

## PM: Thatcher a true friend of Jewish People, Israel

By TOVAH LAZAROFF, GREER FAY CASHMAN, JONNY PAU

04/08/2013 16:57

**Netanyahu, Peres mourn the death of former British Prime Minister who died of a stroke Monday at age 87.**

Nicknamed "The Iron Lady," she led her country from 1979 to 1990. She died suddenly Monday morning of a stroke at age 87.

Thatcher, Britain's first female prime minister, was also the first British prime minister to visit Israel. She had a record number of Jews in her cabinet and was a strong advocate for the release of Soviet Jewry. She often championed the Jewish people as well as their state – even as she harshly criticized some of its policies.

"She was a staunch friend of Israel and the Jewish people," said Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu who knew her personally. "She inspired a generation of political leaders.

I send my most sincere condolences to her family and to the government and people of Great Britain.

"She was truly a great leader, a woman of principle, of determination, of conviction, of strength; a woman of greatness," he said.

Thatcher, a grocer's daughter who became both a lawyer and a chemist before running for parliament as a member of the Conservative party, was first elected in 1959 as the representative of the Finchley district in north London, which had a heavy Jewish population.

"She felt a kinship with the Jewish people," recalled Yehuda Avner, Israel's ambassador to Great Britain from 1983 to 1988, and author of the book, *The Prime Ministers*.

"She was not of the usual Conservative Party establishment.

There was nothing upper class about her. It had been suggested that this is why she felt a certain kinship with Jews," Avner said.

He added that she once explained to him that she saw in Israel some elements of "oldfashioned patriotism."

"She admired Israel's grit and guts. I once heard her say as much to the queen," he said.

Avner recalled that upon becoming prime minister, Thatcher invited then-prime minister Menachem Begin to lunch at 10 Downing Street, even though there were those in the UK

who still considered him a terrorist because he had been the head of the Irgun, a pre-state military organization, recalled Avner.

She didn't always agree with Israel's policies and had a preference for the Labor party over the Likud when it came to diplomatic issues, he said.

Avner also remembered how she once summoned him to No.

10 to personally ask that then prime minister Yitzhak Shamir instruct Ariel Sharon to stop referring to Jordan as Palestine.

"She very often had to fight her own foreign office who tended to support sanctions against Israel because of its settlement policy," said Avner. "As a matter of fact on certain very sensitive issues – and this was an expression of her friendship – she would invite me to her office at 10 Downing in order to avert the foreign office, which she knew would take a certain dim view."

[Azriel Bermant](#), a researcher at the [Institute for National Security Studies](#) at Tel Aviv University, who is writing a book on Thatcher and the Arab-Israeli conflict, said that although she was a genuine friend of Israel, her relationship with the state had its peaks and valleys.

It went downhill during Thatcher's first term when she opposed Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and her support of Palestinian self-determination – particularly of the EEC Venice Declaration that called for an end to Israel's territorial occupation.

Although she took a strong stand against terrorism while in office, Thatcher also supported involving the PLO in the peace negotiations, he said.

Things improved when Peres was prime minister, [Bermant](#) said, both because of his political opinions and because she understood that to influence policy she had to improve her ties with Israel.

Peres said that during Israel's peace negotiations with Jordan in the late 1980s, Thatcher was a mediator and a source of wisdom for both him and King Hussein of Jordan, both of whom admired her and respected her opinions.

Even after she left office, she maintained ties with Israel's leaders, sending Netanyahu a handwritten note when he lost the 1999 prime-ministerial race, according to an official on his staff.

Long before Netanyahu entered politics, he admired Thatcher's political philosophy. In 2000 he traveled to London to meet with her so he could better understand the economic reforms she implemented, the staff member said.

Peres on Monday called her a great and exceptional leader.

"There are people, there are ideas. Occasionally those two come together to create vision, said Peres, adding that Thatcher was not only an exceptional leader and a colleague in the international arena, but also a personal friend. He had never seen a more courageous and clear-minded leader, he said.

"She served as an inspiration for other leaders, as the first female prime minister of Great Britain and broke new ground," said Peres, who commended Thatcher's strength of character, determination and clear vision.

She was a true and dedicated friend who stood with Israel in times of crisis and used her influence to help Israel in its peacemaking efforts, he said.

Peres expressed sincere condolences to Thatcher's family, to her friends and to the people of Great Britain.

Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, in adding her tributes to those of the president and the prime minister, said that Thatcher was a leader who led Britain according to her ideals.

"One could disagree with her regarding her worldview, but it is impossible not to appreciate her impressive ability in the midst of a male political culture," said Livni.

Ambassador to the UK Daniel Taub sent a letter to the baroness's children, expressing his deep condolences on her passing.

"For her strong support for Israel, for the way in which she epitomized the values of freedom and democracy that our two countries hold so dear, and in memory of her remarkable life, we mourn with you and the British people on this solemn day," wrote Taub.

Britain's Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said: "Baroness Thatcher was a giant who had a transformative impact on Britain.

I first got to know her early on in my life when she was the local MP [Member of Parliament]. She was loved and admired by many in the Jewish community who will miss her deeply. Few people in my lifetime have left such a personal imprint on British life."

The Conservative Friends of Israel also lauded her.

"Margaret Thatcher was always a strong supporter of Israel and the Jewish community. Her staunch defense of freedom and liberty perhaps explains her genuine admiration of Israel as the only democracy in an autocratic region; something that she felt should be fought for and protected."

The organization recalled that Thatcher had served as honorary president of its North London Area Council, both as an MP and as prime minister.

"Britain has lost a great leader, but her legacy will never be forgotten and her staunch belief in Israel will always set the tone for future Conservative Party leaders and prime ministers in years to come," the group said.

<http://www.ipost.com/International/PM-Thatcher-a-true-friend-of-Jewish-People-Israel-309090>