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Zionist Organization of America at World Zionist Congress, 1946.

TWENTY SECOND ZIONIST CONGRESS

Basle, Decemoer 10, 1946

A D D R E S S

by

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

(President, Zionist Organisation of America)



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President, Zionist Organisation of America

Delivered at Basle, 10th December, 1946.

When the story of American Jewry during the Second World War is fully told, it will be found to be one of high lights and deep shadows. Many fine and noble things were done. Many sad mistakes were made. Great opportunities were missed. The errors were those of the mind not of the heart. It will also be found that the masses were far ahead of their leaders. Their instinctive judgement was sounder. Their demand and readiness for action more forthright and determined.

2. The war matured American Jewry.. It brought it very close to the orbit of Jewish life and to the heart of the Jewish problem. Just as America became central to the world's political and economic life, and the decisive factor in the winning of the war, so American Jewry became central and indispensable to the total life of world Jewry. American Jewry was quick to grasp the new situation as well as the new challenge which confronted it, and to the best of its ability it tried hard to see to it that a great hour should not find it a small people.

3. You are well acquainted with the record of the material contributions which American Jews made through private and public agencies to help the stricken Jews of Europe. As the true knowledge of the conditions came to be understood, the response of the Jews of America became increasingly more generous. It is difficult to estimate what the total public and private aid amounted to. During this year alone, through the major though by no means exclusive agency, the United Jewish Appeal, more than \$100,000,000 will be raised. This creditable record is due to the fact that the Jews of America not only keenly felt the impact of the appalling tragedy which had overtaken their people, and reacted to the obligation of Jewish solidarity. One of the secrets of our survival is that there never was any isolationism amongst our people when disaster swept upon any segment of our people anywhere. The bond of Jewish unity was again tested during these years of wrath and was found strong and durable among the Jews of America, as among the Jews throughout the world. But there was another factor. There were, in many instances, close family ties which bound together the Jews of America with those who were living and dying in the several hells of Europe. Deep called unto deep- and the hearts of men living in the security and freedom of a blessed land went out to brother and sister, father and mother, kith and kin, who lived in the shadow of death, languished in concentration camps or walked the dolorous roads which led to death in the gas chambers or other human slaughter pens. Myriads of personal anxieties and tragedies deepened and intensified the compassionate efforts of American Jews to sustain and to rescue the Jews of Europe.

4. A valuable by-product of the numerous campaigns which were held in our country year after year, has been the education which was given to our people in the real status of Jewish life in the world today, and in the problems of Jewish survival. The American Jew is better informed today and more alert as a Jew than ever before. He is also better organized. These campaigns made necessary the organization of Jews in every community and of all classes and elements of Jewry. In each community new leaders have come to the front, many of them young, energetic and forward-looking, who are proud to be associated with a vital Jewish service and who derive deep spiritual satisfactions from their new and chosen association with the life of their people.

5. American Jewry also tried to assist in the rescue of European Jewry, and in their escape from the certain doom which threatened them. This called, of course, for governmental action. Unfortunately, in this regard they were very little successful.

6. The contribution of America to the solution of the greatest single humanitarian problem in modern history, that of rescuing millions of men, women and children from mass extermination, is not one which fills us with any measure of pride. It consisted mainly in sending representatives to a do-nothing conference on refugees; in belatedly appointing a committee on refugees of its own, whose accomplishments were insignificant; in sending away from its shores a shipload of helpless human beings who were to find their ultimate doom in the death holes of eastern Europe; and in the setting up, on the eve of a national election, of an American detention camp for 1,000 refugees at Oswego.

7. The whole world, and not only America, remained blind to the ruin and outrage of our people, which is beyond words, beyond tears, beyond all utterable woe. Spiritual paralysis attacked the world, and our moldering age found all sorts of excuses for doing nothing. There were transportation difficulties. There were immigration laws. There was a war on. Nowhere was there any appreciable exertion to rise above the quiddities of technicalities and the barriers of routine. And so, millions of our precious sons and daughters perished who might, otherwise, have been alive today.

