

Chaim Weizmann and James H. Becker The Story of a Friendship

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Chaim Weizmann was deeply preoccupied with the creation of the Jewish Agency long before its founding in 1929. Ever since the ratification of Article 4 of the Mandate in 1922, Weizmann had been planning the implementation of its main provision—"to secure the cooperation of all Jews who are willing to assist in the establishment of the Jewish National Home." He wrote that between 1922 and 1929 he did not once forget the need for the Agency. Confronted by the immense political and financial challenge generated by the Balfour Declaration, he recognized the need for drawing into the work of Palestine distinguished Jews of wealth and prestige—even those "who were not prepared to declare themselves Zionists."¹

It seems clear that Weizmann had in mind mainly American Jews. He was familiar with the financial power of their leaders. He had been impressed by the scope of their philanthropies in Eastern and Central Europe during and after World War I. The Joint Distribution Committee, planned, funded, and administered chiefly by American Jews, had written a memorable page in the history of Jewish philanthropy with its heroic program of rescue and relief in Poland, the Ukraine, and Roumania. At the same time, Weizmann knew that some of the most powerful leaders of the J. D. C.—men like Felix M. Warburg and Louis Marshall—had little interest in the reconstitution of Palestine as a Jewish homeland. The task of persuading these men and their followers to abandon their indifference and, in some cases, their hostility, to the cause of Palestine and to work for its reconstruction would have appeared as an impossible assignment to men less intrepid than Weizmann.

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¹ Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York, 1949), p. 307.

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MUCH NEARER JEWS AND JUDAISM

How well Weizmann met the challenge is known to students of Zionist history. Isaiah Berlin has characterized Weizmann as an “irresistible political seducer.”² Certainly, some of his conquests for the cause of Zion were nothing less than spectacular. His avowed objective, Louis Lipsky tells us, was “the winning of the philanthropists and assimilationists. . . . The provision of money was the supreme political necessity. . . . The abundant participation of American Jewry . . . even of those who had been opponents of Zionism” was vital for the realization of Weizmann’s dream. Beneath the impact of his seductive and relentless charm, some of the strongest pillars of anti-Zionism began to totter and crumble. Jacob H. Schiff, once a militant opponent of Zionism, openly declared his faith in Palestine as a center of Jewish life. Samuel Untermyer, redoubtable corporation lawyer, became head of the American Keren Hayesod. Even the hearts of non-Zionist Reform rabbis “were touched.”³

In the spring of 1923, Felix Warburg invited Weizmann to luncheon in his Kuhn, Loeb office on William Street, and took the occasion to deliver a passionate tirade against all that was happening in Palestine. Listening with what patience he could summon, Weizmann at last suggested that the banker go see for himself what was taking place there. Warburg and his wife left for Palestine shortly afterwards. In his first post card to Weizmann, Warburg wrote that he “felt like doffing his hat to every man and every tree he saw.” When he returned to New York, Warburg again invited Weizmann to luncheon. “Again I sat and listened,” Weizmann wrote, “and what I heard now was nothing but praise of Palestine and our enterprises. I have seldom witnessed a more complete conversion.”⁴ Berlin ventures that Weizmann “possessed tact and charm to a degree exceeded by no statesman of modern days,”⁵ and on the evidence of his triumph as missionary to the non-Zionists, we can believe him.

² Isaiah Berlin, *Chaim Weizmann* (New York, 1958), p. 43.

³ Meyer W. Weisgal and Joel Carmichael, eds., *Chaim Weizmann* (New York, 1963), pp. 180–81, 213.

⁴ Weizmann, p. 310.

⁵ Berlin, p. 27.

One of Weizmann's most notable recruits for Jewish Agency leadership was the famous New York lawyer, Louis Marshall, perhaps the most influential voice in the American Jewish community of his day. His attitude was often decisive in determining the attitude of American Jews toward current issues. Weizmann had been favorably impressed with Marshall since their first meeting at the Peace Conference in 1919. He had admired the force of his personality, especially as applied to his concern for Jewish questions. He could see that, while Marshall may have been a non-Zionist, he was no assimilationist. Assimilationist Jews may have recognized Marshall as their spokesman; Weizmann felt that he was not at all "representative of his following," that he was, in fact, "much nearer Jews and Judaism" than some avowed Zionists. He demonstrated an intense sympathy for the Jews of Eastern Europe locked in their cheerless struggle for minority rights with the architects of Versailles. The fact that he had learned Yiddish and read the Yiddish press must have especially commended him to Weizmann's approval. But the Zionist leader found him "completely skeptical as to the possibilities in Palestine."⁶ Undeterred, Weizmann proceeded to change Marshall's mind. That he succeeded in doing so is but further proof of his inspiring political virtuosity. Marshall came to consider the creation of the Agency a "sacred mission."⁷ It is a matter of history that Marshall became Weizmann's chief partner in bringing the Jewish Agency to realization.⁸

