

Preface

Shevah Weiss was born on July 5, 1935, in Boryslaw, Poland (today Boryslav in Ukraine), to Gienia and Meir Wolf Weiss. During the Holocaust, his father fashioned a hiding place measuring sixty centimeters wide for the family behind the wall of their store. He built bunk beds, one on top of the other, up to the ceiling. Weiss lived there with his parents, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, cousin and a neighbor, who lay down all day in that tiny space. Later they stayed in the basement of a children's orphanage. A few neighbors, subsequently to be recognized as Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem, Israel's World Holocaust Remembrance Center, provided them with food and water. "There we ate a slice of black and shriveled bread, one slice for the day, a slice seasoned with unsanitary water," Weiss recalled: "My father cooked a soup consisting of one potato and water for our whole group. But in the end, we were reduced to chewing book covers made of genuine leather."

Through the crack in the northern wall, he looked at the road leading from the forest. Ukrainians would pass this way on holidays and feast days on their way to church. "Along this route," Weiss remembered, "the soldiers led the Jewish men and women into the woods and then we heard the sound of gunshots. Once I looked through this crack at the daily death march and, among the marchers, I saw my aunt and her children, my cousins."

In 1947, Weiss emigrated to British Mandate Palestine as part of Youth Aliya, the Zionist movement's program to rescue Jewish youth from Europe. The teenager became known for a phenomenal memory, and wrote a number of puzzle books as well as presenting a radio show. Weiss went on to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, served in the IDF military forces as a sergeant in the Engineering Corps and assistant to the command education officer, then in 1975 became a professor of political science at Haifa University. He entered political life in 1969 with his election to the Haifa municipal council. In 1981, he was elected to the Knesset on the Labor Party slate, served as a Deputy Speaker between 1988 and 1992, and was elected Knesset Speaker during Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's second government from 1992 until 1996.

On November 4, 1995, Weiss stood on stage with Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres for a rendition of the *Song for Peace* at the end of a rally in Tel Aviv. At the song's conclusion, Rabin came off the stage and was assassinated by Yigal Amir.

Losing his Knesset seat, in 2000 Weiss was appointed Israel's ambassador to Poland, a post he would occupy until 2004. He also served as chairman of the Yad Vashem Council from 2000 until 2006. In January 2004, for his contribution to the growing cooperation between Poland and Israel, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski bestowed upon him the Grand Cross (1st class) of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland. Thirteen years later, while awarding Weiss with Poland's highest honor, the Order of the White Eagle, at a ceremony in Jerusalem, President Andrzej Duda called Weiss "a son of the Jewish nation and Polish soil," and hailed his role in promoting closer ties between Israel and Poland.

In his special way, this Holocaust survivor with numerous achievements and a mastery of five languages reached many hearts, always with a pipe in his hand and a good story to tell. In 2001, while Poland was astir, shaken over Jan T. Gross's slim volume *Neighbors* for its explosive charge of how on July 10, 1941, ethnic Poles of Nazi-occupied Jedwabne and a few from the surrounding area massacred close to 1,600 of their fellow Jewish citizens, Weiss visited that village incognito with only his security guard and a driver. He cried uncontrollably for some time at the scene of premeditated murder, rare indeed for him. Five years later, on the way to a course at the Israeli president's invitation for guides to Poland, Weiss related that during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, as he was being interviewed by a Polish TV broadcaster, a large sound could clearly be heard not far from the Haifa station. Told that this had come from a rocket hitting the city, the frightened woman asked: "Perhaps you are not so suited for the Middle East?" Weiss answered in his native Polish: "*Być może. Ale już próbowaliśmy z tobą*"—"Perhaps. But we already tried with you." On February 3, 2023, the accomplished, proud Israeli died in Tel-Aviv, his final resting place Jerusalem's Har Herzl.¹

For more than five decades, I have devoted my scholarly pursuits to these same two intertwined subjects—the Holocaust and Israel's sovereign rebirth. Undoubtedly the most significant events in modern Jewish history, if not in all of Jewry's bimillennial experience since the destruction by Roman Legions of the Second Holy Temple in Jerusalem, they continue to claim my primary attention. As to the *Shoah*, the Hebrew term for the Holocaust, a fundamental query arises: When Europe's Jews lived in the half-life between rescue and death, with the darkness of the latter claiming most in Adolf Hitler's uncompromising "Final

Solution of the Jewish Question,” what explains the moral collapse of the free world which stood by when confronted by the ongoing systematic slaughter? As to the emergence of the renewed State of Israel, what factors made the arc of history bend to that momentous denouement? As in my past writing, the essays that follow seek to shed further light on these critical questions.

