

Israel in Revolution— Matzpen, the Palestine Conflict, and the Hebrew Nation

ABSTRACT

The article presents a short history of the Matzpen group and aims at scrutinizing their history as a possible approach to broader questions of Jewish, Israeli, and general history. Starting with the political origins of the group as split from Israeli communism, it concentrates mostly on Matzpen's dealing with the Palestine conflict. Based on a socialist "horizon of expectation", Matzpen struggled for a so-called de-Zionization of Israeli society and simultaneously for the recognition of Israeli Jewry as a Hebrew Nation within the Arab world. It concludes by discussing the central tension arising from the Israeli Left's struggle for a Hebrew nation and a socialist revolution. It led them to maintain distance from a new collective notion of Jewishness after Auschwitz, which regarded the existence of a Jewish state as a guarantee for Jewish life after the Holocaust.

INTRODUCTION

IT WAS ALREADY LATE AFTERNOON WHEN THE FEVERISH ATMOSPHERE of May 1, 1969 escalated in the heart of Tel-Aviv. On one side of the grand Dizengoff Boulevard, demonstrators from the Old Left belonging to the Communist Party arrived. They had just finished their May Day assembly, where they had been attacked by a small group of right-wing adolescents shouting "Down with you!" and "Communists to Moscow!". Now, they faced the next confrontation. Coming from Jaffa in the south of Tel-Aviv, demonstrators from the Israeli Socialist Organization arrived, a group that

had seceded from the Israeli Communist Party [hereafter: Maki, Hebrew Acronym for “HaMiflaga HaKommunistit HaYisraelit”] seven years earlier.

At that time, the whole country knew them already by the name of their party newspaper: *Matzpen*.¹ When both groups faced each other on Dizengoff Boulevard, it was not only the antagonism of Old and New Left that divided them. Much more relevant was the deep split that had emerged less than two years earlier in the wake of the Six-Day War, during which Israel had incorporated East Jerusalem and occupied the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Sinai, and the Golan Heights. Arab threats of annihilation preceding that war had nourished existential worries and the fear of a “new Holocaust” throughout the whole country, to such an extent that even Maki had joined in the collective appraisal that this was a necessary war of self-defense.² Even during their contested May Day demonstration they had passed on their thanks to the Israeli military forces. An unprecedented unity across all parties seemed to have prevailed in the country.

By contrast, the Israeli Socialist Organization stepped out of that national unity, and instead directed their attention outside—focusing especially on the situation of the Palestinians. While Israeli society still discussed whether the areas gained in the war were either “military occupied”, “administrated”, or even “liberated” territories, these young Leftists declared without equivocation that from a Palestinian perspective it was none of these, but only “foreign occupation” and oppression.³ Thus, immediately after the June War *Matzpen* had already begun to agitate for an unconditional withdrawal from all conquered territories.⁴ Their demand boiled down to the sweeping slogan—“Down with the Occupation!”, which they also shouted while demonstrating in the streets on May Day 1969.⁵ ICP members were not willing to leave this provocation unanswered when they faced the New Leftists holding their red flags. Within only a few seconds, the Party communists turned their flags and banners into barriers and rods to bar the way to the *Matzpen* group and disperse its members. A loud confrontation started and it even came to violent fisticuffs. The following day, even the Israeli daily press reported on the turmoil.⁶

Matzpen, the Hebrew word for compass, was also the name of the political group that kept Israeli society in suspense after the Six-Day War like no other.⁷ Even though the Israeli Socialist Organization—with just a few dozen members at most—was at first sight a marginal phenomenon, despite its size it became highly important in the years after the War. Due to their call for an immediate end to the occupation, and especially their proclamations of solidarity with Palestinian resistance organizations, the group quickly became a symbol of national treason and Jewish self-hatred,

if not identification with the enemy. When Nahum Goldmann, then president of the World Jewish Congress, publicly spoke in favor of a political approach towards Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, his opponents attempted to insult him by calling him a “Matzpenist”.⁸ And when Prime Minister Golda Meir received a letter from a group of high school graduates who expressed doubts about their own government’s peace intentions and threatened to refuse serving in the army because she had forbidden attempts to reach a political settlement with Egypt, the press went into a frenzy regarding Matzpen’s alleged dramatic influence on Israeli pupils.⁹ “Within Israeli society, the first fissures were already noticeable,” as Daniel Cohn-Bendit remembers his visit to Israel several years later in the spring of 1970, adding that “By attacking Matzpen, this development was supposed to be restrained.”¹⁰ The leader of the Paris students’ revolts had been invited to the country by the Hebrew University’s student association and his arrival was eagerly anticipated by the Israeli press, especially as he was of Jewish descent. Yet, after “Danny the Red” criticized the Israeli occupation and became a mouthpiece for Matzpen upon his arrival, public opinion rapidly turned against him: “This man here and the one you could hear this morning,” an angry shout echoed through the lecture hall when he first appeared at the Hebrew University; “They try to bring us into the very same situation our parents had to face in Auschwitz.”¹¹

