

A reader responds to correspondence on the boycott of Israeli academics

25 July 2002

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to “An exchange of letters on the boycott of Israeli academics,” posted on July 17, 2002.

I am deeply impressed by your response to the young Jewish man who lost all perspective and compassion in face of the horror in the present Palestinian-Israeli relationships, and turned anti-Semitic in his blindness. I was very young, just 17, when I first came across these same forces in 1964, and like him, my mind was unglued for a time by what I experienced. We petit bourgeois can lurch from one extreme to another, you know. We always have. I am hoping you would forward this letter to him as an attachment.

I was born in Budapest in 1947 to parents who were literally lined up to be shot as Jews by the fascist militias of the Arrow Cross, scarcely two years before my birth. The sound of advancing Russian soldiers scared the fascists off, and so I was born in a neighbourhood beside the Great Synagogue, the largest in Europe, where nearly everyone carried a tattooed number on the arm. Literally, the designated ghetto.

1947 was also the year the Stalinists took power in a rigged election. The tyrant Rakosi and his closest Stalinist associates were Jewish. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, as you know, had an inspired Workers Council at its core, but it is sometimes forgotten that dark forces also come out in revolutions. After all, Hitler got his start after the Bavarian Soviet was suppressed, and among his first followers were the murderers of many Jewish revolutionists.

I have in my mind’s eye, always, the bodies hung and butchered before my house of my neighbours, who were Jewish officials. In the disorder of the times, the Arrow Cross guys came back to the ghetto in 1956. Moreover, my father had tuberculosis in his youth, so it was not easy to find a country that would take us as refugees. We shifted around refugee camps in Austria,

Germany and Holland.

There were the Arrow Cross guys in the camps too. I may be among the very few living Jews who experienced pogrom, for there were many incidents in the camps—turning over of buses of Jews leaving for Canada was one of the things I remember, followed by a blockade of the dining room so that the remaining Jews, including me, could not get fed for days. A Jew was killed on the gangplank of the ship taking us to Canada. He had a leather coat, and a “nyilas”, an Arrow Cross hoodlum, went insane and stabbed him.

Not unexpectedly, I became a Zionist, helped by summer camp indoctrination and personal post-holocaust experience. My father pored over ultra-right Zionist papers day after day. He only left Hungary because my mother promised that we would go to Israel. Fortunately, she heard from her sister what life was like in the promised land, and put her foot down in Vienna. That’s why I received a very benign, actually pseudo-socialist Zionist education in Canada. Then there was a traumatic visit to Israel in 1964 that blew my young petit-bourgeois mind.

You see Israel was a poor place at the time. My Aunt Eva, I was told, was living among the poorest of the poor, the ultra-religious Hungarian Jews, the Satmar, who do not recognize or receive any help from the Zionist state to this day. You may have seen the wonderful picture recently of two Satmar or Naturei Karta folk marching among the Palestinian supporters at the Dunbar conference displaying a sign, “Authentic Rabis.”

How Eva, my aunt, and her children wound up in penury in this section of the ultra-religious B’nei Brak district of Tel Aviv was never really explained to me. However, my father was a follower of Jabotinsky, the founder of the version of Zionism that rules Israel today.

My father sent me to his funeral, and my mother used the opportunity to send money to her sister in an era when such transfers of currency were highly taxed. [*Editor's note: Jabotinsky died in New York in 1940. His remains were interred in Jerusalem in 1964.*] The nation-state, you know, has its disadvantages.

I stayed with my Aunt Eva, who was very concerned over what would happen when Jabotinsky's coffin, contrary to Jewish custom, was displayed in downtown Tel Aviv for a rally and tribute. I went and was shaken to the core of my being. There they were the Betar (the Jabotinsky youth movement). No summer camp Zionists they. They had uniforms resembling the fascist beasts, marching songs and the whole fascist shtick. I know the smell well. Not only that, but they drove up and down the streets on B'nei Brak honking their horns and disturbing the Tisha B'ov mourning of the Orthodox Jews that took place that day as well.

I was walking home in shorts and wearing on my head a kibbutz hat of the times. Religious Jews ran from me, as if I were a fascist beast myself. And that caused me to go into a mental convulsion that my Aunt Eva walked me through.

My aunt's story is amazing, but it is her lesson that I would like to bring to this young man's attention. Eva was being marched on foot to Auschwitz and almost certain death when she asked a young German soldier to allow her to pee in the bushes. She said she was embarrassed.

The German soldier knew that Eva was trying to escape, but allowed the column to march on, and left Eva to return to the rubble of Budapest where her sister, my mother, helped her survive till the Russian troops drove the beasts out. Eva ran away with a Polish soldier serving with the Russians, made her way to Cyprus and was on the Exodus ship that landed in Israel the year before I was born.

She was taken to a Moshav, a kind of farming town, given a house and land, but had no idea how to grow crops. Her neighbours were Arabs, and they helped. A few years later, the Jewish beasts, yes, the Betar, were driving Arabs off their land and confiscating their wealth. My aunt hid the Arab family's wealth in her house. The Arabs, or Palestinians, lost their land, but with the wealth returned to them they opened a restaurant that prospered in Haifa. I stayed with them. When my aunt and I arrived at their restaurant, they

asked everyone to leave so that my aunt and I could eat in peace. Nor would they hear of us staying anywhere but in their own bed.

My point is that the beasts are back. And they will always surprise you. They could be among your own people, and that does not exclude the Palestinians. They have their beasts, to be sure. At the same time, there are everywhere people like the German soldier or my aunt, lest we forget.

For a People's World, not Nation-States! If a transitional state is needed—a Jewish-Arab state in Palestine. Now.

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