8. The United States is not without its full share of blame for this terrible failure. Our country did not open its doors wide to rescue the trapped men, women and children. It did not offer even temporary asylum to them in numbers commensurate with the enormity of the tragedy. Actually, the number of visas which were granted was far below the quota allowed by our immigration laws. The number of Jews who were permitted to enter in some years was only a small fraction of the number which could have been admitted under the quota. America found it possible to transport and to admit to the United States more than a quarter of a million Nazi and fascist prisoners and to give them domicile for the duration of the war. It did not find it possible to do as much for Jews who were its friendliest allies.

9. I believe that much of the failure to achieve results, on the part of the American Jewish organizations which concerned themselves with this problem, was due to their lack of coordination, their working at cross purposes, their tardiness, and the political involvements of some of their leaders which kept them from exposing forcibly the do-nothing policy of the Government.

10. Realizing that it had been singled out by destiny for grave and unprecedented responsibilities, in consequence of the Second World War and the Hitlerian threat to Jewish existence, American Jewry resolved to organize itself on a representative national scale for effective action. The story of the organization and convocation of the American Jewish Conference is, I am sure, well known to you. But, I should like to call your attention to some significant facets of that conference which are indices to the new trends in American Jewish life and to the spirit of the American Jew of today.

11. The Conference was a culminating triumph of the democratic Jewish community over the vestigial oligarchy, self-appointed Hofjuden, which here and there still cling to or maneuver for leadership in American Jewish life. All classes and sections, and all parties in that democratically elected American Jewish Conference were represented. They served clear and decisive notice that American Jews were determined to choose their own spokesmen and to make their true convictions heard.

12. It was heartening to behold the overwhelming interest of these democratically elected representatives of American Jewry in Palestine and in Zionism. What transpired was not an artificially manipulated pro-Palestine demonstration. It was the gratifying product of Zionist education among the Jews of America, which was carried on over a period of years. We had not labored in vain. A scientific poll on Palestine, which was taken at a later date among American Jews, pointed to the same result. American Jewry was overwhelmingly in sympathy with the aims of Zionism.

13. An attempt was made by a very small minority at this Conference to reduce the issue of Palestine to one of immigration and to prevent the Conference from making a clear declaration on the Jewish commonwealth. They failed. The Conference issued a forthright and vigorous declaration on the Jewish commonwealth. The Jews of America assembled in that national Conference realized that on the eve of the great international adjustments and orientations, which the Second World War was destined to bring about, and at a time when undoubtedly tremendous decisions would be made affecting future generations, it would be folly for the Jewish people to confine their demands to a matter of immigration schedules and not to present their full case and their basic historic needs to the tribunal of American and world public opinion.

14. The enemies of Zionism grasped the full significance of this action of the American Jewish Conference when they finally resolved to break away from the Conference and to discredit it over the issue
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of the Jewish commonwealth. It is now being rumored about that these same enemies of the Jewish commonwealth resolution at the Conference, who were so bitter over its enactment that they seceded from the Conference and projected one of the most violent controversies on the American Jewish scene, have now been won over to the idea of partition - to a little Jewish commonwealth. I wish here to sound a word of caution and warning. No one is more welcome in our ranks than the convert and repentant sinner. This is in keeping with an ancient Jewish tradition. We should make sure, however, that they are indeed repentant and converted before we entrust them with any responsible role in any negotiation which may involve the fate and destiny of the Jewish national home.

15. The same political maturity which American Jewry manifested in the American Jewish Conference was evidenced in the last few years also in Zionist activities and techniques, and more especially in the fundamental line which American Zionism came to adopt. You will recall that at the last Zionist Congress which met in Geneva on the eve of the war, a special American Emergency Committee was created by the World Zionist Executive.