At any rate, the resentment, rejection, even hatred Matzpen had to endure after the Six-Day War was rooted in deeper emotions than just those their provocative protests against the Israeli occupation could have brought about—emotions connected more to the mere existence of the Jewish state itself. Just as the Six-Day War had brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back to the surface of dispute but was not its origin or trigger, the protest Matzpen made public did not end with the 1967 borders. Its call for a socialist revolution that would destroy the Arabic dictatorships and at the same time make space for a community of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs by overcoming Israel’s Zionist nature, challenged the very foundations of the Jewish state. As the group declared even before the beginning of the Six-Day War, “One can therefore sum up the solution which we propose by the formula: De-Zionization of Israel and its integration into a socialist Middle Eastern union.”¹² Sure, their optimistic internationalism allowed them to challenge the very foundations of the Israeli state and the conflict entailed by its founding, and also made them rethink the conditions of a secure Jewish-Israeli existence in the Middle East. However, in a post-Auschwitz era when the Jewish world almost without exception was united in solidarity with the Jewish state, this optimism touched on a prevalent collective

self-conception for which the existence of a Jewish state was a guarantee for Jewish life after the Holocaust.

Who were these Israeli dissidents, what were their political motives, and what drove them?¹³ Shortly after the group's appearance had begun to unsettle the Israeli public, those questions first entered the daily press and eventually became a subject of interest for academic research, but were rarely addressed outside the paradigm of political bias.¹⁴ While this continuous political perspective on Matzpen's history and importance may well be rooted in the ongoing regional conflict, it was an obstacle to a true historicization of the group. An actual depoliticization was necessary in order to pose new questions on the subject, and to decipher the history of Matzpen as the continuation of a Jewish tradition that stemmed from before the state of Israel had even been founded and which later contradicted the basic character of this state. Reading the history of Matzpen in this context of clashing utopian ideas about Jewish existence in the modern world—a conflict that had already emerged before the Holocaust and collided again on Israeli soil—opens up a new perspective on the history of Israel itself.¹⁵

THE BIRTH OF THE ISRAELI NEW LEFT

Matzpen's early history was less spectacular than the severe confrontations described above might suggest. It started with a small group of dissidents who split off from Maki in the autumn of 1962. When the Communist party newspaper *Kol Ha'am* reported on the expulsion of Akiva Orr, Moshe Machover, Oded Pilavsky, and Yermiahu Kaplan for treason and the formation of fractions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not yet at the center of the debate.¹⁶

Internal discussion focused on the upheavals in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev's secret revelations at the CPSU XX Congress, which had led to a crisis of faith throughout the entire Communist world. Although party leaders in Israel tried everything to forestall discussing Stalinist crimes in their own ranks, they were unable to avoid the uncomfortable questions posed by Machover, Orr, and Pilavsky.¹⁷ The young dissidents also demanded to know about the past of the local Communist Party in Palestine [PCC], and the reason why its history had not been written at that point. With these pressing questions, they focused on the heads of the PCC who had also fallen victim to Stalinist purges in the 1930s. "Moshe Machover and I became very critical of the Soviet Union and the Israeli Communist Party," recalled Akiva Orr many years later in his autobiographical essays

on the origins of Matzpen. “We began to pose questions: Who were the founders of the Israeli CP? What happened to them? Why are their names never mentioned? Why did the party never write its own history?”¹⁸ It was only after Machover had been in Poland for his doctoral studies from 1959 to 1960 that meetings with the widows of former Palestinian communists provided them with answers.

Also, Leopold Trepper—the former head of the so-called “Great Orchestra”—was among Machover’s interlocutors and provided him with many historical details. Years before Trepper organized the clandestine spy-network against the Nazis, he had already been a leading member of the PCC and became a witness to the Stalinist purges in Palestine—including the murder of his former comrades. “All the members of the Central Committee of the Palestinian party were purged. . . . Of two or three hundred militant party leaders, only about twenty survived,” an infuriated Trepper later recalled in his memoirs. “It was not until 1968, more than ten years after Khrushchev denounced Stalin and exposed his crimes at the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist Party, that the ICP, Maki, rendered homage to the leaders assassinated during the Stalinist purges.”¹⁹ After Machover had returned from Poland with a good amount of information on the tragic fate of the Palestinian communists, this confrontation with the suppressed history of their party became a decisive factor for Machover, Orr, and Pilavsky’s resignations.

