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Report of World Zionist Congress at Basel, Switzerland, 1947.

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REPORT OF THE WORLD ZIONIST CONGRESS HELD  
IN BASLE, SWITZERLAND



By  
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, January 5, 1947



My dear Friends:

I am glad to be back with The Temple, with my friends after the tense and exacting few weeks that I spent in Switzerland at the World Zionist Congress. It is good to get back to one's people and to the normal routine of one's life after being tossed about for weeks in the political maelstrom of an international Congress. You are able to regain at home your equilibrium, your equanimity, your temple. You are also in a position to make up for a lot of lost sleep. For they turn night into day at those European Congresses, and what they can do quite adequately at three o'clock in the afternoon, they insist upon doing at three o'clock in the morning.

It is good also to be back in these United States, this blessed country of ours. One does not realize how fortunate one is, and how terribly grateful one ought to be for all one has until he visits post-war Europe, today. Switzerland is really an oasis in the desert of Europe. There is no want in Switzerland, although it is cold there for there is a shortage of coal, and prices are very high. But outside of Switzerland, on all sides, there is a cold, hungry, shattered and suffering Europe struggling desperately just to survive, a war-exhausted and very unhappy world. Americans should most zealously and most tenderly guard and protect their precious institutions and their traditions of freedom and tolerance which have given them a standard of living and a measure of security unknown in the European world. Americans should do their utmost to avoid all unnecessary strife and industrial conflicts which are prone to endanger their stability, the stability of their institutions and of their way of life and which might conceivably hurl them too into a chaos of disaster and suffering such as Europe finds itself in today. And Americans should share with the less fortunate of the world whatever they can of food and raiment, and of such other means as would help to restore the less fortunate peoples of Europe to a measure of normal life, however difficult that might be.

These are some of the convictions one brings back with him, even after a short visit in Europe today.



This World Zionist Congress which I attended was a difficult Congress because it met for the first time in seven years. Normally these Congresses are scheduled to meet every two years. During these seven years, perhaps the most tragic, the most shattering years in our entire history, there accumulated so much of confusion, so much of disillusionment, so much of bitterness, so much of resentment in Jewish life that it was inevitable that an international Congress meeting after these seven testing, tragic years would be a most difficult Congress.

I attended the last Congress which was held the end of August in Geneva. It was held on the very eve of the Second World War, and it closed rather abruptly in order to permit many delegates to return to their homes in Palestine, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Germany. Many of them returned to their homes only to end up in gas chambers. The Second World War was declared a day or two after I board the ship to return to the United States.

That Congress, too, in 1939, was a very difficult one. It was held in the shadow of the White Paper, the notorious White Paper which had just then been announced by the British Government and which represented a very serious set-back for our movement. And much of the heated arguments of that Congress resolved <sup>in</sup> another form, around the same issues really around which bitter arguments of this last Congress of 1946 resolved: how to resist the White Paper, how to undo its mischief; and whether the policy of close cooperation with the mandatory government ought not to be abandoned, and whether the leadership of Dr. Weizmann should be continued. At that Congress, seven years ago, I stood by the side of Dr. Weizmann. I differed with him in 1937 on issues of partition. At the Congress of 1939, I stood by his side. We were on the eve of the Second World War. It was clear to me, as it was clear to many others, that Great Britain would assume leadership in this war against the Nazis, against the most terrible enemies which our people faced. It was clear to us that we would be the natural allies of Great Britain in this war and that therefore we could not at the same time break with Great Britain over Palestine. We argued that there was no finality about the White Paper then promulgated.



It had been strongly attacked in the British Parliament itself by leading British statesmen. The Permanent Mandate of the League had condemned it. It did not represent the last word in British policy....

I was not convinced at the time that a policy of non-cooperation and non-resistance, which quite a number of the delegates advocated in 1939 was called for, especially in view of the approaching world war. I was personally doubtful at the time, and even convinced ... illegal immigration at time when the seas would be commanded by British Navies, and feared also disaster which unfortunately took place a year or two later in the cases of the Patria and the Struma.

