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Joseph Berger: The Comintern's and Münzenberg's Expert on Middle Eastern Affairs

von
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Joseph Berger-Barzilai (original name Joseph Isaac Zilnik, other form Zeliarnik), 1904–1978, was founding member and secretary of the Communist Party of Palestine and who fell victim to Stalin's purges.²

Berger-Barzilai was born in Cracow, Poland in 1904. In 1914, his family fled the Russian army which threatened to invade their city for Vienna, and moved in 1916 to Bielitz, Silesia. Young Joseph was brought up as an orthodox Jew and a Zionist, becoming active in the Zionist *Wanderbund Blau-Weiß*. He emigrated to Palestine at the age of 15 in 1919. There he worked first on road construction and then as a translator in an engineering firm. During his life he spoke Yiddish, German, Polish, English, Hebrew, and Russian.

Originally a member of the leftist Zionist organization *Hashomer Hatzair*, he became soon a communist, took part in the founding of one of the communist groups, the Communist Party of Palestine, in 1922, and became its secretary. It was then that he assumed the name Berger. Together with Wolf Averbukh, he was responsible for the unification of various left-wing groups that had broken with Zionism to the *Palestiner Kommunistische Partei*, the Palestine Communist Party, in 1923. The party had to operate under illegal conditions since the British Mandate Authority had outlawed all communist activities in May 1921. Berger became deputy secretary of the party that joined the Comintern in March 1924.³ For this mission, he was sent to Moscow. In the same year he helped to establish a Lebanese branch of the party that became an independent organization in the same year. As a communist emissary, he also traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Transjordan. In December 1924 he went again to Moscow to report to the ECCI on the situation in Palestine.

In Moscow Berger met and married his wife Esther Feldman, a Russian Jewess. Upon his return to Palestine in 1925, he was arrested for illegal activities in the Communist Party and Comintern, but was only fined. After another trip to Moscow, the police authorities refused to let him in on 16 August 1926. As a stateless citizen, he had to remain aboard an Italian ship that sailed back and forth for six weeks. The International Aid Organization for Arrested Revolutionaries, together with Labor Zionists, managed to obtain his release. After that, he lived in an Arab village, Beit Safafa, under false identity. He continued to co-lead the party and met with Comintern emissaries.

Under the initial 'J.B.' or the pseudonym 'Bob' Berger frequently contributed to Comintern journals, mainly to the *International Press Correspondence*. While early in 1924 he wrote that all classes of the Arab people are in the struggle against imperialism, a few months later he

¹ Paper submitted to the "Europäische Münzenberg-Tagung – Propagandist, 'Pressezar' und Unperson," Berlin, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 12 and 13 October 2012.

² For Berger's biography, see Claudia Koch, *Joseph Berger – Grundzüge einer politischen Biographie* (M.A. Thesis: University of Leipzig, 2010) and his autobiography mentioned below.

³ For the history of the Palestinian Communist Party in the 1920s, see, e.g., Mario Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der antikolonialen Revolution* (Meisenheim: Anton Hain, 1975); Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979); Suliman Basher, *Communism in the Arab East, 1918-1928* (London: Ithaca Press, 1980); Alexander Flores, *Nationalismus und Sozialismus im arabischen Osten: Kommunistische Partei und arabische Nationalbewegung in Palästina 1919-1948* (Münster: Periferia, 1980); Mario Kessler, *Die Kommunistische Internationale und der arabische Osten 1919-1929* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leipzig, 1982).

made a clear distinction between landowners, urban capitalists and proletarian toilers.⁴ The Third party conference in June 1924 reflected this characterization of class struggle within the Arab camp. While the party should not become a missionary group its duties should involve influencing the speedy development of the division of classes in the Arab sector of Palestine.⁵ Within the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community of Palestine, the party pledged itself to fight primarily against Proletarian Zionism that was seen as an imperialist ideology under Marxist disguise.⁶ This was the main concern of the party as Berger frequently explained in his meetings with Comintern officials in Moscow or elsewhere.

In the spring of 1929, he was again called to Moscow. There he had a five-hour meeting with Stalin on 5 May. He received the order to sever the ties with the Arab Executive Committee and other parts of the Arab nationalist movement. He returned to Palestine to take command of the party after the first Arab-Jewish civil war in August 1929 in Palestine. In a first statement the party had characterized the troubles as a result of colonialism: that Britain, afraid of the unity of Arab and Jewish workers, had instigated racial hatred to divide the communities, and this was aided by Arab effendis and Zionist leaders. According to Moscow's order Berger had to change the line: An ECCI directive from October 1929 characterized the fights as an Arab anti-imperialist rebellion against Britain and the Zionists and demanded unconditional support of the party for the "revolutionary Arab toilers," notwithstanding their nationalist and religious slogans and their subordination under the violent anti-Jewish policy of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin El-Husseini.⁷ Following the ECCI directive, Berger helped to reorganize the party to include an Arab leadership. In 1931, the first party secretary of Arab origin, Nadjati Sidqi, known as Mustafa Sadi, was elected. Two years later Radwan al-Hilu, known as Moussa, became party secretary.