CALL IT "CHICAGO"

If New York's prestigious Jews yielded their converts to "practical Zionism,"⁹ Chicago was a different story. Here Weizmann met with frustration and failure. There was no Louis Marshall here to set the example with his generous enthusiasms for dreams of settlement in

⁶ Weizmann, p. 309.

⁷ Louis Marshall, *Proceedings of Non-Zionist Conference Concerning Palestine* (New York, 1928), p. 17.

⁸ Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York, 1972), p. 467.

⁹ Louis Lipsky interprets Marshall's role as that of abetting Weizmann's plan of transforming non-Zionists and even anti-Zionists into "practical Zionists": See Weisgal and Carmichael, p. 214.

a Jewish Palestine. More than any other individual, the mentor of Chicago's influential and wealthy German Jews was Julius Rosenwald, important executive of Sears, Roebuck. Rosenwald enjoyed a wide reputation for philanthropy, particularly in behalf of Negro institutions, but to Palestine he gave virtually nothing. He contributed to but two minor institutions there.¹⁰ Perhaps the insularity of the Midwest in which he was born and raised was the cause of his unresponsiveness to Palestine's needs. Perhaps years of exposure to the preaching of Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch was in part responsible. For forty years Hirsch had attacked Jewish nationalism from the pulpit of Chicago's Sinai Congregation, spiritual home of Rosenwald and of most of his circle. Whatever the reason, Rosenwald, for all his philanthropy, refused to support the cause of Palestine.

Weizmann and Rosenwald met a number of times upon occasion in Chicago, where Rosenwald proved a gracious host. But that was as far as his interest in Weizmann or his plans went. In his autobiography Weizmann tells the story of a conversation between Shmarya Levin, famous Zionist orator and one of its most effective emissaries, and Rosenwald. Levin must have been remonstrating with his host about the latter's imperviousness to Palestine's appeal. "Look," replied Rosenwald, "my villa in the suburbs is called 'Tel Aviv.' What more do you want?" To which Levin responded, "Only that you should build a house in the suburbs of Tel Aviv and call it 'Chicago.'"

The name of the suburb to which Rosenwald referred was Highland Park, and in that suburb lived James H. Becker, a younger friend of the philanthropist. Weizmann knew Becker. They had first met at Paris in 1919, when Weizmann was head of the British Zionist Commission and Becker was a lieutenant in the United States Army about to leave for Eastern Europe as a member of the United States Food Administration under Herbert Hoover. Weizmann seems to have been much taken with Becker, for there began a friendship which lasted for thirty years. The two maintained a fitful correspondence which continued through the years. Twelve of these letters written by Weizmann between 1923 and 1948 have recently come to light. Because of the insights they offer into some aspects of Weizmann's personality, as well as because of what they tell us about cer-

¹⁰ Weizmann, p. 305.

tain contemporary events, especially the formation of the Jewish Agency, the letters comprise a valuable personal and historic record.

James Becker was unusual in that, while belonging to a Chicago Jewish assimilationist milieu, he differed from his social caste in significant ways. His background and training were those of a child of wealth and privilege raised in the sheltered Jewish circles of Chicago's South Side. Born in 1894, he was the son of Abraham G. Becker, founder of the investment house bearing his name and a leader in Jewish and civic affairs. Members of both his father's and mother's family were known for their high integrity in the community.¹¹ Other members of the family were widely esteemed in the Jewish community, and it could be said that the Beckers were regarded as among its strong and admired pillars. They belonged to Sinai Congregation, a stronghold of classical Reform Judaism, where at its packed Sunday morning services, congregants were introduced to a religion modeled in many ways after the prevailing patterns of liberal American Protestantism. Untouched by the customs and forms of the traditional Judaism of the Old World, Sinai Congregation regarded Jewish ceremonialism as irrelevant to the substance of faith, Yiddish and Hebrew as alien survivals of a ghetto past, and Jewish nationalism as at least unpatriotic. This was the Judaism, taught by Hirsch and exemplified by Rosenwald, which young Becker learned in his childhood and youth.¹²

In 1913, Becker entered Cornell and, upon graduation in 1917, enlisted in the army. By 1918 he had become a lieutenant, and when the Armistice was declared, he volunteered for service with the United States Food Administration, which was being organized for rescuing and rehabilitating the starving and homeless peoples of war-ravaged Europe. Becker would be working directly with his friend Lewis L. Strauss, Hoover's secretary. Strauss's talents enabled him to scale the ladder of political and economic advancement, while moving with easy assurance in the privileged Jewish world to which Becker belonged. From Strauss, Becker learned that one of his principal, although unpublicized, missions was to visit the densely popu-

¹¹ In the crash of 1893, A. G. Becker, then a junior partner in a banking firm, is reported to have personally made good the losses of the bank's clients.

