OCTOBER EARTHQUAKE
YOM KIPPUR 1973

ZEEV SCHIFF
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TRANSLATED BY LOUIS WILLIAMS
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INTRODUCTION

Years will pass before all the facts about the Day of Atonement will be known. And even then the truth will be only one side of coin. The other side can be exposed only when the Arabs choose to open their files. No account of the war can, therefore, be complete.

The problem is made more complex since leaders and generals are cadis presenting their own "truths". Some now claim that they saw shape of things to come. Others have armed themselves with the wisdom of hindsight, which must be at the expense of fellow actors in the drama. The shock of war often prevented the keeping of accurate command diaries. Therefore, when I began to collect the facts and the details, I was faced with irreconcilable contradictions—an Israeli "Rashomon" played out by senior officers.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that journalists have the right to judge the men appointed to conduct Israel's wars. The Press, with few exceptions, spoke the same language as the Israel Defense Forces and the Defense Ministry. Up to the summer of 1972, I felt that another war between Israel and her neighbors was inevitable. But, in 1973, following Sadat's postponement of war and the Russian exodus from Egypt, I was infected by the optimism prevalent in the IDF. The bug stayed with me until the Defense Minister's declaration, in summer 1973, that no major war was to be expected in the coming decade, and Israel's borders would stay unchanged Airinng that period. I then wrote: "Anyone who believes that the present stalemate will long continue is both mistaken and misleading. In the present situation of military and diplomatic stalemate, it seems that a new war is inevitable."

I have, as much as possible, avoided judging and awarding "grades" That duty must be left to the historians. They will be able evaluate the facts in a wider context, free of personal emotions. I tried in so far as it was possible to base myself on authentic material; recordings of command discussions during the battles, and documents. Some of these details are published here for the first time. Many others served as background, but could not be published far obvious security reasons.
“Earthquake in October’ does not have any “star heroes”. Through the men mentioned by name in this book, I have attempted to present the items that seem important to me. What happened to them, on the battlefield, in the quartermasters’ stores, in the command posts—happened to many others. In collecting the facts, I was assisted by cabinet ministers, senior officers and soldiers. I am grateful to all of them.

The daily diary does not pretend to tell all that happened. On each day, I have chosen the events that I saw as most important. Wars and battles do not stop at midnight, to begin again one minute later —and so, I have allowed actions to cross the “calendar barrier” rather than interrupt continuity for the reader.

One last word for the English-language reader: The war of October 1973 has been variously called The Day of Judgment, The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, Ramadan and simply The October War. I have elected not to inflict my choice on history, and so the titles that appear in these pages are governed solely by the needs of the text.

Zeev Schiff
Tel Aviv, September 1974.
SEPTEMBER 21, 1973

President’s Weekend

After a tiring week’s work, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, following morning prayers in his favorite mosque, left with his wife for a weekend at his summer house in Alexandria. Sadat has good reason to rest. His war plans are already complete. Now, he worries only about their implementation — and there is room for anxiety. Sadat is well aware that many plans have failed in the past, and many trusted friends were a source of disappointment. He knows his fate is now in the balance. He promised the “year of decision” in 1971. In 1972, he vowed that — by the next birthday of the Prophet Mohammed — he would push Israel back from the “conquered territories”. Broken promises imply military revolution, but military failures invite the same fate.

Towards evening, as the sun sets, Sadat receives the editor of el Aharam, Hassanein Heikal, in audience. The meeting takes place on a large balcony overlooking the sea. Sadat’s relationship with Hassanein Heikal has always been accompanied by mixed feelings, and his present unease plays its own part. He reveals in deepest confidence that the expected war will take place very soon, and tells Heikal that the Egyptian General Staff have code-named the operation “The Spark” — el Shrara.

Israel is used to Sadat’s “revenge weeks”. So nobody pays any attention to a report in today’s Lebanese paper el-Nahar, known for its connections with the fedayin leaders: Cairo has informed a Palestinian personality that Egypt will shortly embark on an extensive military operation, with the purpose of generating American pressure on Israel.