The questions these young dissidents brought up in Party circles had, however, only partly arisen from the unresolved past of the communist movement. No less important were current political developments, as they addressed the reasons why the Soviet Union refused to support the revolutionary movements in Cuba and Iraq. After all, the Iraqi Communist Party had evolved to become a mass party in 1958, having given up on its own revolutionary ambitions solely as a result of the pressure from the Soviet mother party—a loyalty party members paid for dearly some years later when they became targets of massacres by the country’s new government.²⁰

In contrast to Iraq, a revolution had taken place in Cuba in 1959—yet it wasn’t the country’s Moscow-supported Communist party, but the movement led by Fidel Castro that had started the revolutionary transformation.²¹ “So for us,” Machover later recalled regarding Matzpen’s foundation, “the joint lesson of Cuba and Iraq was that the CP was no longer capable of becoming a revolutionary force, even when a revolutionary situation does arise.”²²

First and foremost however, the dissidents were highly indignant that none of the points at hand could be discussed openly, and that the party

was reluctant to allow internal democratization. Since their criticisms fell on deaf ears again and again, their expulsion was only the flip side of their own decision to call a new movement into life, one that would represent the revolutionary claims of young leftists and thus become the “new compass” of history. After the decision was made to establish a new magazine, Haim Hanegbi, a longtime close friend of the communist dissidents, came up with the name *Matzpen*. It took only a short time until the first issue of the newspaper of the Israeli Socialist Organization was published under that name in November of 1962.

Although *Matzpen*’s founding was in many ways similar to the path of the European New Left, regional specifics and objections to the Maki’s analysis of Israeli society and the Middle East conflict already played a role in the very early evolution of the Israeli New Left. “In fact, we were in conflict with Maki on three major points,” as Orr recalls the split:

We thought that the Histadrut [The General Confederation of Hebrew Workers in the Land of Israel, L.F.] should be destroyed; we argued that there existed no true Socialism in the Soviet Union and we pointed out that the conflict in the Middle East is rooted in the situation of the Palestinians, and that it was them we had to come to terms with, not Nasser or Damascus.²³

This initial conflict over the united Israeli trade union Histadrut had preceded *Matzpen*’s history, and as part of this prior history was imprinted onto the political biography of some of the later party members. The Haifa sailor strike in the autumn of 1951 left the young Israeli state on tenterhooks, and turned out to be the political initiation for the young sailor Akiva Orr. Yet, it was not the initial wage claims that made the struggle so significant—far more central to the debate were the political roots of the economic conflict.²⁴ By calling for an independent and democratic representation of their interests via a work council, the sailors had turned against their former organization Histadrut, which owned the shipping company and whose appointed rather than elected bureaucrats had tried to control the course of the sailors’ strike.

The sailors had shaken the very foundations of the Histadrut, which had been founded in the early 1920s more as a “state in the making” rather than an actual labor union, but equally important was Ben-Gurion demonstrating his lasting insistence on the state’s political control over social conflicts by violently repressing the strike with police forces.²⁵ The Haifa strike, as Orr recalled later, was something like “Israel’s Kronstadt”: a democratic uprising against the political system in power that was in the tradition

of the anti-Leninist seamen-rebellion in Kronstadt in 1921.²⁶ Even though the Israeli communists' support of the sailor strike paved Orr's way into Maki shortly after, it turned out that by calling for the establishment of an independent Israeli union—as both Orr and Oded Pilavsky had—they fell afoul of the mother party.²⁷

Yet alongside these labor struggles, disputes emerging on the issue of the Israeli-Arab conflict had even more important and long-lasting effects. Orr and Machover's book *Peace, Peace and There is No Peace*, published five years after the Suez crisis of 1956, had resulted in some internal discord. Although they had initially intended it to support the Communist Party's analysis—according to which Israel's conflict with their Arab neighbors was rooted in the political relationships of the Jewish state to the Western and partly colonial world—their narrative changed while working on the manuscript, and now turned to the Palestinian conflict and the unrealized foundation of a Palestinian state as guaranteed in the November 1947 UN partition plan. While their mother party still blamed British imperialism for that historic failure and also for the Palestinian refugee problem, the insoluble connection between the founding of the Jewish state and the Palestinian catastrophe moved to the foreground of the dissidents' interpretation.²⁸ Orr described the dissident meaning their book posed within the party:

Even the Israeli Communist Party, the only party that always claimed that a Palestinian people existed and deserved independence, viewed the Palestinians after 1948 as having ceased to be a political entity, as they were divided into three fragments: refugees in camps, a minority in the State of Israel (entitled to full democratic equality in Israel) and citizens of the Kingdom of Jordan . . . No expert on the "Palestine Problem" considered the Palestinians to be a *political* factor.²⁹

In 1950s and 1960s Israel, where the Palestine question and the actual existence of a Palestinian people was somewhat hidden by talk of cross-national conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Machover and Orr were among the first voices to reveal the covert struggle that accompanied the founding of the Jewish state.³⁰ That was the pioneering achievement of the book, as well as at the same time the stumbling block that caused their expulsion from Maki.

