

BUNDISM, ZIONISM AND THE JEWISH STATE

Excerpts from the last article by S. Mendelsohn.

The following are fragments of an article by S. Mendelsohn, who died suddenly of a heart attack while on a lecture tour in California. The article appeared in the January-February issue of UNSER TSAIT, a New York monthly:

* * * Jewish public opinion was never as totalitarian as it is at the present time. Independent thought is not tolerated, but is in a purely totalitarian man-

ner decried as "treason," "enmity toward the people," or similar crimes. What bitter irony that after the utter destruction brought upon the Jewish people by Fascism, the latter's methods of terror are now triumphant in Jewish life! For the time being—it is only *intellectual* and *social* terror. It is as if the slaughterer had infected his victims with his germs during the slaughter * * *

* * * Fifty years just passed since the founding of

the Jewish Labor BUND and also since the birth of political Zionism. And the time is thus truly ripe for conclusions and self-analysis. But these are often made under the sign of Zionism's victory—of the United Nations decision to establish a Jewish state.

And thus it comes about that simplifications are often made—simplifications which frequently border on falsehood. Not everything lends itself to simplifications and to simplify does not always mean to make clearer; the result may sometimes become distorted.

The differences between the BUND and Zionism never consisted in the Zionists' prediction of the catastrophe and the BUND's refusal to listen to these prophecies. Not a single Zionist theorist, not a single Zionist writer could foresee the Hitler catastrophe—I am thinking of its *scope*. Zionism did not build on what was *to come*, but mainly upon what *was*. It saw the "Diaspora Jew" as a perishing, degenerated being—intellectually, nationally, and morally. The source of Zionism was its diagnosis that the Diaspora Jewry was convicted to become nationally sterile,—and that this sterility had already set in. Thus Pinsky spoke of the corpse among the peoples, Nordau about the dead body in the organism of the world. And all subsequent writers turned for their pathos to negating the Diaspora. Without this negation of the Diaspora existence, Zionism loses its basis and its starting point—that was the reason for the discarding by political Zionism of "Akhad Omism," the theory of an intellectual centre in Palestine. Those remaining in the Diaspora presumably could not be saved by similar intellectual influences. The other extreme was the idea of a physical concentration; to *collect* the Jewish people in a country of their own, regenerate it into a people with a *state*. The state was thought of as containing the sources of cultural productivity and renaissance. Zhabotinsky asked—in the brusque manner all his own—that all 15 million Jews throughout the world be declared citizens of Palestine. Thus people and country were to become one. Nordau foresaw an immigration of many millions within a period of but a few years.

This particular vision of Zionism has since long been extinguished. Actually it had already disappeared in the Twenties of our century. From time to time it was taken up anew by Revisionism—which, however, was placed outside the Zionist forces.

Little by little a qualitative theory began evolving: "One Jew on the Jordan is worth more than fifty Jews on the Vistula..." This was an "Akhad Omism" of a vulgarized variety. The former had dreamed of an "isle of old men," of a country populated by intellectual aristocrats who were to educate the Jewish people and perpetuate the continuity of Jewish cultural values. Of this intellectual aristocratism

there remains not a sign today. Conversely, it was replaced by a national conceit which caused harm to the Jewish community in Palestine and the Jews in general. This conceit was to cover up the first fundamental retreat of Zionism.

The other basis of Zionism was—and still remains—the conviction that the Jewish fate could be made independent; that it could be torn from the navel of the world. True, it was argued, the processes taking place in the world were important; yet they did not have any *direct* relation to our existence and our salvation. *Their*—the world's—cause was thought to exist as distinct from *our* cause. The two were not to be mixed and combined. *Our* cause could be achieved with the help of the Turkish sultan, the tsarist minister Pleve, the Rumanian king, Mussolini, Polish Foreign Minister Beck, or reactionary forces in America. These were not mere episodes, unfortunate slips—they were *logical* consequences of a fundamental outlook, a basic viewpoint. They show an attitude toward the world's struggles of a spectator from without. The only measuring stick of the outside world is—whether it is inclined to "give" the Jews a state of their own or not * * *

* * * Bundism promulgated a *diametrically opposed* approach and viewpoint. It recognized the creative potentialities of the Jewish masses. Owing to changed historical circumstances, they had to be given new contents and a new perspective. This the BUND did—and not only by formulating its national program. The national program of the BUND was always much more restricted than its *Jewish national deed*. The BUND's activities surpassed all formulae, they were *much more* than the demand for national-political autonomy. Bundism in active life, in productive reality—not merely in programs and discussions—was created in Poland between the two world wars. With regard to influencing Jewish national life, this was the most productive period in the party's history. Here were created the examples of how high the "Diaspora Jewry" could reach—not by mechanically continuing the religious heritage of two thousand years, but through new values, created by the Jews' new experiences and dynamic endeavors.

As taught by Bundism, the Jews' attitude toward the world was to be not that of an onlooker from the outside, but that of concern for their own cause, *their own* fate: The re-making of the world, its rebuilding by Socialism is not a favor for somebody else, but air to breathe *for themselves*. This amalgamation of national and social salvation was a revolution in our national life. It gave us new outlooks, a new consciousness of ourselves, new responsibilities—and it made possible entirely new demands.

These were the two levels upon which Jewish life

developed throughout half a century. *The differences became greater in life than they had been in theory.* The dividing line appeared in almost every question of importance. Everywhere—in matters of language, culture, schools, community councils, international problems and those concerning the separate countries—the two viewpoints, the two ways, the two perspectives clashed. The two trains ran in different directions, pushed forward from within by strong driving forces * * *

* * * It is a mistake to suppose that the problem of our relation to the Jewish settlement in Palestine is a one-sided one * * * The relation to the Palestinian community is also a result of that community's attitude to all other parts of the Jewish people. The conceit preached in the Zionist camp has already been mentioned here. If, however, it had been a method of propaganda rather insofar as the older generation was concerned, the younger generation has already been

brought up in the spirit of a *superiority complex*, of a higher blue-blooded tribe * * * And thus the question concerns rather * * * the Palestinian community's attitude toward us; its understanding that it is part of a nation—not *the* nation which the Jews outside Palestine are expected to help and be subservient to * * *

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