In 1931, Berger was recalled to Moscow and sent from there to Berlin to work for Münzenberg's League against Imperialism. Berger now met such prominent members of the League as Jawaharlal Nehru. Together with Clemens Dutt he edited several publications of the League and wrote, under the pen name 'L. Haddad', a pamphlet, *Der Tag des Fellachen*, that interpreted the Arab-Jewish clashes in Palestine as a purely anti-imperialist Arab revolt. Berger's direct cooperation with Münzenberg lasted, in all probability, less than a year. It is the least-known part of Berger's political life and still needs to be explored.⁸

In 1932, Berger was summoned to Moscow, where he became a Soviet citizen and, after a short period as lecturer at the University of Moscow, a militant Comintern official who headed the Near Eastern Department, a post which he held for two years. In 1933 he was given Soviet citizenship under the name Joseph Berger.

About this time Berger became doubtful of some aspects of the regime, although he still remained a convinced communist. In 1934 he was dismissed from his post and expelled from

⁴ See, e.g., J.B., "Die Klassenkämpfe innerhalb der arabischen nationalen Bewegung," *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz* (Inprekorr), No. 20 (1924), pp. 435-36.

⁵ See J.B., "Die dritte Konferenz der Kommunistischen Partei Palästinas," *Inprekorr*, No. 94 (1924), p. 1212.

⁶ See Johan Franzén, "Communism versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestine Communist Party," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 36 (2007), No. 2, pp. 6-24.

⁷ For the Arab-Jewish confrontation in August 1929, see Jacob Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism in Palestine: The Comintern and the Political Unrest in the 1920's* (Boston: Schenkman, 1974); Mario Kessler, "Die Augustereignisse 1929, die Komintern und die KP Palästinas," *asien-afrika-lateinamerika*, Vol. 19 (1991), No. 3, pp. 517-29.

⁸ It is possible that he took over the duties of Virendranath Chattophadyaya who had, in August 1931, left Berlin for Moscow where he was murdered in 1937. See Fredrik Pettersson, "We are no visionaries and no utopian dreamers": *Fragments and reflections regarding the League Against Imperialism*, Abo Academy, Comintern Working Paper, No. 1 (2005), pp. 12-13.

the party without any given reason. For some months he worked in a printing house. On January 27, 1935, he was arrested and charged with being a Trotskyist agitator. Interrogated for two months he refused to 'confess' and was sentenced to five years in a labor camp.

First he was in Mariinsk in Siberia, then he was sent to Gornaya Shoriya on the Mongolian frontier. In 1936 he was brought back to Moscow's Lubyanka prison as a potential witness in the trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev. The authorities, finding that they were unable to use him, sentenced him to death, but by a chance the verdict was changed to eight years in prison. Before returning to Siberia, Berger demanded to see his wife and went on a hunger strike for 44 days until he obtained permission for a meeting. After this he was brought to a prison in Vladimir that was reserved for criminals, then to Solovki near the Finnish border, later to Dudinka on the Yenisei river and still later to Norilsk in Northern Siberia.

In January 1938 the left-wing Zionist journal *Jewish Frontier* reported that Berger was arrested after his return to Russia for allegedly misinforming the Comintern in regard to the situation in Palestine. This was the only time that his fate was made public. A few months later, however, a group of Polish dissident communists also mentioned in a manifesto the liquidation of the leadership of the Palestine Communist Party. The author of this manifesto that remained unpublished was the young journalist Isaac Deutscher whom Berger would meet more than two decades later.

In 1941 Berger was charged with organizing a group of prisoners to overthrow the authorities and was, again, sentenced to death. He went on a hunger strike for 56 days and also refused to comply with the regulation that demanded he should sign his own death warrant; owing to the omission of this formality the bureaucracy did not ratify the sentence. Instead he was given a further ten years in prison. Among the places in which he was now confined were Alekxandrowsk, a top security prison near Irkutsk, and Tayshet, a Siberian labor camp for particularly dangerous criminals.

In 1951, he was released, only to be banned to life-long exile in Siberia. His wife and his 16-years old son Joseph were also persecuted on his account, and they could see him only after 15 years, when they were allowed to visit him in Siberia.

It was only three years after Stalin's death, in 1956, that Berger was officially rehabilitated and allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Poland. His family accompanied him. He started working in the Polish Institute for Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, but soon he and his family decided to emigrate to Israel. He lived in Tel Aviv and assumed the name Barzilai. Soon after his return he was invited to give lectures at Bar Ilan University. Later the university appointed him as an associate professor of political science. Berger had completely abandoned his communist faith and had become religious. He nevertheless considered himself left-leaning and, later, supported negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization. In the late 1960s he dictated friends in Tel Aviv and London his memoirs about the time in Soviet camps and prisons. The book came out in 1971 in Britain with the title *Shipwreck of a Generation* and in the United States as *Nothing But the Truth: Joseph Stalin's Prison Camps: A Survivor's Account of the Victim's He Knew*. A French translation was published under the title *Le naufrage d'une génération* in 1974.

