

PALESTINE CONVERSATIONS ON UNITY

By G. Koenig

WITH DR. JUDAH L. MAGNES

DR. JUDAH L. MAGNES, president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is widely known throughout Palestine and outside it as a bourgeois democrat. He is famous for his fight for Jewish-Arab understanding, his frequent negotiations with Arab leaders and his connections with Arab intellectuals. He is the leader of the Ichud (Unity) group whose aim is the achievement of agreement between the two peoples of Palestine. He has published many pamphlets and edits a magazine propagating these ideas.

Among the student body in Palestine, Dr. Magnes is popular for his tolerance of progressive-thinking students who frequently found him their defender against reactionary professors and chauvinist groups. It is therefore no wonder that Dr. Magnes is considered a "traitor" in certain Zionist circles, although he considers himself a good Zionist. There is an effort to circumscribe his influence in the University itself.

In spite of his 69 years, Dr. Magnes looks no more than 50. He makes a very fine impression with his simplicity and the clarity and courage of his thinking. Dr. Magnes came to Palestine three times, in 1907 and 1912 on brief visits, and in 1922 to organize the Hebrew University.

"When and how did you come to concern yourself with the Arab problem?" I asked.

"From the very beginning. How could it be otherwise? Two peoples live in one country next to one another, mixed in with one another. Anyone who sees at all clearly must understand immediately that without cooperation between Jews and Arabs there can be absolutely no possibility to achieve peace in the country. In my opinion the possibilities for agreement are very great. But they are not being used."

"Do you think, then, that mistakes have been made on the part of the Zionist leadership in this regard?"

The gentle face of Dr. Magnes clouded. He spoke without excitement but with noticeable effort, as one would speak of something that hurts.

"There is not one sphere in which the Zionist leaders did not commit errors. Our group has made a number of efforts to come to an agreement with the Arabs. For us it was clear that the Jews with their abilities, their knowledge and their love for the country have achieved much and can achieve much more. But the constant conflict between Jews and Arabs endangers everything. It was as if our achievements

were built on sand. We therefore considered it the most important national task for our people to work for peace between the two peoples. We came to an agreement with the Arabs: political equality, immigration at a rate equal to the ability of the country to absorb. But the Zionist leaders spoiled everything."

"For what reason?"

"For the reason that they wanted the Arabs to adopt the Zionist program. They project such a solution as a Jewish state. I was always against this terrible solution. Palestine can find peace only through the co-existence of both peoples in a bi-national state and—under proper democratic conditions—as a part of a federation of Arab countries, in which Palestine should have its autonomy. Such a solution, it seems to me, means life without danger."

Chauvinist Policies

Dr. Magnes spoke with bitterness about the chauvinist policy of *Kibbush Avodah* (conquest of labor by the Jews). He considers unacceptable the clause in the contract that must be signed by everyone who gets land from the *Keren Kayemeth* (fund for the purchase of land), pledging not to engage Arabs (named "alien labor" in the contract).

We asked Dr. Magnes for some details about the unsuccessful efforts to come to an agreement with the Arabs. Dr. Magnes replied: "It would be necessary for me to insult and compromise too many people if I were to tell publicly how many mistakes and how much bad feeling the Zionist leadership has created on Jewish-Arab questions. There will, however, come a time when I will publicize various facts and documents. . . . People will be horrified at the number of excellent opportunities that were missed because of the political short-sightedness of these people. It must not be forgotten that yesterday Jewish-Arab understanding was comparatively simple to achieve. Today it is already somewhat difficult, and tomorrow it will be even more difficult."

"What forces in the Jewish Yishuv understand the importance of cooperation with the Arab neighbors?"

"There are many people in the Yishuv who grasp the importance of it. A number of Zionist groups are among the supporters of an understanding. We have the support especially of labor circles, the communists, a number of intellectuals and certain parts of the *Aliyah Chadashah* (the New Immigration). . . . But I must repeat, the Zionist leadership persists in its shortsighted policy."

We got on to the question of education. Dr. Magnes informed us that he is following with consternation the chauvinistic education that Jewish youth is getting in Pal-

G. KOENIG, editor of the French-Yiddish paper, *Neue Presse*, has recently returned from a four month visit to Palestine.

estine. They are taught to look with contempt on other peoples, and on all social and cultural achievements of other peoples.