THE ALGERIAN WAR AND THE PALESTINE CONFLICT

The young dissidents could only come to an independent interpretation of the Palestine conflict after they had detached themselves completely from Maki. Apart from the newly-won intellectual independence, those political shifts had been initiated mainly by historical processes outside the Jewish state. When in the spring of 1962—the same year as *Matzpen's* founding—the war in Algeria ended after eight horrific years, its shadows also affected Israel and the Palestine conflict. The war had not only led to Algeria's independence from colonial France, but also to the hasty escape of about a million French Algerians. For the formerly privileged so-called *pieds noirs*, there was no space left in post-colonial Algeria—despite the fact that the country had mostly been their only home for generations.³¹

When the designated Algerian president Ahmed Ben-Bella declared that the liberation of Palestine must also be aspired, for Matzpen the Algerian situation became a catalyst for the threatening insight that the fate of the French Algerians mirrored the situation of the Israeli Jews.³² Thus, Matzpen realized that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians was not the classic example of two native nationalities fighting over the same territory, but rather of a clash between the native residents who already lived there and a European population aiming to establish a state.³³ As a conflict over the foundation and continuation of a Jewish nation-state in a mainly Arab environment, it seemed just as insoluble as the Algerian one, while the situation of the Israeli Jews was even more dramatic than it had been for the French Algerians. *Matzpen's* newspaper declared: "From time to time, we tend to forget about the fact that our position is similar to the French settlers in Algeria, with the only distinction that our situation is way less comfortable: They had the support of a metropole, which we are lacking."³⁴

This perspective on the nature of the conflict as a conflict of nationalities with a colonial form was not entirely new. It already had a long tradition that came into Matzpen's range of vision when Jakob Taut and Jabra Nicola joined the group shortly after it had come to life.³⁵ Both could already look back to a much longer political career. While the Jaffa-born Nicola was a member of the Central Committee of the PCC in the late 1930s, Taut had belonged to a circle of mostly German-Jewish Trotskyists who had immigrated to Palestine not by their Zionist convictions, but because they had to escape National Socialism.³⁶ Their internationalist values of individual and collective equality had increasingly turned them into critics of the transformation of Arab land into Jewish territory taking place right before their eyes. Together with Yigael Gluckstein (Tony Cliff), Jakob Moneta,

Gabriel Baer, and others, Taut and Nicola became active members of the “Revolutionary Communist League”.³⁷ Only a few months prior to Israel’s Declaration of Independence, the group summarized their political views under the title “against the stream”, a passionate pamphlet arguing against a national division of Palestine and for a common Jewish-Arab perspective in a unified socialist Middle East.³⁸ Disappointed by political developments that proved their own political expectations futile, many members of this circle had left the country for Europe even before the Jewish state was proclaimed. But not Nicola and Taut; they stayed, and became intellectual teachers for the young communist dissidents of Matzpen.³⁹

The conflict over Israel did not dissipate after the state’s proclamation in 1948, and not only due to the fact that while the international community recognized the new state, Israel’s Arab neighbors had refused. The pre-state conflict between the Zionist project and the Palestinian Arabs also extended to the inner structure of the new state—as an ongoing contradiction between its Jewish and its democratic character.⁴⁰ The privileged status of the Jewish population, institutionalized with the Law of Return and the Nationality laws, could be perceived as collective discrimination by Israeli Arabs, a situation aggravated by land expropriation and the military administration of the first two decades.⁴¹ Thus, Matzpen members seriously doubted that their own state faced a safe future—and their doubts were not only rooted in their egalitarian convictions. The Sword of Damocles hanging over Israel’s contested presence and the unfulfilled national aspirations of the Palestinians was actually Algerian independence, which had turned even more threatening in the wake of the historically inexorable process of decolonization. *Matzpen* accordingly stated that “If the Jewish Israelis do not turn away from the Zionist movement, they have to prepare for the same fate as the French settlers in Algeria who had not turned away from colonialism.”⁴²

Against this background, Matzpen stood for the attempt of a re-foundation, or even re-invention, of Israeli existence in the Middle East: A reinvention that would take the lasting burden of the conflict of their founding with Palestinian Arabs from the shoulders of Jewish Israelis and result in Israel’s recognition by both Palestinians and the Arab world. In some regard, they were close to the self-conception of the Algerian writer Albert Camus—the *Colon* with anti-colonial feelings who had already imagined a post-colonial Algeria in the midst of the Algerian War.⁴³ This utopia included that the Algerian French should also have the same rights as the older residents. “The French of Algeria are themselves an indigenous population in the full sense of the word,” Camus declared in his interim

report on the Algerian war in 1958—“foreign natives” so to speak.⁴⁴ Of course the Israeli New Left codified their utopia in different words; they spoke of a “Hebrew nation” and socialist revolution. This perspective of reinventing Israel came first and foremost from the utopian socialist horizon of Matzpen that believed that only a social revolution in the whole region could overcome their troubled existence.