16. The Emergency Committee for Zionist affairs - later to become known as the American Zionist Emergency Council - was established with two purposes in view. The possibility was foreseen that, as a result of the war, the headquarters of the Zionist Organization in Jerusalem might, by reason of invasion or otherwise, be completely cut off from the rest of the movement. It was desirable accordingly, that there should be in existence in America a body which could, if need be, assume the authority and the functions of Zionist leadership. But it was further recognized that, whether America entered the war or not, the attitude of that country was likely to be of decisive importance in determining the future of the Jewish National Home. With the eclipse of the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe, the center of gravity for Zionism, outside Palestine, had moved clearly and unequivocally to the American continent. On American Zionists would now devolve duties and responsibilities, on the due discharge of which might well depend the fate of the Jewish people in Palestine. With this in mind, it was essential that an effective instrument be created, whose purpose it should be to bring home to the American public and to American political leaders the needs of the Jews as a people and the meaning of Palestine to the Jewish future. A major task of public relations, of political action and education was involved, requiring a concentration of all available forces in American Zionism.

17. The first eventuality which the Executive had in mind in setting up the Emergency Committee was, happily, not realized. Despite periods of imminent danger, Palestine and the Yishuv remained safe during the war. Zionist communications by letter and cable with the rest of the Jewish world, outside of Europe, though subject to various wartime difficulties and restrictions, were maintained without interruption. In particular, the Zionist Executive in Jerusalem continued to function and from time to time sent out
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some of its leading members to guide and inform the movement abroad. It was, accordingly, on the second task- that of directing and coordinating Zionist public relations and policy in America- that the work of the Emergency Committee has been primarily concentrated.

18. It is gratifying that all Zionist parties in the United States were able to work together in the Council with a minimum of friction and with a large measure of effectiveness.

19. The issue which agitated American Zionists most in the last few years was the proper attitude to take towards our government's handling of the Palestine issue. Some of us felt that our Government was derelict in pressing for our rights to which the American government and the American people stood committed. Others were unwilling to embarrass the administration or to embarrass themselves with the administration. This issue in our own ranks was bound, sooner or later, to come to a head and it did. After a period of sharp controversy and public debate, the issue was decided in favor of those who believed in a frank, forthright and resolute approach to our Government and in the mobilization of American public opinion, Jewish and non-Jewish, for a determined representation to our Government that it must not rest content with promises and more statements, but that it must act.

20. The attitude of the American Government towards our cause through the years, in all fairness, might be characterized as one of mere benevolent neutrality. Our Government was at all times kindly disposed, but it persisted in doing nothing about it. It was fashionable for public officials to give warm endorsement to our movement, and it was generally assumed, even among some of our Zionist leaders, that that was all that we could really expect from our Government. This attitude persisted even after the White Paper of 1939 was issued. Our Government made no protest whatever against this unilateral and unwarranted action of the British Government which clearly violated the Anglo-American Convention of 1924.

21. When the United States entered the war even this attitude of benevolent neutrality was abandoned. By 1942 the subject of Zionism had become taboo in Washington. The word had gone through Washington that for the duration of the war the subject of Zionism should be avoided. This became the official line. But Zionist leaders preferred to remain blindly unaware of it. The President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Great Britain had actually come to the point of issuing an official request for the cessation of all discussions of the Palestine question. Fortunately, this was averted through energetic intervention. It was clear that a change had to be forced in this attitude in Washington if our cause was ever to have a chance. Our demands had to be placed on the agenda of the political thought and concern not only of the United States, but of the world. All through 1943 we carried on an energetic campaign of education among the American people and in political circles.

22. March 31st, 1944, was the deadline set by the White Paper. We accordingly intensified our political action, urging the immediate abrogation of the White Paper. Pro-Zionist resolutions were introduced into both houses of Congress in the early months of 1944. It took nearly two years, however, before these resolutions were adopted, not because Congress was unwilling to proceed. The Congress of the United States was always in sympathy with our cause. First, however, the War Department intervened on the grounds of military expediency, and then the President of the United States, who had himself come out unequivocally for a Jewish Commonwealth, stubbornly resisted the passage of a Palestine resolution favoring such a commonwealth. Some Zionist leaders unfortunately were short-sighted enough to collaborate in this effort of the Administration to defeat action.