"My own task, as I understand it, is to state what I saw and felt and lived through," he wrote in the beginning of the book. Like many other victims of Stalimism, Berger's initial reaction to his arrest was that it must be an error: "The natural reaction of a communist arrested in 1935 was to take it for granted that he was the victim of a misunderstanding which sooner or later

would be cleared up. It was still believed that the population of Soviet prisoners and camps consisted overwhelmingly of class enemies and counter-revolutionaries.”⁹ It took him years of persecution and humiliation to ask: “How could the Revolution have turned upon itself and become the instrument of its own destruction in the hands of the man whom the revolutionaries themselves had put at their hand?”¹⁰

In Israel, Berger published a number of essays about his time in the Soviet Union but also on the history of the communist movement in Palestine. Far from condemning his former comrades or his own activities, he nevertheless saw the party policy now from a critical perspective.

In an essay about the 1929 riots Berger wrote, in 1965, that the party’s first reaction was one of confusion, but then it distinguished between the reasons underlying the attacks, the Arab fear to be dispossessed by the Jews, and the form it took, a clash which reminded the Jewish communists of a pogrom. Berger emphasized that it was the Comintern, and not the party leadership, that called the riots an anti-imperialist uprising. He saw this over-simplified view within the context of the Comintern’s Third Period in which the organization envisaged an economic collapse of capitalism and a massive radicalization of the workers and oppressed masses in the colonies.¹¹

On 19 April 1970 Berger wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*:

“In 1925 the Comintern asked me to keep in close contact with Jamal Husseini, who was the right-hand lieutenant of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin El-Husseini, the revered leader of the Palestinian Arabs. [...] In the name of the Comintern we promised these Arab leaders organizational and financial help to consolidate the Arab national movement, and to unify the Arab people, which was under British rule in the Land of Israel and in Egypt, under French rule in Syria and the Lebanon. [...] We, the Jewish communists of the Land of Israel, really believed then that, with the help of the Comintern, we would take our place in the government of the Palestinian State where we would defend the rights of the Jewish minority.”¹²

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Late in life Berger was deeply impressed about what he considered a “miracle of Jewish awakening”, i. e. the wish of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. Soviet Jews would, as he wrote, fight “to realize their basic demands for national self-determination, as embodied in the Soviet constitution, against a harsh bureaucracy putting innumerable obstacles in their way, and against the full blast of the official propaganda machine.”¹³

Contemporary witnesses in Israel see, in retrospect, Joseph Berger as a person who was completely disillusioned of Soviet communism but had not completely abandoned the ideals of his youth.¹⁴ He wrote his memoirs, as he emphasized, for a young generation in the Soviet Union who may not read them but would undergo a process of rethinking Stalin’s bloody

⁹ Joseph Berger, *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger* (London: Harvill Press, 1971), p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹¹ See Yosef Barzilay, “Jerusalem, August 1929,” *Keshet*, Vol. 8 (Winter 1965), No. 1, pp. 122-37. English translation in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, No. 46 (Spring 1988), pp. 16-32.

¹² Joseph Berger-Barzilai in *Haaretz*, 19 April 1970, as quoted from Maxim Ghilan, *How Israel Lost its Soul* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 144-45.

¹³ Joseph Berger-Barzilai, “The ‘Neo-Zionist’ Revolution in the USSR,” *The Jewish Quarterly*, Vol. 19 (1971), Nos. 1-2, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ See my interviews with Riva Ben-Eliezer and Ruth Livnit, Tel Aviv, 17 and 18 March 1994 (handwritten notes).

legacy. “This process is not limited only to the students or to the intellectual élite, but is spreading to various levels of the working class and even to some parts of the peasant youth. [...] I have the feeling that the conclusions to which the new generation in the Soviet Union is coming will be more far-reaching and more surprising for most outside observers than anything that has been written or said on the subject until now.”¹⁵

This was similar to what Berger’s longtime friend Leopold Trepper, communist in Palestine, leader of anti-Fascist resistance in Belgium and France, then Stalin’s victim and, at the end, like Berger, settling down in Israel, concluded: “I do not regret the commitment of my youth, I do not regret the paths I have taken. In Denmark, in the fall of 1973, a young man asked me in a public meeting, ‘Haven’t you sacrificed your life for nothing?’ I replied, ‘No.’ ‘No’ on one condition: that people understand the lesson of my life as a communist and a revolutionary, and do not turn themselves over to a deified party.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ Berger, *Shipwreck of a Generation*, p. 273.

¹⁶ Leopold Trepper, *Die Wahrheit: Autobiographie* (Munich: dtv, 1975), p. 345. Berger wrote the entry on Trepper in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Supplement, Vol. 17 (Jerusalem: Keter, and New York: McMillan, 1973-1982), cols. 586-587.