . . I don't know how to explain. . . . Maybe this way: love is always beautiful, but the act of love with a prostitute is ugly.

O.F.: They say too that you're very hard, inflexible . . .

G.M.: I, hard? No. There are a few points, in politics, on which they might think me hard. In fact, I'm not one to compromise and I say so adamantly. I believe in Israel, I don't yield when it comes to Israel—period. Yes, in that sense the word inflexible applies to me. But otherwise, I mean in private life, with people, with human problems . . . it's foolish to say I'm hard. I'm the most sensitive creature that you'll ever meet. It's no accident that many accuse me of making political decisions on the basis of my feelings instead of my brain. Well, what if I do? I don't see anything bad in that, quite the contrary. I've always felt sorry for people who are afraid of their feelings, of their emotions, and who hide what they feel and can't cry wholeheartedly. Because anyone who can't cry wholeheartedly can't laugh wholeheartedly either.

O.F.: Do you sometimes really cry?

G.M.: Do I! And how! And yet if you were to ask me, "Tell me, Golda, have you had more laughter or tears in your life?" I'd answer, "I think I've laughed more than I've cried." Aside from my family dramas, my life has been so lucky. I've known such fine people, I've had the friendship of such interesting people—especially in the fifty years I've spent in Israel. I've always moved within a circle of intellectual giants; I've always been appreciated and loved. And what else can you ask of fortune? I'd really be ungrateful if I didn't know how to laugh.

O.F.: Not bad for a woman who's considered the symbol of Israel.

G.M.: I, a symbol?! Some symbol! Are you maybe pulling my leg? You didn't know the great men who were really the symbol of Israel, the men who founded Israel and by whom it was influenced. Ben-Gurion is the only one of them left, and I swear to you on my children and grandchildren that I've never put myself in the same category as a Ben-Gurion or a Katznelson.

I'm not crazy! I've done what I've done, that's true. But I can't say that if I hadn't done what I've done, Israel would have been any different.

O.F.: Then why do they say that you're the only one who can hold the country together?

G.M.: Nonsense! Now I'll tell you something that'll convince you. When Eshkol died in 1969, they conducted a poll to find out how much popularity his possible successors had. And you know how many people came out for me? One percent. Maybe one and a half percent. All right, there was a crisis in my party and even as foreign minister I'd felt the effects of it—but still one, one and a half percent! And a woman so unpopular up until three years ago should today be the one holding the country together? Believe me, the country holds together by itself; it doesn't need a prime minister named Golda Meir. If the young people were to say, "Enough fighting, enough war, let's surrender," no Golda Meir could do anything about it. If in the kibbutzim of Beth Shean, they had said, "Enough of living under the rockets of the fedayeen, enough sleeping in shelters, let's go away," no Golda Meir would have been able to do anything about it. What's more, it was by accident that Golda Meir got to lead the country. Eshkol was dead, someone had to take his place, and the party thought I might replace him because I was acceptable to all factions and . . . that's all. In fact, I didn't even want to accept. I had got out of governmental politics, I was tired. You can ask my children and grandchildren.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, don't try to tell me that you're not aware of your success!

G.M.: Of course I am! I don't suffer from delusions of grandeur, but neither am I troubled by an inferiority complex. When I deny being a symbol and holding the country together, I'm not saying I'm a failure! I may not always have been perfect but I don't see that I've failed in my career, either as labor minister, or foreign minister, or party secretary, or head of the government. Indeed I must admit that, in my opinion, women can be good government leaders, good heads of state. Oh, Lord, maybe I would have functioned just as well if I'd been a man. . . . I don't know, I can't prove it, I've never been a man.

. . . But I think that women, more than men, possess a capacity that helps in doing this job. It's that of going right to the essence of things, of taking the bull by the horns. Women are more practical, more realistic. They don't dissipate themselves in mystifications like men, who always beat around the bush trying to get to the heart of the matter.

O.F.: And yet you sometimes speak as though you didn't like yourself. Do you like yourself, Mrs. Meir?

G.M.: What person with any sense likes himself? I know myself too well to like myself. I know all too well that I'm not what I'd like to be. And to give you an idea what I'd like to be, I'll tell you who I like: my daughter. Sarah is so good, so intelligent, so intellectually honest! When she believes in something, she goes all the way. When she thinks something, she says it without mincing words. And she never gives in to others, to the majority. I really can't say the same for myself. When you're doing the job I'm doing, you always have to stoop to compromises, you can never let yourself remain one hundred percent faithful to your ideas. Of course, there's a limit to compromise, and I can't say I always stoop to them. However, I stoop enough. And that's bad. That's another reason why I can't wait to retire.

O.F.: Will you really retire?

G.M.: I give you my word. Listen, in May next year I'll be seventy-five. I'm old. I'm exhausted. My health is essentially good, my heart functions, but I can't go on with this madness forever. If you only knew how many times I say to myself: To hell with everything, to hell with everybody, I've done my share, now let the others do theirs, enough, enough, enough! There are days when I'd like to pack up and leave without telling anyone. If I've stayed this long, if for the moment I'm still here, it's out of duty and nothing else. I can't just throw everything out the window! Yes, many don't believe that I'll leave. Well, they'd better believe it, I'll even give you the date: October 1973. In October of '73 there'll be elections. Once they're over, good-by!

O.F.: I don't believe it. And everyone says you'll change your mind because you aren't able to sit still and do nothing.

G.M.: Look, there's another thing that people don't know about me.

