Airstop in Israel

Stephan Theodore Norman

Theodor Herzl's untimely death in 1904 at the age of 44, and that of his wife Julia three years later, left the couple's children—Pauline, Hans, and Trude—orphaned in their early teens. This was merely the first of many tragedies to befall Herzl's children: Pauline died in a Bordeaux sanatorium in 1930 at the age of forty, and Hans took his own life a few days later, in grief at having failed to prevent his sister's death. They both died childless; only Trude, who married Jewish industrialist Richard Neumann in 1917, continued the family line through the birth of an only son, Stephan Theodore, in 1918.

As the Nazis began gaining power in Austria in 1933, the Neumanns enlisted the aid of the Zionist Organization to send their son to England for schooling. After the annexation of Austria by the Germans in 1938, Stephan began to study his grandfather's writings on Zionism. A short time later, he wrote to his parents and suggested they emigrate to Palestine, where he hoped the three of them might live together. His parents were unable to leave Austria, however, and with the outbreak of World War II, Neumann obtained British citizenship, changed his family name to Norman, and joined the Royal Artillery Regiment to fight Hitler and the Nazis.

In 1945, at the war's conclusion, Norman stopped in Palestine on his way home from India, making him the only descendant of Herzl to do so. The trip left him deeply moved, and impelled him to visit Palestine for a second time that same year.

The following year, the British Foreign Service posted him to Washington. Two months after his arrival, Norman learned that both his parents had perished in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Grief-stricken, he jumped to his death on November 25, 1946 from the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge.

Norman wrote the following essay after his first visit to Palestine, and it is published here for the first time. Its publication comes at a time when there is a renewed initiative in Israel to inter the remains of Herzl's descendants, who are buried in France and the United States, in Jerusalem's Mount Herzl Cemetery.

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The Dakota, caught in an air pocket, bumped, leveled, and bumped once more. The tarmac of the landing strip rushed towards us, appeared below our windows, straightened out. Braking gently, the plane came to a stop, turned, and taxied rapidly to dispersal. A last revving of engines and silence, but only momentarily; the door of the plane was opened, and a red-haired, sandy-faced flight lieutenant appeared, grinned, and said: "Welcome to Palestine. This is Lydda." Another moment and I stood, inhaling fresh air, on the soil of Palestine.

I had reached the halfway post on my journey to England. After two and a half years in the Far East, I was to have twenty-eight days of home leave before continuing my tour of overseas service.

As soon as the news of my leave had come through, I knew I would be going by air: Knew, too, that Palestine lay en route. I was not aware of the

length of my stay there, which might be a ninety-minute fuelstop or a two- or three-day "acclimatization halt." How I hoped it would be the latter.

Long-distance flying is a monotonous business. Usually there is little to see. Your time is spent reading, dozing, and sleeping. In spite of large meals at all airstops, your waking moments are passed in the continuous nibbling and chewing of stale biscuits and sticky, hard-boiled sweets.

But now, on the last hop from Habbaniya in Iraq, I could not sleep; nor could I read, or nibble. Flying parallel to the pipeline, I watched the sepia-colored desert below for hour after hour, and time suddenly seemed to stand still.

My ever-mounting excitement at the prospect of seeing Palestine had been a matter of days: My desire to visit it was of many years' standing. I cannot say that my upbringing had been markedly Jewish or Orthodox. Nor was the idea of Zionism, in spite of my family connection with it, ever at any time rammed down my throat, either at home or subsequently at school and university. But I had found and read my grandfather's writings, which make, I think, fascinating reading to anyone even remotely interested in Judaism, and which were, of course, of considerable interest to me.

I had long determined to see this Palestine that had grown from the prayers and longing of centuries of dispersed Jews; that had been shown the way to practical realism by Herzl; and that had, especially in the last thirty years, become socially and economically real.

It had been my intention to visit Palestine after the completion of my studies in 1939, but the war that had been threatening for so long came at last, and once again my visit was postponed indefinitely. Now, chance had presented me with an opportunity. I determined to make the most of my few hours in the land of Israel. I believed in the idea and the aims of Zionism, and in the moral, ethical, economic, and social need for it that had been made even more urgent and important by world events and the tremendous problems created by the new scientific anti-Semitism of the last decades. I desired to see with my own eyes a little of what had been created in Palestine, of what the feeling was in the country, and what its potential

may be. I knew I could not do that in a few hours, but one must begin sometime. Later I would have the chance to pay a more extensive visit.