The Geneva Conference of '39 adopted a sort of middle-course road. It declared its uncompromising hostility to the White Paper, and announced that the Jewish people would not acquiesce to it. It did not formally approve of illegal immigration although it was tacitly understood among the delegates that it would be continued. At the same time it proclaimed its unequivocal support of Great Britain in its defense of democracy in the Western World.

I mention these facts at this time in order to correct some impressions which some people would like to give currence to: (1) that I am by temperament and disposition a fanatical extremist (2) that I am by birth and breeding a bitter enemy of Great Britain and thus determined to drive the movement on to violent resistance (3) that I am and always have been an enemy of Dr. Weizmann and have been plotting his overthrow. If you haven't already read this in the paper, you will before many weeks have gone by.

I am a great admirer of the English people and have always been..... I have been fighting and am still fighting a wrong-headed policy of the British Government which I still hope will change.

I do not believe in violent resistance as such. I am not a militarist. I am a Rabbi. As long as other avenues are open, as long as other avenues are open,



resistance is the last weapon, the last desperate weapon to which one should resort. When all else fails, when all the doors are shut, one door has to be broken through.

How has any people ever won its freedom in the world? How did the revolutionary fathers in this country establish freedom?...Was their cause - "No taxation without representation" - any more just or holy than the cause of the security of the hundreds of thousands of refugees languishing in concentration camps who were being driven away from the shores of Palestine by tear gas and rubber truncheons?

And I am certainly an admirer of Dr. Weizmann. I am a friend and a great admirer of his. Some of you may recall that Dr. Weizmann graced this very pulpit on the occasion of my 25th anniversary. Shortly thereafter I delivered the address in honor of Dr. Weizmann at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. Some of you may be interested in reading the testimonial which was printed in his honor two years ago.

But all this is irrelevant to the political issues. Personal friendship has nothing to do with political problems. The most beloved man in England at the close of the world war was Winston Churchill, not only the most beloved man, but the man who scored the greatest victories for the British Empire in its history. Yet when the British people felt that British policy changed, they voted him out of office. Their admiration for him was the same. They wanted a change. Conditions called for change so they voted him out of office.

We are at the head of a political movement which has suffered so many serious reversals and set-backs until the movement finds itself in position where change needed. Whether the head of the movement should or should not resign has nothing to do with personal friendship and admiration. I did not at Basle, nor did I at any time seek the office of Dr. Chaim Weizmann. My ambitions lie in other directions altogether. I requested my colleagues in Basle not to propose my name. And they respected my wishes. There was a widespread feeling shared by most of the delegates that Dr. Weizmann was the symbol of a line and policy which had failed and which had



and which had to be abandoned, and that therefore he should not be re-elected. There was one other period when Weizmann failed to be re-elected. That was in 1931 -- also because of political set-back which the movement suffered under his leadership. For four years he was not head of the movement. Those four years were perhaps among the most fruitful of the movement. This feeling for need of change is not limited to one party nor to one country.

There were six parties represented at this Congress. Perhaps you would be interested to know something about it. There was the center party made up of General Zionists, the largest body of the Congress -- and I had the honor to be selected as chairman of this center party. To the right of this center party was the very important religious bloc known as the Mizrachi, and to the right of that were the Revisionists who this year, for the first time in nine years, came back to the World Zionist Movement after having withdrawn some nine years ago. They represented the extreme right. To the left of the center party, the general Zionists, were three Labor groups -- the Mapai, which is the largest Labor group, the Achdut Avodah, which sort of challenges the leadership of the Mapai, and finally the Hashomir Hatzair, the extreme left of the movement. These were the six parties represented at the Congress. And opposition to Dr. Weizmann and to his policies was strong in five out of these parties. The only group that was consistently and entirely for Dr. Weizmann were strangely enough, the Hashomir Hatzair, although they were opposed to everything he stood for. They were opposed to partition and to going to the London Conference. Within the Mapai there was a most bitter and prolonged controversy over the policies of Dr. Weizmann and over the question of retaining him as head of the movement. And the reason why the Congress was so lengthy was because this party could not come to an understanding on these issues.