¹² See, for example, Bernard Martin, "The Religious Philosophy of Emil G. Hirsch," in *American Jewish Archives*, IV (1952), 66-82.

lated Jewish areas of Eastern Europe in order to verify the widely prevalent accounts of Jewish persecution and need, and to render such relief as might be possible.¹³

It was probably in connection with his impending assignment in Poland that young Becker called on Weizmann, who was staying at the Hotel Meurice in Paris. Nahum Sokolow, the leading Polish Zionist of the day, was with Weizmann. The two world Jewish leaders spent the next hour describing to the young American the conditions which he would be likely to encounter in Poland.¹⁴ The older men, all too familiar with the *shtetlach* and ghettos of Eastern Europe, gave the American lieutenant from Chicago a realistic briefing on the makeup of its castes, cults, and classes. Becker recounts that he did not disclose the Jewish aspect of his mission. He felt he would learn more "without showing my hand." He portrays Weizmann as "a remarkable man who discovered T. N. T. and gave it to the British government, and who later on was rewarded by that government with a £30,000 pension, which he uses for the Zionist cause."¹⁵ Obviously, he found both the legend and the reality of Weizmann impressive.

POSITIVE HUMAN GIFTS

The letters Weizmann wrote to Becker make us wonder what drew the two together. What did they have in common? No two men could have come from more dissimilar backgrounds. Weizmann was the Jew from Motol, a tiny *shtetl* near Pinsk bounded by a constricted village culture unchanged through the generations. His training as a scientist in Germany and Switzerland did not swerve him from a passionate commitment to Jewish nationalism. He came to be looked

¹³ James H. Becker: "The war on the Eastern front has been fought over what is essentially Jewish territory. In other words, the bulk of the Jewish population in the world lay in those areas which were laid waste by the war on the Eastern front." Speech at the dinner given in Becker's honor at the Standard Club, Chicago, on April 30, 1920, upon his return from Europe. Transcript, p. 58.

¹⁴ Becker kept a detailed journal of his activities and impressions; much of the material used here is drawn from this journal, on deposit at the American Jewish Archives.

¹⁵ Becker, Journal, February 1, 1919.

upon as the voice of the Jewish masses.¹⁶ Becker was the scion of a wealthy family acculturated to the American Midwest. Such Jewish identity as his social world avowed looked upon Jewish tradition as alien and Jewish nationalism as a challenge to American patriotism. There was also a twenty-year age difference between the two men.

There is no reason to doubt that Weizmann saw in Becker a representative of the wealthy, assimilated Jews whose support he coveted for the upbuilding of Palestine. The fact that Becker came from Chicago, and that he belonged to the Jewish circle which constituted the stubborn garrison led by Rosenwald holding out against the forays of Zionist leaders and the eloquence of their fund raisers, must also have occurred to him. In the blueprint for building a Jewish Agency, already taking shape in Weizmann's mind, the young Midwesterner might in the course of time prove a valuable ally. Others have noted that as Zionist leader Weizmann believed in long-term strategy.¹⁷

But this could not have been the main, certainly not the only, attraction Weizmann saw in Becker. For the letters reveal a personal liking, a genuine fondness for Becker which obviously transcended utilitarian motives. The salutations and frequent assurances of love and friendship display a degree of affection quite unexpected in a man not given to sentimental indulgence, a man whose words and actions "were addressed to reason rather than feeling."¹⁸ In almost every letter he asks solicitously about the members of the family, calling them by first name. The letter of January 24, 1924, is a deeply moving message of condolence over the death of Becker's niece. There is nothing perfunctory or formal about these exchanges. They portray a depth of feeling which a man could scarcely dissemble. The letter of November 4, 1947, written after a silence of nineteen years, asks, "Could you let me have a line, how your family is, how is Helen, Margaret and the others and their children? I would love to see them all. . . . Give them my very best love. . . ." As one reads the letters, one senses that Weizmann may have regarded Becker with feelings akin to those of a father for a son.

