

By: SLH Date: 4/26/2001

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SUBJECT: The Eichmann Trial: A Midway Assessment

The Eichmann trial, *sui generis* in the affairs of human kind, presents a near baffling problem to the analyst, even though he may set aside the profounder questions of human behavior as belonging properly to the realm of ethics. The mere assaying of the manner in which the trial has been handled and received, in an attempt to gain a glimpse into the psyche of the spiritual kinsmen of Snadrach, Mashach, and Abed-nego, perhaps approaches confrontation with the face of the inscrutable. Restricted as the frame of this study may be at an intermediate phase of the trial following the prosecution's resting of its case, an inchoate consciousness of one of the mysteries of human history has accompanied its preparation.

I. The Emotional Background

Despite the conviction expressed in many quarters, both Israeli and other, that the trial would pall on the public after the first few weeks, a broad and intense Israeli interest has in fact been maintained. This interest would be difficult to explain on the basis of events or revelations in the trial, or in fact, in so far as Embassy observations are concerned, on any basis except that of a long-frustrated and naked desire for vengeance, meager as the retributive value of the punishment of one man may appear. A prominent Israeli of exceptionally moderate temperament who decries, at least in private, the decision to bring Eichmann to judgment responded, when pressed for basic motivations of the trial, with a story about a group of underground Jews who during World War II discussed how they would kill Hitler. They would chain him beside a bomb, they agreed, and lead a fuse to the site along hundreds of miles of railroad track. They would light the fuse and allow it to creep forward, but a second before the fuse made contact they would cut it. Thereafter, they would lay another fuse, light it, and start all over again.

In so far as the scope of the trial was the result of planning by Ben-Gurion and the Cabinet, there appears to be reason to assume that the decision was based on an acute awareness of the above-described emotional factor and of the political trap yawning for any leader who would suggest no trial or a modest one. In addition to basic Government decisions, however, the trial appears to have grown to greater proportions than may have been originally envisaged, as the result of pressures coming from numerous quarters, political parties and other organizations, all of whom demanded a voice and representation.

Although the emotional attitudes of significant elements of the population,

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primarily those who were personally or through close kinsmen the victims of atrocity, appear to have provided the mass weight behind the basic conduct of the trial, this does not mean that virtually everyone in the country concurs in the wisdom of it. In talking to foreigners, few Israelis will admit to reservations about the trial. However, at least one contact, a person well known to and respected by the Embassy, ascribed this merely to the fact that "we are stuck with it and have to put the best possible face on it." It is the Embassy's impression that many Israelis are doing precisely this.

II. The Didactic Intent

Anxiety over the final outcome of the intended educational aspects of the trial appears to be one of the latent concerns of many Israelis. It is commonly accepted as a fact that young Israelis born in this country have recoiled at the demonstration of thousands of Jews, at times outnumbering German occupation forces, proceeding docilely to death and destruction. This picture of docility, it may be said, emerged overwhelmingly despite the fact that the prosecution strove to present every available bit of evidence tending to prove mass or individual resistance by Jews. The lesson that the youth may draw from the picture, some Israelis appear to think, may not necessarily be calculable or in the national interest. One Embassy source remarked that the trial reflects the personality of a ghetto Jew like Ben-Gurion but not the personality of the Israeli-born. The source, father of a high school student, added that Israeli children dislike to study Jewish history because it presents nothing but the account of one persecution after another. He seemed to doubt that the Eichmann trial is dissipating this aversion.

The broader educational aim of showing the world the dangers of anti-Semitism is also the source of some concern. That the world press has continued to give prominent treatment to the trial is ascribed by some Israelis to be due, at best, to a sense of duty. Although many Israelis revel in publicity ~~for~~ ~~so~~ for their country, others recognize that the Eichmann trial may not be good publicity. They perceive it may be as difficult to induce German youth, for example, to accept moral responsibility for the acts of the Nazis as it is to convince the youth of Israel that the Jews of the period had done all that was possible to save themselves. Again, these Israelis appear to fear that the final outcome of the educational attempt may be incalculable or leave an impression that not only the moral structure of the rest of the world but of Jewry as well was at fault.