"I am in absolute opposition to the theories of 'liquidating the diaspora' and of 'exodus from Europe,'" he said in reply to my question. "I believe in the importance of the various Jewish communities in the world. It is necessary to help build a healthy Jewish life everywhere, wherever Jews live. During my last visit to the United States I was especially convinced of the profound meaning of the community of five million Jews there. During the opening ceremonies of the new academic year at the University in November, 1946, I especially commented in my speech on the Jews of America and on the relations that the Jews of Palestine have to the community there. What I said about American Jews is equally true about the Jews in other countries."

On the Future of Jews

This is what Dr. Magnes said, among other things, to the assembled professors, students and guests:

"Without doubt there are in this hall many who say with a shrug of the shoulder that everything the Jews of America achieve is very nice. But those Jews have no future, because there is in general no future for Jewry in the diaspora. They are certain that the hatred for Jews will spread so much in America, that the Jews there may possibly come to the same end as the Jews of Germany. God preserve us! . . . If it comes to such a pass in the world that even America adopts the Hitler methods—do they really believe that it will then be possible to find a place in the world, and even in Palestine, where Jews will be able to live and create?"

"When Hitler came to power there were many who were happy, declaring that despite the horrible tragedy of the persecutions, this tragedy nevertheless justifies the teachings of Zionism that no existence for the Jews is possible in the diaspora. In my opinion, these people sinned against the teachings of Zionism by having such ideas. Zionism does not need the destruction of any Jewish community to justify its program. Let us not repeat the same mistake with regard to American Jewry. Without a people there is no country. Without the diaspora there is no center. Let us not interpret everything that happens in America as a sign of the disappearance of the Jewish community there. We should rejoice at every positive Jewish manifestation and consider as a matter of honor to give it the maximum of help not only spiritually, but with personnel. The Yishuv in our country and Jewry in America need each other as a body needs a heart and vision.

"As I have said," Dr. Magnes concluded, "I have the same positive position with regard to the Jewish communities in Europe and other parts of the world."

We talked about the development of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Dr. Magnes declares that he would like the university to be progressive in spirit and to be able to attract Arab students and professors. In the mean-

time few Arabs come to the Arab section of the national library.

"My opinions," he admits with a smile, "are shared by a minority of the University faculty. The main thing is, however, that up till now no one has succeeded in interfering with the ideas of the minority."

"Why is there no chair of Yiddish at the University?" we asked.

"There was such a project before the war—there were even available the necessary funds for it. Unfortunately the leadership of the project categorically rejected it. Needless to say I was very much in favor of such a chair of Yiddish."

"Are you acquainted with the project to call a world Jewish cultural congress and are you prepared to participate in its organization?"

"I have heard about it. I can only greet the proposal. Unfortunately I do not see how I can participate in its preparations. I have too many problems on my mind now."

Dr. Magnes asked me to give hearty regards to the Jews of Europe. I thanked him and expressed my pleasure at the fine and warm Yiddish with which he had spoken throughout the interview.

"I learned Yiddish," he informed me, "as a reply to the persecution by the Hebrew chauvinists against the Yiddish language. Only through tolerance and through mutual understanding in the Jewish community, and through friendship with the neighboring peoples and the world democracies shall we be able to build the future of our people."

WITH MOSHE SMELANSKY

MOSHE SMELANSKY is a prominent figure in Jewish life in Palestine. With his name is connected the building of one of the oldest Jewish colonies in the country—Rehovet, which now has over 10,000 inhabitants. An old Zionist leader, he participates to this day in various Zionist institutions. At the same time he is a prominent Hebrew author and journalist. His articles in the bourgeois *Haaretz* always create a great deal of interest and discussion. Now over seventy, he is himself a rich orange-grove owner, and is the head of the association of the Jewish plantation owners.

Smelansky cannot be accused of "leftism." He has, however, one thing that is not common among most Zionist leaders—a great sense for reality. Knowing thoroughly the country and its inhabitants, coming daily up against the main problem of Palestine—Jewish-Arab relations—he, together with a number of other prominent Jewish bourgeois leaders, has come to the conclusion that only an understanding between both peoples can bring peace and security.

He speaks quietly and slowly, but with great clarity of thought and in a beautiful Yiddish. He reaches immediately to the heart of the question which had brought us to him.

"It is my deepest conviction," he said, "that without an

understanding between Jews and Arabs it is impossible to continue to build the country. But I have never believed, and I don't believe now that such an agreement between two nations can come only through an agreement between leaders. The understanding cannot be something on paper, but must be a matter of life. It must be built so that the Jews and Arabs can live together, work together, and create common institutions. Unfortunately, the Zionist leaders have done much to create an abyss between both peoples and to cut off the avenue to rapprochement. We let go by opportunities without number. It is a little late now because the Arab people have been pushed into the arms of such leaders as have special interests in struggle and unrest."