Of one thing I was determined: I would not let my emotions get the better of me. It was easy for that to happen when you approve of an idea in advance, and the Jews are an emotional people. I wanted to see with my own eyes, and to remember what I saw.

My first view of Palestine was from the air. I had flown for several hours above the unrelieved barrenness of Arabia. Small signs of cultivation had become apparent as my plane neared the valley of the Jordan. After flying over the twisting, curving river, these signs increased. But the general bleakness continued. Jerusalem lay about thirty miles to the south, among rocky hills. As we began to descend, the sea and the coastal plain came into view, and then the great city of Tel Aviv. Now there were many villages and orderly settlements and carefully planted citrus groves. Trees, too, appeared, and I could see that all of them were young.

The large aerodrome of Lydda stretched below us, fringed with plantations. We had landed in Palestine—for a two-day halt!

I hitched a lift into Tel Aviv as soon as I was free. Driving along good, even roads, we soon reached the outskirts of the city and saw the first Hebrew street sign. Notices warned drivers to proceed slowly and beware of children. I looked around, and there they were, the children. They were playing, like children play in an English street. But here they romped in a Jewish street. I thought of their little brothers and sisters who had not been allowed to play in German streets, and it was good to see these free Jewish children. I had been told, You will be amazed at Jewish youth in Palestine: They are fair and sturdy and handsome. Therefore, I might have known what to expect, yet when I saw them, it was somehow new. These children bore the mark of freedom. It was quite unmistakable: In their bearing, in their eyes. I did not know who they were; workers' children, no doubt, for this was a workers' district, not a residential quarter. They might have been

born in Palestine—*sabras*, cactuses, as they are called—or they might be recent arrivals. Whoever they were, they had the look of freedom. I thought of the dark, sallow, unhappy Jewish children of Europe. I had seen pictures of their faces; their youthful frames had borne the features of old men and women, and now I saw these little ones who look like children again.

I walked into the city. In this Jewish metropolis, everyone and everything would be Jewish: The bus conductors and the milkmen and the town councilors; the laundresses; the shopgirls; the lady doctors. All this is common knowledge. Yet to see it was, once again, new.

The buildings were upright and simple and modern; the streets were of an incredible cleanliness. To one coming from the dirt and squalor of India, it seemed almost unbelievable. For after all, this was still the East. I had seen modern houses and streets in Bombay and other cities, but they always bore signs of the dirt and refuse that continue on in a sewerless country, even after it had been given sewers. The streets of Tel Aviv were clean.

I walked on Allenby Street and saw the shops of all the big capitals of the world in their prewar splendor. The wartime flavor was, alas, present too. It was in their prices.

Suddenly I came to the sea. Wandering along the promenade from Sir Herbert Samuel Square to London Square, I found one of the loveliest beaches I had yet seen. Flanking it were dozens of open-air cafés and restaurants, with Jaffa adding a picturesque background and reminding you that this was still an old land—you were apt to forget it in Tel Aviv.

I strolled around most of the day, occasionally sitting in one of the many boulevard cafés. I watched the busy life of the city before me, and saw also many unhappy continental faces.

The sad faces of the Jews! I saw no unhappy-looking children: They were being cared for, had perhaps forgotten. But in the faces of the older people, there was still the shadow of Europe. These were the uprooted ones—*die Entwurzelten*—who unhappily would carry that shadow for the rest of their lives. Their bodies might be free now, but their minds would never be. You cannot degrade matured human beings beyond the point where they cease

to be human and then expect them to heal. But they are the transients. Their sadness will die with them and their seed will not bear its marks. For in the faces of young Jews in Palestine, there is a quiet strength of feature and of purpose the likes of which I had never witnessed before. It made the contented faces of English Jewry seem decadent. These young Jews and Jewesses, whether they were Palestinian-born or had succeeded in throwing off the shackles of Europe, were strong. And about them was the breath of freedom.

