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## INTERVIEW: Oved Ben Ami

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# Founding father describes the pioneer days: 'how we made cities from swampland'

*Interview with Oved Ben Ami, founding father of Israel, builder and former mayor of the city of Netanya.*

**EIR:** Mr. Ben Ami, you count yourself among the founding fathers of Israel, having built two of her cities, Netanya and Ashdod. Can you tell us how this began?

**Ben Ami:** I am actually one of the few real natives of Israel, coming from a family of colonists who never left Israel. I was born in Petah Tikve, which was the first Jewish settlement at the beginning of the century. I remember the story told about purchasing the land from the Arab sheik owner. When he finally agreed to sell the land, despite fear of reprisals, he quoted a very high price for what was then essentially swampland. When asked why the price was as high there, east of Jaffa, as it was in the cities, he replied: "Well, we have been holding this land for you for almost 2,000 years, you know!" The land was settled by 60 families, who turned its 150 acres into farmland for orange growing.

**EIR:** What about your own role?

**Ben Ami:** Later, I became a close friend of Hamar Ben-Avi, the son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who was the man responsible for shaping Hebrew into a national language. He and I traveled abroad together in search of funds to expand the existing settlements, and to build new cities. This is how we met Edmond de Rothschild, who did a great deal to build Israel. I remember Rothschild, when I first met him in his enormous Parisian office. There he was, hunched over a huge map of Palestine laid out on the floor pointing to various sites and saying, "Let's build a settlement here, that will be the eastern boundary; another settlement there, and that will be the southern boundary," and so on.

**EIR:** Is that the kind of settlement policy you followed?

**Ben Ami:** When I built my first city, Netanya, I did not think of it as a settlement only. Already back in 1929 and 1930, when I built it, I conceptualized it as a city capable of housing 200,000 people. On the 25th anniversary of the founding of Netanya, I received a letter of congratulations from Ben Gurion who told me I should not only be a patriot of Netanya, but should also think of doing something for the southern part of the country. I made an agreement with the govern-

ment, that if it would agree to build a second deepwater port (the first being Haifa), I would agree to build a city around it. Ben Gurion presented the plan to the cabinet, immediately gaining its approval, and the work began. I wanted to call it City of David, but he refused to have anything named after him, so I called it Ashdod.

**EIR:** How do the two cities compare?

**Ben Ami:** I learned from my first experience and tried to improve on it. Ashdod is built around the port, which now handles as much traffic as Haifa. I tried to ensure better traffic facilities, with wide avenues, commercial centers in every neighborhood, and plenty of park areas for children.

**EIR:** What kind of industry is there?

**Ben Ami:** In addition to the citrus fruit production, I introduced the diamond industry to Netanya, which has become the center of it in Israel. I had good relations with the British High Commissioner, who gave me advice in 1939 and 1940, on how to help people from Antwerp to leave the war-endangered area and emigrate to Israel. Since it was war-time, it



*Oved Ben Ami, in front of the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv.*

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