It would simplify matters, I am afraid, and <sup>pay</sup> my own humble prowess too great a compliment to state that the ZOA delegates under my leadership were responsible for



the defeat of Dr. Weizmann. If Dr. Weizmann had chosen voluntarily to assume the post of honorary president, I am persuaded that a great sigh of relief would have been uttered by at least ninety percent of the delegates who attended the Congress at Basle. Voting against Dr. Weizmann's policies were not only the Revisionists, almost as a bloc, the Mizrachi, almost as a unit, some 70% of the general Zionists and the 2nd of the three labor groups, almost as a unit -- the Achdut Avodah. These delegates came from all over the world -- from America, Europe and Palestine.

I mention this because of some impressions which may have been gained from an article which appeared in the papers in Cleveland by Mr. Crossman who was one of twelve members of the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, Mr. Crossman being one of the six Britishers on the Commission, in which he referred to me as an "ambitious politician whose primary aim was to oust Dr. Chaim Weizmann." If you like a man's position he is a statesman. If you don't like it, he is a politician. At the very moment that Mr. Crossman's statement appeared in the local press, I received a letter from another member of this Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, one of the six Americans who were on this Commission. He seems to have a different point of view on this entire matter. James G. McDonald writes to me: (Quote his letter)

This is a sort of antidote to Mr. Crossman.

This is not the important thing, however. The important thing is the effort which is being made to suggest that what took place at Basle was exclusively an American maneuver, or an American achievement resented by the Europeans and by the Palestinians, an attempt on the part of the Americans to impose their control because of their financial prowess upon the world Zionist movement. This is fantastically unreal and false from beginning to end. To be sure the Americans will have to play an increasingly important role in the Zionist movement ~~but~~ because most of the Jewry left, except in Palestine, are American. Great European Jewry was tragically destroyed.

In America there are fine million Jews who represent the great reservoir of Jewish initiative, Jewish strength which the movement should draw upon increasingly



more and more not merely for financial support, but for political guidance and in every other way.

The issues at the World Zionist Congress boiled down to three -- the issue of resistance, the issue of whether we should go to the London Conference or not, and the issue of partition. Dr. Weizmann and those who were of like mind with him demanded an end to all forms of resistance, demanded that we go to the London Conference without any conditions since all conditions had already been rejected by the London Conference, and that we should negotiate for partition. Mr. Weizmann argued their case against resistance most eloquently. He did not draw any distinction between terrorist acts of murder and the shedding of innocent blood of certain dissident groups in Palestine who flout national discipline and authority, and the determined resolve of the respected and authorized Yishuv through the Haganah to resist illegal acts of the mandatory government to curb Jewish immigration and colonization. On this issue of resistance, the Congress was not with Dr. Weizmann. The Congress followed instinctively the mandate that "resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

If now, when the war is over, and no excuse of military necessity exists for keeping Jews out of Palestine, if now a government committed to the hilt by its party pledges to upbuild the Jewish National Home and to create in Palestine as rapidly as possible a Jewish National Home -- if such a government still persists in keeping in concentration camps hundreds of thousands of people, or sending them back to Cypress -- men, women and children who came in sight of the Holy Land -- children who never since their birth have known a home -- children eight, ten years old, who have never lived in a home -- then it is the clear moral duty of a people to resist such illegal and outrageous action. This is <sup>what</sup> ~~the~~ the Congress decided:

"The Congress declares that the persistent violation of the rights of the Jewish people has placed the Zionist movement and the Yishuv under the necessity and moral compulsion to resist unceasingly and with utmost vigor the present policy of the Mandatory which, being based on the White Paper, is devoid of all legal or moral validity."



But at the same time it came out clear and unequivocally against terrorism and it states:

"While upholding the right of the Yishuv to resist the policies of the present oppressive regime in Palestine, the Congress condemns murder and the shedding of innocent blood as a means of political warfare. The terrorist campaign to which certain dissident groups in Palestine have resorted in defiance of Jewish national authority serves to distort the true character of the Yishuv in the eyes of the world and to defeat rather than promote its legitimate struggle. The Congress pledges the full support of the Zionist movement to the Yishuv in its efforts against terrorism. It calls upon the members of the dissident organizations to desist from further shedding of innocent blood and to submit to the national discipline of the organized Yishuv and the Zionist movement."