Isaiah Berlin tells us that Weizmann was an "irresistible political

¹⁶ Lipsky: "He seemed to speak ex-cathedra for the silent Jewish people" (Weisgal and Carmichael, p. 212).

¹⁷ Berlin, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

seducer," but he goes on to remark that "he did not offer himself except to those whom he truly admired. . . . He liked only large, imaginative, and generous natures. . . . Best of all he liked positive human gifts: intelligence, imagination, beauty, strength, generosity, steadfastness, integrity of character, and especially nobility of style, that inner elegance and natural breadth and sweep and confidence." Weizmann must have discerned some of these qualities in James Becker. He admired the attributes which others had noted in Becker, his fastidiousness of bearing, his unfailing courtesy, his restraint and modesty. There was something aristocratic in his demeanor, an endowment for which Weizmann had a special regard.¹⁹ When they first met, Weizmann may indeed have visualized the young Chicagoan as a likely emissary for the cause of a Jewish Palestine in hostile territory. But as time went on, the older man must have discovered in the younger those graces of character and personality which he found so appealing, together with that genuine sympathy for Jews and that deep insight into the dilemma of the Jew, which recommended him both as an ally in the cause and as a friend.

RECEIPTS FOR EVERY CENT

Two days after his visit with Weizmann in Paris, Becker left for Poland. For the next four months he was busy with his duties as member of the American relief mission. Most of his time was spent in Warsaw, but he undertook difficult and dangerous journeys to Lemberg and Cracow, populous Jewish centers, where fighting between the Poles, Ukrainians, and Ruthenians kept the cities under intermittent fire. Visiting the hospitals and food distribution centers made Becker aware of the tragic dimensions of war.²⁰ Meeting the Jewish leaders and seeing the suffering of the Jews familiarized him with the darker and more brutal aspects of anti-Semitism. These impressions were only deepened by his experiences with the relief missions in Roumania and Bukovina, where he spent the latter months of 1919 and the early months of 1920.

Becker's journal describing his experiences in Eastern Europe

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

²⁰ Becker, *Journal*, February 18, 1919: "The glory of war does not enter the military hospitals."

would appear to validate Weizmann's favorable appraisal of him. Courage, steadfastness, strength, imagination, intelligence, and integrity of character were all exhibited in the way the young American officer served first in a subordinate, later in a supervisory role with the American Missions and with the Joint Distribution Committee.

An entry dated March 5, 1919, written late at night in Lemberg, describes the severe shelling to which the city was being subjected:

At one o'clock I was awakened by another terrible bombardment. . . . I thought that I would never see dear old Chicago again. No, it never occurred to me to regret having come here—how could one when there is such suffering going on and such need for help: how could one when in this place above all others in the world these poor Jews need a fair distribution of food—which perhaps I alone can get for them? ²¹

Becker's compassion for the stricken Jews who came under his care went deeper than the paternalist sympathy of the philanthropist or the clinical attention of the social worker. In a letter to Felix M. Warburg, Dr. Julius Goldman, the European Director General of the Joint Distribution Committee, summarizes the work done by Becker in Roumania. "I must confess," he wrote, "that more intelligent, conscientious, and humane action I have not come across in any of the work that has been done by anybody on behalf of the J. D. C." ²² Another report on conditions among the Jews of Roumania written by a J. D. C. official working in the field tells of Becker as working like "a slave and a martyr. . . . Outside of what he has done, there is nothing at all." ²³ These are not the routine testimonials expected and given on ceremonial occasions. They are tributes to a man whose unusual feeling for the human was deeply stirred by Jewish need.

Becker concluded an article in the *Menorah Journal* with a plea to American Jews: "If there is any single message which I bring it is one which implores the Jews of America not to forget, in the hour of their greatest need, their emaciated, persecuted, downtrodden but ever unbroken co-religionists in Eastern and Central Europe." ²⁴

²¹ Becker, Journal, March 5, 1919.

²² Read at the Standard Club dinner, April 30, 1920. Transcript, pp. 8-9.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

²⁴ *Menorah Journal*, October, 1921, p. 223.

Becker was interested not only in saving Jews from the physical torments of war; he was interested also in saving their indigenous cultural and spiritual life. He praises the Jews of Eastern Europe because their "cultural and spiritual interests play an overwhelmingly important part as compared to the material aspects of life."²⁵ He admonishes the relief organizations to concern themselves with more than relief because these Jews "have been willing to sacrifice their physical comfort and material welfare for their cultural and spiritual aspirations." He stresses the importance of Jewish teachers, lauding the "idealism" of their work.²⁶ He even requests that funds be provided for clothing rabbis, who in their capacity as community leaders, made a "disreputable" appearance before the civil authorities in the ragged attire which their poverty enforced.²⁷ Such concern for the culture of the East European Jew set him apart from the generality of his social peers.