Above all, these revolutionary utopian aspirations culminated in the demand for a so-called de-Zionization of Israel. It envisioned a transformation of Israel into a state of all its citizens. Israel was to disentangle itself from the conditions of its Zionist genesis and abolish all institutionalized forms that enforced Jewish political supremacy and demographic majority vis-à-vis Palestinian Arabs. Whereas on the one hand this meant the demand for an abolishment of the Law of Return, Matzpen had argued for a Palestinian “right to return” on the other.⁴⁵ No less, their idea of socialist revolution was inspired by a vision of a modernized and secularized Arab World, one that would at the same time secure recognition of Jewish Israelis as a nation with equal rights.⁴⁶ This was the irreducible condition expressed by the Israeli Left towards the Palestinians and the Arab world. “As a result of Zionist colonization, a Hebrew nation with its own national characteristics (common language, separate economy, etc.) has been formed in Palestine.”

Matzpen resumed their position at a public meeting of Arab Students in Paris, three weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War.

The argument that this nation has been formed artificially and at the expense of the indigenous Arab population does not change the fact that the Hebrew nation now exists. It would be a disastrous error to ignore this fact. The solution of the Palestine problem must not only redress the wrong done to the Palestinian Arabs, but also ensure the national future of the Hebrew masses.⁴⁷

Although Jews were classified by the Arab world as foreigners and people “from outside”, *Matzpen*—belonging to the first generation of a newly-developed Hebrew Nation—claimed for them all the rights of an indigenous nationality and an integral part of the region.⁴⁸

A JEWISH STATE AND A HEBREW NATION

Talking about a new “Hebrew nation” emerging inside the country was not only a political challenge for the self-conception of the new Jewish state, but also mirrored a conflict that had existed ever since Jewish settlement began. The continuous struggles over the character of the Israeli state were shaped by the question of the meaning of a new “Hebrew” identity.⁴⁹ This concept has its own importance, because the idea of a new, yet separate national community was a serious drain on the Zionist notion of a trans-territorial unity of the Jewish people to be brought together in Israel. A specific Hebrew national culture, first evolving under the protection of the British Mandate and established deliberately in opposition to diasporic Jewish existence, was in that sense the result of Jewish settlement policy itself.⁵⁰ The Jewish diasporic population arriving in Palestine/Israel was somehow transformed into a territorial Hebrew Nation, with a separate state and its own language. “In a way,” the appearance of this Hebrew identity “is a failure of Zionism, which proclaimed that all Jews in the world make up one people with one identity.”⁵¹

This concept of a Hebrew Nation, however, was not the invention of the Israeli Left. Its origins date back to the political mythology of right-wing Zionism, whose most eccentric branch was the so-called Canaanite movement.⁵² In his manifesto from 1944, their founding father had declared that “A Hebrew cannot be a Jew, and . . . a Jew cannot be a Hebrew”, despite the fact that he himself had come from Warsaw to Palestine as a Jewish child, and only then changed from Uriel Halperin to Jonathan Ratosh.⁵³ The generation of native-born children of Jewish immigrants who separated themselves from their parents’ cultural experiences and developed their own national culture would prove him correct. The French sociologist Georges Friedmann observed in the 1960s a process in which the fruits of Zionist settlement slowly had detached from its own historical origin, and increasingly opposed it.⁵⁴ While there was no need for this generation to relate to the Canaanite myths of a far-distant past, their belonging to a new Hebrew nation found its expression mainly in a cultural and habitual change, in their way to dress and in their modes of behavior.⁵⁵ However, the change was nowhere as relevant as in language. While for diasporic Jews, the Hebrew language was mostly a sacred language of liturgy, its nature changed to a secular and profane everyday native tongue.⁵⁶ A whole milieu, which is amongst others connected to the names Shimon Tzabar, Amos Kenan, and Dan Ben-Amotz, and pivotally attached to Uri Avnery’s weekly newspaper *Haolam Hazeh*, had emerged around this new national and linguistic culture.⁵⁷

Matzpen had also arisen from this cultural environment. While on the one hand the group had its origin in the traditions of Palestinian and Israeli communism, on the other it originated in the cultural and political circles that aimed to foster a new Hebrew identity.⁵⁸ However: when Matzpen began to perceive the Palestine conflict in light of Algerian decolonization and as a colonial conflict of nationalities, they carried the values of the generation of the new Hebrew nation even further—they declared that a new Hebrew national culture would be a crucial requirement for cutting the ideological bond of the Law of Return between diasporic Jews and native Israelis on the one hand and to gain Palestinian recognition as a nation belonging to the region on the other.

The idea of a Hebrew culture remained, however, rather short-lived. Just as the Six-Day War revealed the fundamental conflict of the Israeli state foundation—the Palestinian question—and brought it back into national and international debate, it also decisively shaped the internal culture clash about the nature of the Jewish state. For most Israelis seeing religiously-charged places in the new territories was like “encountering a deeper, forgotten self”, as a contemporary put it.⁵⁹ Thus, the Jewish components of the collective self came to the fore once again, and did outshine secular “Hebrew culture”.