Chapter one, an examination of the career of Theodor Herzl, serves as the prelude to this volume. The father of political Zionism, an assimilated, liberal author who sought to join the best of Western culture to a traditional Jewish hope for “the return to Jerusalem,” had an almost prophetic sense that apocalyptic catastrophe loomed for his people unless a mass exodus from Europe occurred soon. Creating the ideology and instruments to enable Jews, for millennia viewed as the eternally persecuted “other,” to reenter history as actors in their own fate, his dream would be turned into Jewish destiny. Yet the desacralized, progressive “Jews’ state” that this Zionist zealot envisioned cannot be a nation “like all other nations” (*KeKhol Am V’Am*), the phrase even entered in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. It cannot be divorced from the spiritual, moral essence which has always made Judaism unique. The content of the specific Jewish experience, its quality both in the State of Israel—where the totality of Judaism can be lived – and in the Diaspora, is fundamental. It still remains to be realized.

Chapter two examines the valiant but fruitless efforts in the years 1933–1935 by James G. McDonald, then serving as the League of Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees (Jewish and Other) Coming from Germany, which culminated in his much publicized, lengthy letter of resignation. Presciently, but to no avail, the tall American warned that the Nazi concepts of “blood, race, and soil,” propagated with “fanatical enthusiasm,” menaced not only Jews, but “all those who remain definitely loyal to the old ideals of religious and individual freedom.” That historic document and the subsequent Petition to the League in its support reflected honorable failures at a time when Hitler’s Third Reich and others in the international arena insisted on the absolute supremacy of states, leaving the Jews, not masters of their own destiny, vulnerable to unimaginable, brutal tragedy.²

The tumultuous 1930s found that defenseless people hounded across the European Continent. Chapter three reviews how the shadow of the Nazi swastika darkened Poland, Rumania, and many other countries, where virulent Jew-hatred assaults were common knowledge. Throughout that perilous decade, statesmen who grappled with unemployment, rearmament, chauvinism, xenophobia, and pervasive antisemitism shut their hearts and their doors to trapped Jews. Aside from appeasing Germany, these powers regularly

masked the communal identity of world Jewry behind the term “refugees” (such as in the very title of the July 1938 Evian Conference on Refugees) or denied it outright. None could have foreseen the Holocaust, when Jewish hopes would be literally reduced to ashes, but all sensed the screw press of history inexorably tightening around Europe’s Jews.³

The young Palestinian Hillel Kook (alias Peter Bergson), echoing the call of Revisionist-Zionist leader Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky, sought to gain American non-partisan backing for a Jewish army to fight alongside the Allied forces against Hitler. Chapter four relates how, with a few right-wing Irgun Tzva’i Le’umi emissaries in the United States under his command and the spirited pen of famed Hollywood writer Ben Hecht, Kook garnered widespread support. When news of the Nazi annihilation campaign became public, the group immediately shifted its efforts towards the imperative of rescue. Their ceaseless campaign played a decisive role in the creation of the US War Refugee Board in January 1944. Yet fundamental decisions rested with Washington and London (Moscow ignored the entire matter), whose leaders chose not to try to save an innocent people uniquely targeted for death in World War II, an independent entity desperate for, and surely deserving of, help in its darkest hour.⁴

The debate over Zionism and the Jewish future as conducted between Milton Steinberg, Morris S. Lazon, and Jerome Frank is the subject of chapter five. Steinberg’s *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem*, published in the autumn of 1945, well reflected its author’s embrace of Zionist aspirations. Frank, once associated with the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism, would eventually join in a legal brief to the UN General Assembly in September 1947 advocating for a Jewish State despite harboring some personal ideological reservations. The Council’s Lazon remained obdurate in opposition. American Jewry, however, seared by the fires of the Holocaust, overwhelmingly rallied to the political Zionist banner after World War II, understanding the indissoluble link that existed between catastrophe and sovereignty.