By nature, I'm a lazy woman. I'm not one of those people who has to fill up every minute or else get sick. I like to be with nothing to do, even just sitting in an armchair, or wasting time with little things I enjoy. Cleaning the house, ironing, cooking a meal . . . I'm an excellent cook, an excellent housewife. My mother used to say, "But why do you want to study? You're such a good housewife!" And then I like to sleep. Oh, I like it so much! I like to be with people, to talk about this and that—to hell with serious talk, political talk! I like to go to the theater. I like to go to the movies, without my bodyguard underfoot. How did it happen that whenever I want to see a film, they even send the Israeli army reserves along with me? This is a life? It's been years that I haven't been able to do what I like, to sleep, to talk about trivial things, to sit with my hands folded. I'm always tied to this piece of paper that lists what I have to do, what I have to say, half hour by half hour.

Ah! And then there's my family. I don't want my grandchildren to say, "Grandma behaved badly with her children and neglected them, and later she behaved badly with us and neglected us." I'm a grandmother. I don't have many more years to live. And I intend to spend those years with my grandchildren. I also intend to spend them with my books. I have shelves full of books that I've never read. At two in the morning when I go to bed, I take one of them in my hand and try to read it, but after two minutes—pff!—I fall asleep and the book drops. Finally I want to go to Sarah's kibbutz when I like. For a week, a month, not rush there Friday evening to rush back on Saturday evening. I should be the master of the clock, not the clock the master of me.

O.F.: So you're not afraid of old age.

G.M.: No, it's never frightened me. When I know I can change things, I become as active as a cyclone. And almost always I succeed in changing them. But when I know I can't do anything, I resign myself. I'll never forget the first time I flew in an airplane—in 1929, from Los Angeles to Seattle. For my work, eh, not for fun! It was a little plane and the moment it took off, I thought: How crazy! Why did I do it? But right after that I calmed down—what good would it do to get frightened?

Another time I flew from New York to Chicago with a friend of mine, and we got caught in an awful storm. The plane was bouncing and swaying, and my friend cried like a baby. So I said to him, "Stop it, why are you crying, what good does it do?" My dear, old age is like an airplane flying in a storm. Once you're in it, there's nothing you can do. You can't stop a plane, you can't stop a storm, you can't stop time. So you might as well take it easy, with wisdom.

O.F.: Is it this wisdom that sometimes makes you severe with young people?

G.M.: Listen, you'd have to be crazy not to realize that the younger generations think differently and that that's the way it should be. It would really be dreary if every generation was a copy of the previous one; the world wouldn't go forward any more. I accept the fact with joy that young people are different from me. What I condemn in them is their presumption in saying, "Everything you've done is wrong so we'll redo it all from the beginning." Well, if they were to do it all over again better, I wouldn't even mind, but in many cases they're no better than us old people and can even be worse. The calendar isn't the standard for good and evil! I know selfish and reactionary young people and generous and progressive old ones. And then there's another thing I condemn in young people: their mania for copying whatever comes from outside. Their fashions irritate me. Why that music that isn't music and is only good to give you a headache? Why that long hair, those short skirts? I hate fashions, and I've always hated them. Fashion is an imposition, a lack of freedom. Somebody in Paris decides for some reason that women should wear miniskirts, and here they all are in miniskirts: long legs, short legs, skinny legs, fat legs, ugly legs. . . . Never mind as long as they're young. When they're fifty, I really get mad. Have you seen those old men who grow a bunch of little curls on the back of their necks?

O.F.: The fact is, Mrs. Meir, that yours was a heroic generation, while the one of today . . .

G.M.: So is the one of today. Like my children's generation. When I see men of forty-five or fifty who've been fighting the war for twenty, thirty years . . . But you know what I say? Even the

young people of today are a heroic generation. At least in Israel. When I think that at eighteen they've already been soldiers, and that to be a soldier here doesn't just mean training and that's all . . . I feel my heart bursting. When I go among high-school students and think that a whim of Sadat's could tear them away from their desks, I get a lump in my throat. For the moment I often get impatient with them. I argue with them. But after five minutes I say to myself, Golda, in a month they could be at the front. Don't be impatient with them. So let them be conceited, arrogant. So let them wear miniskirts, long hair. Last week I was at a kibbutz in the north. In the office they were shocked, they said, "To make such a trip! So tiring! You're crazy!" But you know why I went? Because the granddaughter of one of my old comrades was getting married. And in the Six Day War he had lost two grandsons.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, have you ever killed anyone?

G.M.: No . . . I've learned to shoot, of course, but I've never happened to kill anyone. I don't say it as consolation—there's no difference between killing and making decisions by which you send others to kill. It's exactly the same thing. And maybe it's worse.

O.F.: Mrs. Meir, how do you look on death?

G.M.: I can tell you right away: my only fear is to live too long. You know, old age is not a sin and not a joy—there are plenty of disagreeable things about old age. Not to be able to run up and down the stairs, not to be able to jump. . . . And yet you get used to some things without difficulty. It's just a matter of physical troubles, and physical troubles aren't degrading. What is degrading is to lose your mental lucidity, to become senile. Senility . . . I've known people who died too soon, and that hurt me. I've known people who died too late, and that hurt me just as much. Listen, for me, to witness the decay of a fine intelligence is an insult. I don't want that insult to happen to me. I want to die with my mind clear. Yes, my only fear is to live too long.

Jerusalem, November 1972