This entry of the sacred into the field of politics, i.e. the emergence of political theology became most visible immediately after the Six-Day War, with the publication of the founding manifest of the “Movement for Greater Israel” on 22 September 1967. “While we have no right to give up on the state of Israel,” the document stated, “it is our duty to achieve the idea it stands for: the Land Israel—Eretz Israel.”⁶⁰ By demanding the annexation of the historical territories of *Eretz Israel*, it became obvious that the military success of the June 1967 war had exposed a glowing sacral core of Israeli politics that already seemed to have vanished after the state was founded in 1948.⁶¹

This claim to the newly-occupied territories did not go unchallenged, since it would have led to a majority population of 1.5 million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Thus, the unequivocal message of a newspaper advertisement placed by Shimon Tzabar and Haim Hanegbi stated: “Get out of the occupied territories—Now!”. It also warned of a dramatic expansion of the conflict with the Palestinians. In words foreshadowing future developments, the text stated: “Occupation leads to foreign domination. Foreign domination leads to resistance. Resistance leads to oppression. Oppression leads to terror and counter terror.” It was signed by 12 people—all of them from the circle around *Matzpen* and Jerusalem’s

left-wing Hebrew bohemia. It was published in *Ha'aretz* on 22 September, the same day as the publication of the manifesto of the “Movement for Greater Israel”. Two Israeli self-perceptions were directly opposed here: “One day, two declarations”.⁶²

THE GLOBAL NEW LEFT AND THE SPLITS IN MATZPEN

But it was not only the year 1967 whose central meaning was inscribed into the history of Matzpen. Its history was also closely linked to the year 1968, the year of the Global New Left. The conjunction of both temporal symbols made solidarity with Palestine a crucial element for the New Left—and thus the international importance of Matzpen increased.⁶³ In Israel, the group won over some new members after 1967 who were motivated by political rejection of the occupation and moral solidarity with the occupied Palestinians.⁶⁴ Others came from different political spectrums of the European Left who found their way to Israel. Matzpen initiated a familiar process repeatedly experienced on the Left; arguing over the future of revolution, mainly with regard to different possible solutions to the Palestine conflict, the group subdivided into many different splinter groups.⁶⁵

This process had already begun in 1970, when two different currents inspired by the French Left entered Matzpen: On one side was the so-called Avant-garde-group: an esoteric branch of Trotskyism, which rediscovered the international proletariat as revolutionary subject and was attracted by the theories of Pierre Lambert.⁶⁶ On the other side were the followers of *tiers-mondisme*, a kind of third world nationalism. Within Matzpen, this branch was closely tied to Ilan Halevi, who had immigrated to Israel in 1965, after he had supported the national liberation movements in Angola, Mali, and Algeria. He considered himself a “travelling salesman of revolution”.⁶⁷ He attempted to transfer his perspective—that the anticolonial revolution was the vanguard of universal liberation—onto the Palestine conflict as well. Halevi did not stick as closely to the basic premise of Matzpen, according to which support for Palestinian organizations was tied to the precondition of a common perspective and the recognition of the Israeli Jews as a Hebrew nation belonging to the region in equal measure. Instead, he founded his own group *Ma'avak* (Struggle), which proclaimed a more unconditional solidarity with the Palestinian organizations.⁶⁸

The dramatic consequences of this political re-orientation would only become clear one year and another split later when Udi Adiv, whose origins lay in the Socialist elite Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, chose to go underground

and joined the parallel world of Jewish-Palestinian resistance, a spectrum which at times also entertained the notion of armed struggle.⁶⁹ Thus, at its very margins, Matzpen's history was also influenced by the violent fantasies of the New Left, which considered itself as sitting in the cockpit of world history, but had long lost sight of political realities and responsibilities. Adiv made several trips to Damascus where he met what he thought were left-wing members of the PLO. Only after his detention in December 1972 did he learn that it was the Syrian Secret Service, who stood behind the Palestinian Group that brought him to Damascus.⁷⁰ Although it was stopped in its very beginnings, the so-called "Jewish-Arab spy ring" gave the Jewish state a severe shock—someone from the heart of Israeli society had dared to switch sides and now supported the Palestinians in their struggle. Adiv had to serve 12 years of a 17-year sentence in prison for treason and membership in a hostile organization. But he also shaped the public perception of Matzpen, despite the fact it had set itself distinctly apart from Adiv and the activities of his so-called "Red Front".

Matzpen entered a period of political realism some time later. The Yom Kippur War had ushered in a new era for political negotiations in the Middle East, which via Jerusalem and Cairo led to the historic Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt. Even the Palestinians slowly stepped away from their former position of intransigence, and relativized their demand for the "liberation of the entire Palestinian soil" for the benefit of territorial sovereignty in all territories regained from Israel, a first step towards a territorial compromise: the so-called two-state solution, a compromise that led Matzpen also to undergo several changes.