A letter James Becker wrote in 1924 to Hortense Koller, whom he later married, offers further evidence of his understanding of the life and values of the East European Jew. He is commenting on a performance by the Habimah Theater players of S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, which he had just seen:

. . . I got a tremendous emotional reaction from the play—the greater perhaps because I know something of the Chassidic movement and of the people. It was beautiful—and right to show to non-Jews, and to German Jews so far as that goes. Despite their conception of the physical filth of the ghetto, there was also great spiritual cleanliness and beauty. That it was obscured by superstition to me means nothing. But then the people who need to find out those things won't pay any attention to them!

Becker's impatience with "the people who need to find out those things" is proof that he had not absorbed the stereotypes of the East European Jew current in the circles he frequented.

Among other qualities in Becker which Weizmann must have found congenial to his own temper was his scrupulous understand-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁷ James H. Becker, *Roumania—A General Survey of the Work Done by the Joint Distribution Committee from August 1st, 1919, to March 1st, 1920, with Particular Emphasis as to the Present and Future Needs for Relief*, pp. 16–17.

ing of the real world. Like Weizmann, Becker was an empiricist, and indulgence of vain hope or false illusion was dismissed as so much wool-gathering. His impulse to compassion did not prevent him from insisting that programs of relief be conducted on an "absolutely businesslike basis" with loans repaid so that the money could be loaned again.²⁸ All accounts were meticulously kept. "It might be of interest to know," he reported, "that we have receipts for every cent of the money spent in Rumania . . . and that every cent of the administrative expenses were paid for by the local communities."²⁹ Governor Henry Horner, presiding at the dinner welcoming Becker when he returned to Chicago in 1920, described the honored guest as possessing a "level head and a warm heart." This combination must have appealed to the man who always insisted that Palestine would be built not on the frothy foundation of the speeches so dear to early Zionist leaders but on the bedrock of hard work and economic achievement.³⁰

Becker's independence must also have appealed to Weizmann, especially when confronting bureaucratic inertia. When human suffering was involved, he was capable of acting on his own, of breaking encrusted protocol. He organized local committees in Bessarabia for distributing supplies, even though denied permission by the military governor.³¹ "I was not supposed to conduct any work in the Ukraine," he reported, "but in view of the fact that there was such great misery and that no Joint Distribution Committee had gone there, I decided to go there." To save innocent Jewish soldiers in the Roumanian army from court martial sentences, he organized the "Union of Indigenous Jews," who succeeded in securing new trials for the victims. The forthrightness, precision, independence, and courage with which Becker moved in these situations were qualities which Weizmann admired.

A perceptive judge of men, Weizmann sensed in Becker what he had seen in Louis Marshall—a man who, despite his social environ-

²⁸ *Menorah Journal*, October, 1921, p. 218.

²⁹ Becker, Speech at the Standard Club dinner, April 30, 1920. Transcript, p. 42.

³⁰ "No political declaration, however weighty, counted as much for him as the founding of a settlement, the planting of a grove, the building of a school": Meyer Weisgal, *Meyer W. Weisgal—So Far. An Autobiography* (New York, 1971), p. 212.

³¹ Becker, Speech at the Standard Club Dinner, April 30, 1920. Transcript, p. 44.

ment, was “near to Jews and Judaism,” capable of a deep humanity which kindled generous enthusiasms, responsive to the Jewish plea for help.³² Perhaps he looked upon the American from the Midwest as a younger Marshall, a Midwest partner in helping to organize the Jewish Agency. What better representative was there among the hostile philanthropists of Chicago’s Jewish elite? Born and bred in these very circles, profoundly conversant through personal experience with the needs for some measure of permanent security for persecuted Jews, and endowed with special skills in administration and leadership, Becker was ideally suited for a role in the leadership of the Jewish Agency.

EVERYBODY WHO’S ANYBODY

In 1927, Becker finally went to Palestine for a visit. Weizmann had urged him to come there in 1924 to attend the ceremonies which marked the opening of the Hebrew University.³³ The pages of the journal he kept during his Palestine visit show how far Becker had wandered from the indifference to Palestine characteristic of the assimilationist matrix from which he had sprung. The entries reflect a deep emotional attachment for the land. As one traces the development of this attitude, the experiences he personally shared in the miserably poor and desperately persecuted communities of Eastern and Central Europe undoubtedly played their part. Weizmann’s influence cannot be discounted. Certainly, the Zionist mentor had accurately gauged the direction in which his young friend’s Jewish sympathies would lead him.