Now as to the second issue -- about going to the London Conference. What was there about going or not going to the London Conference that provoked such a controversy. After all, why not go? If you don't like the results, you can go home. First all our experience with a similar Arab-Jewish Round Table was a very disastrous one. In 1939, Great Britain convoked this Round Table of Jews and Arabs after it decided not to implement the report of the Royal Commission which recommended the partitioning of Palestine, the setting up of one Arab State and one Jewish State and the Zionist Congress in 1937 had authorized negotiations with the British Government with a view to ascertaining His Majesty's Government's attitude on partition. But Great Britain changed her mind and abandoned the idea of partition and called an Arab-Jewish Round Table to find a proper solution. This Conference failed. No compromise solution resulted. As a result of this Round Table the White Paper was issued which practically ended in the complete surrender of the Arabs and the liquidation of the Jewish National Home. Naturally the Zionist movement ever since that time has been very chary about Round Tables.

This Round Table of 1946, <sup>was</sup> called by Morrison after Great Britain 1) rejected President Truman's request for the immediate transfer of 100,000 Jews to Palestine;



this Round Table was convoked after Great Britain rejected the unanimous findings of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry which recommended the immediate transfer of 100,000 Jews of Europe to Palestine; this Round Table was convoked in order to implement the Morrison scheme which was Great Britain's substitute for partition. This scheme divided, as you will recall, Palestine into Arab, Jewish and British provinces -- under the control of British administration. The Jews would be kept out of about 80% of Palestine and even in that little area there would be control by the British. And of course there was no status of statehood granted. The Jews rejected this Morrison scheme. The American Government refused to accept it. Nevertheless, Great Britain convoked this conference to implement this scheme.

In the meantime the Executive of the Jewish Agency, meeting in Paris early in August came forth with a solution of its own, a partition scheme of its own to solve the problem. Many of us regarded the action of the Executive as unwise, as contrary to the clear instructions which were laid down by the political bodies of the Zionist Movement. Be that as it may. It became clear before long that if you really believe that partition is the solution then the surest way not to get it is to proclaim to the world that you are willing to settle on half of what you are justly entitled to. As soon as we announced partition as our solution it became the Jewish solution and therefore unavailing as a compromise solution. And because the executive made such an offer of partition it had to insist before it could go into the conference, before it could go to the conference that partition was accepted as the basis for discussion. It could not make any proposals. It could have considered before, going or not going on its merits, whether there was more to be gained by going or by staying away. If it decided to go, it would have presented its full Zionist program and perhaps out of the conference deliberations some measures satisfactory to both would have evolved. This was no longer possible. This represented our absolute irreducible minimum. How can you go to a conference to negotiate with an irreducible minimum. One is expected to be reasonable at a conference, to be informal, to make concessions. The Agency was



no longer able to make concessions. It had already made its maximum concession. It was no longer free to go to the Conference without the protection of a prior commitment on the part of Great Britain that partition would be the basis for discussion. But that commitment Great Britain refused to give.

In August, Dr. Weizmann wrote a letter to the Colonial Office in behalf of the Executive in which he stated the conditions on which we could go the conference, namely:

"While the Agency was not prepared to participate in any discussion based on the Morrison Plan, it was prepared to participate in the Conference if the establishment of a viable Jewish State in an adequate area of Palestine was the purpose of the discussion.

"The Jewish Agency must have full freedom to designate its own delegates to the Conference, including any who were then detained or subject to detention.

"The Jewish Agency should invite, in consultation with His Majesty's Government, all the members of the Jewish Delegation to the Conference, it being understood that it would include among them representatives of other important bodies and organizations."

That was the position of the Executive of the Jewish Agency in August and September. Great Britain refused to commit itself, whereupon the members of the Agency decided to go anyhow. But they had to receive the sanction of a smaller Actions Committee which met in Jerusalem and this smaller Actions Committee refused to grant permission. On September 25, the Inner Zionist Council which spoke for the movement between congresses because the larger Actions Committee could not be convoked, resolved:

"The Council, having heard a report of the negotiations, declares that it does not find it possible for the Jewish Agency to participate in the London Conference. The Council empowers the Executive to continue its efforts with a view to bringing about preliminary conditions essential for the participation of the Jewish Agency in the Conference. The Executive shall submit the result of its efforts to a further meeting on the Inner Zionist Council for consideration and decision."