For Ilan Halevi, the diplomatic turn after the war was the first step in turning his back on his former utopian Socialist ideas. "Due to the Yom Kippur war I started to understand that the world does not plan on taking its cue from my dreams, and that my friends and I won't succeed in imposing our will on the world."⁷¹ What had begun with leftist self-criticism and a transitory commitment to a two-state-solution by his group Ma'avak, led to a veritable conversion—Halevi became a member of the PLO and even a Palestinian: "Whenever he was asked about his identity, he replied jestingly that he was 100% Jewish and 100% Arab."⁷² He had already joined the PLO in 1975, and in 1983 he was even their delegate to the international assembly of the Socialist International.

The Left critics of a diplomatic solution, who had splintered off from Matzpen and established their own organization around Michael Warschawski in the guise of Trotskyism some years earlier, were completely reluctant to agree to a territorial compromise, even if it was only

an interim solution. The group had for some time published their own newspaper *Matzpen-Marxisti* under the name of the “Revolutionary Communist League”: A new beginning under the head of the Trotskyite “Fourth International”, which they saw as necessary to revive the dying revolutionary spirit in Israel. After the Yom Kippur War, when the idea of a territorial solution to the Palestine conflict became increasingly prominent, they labelled this concept pejoratively as a “Palestinian mini-state”, which they regarded as nothing less than a retreat from a revolutionary solution to the Palestine conflict.⁷³

More pragmatic considerations determined a meeting that took place in London in November 1975 when Machover met with Said Hammami, the local representative of the PLO, who embodied more than anyone else the compromise position among Palestinians. In 1973 he had published two articles in the London *Times* arguing in favor of that compromise.⁷⁴ With outspoken and almost statesmanlike respect, Machover and Hammami expressed their mutual political recognition during the meeting, and sought to discuss a two-state solution in the near future and a shared municipality in the far future.⁷⁵ This meeting caused a sensation in the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot* and marked the high point of diplomatic attempts by the Israeli Left.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, those attempts were not crowned by success, and not solely due to the fact that Machover did not hold any official function as it could have appeared in the meeting with Hammami. The radical nationalists among the Palestinians that had merged in the so-called Rejectionist front did not welcome the diplomatic solution either, and opposed it with extreme hostility—a hostility leading to Hammami’s assassination only three years later.⁷⁷

AVOIDING THE HOLOCAUST

In retrospect it may seem as if the first approaches between Machover and Hammami paved the way for political developments much later. *Matzpen*, however, had never lost its marginality and remained with its radical thoughts on the margins of Israeli politics. The opposition the New Left had to face within Israeli society was rooted also in a constellation that went far beyond the situation in the Middle East. With their voluntary willingness to sacrifice the emblems of national sovereignty—or even the Jewish state as a whole—the Israeli leftists not only brought up questions about the Palestine conflict, but had collided with the inexorable impact of the brutal destruction of Jewish life in Europe. While *Matzpen* repeatedly referred

to the threat of a “second Holocaust” in light of the existential threat of the Palestinian conflict,⁷⁸ the impact that the annihilation of European Jewry exercised on the collective existence of the Jews after the Holocaust remained somehow concealed to the group.

As a consequence of National Socialist extermination and its intention to kill all Jews everywhere simply because of their descent and background, most Jews assigned their collective affiliation to Israel as the Jewish state: as a self-assertion, a means of sovereignty, and also for securing their mere existence. “Among all those who were persecuted, only Jews were singled out for certain death,” Hannah Arendt wrote in the aftermath of the war about the new center of Jewish politics, evolving from the solidarity with the survivors of the Holocaust: “For the Jews who experienced this, all Gentiles became alike. This is what lies at the bottom of their present strong desire to go to Palestine. It is not that they imagine they will be safe there—it is only that they want to live among Jews alone, come what may.”⁷⁹ Asked the question “What is a Jew”, Isaac Deutscher’s response was that “Auschwitz was the terrible cradle of the new Jewish consciousness and of the new Jewish nation . . . It was from the ashes of six million Jews that the phoenix of Jewry has risen. What a resurrection!”⁸⁰ The defense of Israel’s borders—as Israel’s former Foreign Minister Abba Eban put it—was always a defense of the “borders of Auschwitz”.⁸¹

By contrast, the Israeli Leftists were rooted in the political culture of Mandate Palestine and the young Jewish state that was somehow detached from that part of history. Far from events in Europe, the traditional political and ideological discourses on Jewish existence here remained somehow unaffected by the Holocaust.⁸² Those discourses later on proved to be barriers to acknowledging the Holocaust’s meaning for Jewish collective awareness—and also for their own identity.⁸³ This also held true for the continuation of a Zionist teleology after the Holocaust, which insisted both that a Jewish state was the primary objective of Jewish history and that *Eretz Israel* was the only guarantor of Jewish existence.