On the day he landed, Becker eloquently apostrophizes the “land of my fathers”:

Land of my fathers—what emotions you awaken in me of pride and joy and sorrow. Here I am, at last in the Holy Land. How many hundreds of times have I dreamed of this place and wondered why it should have such a very strong appeal for me. The more I think of it the more complicated it becomes. Why should a third generation American boy living in good circumstances, and knowing nothing of anti-Semitism in the real meaning

³² Weizmann, p. 309.

³³ Weizmann, Letter of December 25, 1924, on deposit at the American Jewish Archives.

of the word, having a happy home in every way—why should there be such a kindred feeling and such an attachment for this little land? Strange but nevertheless real!³⁴

In a moving passage, he describes the approach and entrance to Jerusalem, the “city of cities.” “What strange emotions seem to choke me,” he remarks.

As I caught my first glimpse of the old city my heart beat furiously and I was afire. How often have I wondered when I should get there, and here I am. And, as is not often the case, when one has heard so much and expects everything, I was thrilled beyond measure and I got a joy infinitely greater than I thought I could get.³⁵

On the road driving back to Haifa in the twilight, he notes that he is “glad that I was alone in front where I had a chance to think of the greatness of the Jewish past and to dream of the possible glory of the future.”³⁶

Becker’s love for what he saw encompassed the old as well as the new. “I was . . . very impressed with the old Orthodox Jews praying at the Wailing Wall.” At the same time he was “pleasantly surprised” by Tel Aviv, then the subject of “adverse criticism.” People who voiced such criticism could have had no knowledge of the surroundings from which the settlers had come. He had acquired this knowledge through dispensing food to the starving, providing shelter for the homeless, living through the bombardment of ghettos, witnessing pogroms. “Compared with the ghetto cities of Poland, Galicia, the Ukraine, and Rumania,” Tel Aviv was a “paradise.” He visited a number of the agricultural colonies—Nahalal, Degania, Hadera—and was deeply affected by the spirit of the people. “The idealism of these colonists is a great joy to behold”; they felt they had “a mission to perform, and not only a livelihood to earn.”³⁷

The Jewish Agency became a reality in 1929. More than seven years of Weizmann’s life had been consumed in its creation.³⁸ His let-

³⁴ Becker, *Journal*, January 26, 1927.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Weizmann, p. 313.

ters to Becker reflect the depth of his concern and anxiety about the Agency. There were at first the sanguine expectations, then the false starts, the backing and filling, the hopes aborted by frustration. We read these changing moods in the letters.

Hope and optimism are notes struck in the letters of 1923. On May 10, Weizmann wrote of a meeting that had taken place on the previous day in Philadelphia at the house of Judge Horace Stern.³⁹

Present were . . . everybody who's anybody. Without desiring to put a more optimistic construction on the result than it really was, I am convinced that it marked a turning point in the relation of America's Jewry to Palestine and Zionism. A similar meeting took place in New York, and at both meetings committees were elected with a view of *establishing cooperation*. I feel that this is a real program.⁴⁰

In Weizmann's mind matters had progressed so favorably that on December 23, 1923, he wrote Becker of a decision reached with Marshall to call a "conference of non-Zionists (probably for February 9 and probably in Chicago) with a view to consider the formation of the Jewish Agency." Marshall was to come to Chicago shortly and would discuss the details with Becker. Weizmann's appeal to Becker reveals the esteem in which he held his young correspondent.

I'm anxious that you—to whom all sides justly attach the greatest importance—should consider with Mr. M. the advisability of calling the conference in Chicago and in case you decide on it that you should give us all the help which may be needed in order to make the conference a success. It is I feel a great historic occasion.

But the conference was not held, and the letter dated July 18, 1924, expresses Weizmann's apprehensions. From the enclosure of a copy of the letter sent to Marshall on July 17, it would appear that he felt that the progress already made toward creating the Agency might be grinding to a halt. "I beg of you," he pleads, "to use your influence to hasten the matter of the Jewish Agency: please do not let it go to sleep."

³⁹ Judge Horace Stern was a leader among the old Jewish establishment of Philadelphia: See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, XV, 386.

⁴⁰ Weizmann, Letter of May 10, 1923, on deposit at the American Jewish Archives.