23. On the eve of the White Paper deadline President Roosevelt authorized a statement to the effect that "the American Government had never given its approval to the White Paper of 1939", This statement of the President of the United States broke a long and, to the Jews of Europe, a dreadfully costly silence. Nearly five years had elapsed since the issuance of the White Paper and all through that time our Government had not registered a single official objection. Meanwhile millions of our people perished. Unfortunately, even this declaration of the President was not followed up by any representation to the British Government, and, as if to indicate that the President's statement did not imply any new departure on the part of our Government in its policy towards Palestine, the heads of the Arab countries were informed by our State Department, with the approval of the President, that no decision on Palestine would be reached without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews. Such assurances were not at all called for, nor were they at all in the spirit of the Anglo-American Convention. It was not until three years later that this position of the American Government was modified so that the admission of 100,000 Jews which President Truman requested did not involve any change in the basic policy of the United States touching Palestine, and, therefore, did not call for consultation with the Arabs.

24. We continued our political activity throughout 1944. We succeeded in having pro-Zionist planks introduced into the platforms of both our major political parties- an unprecedented event. On Oct. 15th of that year, on the eve of our national elections, President Roosevelt sent to the Convention of the Zionist Organization of America a message in which he expressed satisfaction that, in accordance with the traditional American policy, and in keeping with the spirit of the four freedoms, the Democratic Party at its July Convention this year included a plank in its platform; 'We favor the opening of Palestine to unrestricted immigration and colonization, and such a policy to result there in the establishment of a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.' Efforts will be made to find appropriate ways and means of effectuating this policy as soon as possible. I know how long and ardently the Jewish people /have

have worked and prayed for the establishment of Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth. I am convinced that the American people give their support to this aim, and if reelected I shall help to bring about its realization."

25. But this admirable statement, too, was not followed up by any action. In fact, the events which followed proved greatly disturbing. Early in February of 1945 President Roosevelt met with Ibn Saud and discussed Palestine with him. The correspondence which followed between the President and Ibn Saud, which was made public a few months later, was alarming. In this correspondence the President again assured Ibn Saud that no decision with respect to the basic condition in Palestine would be taken without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews. Furthermore, that the President would take no action which might prove hostile to the Arab people. Since the attitude of the Arab people was quite well known to the President, and was made absolutely clear to him by Ibn Saud, this assurance meant that no action whatsoever would be taken to change the status quo, which was keeping Jews out of Palestine.

26. Thus throughout the Roosevelt administration, the United States Government was determined to take no action whatsoever and to make no representations whatsoever to the British Government either to open the doors of Palestine to Jewish immigration, or to live up to the other obligations which it had assumed under the mandate. On strategic occasions statements were issued to assure the Jews of America that the Government of the United States was heartily in sympathy with their aspirations. It was an unpleasant task for Zionist leaders to draw attention to these simple and unpalatable facts, and these leaders were bitterly attacked from time to time, even by some Zionists, as enemies of the administration, or as rough and inexperienced men who do not know the subtleties of diplomacy and do not understand the refinements of true statemanship.

27. The action of President Truman in connection with the 100,000 refugees was a welcome turning point, not in American policy on Palestine to be sure, but in the sustained policy of the former administration to do absolutely nothing to help Jews get into Palestine. The President made his request on purely humanitarian grounds. Nevertheless, this marked a real step forward in the direction of intervening actively in the Palestine situation. But the hand of the new Chief Executive also soon faltered. Instead of pressing vigorously and with the authority and prestige of the Government of the United States upon Mr. Atlee to accede to his request, he accepted a refusal and yielded to a counterproposal for a Joint Committee of Inquiry, which was a palpable delaying device and an excuse for inaction. You may recall that I urged that our movement should ignore this Committee of Inquiry and should not appear before it, especially since Mr. Devin had made it clear that the real purpose of the committee was to liquidate the Zionist movement. Nevertheless, the World Zionist Executive decided to cooperate with the committee and the American Zionist
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Emergency Council made a full and , I believe, a very creditable presentation of our case before this committee.