Contact With Arabs

Mr. Smelansky told us how he became acquainted and more deeply concerned with the Arab question.

"I came to this country 56 years ago as a boy of 16. Almost immediately I met some of our Arab neighbors in the most natural way. We lived among them. Our relations with them were good. Jews and Arabs worked together in the colonies. We learned about agricultural problems from them, and they from us. Very often, when a Jew had no bread, an Arab would lend him a sack of wheat. Even then I was convinced that the fellaheens and the Bedouins were primitive but very goodhearted people. Even later, in the most difficult days of unrest in 1929 and in the years between 1936 and 1939, I continued to meet with Arab friends. Often I was compelled to dress like an Arab, and they had to dress like Jews before coming to see each other.

"Every time relations between Arabs and Jews deteriorated," Smelansky agreed, "it was a result of outside influence. In this manner, before the first World War, did the consuls of Britain, Germany and Tsarist Russia try to instigate the people against each other in order to exercise influence in their own interests. At that time they tried to worsen Arab-Jewish relations through religious irritations. In later years, British, Germans and Italians played on nationalist feelings. But all this would not have mattered too seriously, had not Zionist leadership made very serious mistakes in this regard."

Smelansky spoke bitterly about the policy of *Kibbush Avodah* (employ Jews only). He insists that this was one of the main reasons for the break in the spirit of friendship with the Arabs.

"There is much complaint," he declared, "against the boycott by Arabs against Jewish goods that brings great harm to the Jewish community. However, it must be said to our shame that without using the word, this boycott was begun first by the Jews against Arab workers in the cities and in the colonies. In the colonies this took even sharper forms because it involved—and continues to do so to this day—driving out Arab workers who were already employed on orange groves and in other places. Often when there was a temporary shortage of agricultural workers, Arabs were engaged. But the moment Jewish laborers were available in

the cities, they would be sent to the colonies to drive the Arabs out. This constantly created conflicts, and tended to embitter relations between the two peoples."

Causes for Disagreement

"But the Jewish plantation owners," I remarked, "are accused of paying the Arabs low wages, and that is the reason why the Histadruth (Jewish Federation of Labor) leadership carry on such a sharp struggle against Arab labor."

"It is true," Smelansky replied, "that the Arab workers are paid less, and I don't want to defend the landlords. I maintain, however, that it is the task of the Histadruth to struggle so that the Arab workers receive equal pay with the Jewish workers, and not to struggle to drive Arabs from work!"

"I saw in Tel Aviv and in Haifa," I told him, "how Jewish youth attack Arab merchants and destroy their merchandise. What is your opinion of this?"

"My opinion is that driving Arabs from the market is scandalous. Merchandise should compete in a legal manner. Jews should not rely on such unheard of methods as pouring kerosene on products and beating up merchants. This is not decent, and brings bad results."

"And what about buying land? Are not there also known instances of conflict around the driving of Arabs off the land?"

"I am well acquainted with all the important land purchases of the last decades. There were many instances when the deals were consummated under normal conditions. The land involved was not worked, or the Arabs who lived on the land, were given other acreage. There were, however, other instances that were very regrettable. I myself am active in the *Keren Kayemeth*. But I was always opposed to driving the Arabs from their land. There is plenty of unoccupied land. There are also many possibilities of friendly dealings with the fellaheens. Besides, I have always maintained that when 10,000 dunams of land are purchased, and Arab peasants remain on 1,000 of them, it is not an absolute tragedy. On the contrary, the fact that Arabs will find themselves among Jewish colonists can only help to bring the two peoples together. Unfortunately, no one in *Keren Kayemeth* circles paid very serious attention to my opinion."

Smelansky then told me about a number of unfortunate dealings of Zionist leaders on the question of *Kibbush Ha-karka* (conquest of the land). The facts would be extremely important for our readers as documentation with regard to a terrible chauvinist policy. Smelansky, however, asked me not to publish these facts.

The Problem of Immigration

"We are told," I said, "that the principal cause for the impossibility of understanding with the Arabs is their opposition to Jewish immigration."

"That is not true," Smelansky replied. "There were many times when it was easily possible to come to an agreement also on the question of immigration. Thus in 1936 we had meetings with outstanding Arab leaders who proposed to us an agreement to admit 40,000 Jews every year for ten years. At these discussions there were five Jewish representatives: Dr. Magnes, Ruthenberg the engineer, Judge Frumkin, Novomeysky the engineer, and I.