HEADLONG FOR CRIMEA

Weizmann was at this point disappointed in Marshall. If he found any fault with him, it was with the latter's tendency to procrastinate. Of course, he understood the demands made on a famous lawyer, especially one engaged in a heavy schedule of civic and Jewish activities. He was also aware of the fact that among Marshall's associates were bitter opponents of the Jewish Agency, and these were plainly doing nothing to encourage him to advance its implementation. Meanwhile Palestine's mounting problems—sparse migration, lack of funds for land purchase, an uncertain economic outlook for the colonies, noncooperation by the British, hostility from the Arabs—might well be eased by a Jewish Agency which would unlock the reservoir of American Jewish support. And there was Louis Marshall, the one man who could galvanize the American Jewish community into action, immobilized by mundane concerns and misguided projects.

One such misguided project absorbing Marshall's time and energy, Weizmann was convinced, was the attempt to settle Jews in the Crimea. During the 1920's the Soviet government had opened rich farm lands in the Crimea for Jewish colonization. There Jews, displaced by changing economic policies from their urban occupations as small traders and middlemen, would be helped to establish autonomous agricultural colonies. When the Soviet officials invited American Jews to participate in financing the project, the response was spontaneous and generous. Weizmann could only be dismayed by this turn of events. Jews whom he had wooed in vain for Zion pledged large sums for the Crimea. The resources and energy so desperately needed for Palestine were being siphoned off by what he deemed an ill-conceived and foredoomed venture in southern Russia. For to Weizmann the Crimea represented no solution to the problem of Jewish homelessness. Jewish history told him that such expedients offered little hope for permanent settlement. The twentieth century had demonstrated clearly enough that the idea of stabilizing East European Jewry was a chimera. He saw in the Soviet settlement scheme the re-enactment of an age-old Jewish tragedy, building Jewish life on the quicksands of endemic bigotries and millennial hatreds. The millions contributed by well-intentioned Jews to Agro-Joint, the agency for Crimean settlement, were being funneled down a bottomless pit.

Weizmann's letters to Becker—and copies of those to Marshall

which he enclosed—reflect his unhappiness over the Crimean venture. In a striking phrase he calls it a “project in despair.”⁴¹ “I’m not happy,” he writes two years later, “about . . . the way Marshall and his friends have gone headlong for a Crimea! Palestine seems to be forgotten. This letter is meant as a reminder.”⁴² He then adds plaintively, “Why does a ‘Crimea’ produce such prompt action, why does Palestine make the same people sluggish? Curious.”

Whether the sentence, “This letter is meant as a reminder,” was intended to influence Becker to prod Marshall on the lagging Jewish Agency, or whether it was a hint that Becker himself not join Marshall and his friends “headlong for a Crimea,” we can only guess. In the spring of 1927 Becker did, in fact, accompany Felix Warburg on a visit to the Crimean farming colonies.⁴³ Becker’s impressions of what he saw indicates that he had come to share the general optimism over the Crimean venture. He does not, however, echo Warburg’s unbridled euphoria. He qualifies his praise of the colonies and his projections for their future with the caution learned perhaps in the pogroms of Poland during the immediate post-World War I days. Thus he does not dismiss the possibility of the occurrence of pogroms, despite the goodwill of the present government. “I think Jewish history has taught us,” he observes, “there is always the danger of this sort of thing and it cannot be overlooked.”⁴⁴ Becker is always the prudent realist.

Weizmann acknowledges that he found Marshall’s involvement with the Crimea “heartbreaking.”⁴⁵ For while this “project in despair” was winning generous support from the American philanthropic elite, Palestine, which gave genuine promise for solving the problem of Jewish rootlessness, was being neglected.⁴⁶ At the same time, Weizmann understood rich American Jews well enough to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Letter to Marshall, July 17, 1924, enclosed in the letter of July 18, 1924, to Becker, on deposit at the American Jewish Archives.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Letter of May 17, 1926, on deposit at the American Jewish Archives.

⁴³ A report of their experiences was published in a pamphlet, *After Three Years—The Progress of the Jewish Farm Colonies in Russia* (New York, 1927).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Weizmann, p. 304.