28. When President Truman made public the report of this committee on April 30th of this year, he stated, " I am very happy that the request which I made for the immediate admission of 100,000 Jews into Palestine has been unanimously endorsed by the Committee of Inquiry. The transfer of these unfortunate people should now be accomplished with the greatest dispatch..... In addition to these immediate objectives, the report deals with many other questions of long-range political policies and questions of International law which require careful study and which I will take under advisement."

29. This was a sound and statesmanlike position to take. Unfortunately, here again the hand of the Chief Executive faltered. The President failed to follow through and our State Department announced that no immediate action would be taken in behalf of these refugees without first acting on all the other recommendations of the report. Our State Department went through the motions of inviting Arab and Jewish representatives to present their views on the recommendations of the Committee, as if these views were not already fully known. After considerable delay a Cabinet Committee on Palestine, consisting of the Secretaries of State, of War and of the Treasury was appointed to assist the President in the early consideration of the recommendations of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry.

30. After another delay American technical experts were sent to London to meet with British experts and to discuss the logistics involved in the transfer of the 100,000 . Finally the Cabinet Committee dispatched to London its three deputy members to meet with the British - Not to get the 100,000 Jews moving into Palestine, but to work out the implementation of all the recommendations of the Committee of Inquiry. The results of the labors of these deputy members was the well-known Grady-Morrison plan, which I am sure is fresh in your minds. What the report recommended was not a plan for implementing the recommendations of the Committee of Inquiry, but an utterly new and radically different substitute plan. On the advice of Secretary of State Byrnes, President Truman was prepared to approve this report for the American Government. The decisive role which American Zionists played in having this scheme rejected by the American Government is well known to you.

31. It was at this juncture after the rejection of the Grady plan by the American Government, that the Executive of the Jewish Agency came forward with its partition proposals and sent an emissary to Washington, who presented them to the members of the Cabinet Committee and to others, The role of the American Zionists in connection with this action will, I am sure, be fully told at this Congress, and I will not dwell upon it here.

32. The November elections in the United States offered us the opportunity to place before the American people the failure of /the

the foreign policy of the Administration with regard to Palestine. We mobilized American opinion to demand, in the name of American principles and American commitments, action from our Government. Our purpose was not to elicit another statement from the White House - of these the records show that we have had quite a number. Nevertheless, the pressure aroused by public opinion was so great that on October 4th the President did issue a statement in which he strongly urged that in view of the postponement of the London Conference "substantial immigration into Palestine cannot wait a solution to the Palestine problem, and that it should begin at once. Preparations for this movement have already been made by this Government,, and it is ready to lend its immediate assistance!" With reference to the ultimate solution for Palestine, the President took note of the Agency's proposal. It was his belief that a solution along these lines would command the support of public opinion in the United States. However, the President did not commit the United States to the Agency's proposals, but indicated that the Government is prepared to give its support to a compromise as between the partition scheme of the Agency and the Grady-Morrison plan. President Roosevelt, you will recall, went much further in this regard than President Truman. He stated that the American people give their support to the establishment of Palestine (that is to say, the whole of Palestine) as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth, and if reelected he would help to bring about its realization.

33. However, in answering King Ibn Saud's protest on the President's statement of October 4th, President Truman took a far more positive attitude towards our cause than did his predecessor. He declared;, "It is only natural.... that this government should favour, at this time, the entry into Palestine of considerable numbers of displaced Jews in Europe, not only that they may find shelter there, but also that they may contribute their talents and energies to the up-building of the Jewish National Home." The President furthermore rejected Ibn Saud's accusations against the Jews, declaring that he is "convinced that responsible Jewish Leaders do not contemplate a policy of aggression against the Arab countries adjacent to Palestine." For the first time, the unwarranted intervention of King Ibn Saud in the Palestine situation was dealt with in a forthright manner by the President of the United States.