When the Congress met in Basle, Dr. Weizmann and the Executive asked for authority to go to the London Conference without any conditions, scrapping their own condition which they had made to the British Government. And that the Congress refused. The Congress demanded that we stand by the conditions which were made and a resolution was adopted -- the most important resolution adopted at the Congress, over which great controversy raged. It was as follows:

"that in the existing circumstances the Zionist movement cannot participate in the London Conference. If a change shall take place in the situation, the General Council of the Zionist Organization shall consider the matter and decide whether to participate in the Conference or not." This passed 171-154. But the other resolution which was against going, that of the Hashomir Hatzair also carried by some 25 or 26,

I would like to say a word about the resolution. It does not say that the Zionist movement breaks off relations with Great Britain, or the Executive shall not carry on any negotiations with Great Britain, but that the General Council of the Zionist Organization shall consider whether we should accept an invitation to attend the certain conference which was called. This was based on the experience of the last few years, particularly the last one. What we wanted was something more concrete on the part of Great Britain showing a change of heart, before the movement would go to the conference....

Now for the third and last issue, and I must draw to a close, though if more time more to be told. On the subject of partition per se no resolution was adopted. No resolution was raised because there were no partition proposals before the Congress. Nobody had made any to us. We adopted exactly the same line as was adopted by the Zionist Organization of America at its last convention in Atlantic City reaffirming the classic Zionist position. If proposals are made by Great Britain concerning partition we will then have time to consider them. At present Great Britain has made no proposals.

At the Zionist Convention in Atlantic City, the following resolution was



adopted which was reaffirmed by the Congress at Basle:

"The 22nd Zionist Congress reaffirms the following political demands repeatedly voiced by the Zionist organization: 1) That Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth integrated in the structure of the democratic world (2) that the gates of Palestine be opened to Jewish immigration and 3) that the Jewish Agency be vested with the control of immigration into Palestine and with the necessary authority for the upbuilding of our country."

I began by saying that the Congress was a difficult one. It was. However, there did emerge in the conflict of opinion from long deliberations a very clear line and clear directive. The movement is determined that there should be no more retreat. The movement is determined upon the defense of Jewish rights at all costs, and repudiated the leadership which did not represent this dynamic and militant mood of the movement. It elected an executive to carry out this line and these directives which is in the nature of a coalition executive representing the three most important parties of the movement, the center, the religious bloc and the Mapai Labor group. These three parties united in forming the executive. There will be an executive of nineteen, eight General Zionists, seven labor group -- the Mapai, and four from the Mizrachi.

There will be difficult days ahead. I am not at all in a position nor is anyone else to foretell what tomorrow or the next day will bring. It is uncertain how Great Britain will react to the Congress in Basle. It is difficult to know what the reaction will be towards these unfortunate happenings transpiring almost daily in Palestine. The movement may be in for another spell of very serious times. I hope not. But this is clear and I brought back this conviction with me from the Congress and from the representatives of the Jewish people from all parts of the world including those from the concentration camps of Europe. There is in the heart of these people who met there a determined resolve finally and at long last, regardless of cost, that there should be established with the aid of God and the sacrifice of the Jewish people



a Jewish state in the land of Israel for all Jews who want to or who have to go there, and they shall be free to go there. They are resolved that these tactics of evasion and ~~deception~~ maneuvers to outsmart the people shall be stopped. They mean to carry on in the long tradition of their own history, a fine tradition which fought for freedom, and a dream of all peoples who have had to fight for their freedom. They hope and pray that fighting will not be necessary... and that with the help of Great Britain and the United States a Jewish National Home finally will be granted to them. But they are determined that that shall ultimately be granted.

I pray that this coming year may see the lifting of the clouds and that the long black chapter which began with the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe and which led to the second World War and the destruction of six million of our people -- that this long black chapter will finally come to a close and at long last our people will be given a chance to live in dignity, quietitude, freedom in its own land.