III. Exculpation of Jewish Leaders

Evidence at the trial presented a picture of Jewish leaders in Palestine who did all they could to save European Jewry, but were thwarted by the indifference, or worse, of big powers. Primary blame has been laid on the British Government. It is doubtful that there are any Israelis, even those not sympathetic to the trial, who do not believe that the British were guilty of at least passive complicity with the Nazis. Some Israelis might add that "politics are politics" and excuse Britain on the ground that its policies did not call for action on behalf of the Jews. There may also be a latent but unexpressed acknowledgement that the Jewish leaders of Palestine chose to meet British Middle East policies head on by their insistence on a Zionist solution for the problem of European Jewry. Between the "final solution" of the Nazis and the Zionist solution lay possibilities

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perhaps not fully explored by either the British or the Palestine Jews.

Although the Jewish leaders of Palestine have come out of the trial thus far with their reputations intact, it appears evident that the ghost of serious suspicion will probably never be laid. For example, the following paragraph appeared in the JERUSALEM POST, English-language daily, of June 18:

The rest of the world may, perhaps, find excuses and some apologia for their (the big powers) "lack of action," if we are not to call it indifference. But what excuses can we, the Jews of what was then called the Yishuv, find for ourselves? It is true we demonstrated. It is true that we protested, that we wrote memoranda, that our papers printed indignant editorials. But if Hershel Grynszpan could have shot von Rath in Paris in a desperate attempt to bring the attention of the world to the German atrocities; if the people of Amsterdam could have called a general strike and risked the bloody wrath of the Germans, in solidarity with their Jewish countrymen; if the Norwegians and Danes could have risked their own lives and those of the people they held dear, to snatch their Jewish compatriots away from the Nazis' clutches—then surely we of the Yishuv should have given more effective expression to our solidarity with our own brethren and to our horror and frustration at the world's indifference to their fate than we did.

The above passage, which appeared shortly after the prosecution completed its presentation, suggests that doubts and recriminations will continue as they have in the celebrated Kastner case over the question of the role of the leaders of Hungarian Jewry in their dealings with Nazis.

IV. The Image of Israel

Amid the tangle of gnawing doubts and self-exculpation one fact emerges clear—the major burden of the trial has been that Israel alone is the haven of Jews. Although it was admitted that Jews in Western Europe were treated benevolently, a case was also made that in the face of critical danger it was the more wary East European Jews who had the stamina to put up resistance, when possible. The Western European Jews, shocked at the sudden reversal of their status, were pictured as being too bewildered to act at all in their own defense. A Jewish correspondent of a large American newspaper commented during a discussion of the above subject that Ben-Gurion, in a pre-trial interview, stated his belief that "it will happen" also in the United States.

The impact on Israelis and other Jews of the picture of Israel as a unique safe haven in a sea of ubiquitous anti-Semitism is not one that can be readily assessed. There is no way to determine, for example, what effect it may have on emigration from or immigration to Israel. Likewise, there is no way to assess how it will affect the moods of the country toward international cooperation as against "going it alone" when it is felt that vital interests of the nation are involved.

V. Conclusion

The Embassy believes that the foregoing, if not a successfully balanced

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presentation because of the difficulty of assessing reactions, tends at least to balance the picture in the direction of latent realities. In this apparently truer balance, Israeli reactions may be said perhaps to present a more reassuring picture in that some awareness seems to exist that the problems symbolized by Eichmann may not be specific problems of anti-Semitism alone but involve broader questions of humanity and history.

FOR THE AMBASSADOR:

William Bruce Locking

William Bruce Locking
First Secretary of Embassy

Department please-pass to Poun and London
Copies to Haifa and Jerusalem.

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