⁴⁶ Marshall, pp. 8–9.

perceive that the Crimea may have attracted their interest and money precisely because it did not stigmatize them as Jewish nationalists.⁴⁷

As it turned out, Weizmann's doubts—and Becker's apprehensions—about the stability of Jewish settlement in the Crimea were fully justified. Early in the 1930's the Russian government began to show its preference for Birobidzhan, a sparsely settled region on the Sino-Soviet border in Siberia, as an area for Jewish colonization. With the introduction of collectivization and with increasing industrialization, many Jews left the colonies in the Crimea. By 1938, no more than 20,000 were living in the Jewish kolkhozes. When the Germans marched into the Crimea in 1941, the Jewish settlements were exterminated.⁴⁸

NOTHING JEWISH WAS ALIEN

When the Jewish Agency was finally established in 1929, it marked a major achievement in Weizmann's career.⁴⁹ With unrelenting patience and skillful persuasiveness he had succeeded in forging a pragmatic agreement between Jewish leaders who had long held disparate and conflicting views on Zionism. The convening of the council of the Jewish Agency in August, 1929, in Zurich found Léon Blum, Albert Einstein, Herbert Samuel, Lord Melchett, Louis Marshall, Felix Warburg, Cyrus Adler, Menahem Ussishkin, Chaim Nachman Bialik, and Stephen S. Wise⁵⁰ arrayed behind Weizmann on a common platform. A note scribbled by Einstein, now in the Weizmann Archives at Rehovot, records the excitement of the hour: "On this day Herzl's and Weizmann's seed has sprouted wonderfully. No one who was present remained unmoved."⁵¹ It was a great triumph for Weizmann. He was greeted with tumultuous acclaim.

⁴⁷ Weizmann, p. 305.

⁴⁸ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V, 1107.

⁴⁹ Weizmann, p. 313.

⁵⁰ When the agreement was endorsed by the Action Committee in 1928 by a vote of thirty-nine to five, Wise voted against it (Laqueur, p. 468).

⁵¹ Weisgal and Carmichael, p. 221.

In a long talk following the meeting, Marshall and Warburg assured Weizmann that his financial troubles were over.⁵² No longer would he have to travel the length of the land hat in hand in order to save Palestine from bankruptcy. A solid foundation for sound economic growth had finally been laid. But with a suddenness which shocked the Jewish world, these glittering hopes, so recently and laboriously conceived, were rudely darkened. Within a month of the convention, Louis Marshall died. A few weeks later came the economic crash, which ushered in the Great Depression of the 1930's. In Palestine itself, serious rioting against the Jews had broken out. The euphoria of Zurich had given way to yet another climate of crisis.

Yet much had been gained. As Weizmann pointed out, the chasm between non-Zionists and Zionists had been bridged, and henceforth there would be greater sympathy for the building of a Jewish homeland in Palestine among the previously apathetic or hostile. Sober and practical men of affairs had made their commitment to what had been dismissed too often as a Utopian dream. We assume that such a man was James Becker.

He did not attend the historic meeting in Zurich. Nor do we know of any far-reaching practical moves he may have made in behalf of the Jewish Agency. But we have reason to believe that he supported it among his peers. Who can tell how many obstacles to the final consummation of the Agency were overcome through his efforts? It was not his style to speak, much less bruit abroad, his achievements. But it would be unnatural for a man who identified himself so closely both with the persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe and with the land of his fathers to oppose the plan to make Palestine a haven of physical security and spiritual survival for Jews.

On March 19, 1923, Louis Marshall wrote Becker a letter in which he delineated his "platform" as a Jew. He said that he deplored the labels which divide Jews from one another, that he hated "the very sound of the phrases orthodox, conservative, reform, Russian, Polish, Rumanian, German, as applied to Jews." He was "simply a Jew to whom nothing Jewish was alien." It was furthermore his "bounden duty to protect the good name of Jews" and to enable

⁵² Laqueur, p. 468.

them "to create a home for those who desired it in Palestine." Failure to do so would "disgrace . . . every Jew who had failed to do his duty."⁵³

It is perhaps upon this platform that Becker also took his stand as a Jew. Weizmann may indeed have been prescient in seeing in him a Marshall of the Midwest.

⁵³ Charles Reznikoff, ed., *Louis Marshall—Champion of Liberty* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 731-32.

ARCHIVES POSTERS

The America Jewish Archives has issued a number of multi-colored posters dealing with the American Jewish experience:

- Jewish participation in the Civil War (6)
- Immigrants from Eastern Europe (3)
- Episodes in eighteenth-century American Jewish Life (3)
- Abba Hillel Silver at the United Nations (1)
- Jews and the American Revolution (6)
- Women: Abigail Minis, Rebecca Gratz, Henrietta Szold (3)

These posters are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations, and organizations interested in American Jewish history.

When properly matted and mounted on heavy cardboard, these posters make an attractive exhibit.

Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.