Chapter six brings to light for the first time the best juridical defense for the Zionist objective before the UN General Assembly’s seminal vote of November 29, 1947, to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The genesis of *The Basic Equities of the Palestine Problem*, a memorandum composed by eight distinguished American Jewish practitioners of the law, emerged from London’s requesting the UN for its recommendation as regards a settlement for the highly contested country. A detailed analysis of that legal brief reveals that its authors focused on the official Allied promises regarding Palestine that had been made to the Jewish people worldwide for

over a quarter of a century; the tragic situation of the Holocaust survivors in Europe; and Palestinian Jewry's impressive achievements in reclaiming the land while much benefiting the Arab population there—this despite Great Britain's subverting its obligations under the League of Nations Mandate. The document had “great—perhaps decisive—influence on the thinking of most members of the United Nations Assembly,” wrote James G. McDonald, soon to become the first US ambassador to the new State of Israel.

Poland's consistent refusal to acknowledge the violence and killings committed by Poles against their Jewish neighbors while under the German occupation, the subject of chapter seven, reflects that government's use and abuse of history. A vigorous challenge by Polish historians to the official narrative, stretching from the year 2000 to the present, continues to meet with strong recrimination from right-wing Polish nationalist groups. The latter majority in parliament passed a Holocaust Law making suggestions that Poland bore responsibility for alleged Nazi crimes in the country a criminal offense (amended under international pressure to a civil offense), in turn triggering a new wave of agitation against Jews in the media and the internet. Another law effectively prevents Jews from receiving restitution for property stolen from their families during the Holocaust. Strained relations with the State of Israel are only slowly being mended. Antisemitism in Poland has not disappeared, while prevalent universalizing of the Holocaust refuses to acknowledge that Jews, not the ethnic Poles, faced annihilation. A full, honest healing has yet to begin.

The final chapter begins with a description of how I came to write *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust*, the first overview of how and why those governments and organizations outside of Hitler's *Festung Europa* responded in the years of Jewry's bleakest travail. *The Jews Were Expendable* also details how a few courageous souls attempted to shatter the Allied conspiracy of silence, as well as the prevailing illusion that nothing could be done. Yet their valiant race against calculated mass-production murder wrested only limited successes. Zealous killers and indifferent bystanders, by depersonalizing the Jews of Europe, marked these innocents for doom. The chapter then reviews my subsequent publications and additional scholarship on the world of the bystanders which appeared during the forty years since that volume's appearance in 1983, including those studies which sought to exonerate the scant record of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in whom Jews placed their greatest trust, and the inaction of other Allied leaders in World War II.⁵

As the Holocaust continues to be universalized, trivialized, even brazenly denied outright, it is essential to understand that the Nazi regime's firm conviction of the Jew as the incarnation of evil threatening world survival, shared by collaborator nations and driven by a pathological, Manichean view, was not countered by an Allied will to save. Already evident ever since Hitler's ascension to the German chancellorship on January 30, 1933, the kingdom of barbed wire and death would consequently enjoy an unbridled reign, human beings reduced to ash and anonymity. Two out of every three of Europe's Jews (ninety percent and more in Eastern Europe) and 5,000 of their communities were obliterated forever. Further, as John Updike, recipient of the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, put it years later, Auschwitz-Birkenau and the other death camps "ended forever Europe's concept of itself as civilized and of the Western world as proceeding under a benign special Providence."⁶

Most Holocaust survivors had few doubts about Jewish independence in Palestine. A few days after Bergen-Belsen's liberation on April 15, 1945, by British troops, a few hundred Jewish prisoners, knowing that they were being recorded by the BBC radio service, sang the Zionist anthem *HaTikva* ("The Hope"). The first large boatload to reach Haifa harbor after V-E Day, including 242 traumatized orphans from Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen, hoisted a Zionist flag when arriving aboard the *Mataroa* on July 15, 1945. The first conference of the "surviving remnant" (*Sh'eirit HaPleita*), convening on July 25 in St. Ottilien, Germany, demanded "the immediate establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine, the recognition of the Jewish people as an equal with all the Allied nations, and its inclusion in the peace conference." They would return to their ancestral patrimony, united in the firm belief that Jews possessed the inalienable right to self-determination in the one country that had seen their emergence as an autonomous people and that beckoned now as the end to their anguished wanderings in exile.