"On the basis of the Arab proposal, the question of further immigration would have been determined after ten years. If we had adopted that project, we should now have 200,000 more Jews than there are in Palestine, and we should not have created a front of all Arab countries against us. The Arab proposals were, however, rejected and a few months later unrest in the country began."

"Who rejected the negotiations for an understanding?"

"Who? The Mufti. . . . But also Ben Gurion, Sher-tok. . . ."

As is well known, the Arab leaders demanded that the Jews join with them in speaking up against the British mandate over Palestine.

"Were further attempts made in recent years to reach an agreement with the Arabs?"

Smelansky told me about the many efforts made during the war by the Ichud group, headed by Dr. Judah L. Magnes, to find a general basis for agreement with the Arabs. Unfortunately, the policy of the guiding powers of Zionism disturbed the efforts of the far-sighted Jewish leaders.

"The proclamation of the Biltmore program for a Jewish state in Palestine was a terrible blow against agreement. I later told Ben Gurion of the evil of his policy. Now the Arabs no longer believe us when we say that we want the country to be for both peoples. This also helped to strengthen the influence of the most reactionary elements among the Arabs."

Moshe Smelansky proved to us with the facts of daily life what possibilities there are, given the will, to talk things over with our neighbors. Among them was the six-year-old Arab-Jewish committee of planters to regulate exports and prices of oranges, which was an example of cooperation. "Why cannot workers, peasants and intellectuals of both sides do the same?" he asked.

He spoke up sharply against the supporters of partition. "There are some who think that if we were only given a bit of Palestine we would have a Jewish state and be the equal of others. . . . This partition would, however, be the greatest danger for the Jewish community. In the first place, I do not believe in general in small states. Further, it will place the Jews at the point of a sword against the Arabs and the Arabs against the Jews. The greatest part of the budget for such a Jewish 'state' will go not for construction, but for an army. Both the Jews and the Arabs will maintain that they have too little territory, and there will without doubt be enough hotheads on both sides to attempt to grab a piece of the other's 'state.' Can you imagine the situation? No, partition will mean the third destruction for us!"

"And what is your opinion about the terrorist activities in the country?"

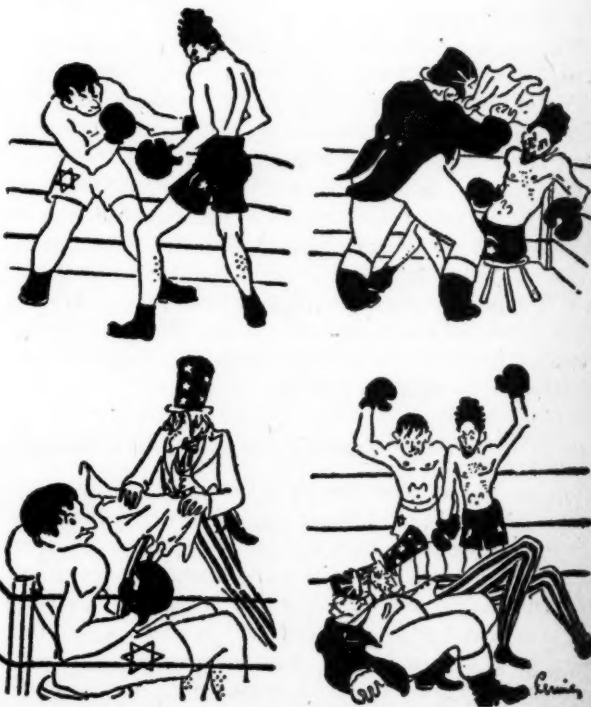
"I believe that the terrorist acts bring great harm to the Jewish people. The youth is being brought up in the worst military spirit. They find themselves in the hands of evil leaders."

Smelansky maintains that there is no great difference between the Revisionist terrorist organizations, the Irgun and the Stern gang, on the one hand, and the Haganah on the other. He emphasized that the Haganah is in conflict with the other two organizations not because of their bad deeds, but because these groups reject common discipline. In many instances they even worked together.

"Certain Zionists speak about an 'Exodus from Europe,'" I said. "Do you consider this a correct solution?"

"I think that 'Exodus from Europe' is an absurdity. Palestine cannot absorb even a couple of hundred thousand in a brief time. Even if Britain should permit unlimited immigration and the Arabs should agree to it, such a large immigration would mean a catastrophe for the country and for the immigrant Jews. We have to deal with a small country that hasn't too much good free land and also lacks raw materials. I believe that many Jews can still be brought to this country, but that is a long and difficult process of decades."

THE WINNER



Palestinian view of the key to the problem, reprinted from the January 1947 issue of *Volkstimme*, German language monthly issued by the Palestine Communist Party.