

THE JEWISH NATIONAL FUND AS SEEN BY AUSTRALIAN AND BRITISH SECURITY FORCES DURING WORLD WAR I

by

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When a country is in a state of war it is common, indeed natural, for Intelligence Agencies to concern themselves with organisations which have international networks. It is therefore hardly surprising that the J.N.F. attracted the attention of British Intelligence soon after the outbreak of hostilities.

An examination of the U.K. Articles of Association of the J.N.F. (1907) quickly allayed the fears of the guardians of British security. Of the three founding directors of J.N.F. (London), Dr. Wolfsohn of Cologne, the only foreigner, was dead. Of the remaining two, Jacob Moser was a former Mayor of Bradford and Leonard Greenburg was a well known and respected Londoner. By the time the investigation began, these were joined by C.H. Weizman who held a Chair at Manchester University and Claude Montefiore, who was at the time the President of the Anglo-Jewish Association. The investigation of the London branch of the J.N.F. was therefore concluded with the following summary:

“... the London branch seems to be an influential one, and has the support of distinguished Jews whose loyalty to British interests cannot reasonably be doubted. (Mr. Montefiore and Dr. Weizman for instance).”¹

Nevertheless, the international character of the Fund was the cause of periodic concern. These fears were further augmented by the predominance of German and Austrian Jews in the hierarchy of the J.N.F.'s Central Bureau which had its headquarters in the Hague. The sudden realisation that Kaplansky, an active functionary of the Central Bureau, was also a well known Russian Socialist with close links to Poalei Zion² contributed to the concern of the Intelligence Agencies.

Further investigation of the Central Bureau revealed the following information on the nationalities of its members:

Governors:

Otto Warburg, Professor of Zoology, Berlin.

Jacob H. Kann, Banker, The Hague.

Directors:

Max Bodenheimer, Counsellor at Law, Cologne.

Arthur Hantke, Counsellor at Law, Berlin.

Leopold Kessler, Consulting Engineer, London.

Johann Kremenevsky, Electrical Engineer, Vienna.

E. Tschelenow, Physician, Moscow.

Controlling Committee:

Otto Warburg, Professor of Zoology, Berlin.

Victor Jacobson, Doctor of Philosophy, Copenhagen.

Arthur Hantke, Counsellor at Law, Berlin.
Shmaryah Lewin, Doctor of Philosophy, New York.
Nahum Sokolow, Author, London.
E. Tschelenow, Physician, Moscow.

Clearly, the directorate of the J.N.F. had a predominant membership of citizens of the Central Powers. The investigators nevertheless concluded that even though there existed a:

“ . . . slight preponderance on the directorate of Jews in Germany and Austria over those in England and Russia and (though) the headquarters were in Germany before the War . . . the Zionists would welcome rather than otherwise a British protectorate over Palestine, as likely to provide a more peaceful environment than the present Turkish domination.”³

Besides the directorate, there was one group within the J.N.F. which, because of the nature of its work, tended to attract attention. The principal task of this group was to promote Zionism and to raise funds for the War Land Fund.⁴ Therefore, members of this group were constantly attracting the attention of the Press and, of course, of various Intelligence Agencies. The group consisted of Israel Cohen (London), Dr. D. Thon (Cracow), Dr. E. Zweig (Austria), J. Oettinger (Austria), and Adolf Boehn (Austria).

Israel Cohen was born in Manchester in 1879. In 1914 he was in Cologne as the Secretary of the “Action Group”. Interned, he spent 19 months in the Ruhleben Prisoner of War Camp. On his return to England in June 1916, he resumed his work for the J.N.F. He was engaged to translate a number of articles for the Jewish-American Press and he also wrote and published a book. One of the articles he translated attracted the attention of the American authorities who handed over the matter to British Intelligence. It soon became apparent that even though the J.N.F., due to its international character, remained studiously non-partisan and at no time did it display pro-German sentiments, it was most emphatically anti-Russian. In fact, the whole tenor of J.N.F. polemics was directed against Russia. The article translated by Cohen and written by Dr. Thon of Cracow described the miserable conditions of Jews in Galicia. It further described the retreat of the Russian Army in Debia, West Galicia, of which Thon caustically wrote:

“Out of 125 houses destroyed by fire during the Russian retreat in 1915, only 123 belonged to Jews.”

Such an article was an obvious embarrassment to the British Government and the censor refused to allow its publication.

In Australia the J.N.F. came to the notice of Central Intelligence in circumstances which can today be described as comical. In July 1917, a letter addressed to “Berliner Blechem-ballage-Fabrik” (sic) from the Fund’s headquarters at The Hague, miraculously found its way to Wellington, N.Z. The letter referred to a consignment of 500 **Buchsen**

which was to be sent by the Fund to Berlin. Alarm bells were sounded and an investigation into the activities of the Fund was launched. The translator had interpreted the word **Buchsen** as "firearms or muskets" which indeed it can mean. However, in late August communication was received from Rotterdam pointing out that the word also means "cans/tins or small boxes". The embarrassed Intelligence Offices in Australia promptly dropped the whole matter, but not before A. Mutz, the Australian President of the J.N.F., was subjected to intense questioning. He agreed to make all J.N.F. books and records available to the authorities for inspection. These revealed that in the year ending 31st December 1916, the total receipts of the Association amounted to £293/16/1d., of which £44/14/1d. was sent to the London J.N.F.

A report filed with the Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, concluded that "all Executive Officers (of the J.N.F.) are well known loyal citizens".⁶ It then added that "the question as to whether the Jewish Colonial Trust is under enemy influence is being investigated in London and on receipt of advice you will be advised further".⁷

Though the affair arising from the mistranslation was closed, the Australian Censor continued to scan all the incoming mail of the Fund. Despite repeated assurances from British Intelligence that the members of the London Branch of the J.N.F. were citizens of unquestioned loyalty, the Australian Intelligence authorities remained suspicious. In the summary to the Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, the report made the following points:

1. The funds collected in Australia and in the other countries of the Entente were sent to Palestine.
2. That this could not but help provide and maintain enemy subjects in employment.
3. That booklets of stamps sent to J.N.F. Melbourne by the Central Bureau for fund-raising purposes bore a portrait of Dr. Wolfsohn with a **German** inscription.

The report concluded:

"It would be easy to give much further evidence against the present activities of the J.N.F. but I think there is sufficient in the above to prove the undesirability of this work being allowed to continue."⁸

The difference of approach between the two Intelligence Services probably reflects different degrees of sophistication. It seems that the Prime Minister's Department did not act on the above report and no further action was taken against the J.N.F.

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1. P.M. Dept. Correspondence Files, SC (Secret and Confidential) Series. Regd. No. 17/18/483. Item 17 (4).

2. Poalei Zion was a pacifist organisation opposed to the War effort.
 3. No. 17/18/483 p. 6.
 4. This was started in April, 1915 by Dr. Gerson Zipper and Dr. Zweig.
 5. No. 17/18/483 p. 3.
 6. No. 17/11/483 p. 1.
 7. Ibid., p. 2.
 8. No. 17/18/483 p. 4.
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