“There, in Palestine, they would be safe from their enemies,” as Hannah Arendt in 1945 described Zionist political theology during the war, one that assumed “special conditions for Palestine, unrelated to Jewish destinies elsewhere, while at the same time generalizing adverse conditions for Jews everywhere else in the world”. However, the horrific dimension of the Nazi genocide had in fact created a different truth at this point, “when Rommel’s army threatened Palestine Jewry with exactly the same fate as in European countries”.⁸⁴ After all, the Nazis had not planned to spare the Jews of Palestine from the fate of European Jewry, and the Yishuv owed its survival not

to Zionism, but only to the victory of the British troops over the Germans in El-Alamein in 1942.⁸⁵ The Zionist utopian idea of *Eretz Israel* as a secure refuge during the Holocaust was preserved in the young state's structure and was considered a political instance of salvation that had proven correct and historically proactive in comparison to European Jewry.⁸⁶

Against the background of the Palestine conflict, also the Israeli Leftists of Matzpen argued that the catastrophe of the Holocaust by no means proved the necessity or accuracy of Zionism. On the contrary, the young leftists emphasized, it was the exclusivist focus on *Eretz Israel* as the only safe haven for the Jews that had limited the efforts of the Yishuv's leadership to save European Jewry in times of crisis.⁸⁷ It was Matzpen also that highlighted how the political theology of Zionist Palestino-centrism in some ways concealed the fact that the Yishuv's survival was based on the British efforts rather than the Zionist ones.⁸⁸ Matzpen's political argument however—that Zionist politics after the war was rooted in theoretical grounds proven wrong by history—turned towards the critics themselves.⁸⁹ As the “post-Zionist children of Zionism”, their own optimistic expectations about the future showed how they had preserved national and social utopian ideas of a Jewish existence that kept distance to the effects of the Holocaust. The ideas of a Hebrew nation on the one hand and a socialist revolution on the other had a mutually reinforcing effect that made them close their eyes to the new collective notion of Jewishness after Auschwitz.⁹⁰ As a radicalization of the Zionist idea of a “negation of Diaspora”, the founding of the Canaanite movement in 1944 and their reinvention as “new Hebrews”—taking place simultaneously with the genocide—can almost be regarded as self-immunization to events in Europe—as if a self-chosen exit from Jewish existence would shield them from the catastrophe.⁹¹ This tension persisted in Israeli history, namely in the cultural habitus of a young generation of Sabras who mostly reacted with complete incomprehension to the horrors endured by Holocaust survivors.⁹² A process that only began with the Eichmann trial gradually resulted in the erosion of a separate Hebrew identity concerning the Holocaust.⁹³ When Matzpen shortly afterwards adopted the concept of a new Hebrew nation for their own cause, it was used in opposition to a sacred legitimization of the Jewish state, and also as a helpful tool towards the Palestinians for demanding the recognition of Israeli Jewry as a post-Zionist nation that belongs to the region. In light of the catastrophe of European Jewry that somehow had united most of the Jews in a shared experience or memory, the concept of a separate Hebrew nation was already being denied by history.

By sticking to their faith in progress rooted in the socialist teleology of history, the Hebrew leftists of Matzpen carried this incredulity towards the consequences of mass extermination even further—and this despite the fact that these Israeli Leftists and their socialist internationalism were also connected to the revolutionary hopes of Eastern European Jewish Communists of the interwar period.⁹⁴ While the young Israeli communists continued to follow the historical program of overcoming both the Jewish question and Zionism through socialist revolution, this idea had proven terribly futile for the older Jewish communists. Deutscher described the shattering effects the Holocaust had on his own political and existential understanding of Jewish politics:

I have, of course, long since abandoned my anti-Zionism, which was based on a confidence in the European labor movement, or, more broadly, in European society and civilization, which that society and civilization have not justified . . . For the remnants of European Jewry—is it only for them?—the Jewish State has become a historic necessity.⁹⁵

Thus, their universalist hopes had been irreversibly destroyed by the genocide and exclusion from humankind the Nazis had executed on the Jewish people. For some of the Jewish communists who had been able to escape death, Israel was the last refuge and resort of their mere existence: Not as a consequence of Zionism, but as a consequence of Auschwitz.

CONCLUSION

At the end of Matzpen's history stands the historic downfall of Jewish and Israeli utopias that were once supposed to secure a shared future for Israel and Palestine. Thus, this history entails an irresolvable conflict: the aporia between the perpetual effects of the Holocaust on the one hand and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the other. Still, to emphasize the independent history and structure of the Israeli-Palestinian-conflict was a major effort of Matzpen as well as an act of historical responsibility. Even more, Matzpen's enduring historical legacy is to have opened up a perspective of mutual understanding in this conflict; one that involves the secure existence of both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs based on equality and recognition, whatever the shared ways of cohabitation in the region might ultimately be.

NOTES

All Israeli newspapers are in Hebrew.

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3. “May 1st 1969,” *Matzpen* 49 (May 1969). See Gershon Gorenberg, *Occupied Territories. The Untold Story of Israel’s Settlements* (London, 2007), 8.

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