This remnant came to the identical conclusion drawn by Dr. Elchanan Elkes, heroic chairman of the Kovno (Kaunas) *Judenrat*, who had written a last testament to his son Joel in London on October 19, 1943: "Try to settle in the Land of Israel. Tie your destiny to the land of our future. Even if life there may be hard, it is a life full of content and meaning."⁷ With no state of their own—the Zionists had always grasped this—Jews under the swastika could conveniently be considered by the free world powers expendable in the World War II years. Thereafter, Jews everywhere, bolstered by impressive non-Jewish support and now converts to political supremacy in the biblically covenanted Promised Land, hailed the tangible Jewish community (*Yishuv*) of 600,000 strong in

Eretz Israel that was ready to fight for self-government and the only collective entity prepared to receive the survivors.

Jewish intellectuals Hannah Arendt, George Steiner, and their like might still champion the alienation of “the exiled Jew,” calling for a common human consciousness that dissolves barriers of language, ethnicity, and territory, but, as we are reminded by literary master and critic Cynthia Ozick, herself taunted in childhood as a “Christ-killer,” “universalism is the ultimate Jewish parochialism.”⁸ Abstractions, though alluring, must yield to reality. That actually insular view overlooks the need, then as now, of the centuries-old “pariah people”⁹ leading a sovereign existence freed of the indignities of persecution, marginality, and assimilation. From Israel’s Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948, and beyond, the Jewish people re-entered the arena of world history, actors in their own fate¹⁰ at last afforded a place in the family of nations. Its restoration after 2,000 years gave official stamp to the audacity of vision and the depth of the revolution that is Zionism.

A loving family has eased my professional dedication to exploring these two complex themes. My sisters and their spouses, my brother, my children and their spouses, and my grandchildren, with keen understanding and unflagging encouragement, have each played their individual part in the loom on which my narratives have been woven over the years. My dear wife Phyllis has provided incomparable gifts of warmth and grace. Professor Michael Popkin, former colleague at Touro College and head of its Humanities-Literature department, again merits my great appreciation for reviewing the text for clarity. He is a cherished friend. Thanks are also due to the collaborative effort, as in the past, of Touro University Press and Academic Studies Press in bringing the manuscript to ultimate publication, and to Dr. Alan Kadish, President of Touro University, for his support.

I have been privileged, like the biblical Joseph (Genesis 50:23), to see the first births of my fourth generation. This volume is dedicated with much affection to Shachar Ayelet Simon, Ofri Yael Simon, Matan Binyamin Mayer, Yakira Nili Mayer, Gilad Daniel Haik, Eyal Oren Haik, Sophie Leora Mayer, Avery Micah Mayer, and all my great-grandchildren to follow. Despite the Holocaust, the triumph of radical evil against powerless European Jewry, our planet is plagued by on-going genocides, terrorism, antisemitism, and baseless hatreds that continue to stigmatize and target certain human beings as “the other.” To wage resolute battle against these, to forge a better tomorrow, the clarion call of truth and human decency must be answered forthrightly. I wish them to appreciate in time that complacency must give way to personal commitment, and that active compassion which flows from mutual need must replace the crime of indifference.

As for the State of Israel, I hope that they will become conscious of the fact that the victorious Principal Allied Powers at the 1920 San Remo Conference recognized, with the wording of a solemn pledge that was to be repeated by the League of Nations when according the Mandate for Palestine to Great Britain two years later, “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.” Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah have unabashedly committed themselves to Israel’s destruction, while the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority’s “pay for slay” bounties award monthly salaries and benefits to terrorists and the families of “martyrs.”¹¹ Moreover, the Third Jewish Commonwealth is regularly and singularly vilified by the very international organization that had bestowed upon it a certificate of national legitimacy. A global delegitimization, even a demonizing campaign, denies the one Jewish state the right to be.

Yet *Medinat Yisrael*, despite the precariousness of survival in several Arab wars against its very existence, stands steadfast. Echoing Judaism as the voice of hope, it proudly and deservedly celebrates a seventy-sixth birthday. There is much remarkable achievement to salute, a community with continuity of heritage and language intact that defies historical parallel. There is more yet to be done to preserve its robust Jewish and democratic character. The transformation from unimaginable rupture to extraordinary revival, against all odds, continues apace.

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