34. Up to his return from the recent Paris conference late in October, Secretary of State Byrnes did not concern himself much with the Palestine problem, or reasons best known to himself. Within recent weeks there have been clear indications that he has taken active charge of the matter. He understands the full gravity and urgency of the problem. He has been personally conferring with Mr. Benin on the subject. It is too early to say how firm and persistent he will be in pressing for Jewish rights in Palestine and for a just and early solution. Here is where, my friends, the road ends at the moment. It remains to be seen whither it will lead from here on.

35. If I were to summarize the activities of American Jewry /with

reference to Palestine during and since the war I would say that in the fields of organization, education and propaganda, and material support, it did well. It carried on an effective job of public relations. It brought the message of Zionism to Christian and Jew alike. It enrolled leading Christian Americans, both of the laity and the clergy, in our cause. It won the cooperation of nearly all the members of the Congress of the United States. More than forty State Legislatures in our Union, which represent approximately 85% of the population of the United States, adopted resolutions in our behalf. Organized American labor came solidly to our support. A scientific poll, taken among the American people registered an overwhelming sympathy for our objectives. American Jewry is solidly behind our movement. The Anglo-Jewish press and especially the Yiddish press have been valiant champions. The American rabbinate, orthodox, conservative and reform alike, - and in our country we do not investigate the theologic credentials of those who wish to serve our cause, - have been strong spokesmen of our movement, and much of our effective leadership has come from their ranks.

36. There has been a growing awareness of Zionism among the Jewish youth of America. Many of them have been aroused and stirred by the events of recent years. Not only the tragedy of world Jewry, but the magnificent struggle of the Yishuv has appealed to the imagination of American Jewish youth. The fact of an embattled Israel fighting heroically for its rights against tremendous odds is drawing our young people closer to us in bonds of pride and solidarity. It is our hope that we shall be able to develop a large movement of Chalatziut among the young Jews of America, and that we shall be able in the years to come to provide Palestine not only with financial support and political under-girding, but also with fine human material.

37. There does exist a small, well-financed and highly vociferous group of anti-Zionists who are actively on the scene. They do create frequent embarrassments for us. Their size and importance, however, is not overestimated by the American Government.

38. We succeeded during these recent years to clarify to ourselves our own Zionist position and, after some struggle, to agree upon a forthright, aggressive and militant line of action which involves the mobilization of American Jewry for political action at strategic moments in behalf of a policy of which the American people have approved and which the Congress of the United States twice adopted.

39. American Zionists also succeeded in impressing upon their Government the fact that the Palestine issue is not a peripheral one, one that can be treated lightly, but that it must become one of the major objectives of American foreign policy, to which it must devote as much of its thought and energy as it does to other important political problems in other parts of the world. Palestine is a major international political problem to which far-sighted statesmen have pointed time and again as containing disastrous explosive possibilities for the peace of the world.
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The United States Government, not only because of its Palestine commitments, but also because of the dominant role which it now plays in international affairs, must treat this problem not as something incidental to its diplomatic activities, to which it give a passing thought only when prodded by an unhappy electorate. The American Zionists and their friends throughout the country have I believe, convinced our Government that the interest of the American people in this subject is deep, earnest and persistent, and that its demands will not be satisfied until action takes the place of pronouncements and promises.

40. In the political field we have, as yet, had only minor, tactical successes. We fully realize that our battle days are far from over. We believe that our Government is now moving in the right direction. That is all that we can say. The future is very uncertain. We may be facing new disappointment. We shall not be discouraged nor deterred. We are not going into the battle empty-handed. We know our strength, our faith, our resolute purposes. We have learned not to yield to wishful thinking and pleasant illusions. We have forged a strong movement. We have a loyal and disciplined army of followers ready to give of themselves, of their substance and of their loyalty and devotion to the cause of a free Israel in a free land of Israel. This great testing hour of Jewish destiny will not find American Jewry wanting.