To happy people like the English or Americans, such freedom is a birthright; to Jews, it is not. Yet here in Palestine, looking at them dispassionately and even critically, I saw it. You may hear about these things and read of them, and you may be glad; but to understand this look of freedom, you must see it with your own eyes. Only then will you know its meaning. The Jews of the world are an old, old people. But the Jews of Palestine are young—the youngest people in the world. They are not carefree. They have great and difficult problems. And in their hearts they carry the memory of the fate of their brothers and sisters in Europe, a fate that an indifferent world is rapidly forgetting. But they are young and strong, the Jews of Palestine, and they are eager to shoulder their problems, although they will never forget their Jewish brothers and sisters.

They cannot awaken the dead. But they can and will succor the living. This they are determined to do with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their might.

The afternoon had set, and night was falling on the Jewish city. Lights sprang up everywhere, and music came from a hundred cafés and restaurants, bars and clubs. The promenade looked enchanting. Here the melodies of a dozen nations intermingled. The swing music of America blended with sentimental Russian tunes, the fiery czardas of Hungary with the lilting Vienna Waltz. Fragments of Beethoven drifted from a ground-floor piano. There was dancing and the murmur of a thousand conversations, the laughter of women. Tel Aviv was gay and charming and its women were beautiful. The day had been hot, but now it was cool, and the swell of the sea was clean and full of fragrance.

I was on the road early next morning, bound for Jerusalem. Passing through the old towns of Lod and Ramleh, we traveled for several miles through flat country and then began to ascend through those barren rocky hills to the capital. The villages and towns on the way consisted of large white-stone houses looking clean and attractive. There were police stations and minor fortifications surrounded by barbed wire, massively built with small, heavily barred windows.

I had joined up with a fellow traveler from my aircraft, a flying officer of the RAF. Together we went into the Old City. We had managed to obtain a guide, an elderly Jew. Born in this city, he had lived in it all his life. Expertly he led us through the crowded overhung bazaar streets, pointing out ancient and historical sights. Mules passed by, docile and undisturbed by the crowding multitude. Here was truly the East; we would walk for many minutes and see only people dressed in the garments the likes of which their forefathers had worn for hundreds of years. The feeling of having stepped out of the twentieth century and into the past was complete: More so than I had ever experienced, even in the villages of central India. Jews and Arabs were living together in the closest proximity, as they had done for centuries, and they looked alike. There was little room, and there seemed none, for ideological, social, and political differences.

In the midday sun we stood at the foot of the Wailing Wall, towering high above our heads in space and in time. Untold numbers of Jews had come here throughout the centuries, had wept, and had received consolation. Into its thousands of crevices the prayers of our people had been inserted.

I had never been a religious Jew, but the silent, regal dignity of the Wall stirred me deeply. My Gentile friend, too, I could see, was affected. I tried to explain to him its meaning. There were few people present at this time of day. Among them was an old lady who wept quietly as she prayed close to the Wall. A sturdy peasant girl stood near us and kissed the sun-baked

stone with infinite tenderness. Walking backwards, she seems almost unable to take her farewell. And strangely, my companion and I had the same feeling. We left slowly and almost unwillingly, casting another and yet another glance back, hesitating to depart from "a sight so touching in its majesty."

We turned our backs on the Old City and went to look at the New. Most of its buildings were large and spacious, built of that same rough white stone that I had seen en route this morning. Their contours were dignified and combined agreeably the old Eastern and new Western civilizations. In the residential quarter of Rehavia, streets were wide and frequently tree-shaded.

I wanted to see something especially representative of Jewish initiative and endeavor, and was delighted when the Jewish Services Club arranged for a visit to Hadassah Hospital. A short drive took us to Mount Scopus, with the beautiful buildings of the university and the hospital. We were met by the secretary and given the history of this magnificent hospital. Its erection had been the work of the American Hadassah, and it ranked among the foremost hospitals in the world.

We saw immaculate kitchens with the latest devices for the preparation and serving of food. Cheerful nurses and trainees dressed in white, and spacious, airy wards. My companion, whose medical knowledge was considerably greater than mine, discussed technicalities, and seemed greatly astounded and impressed. We saw the maternity wards, with rows of tiny, pink babies behind an enormous window of plate glass. Fathers stood in front and made those cooing noises which are the same in any language, while efficient nurses held up their offspring for inspection. We were shown the waiting room for expectant fathers, with easy chairs and a large space for pacing up and down. A doctor, we were told, was always ready to give first aid to over-anxious male parents.

The hospital will take all but the very rich: These must go to private clinics or nursing homes. Patients pay according to their means; the poor, of course, not at all. The hospital takes all patients irrespective of race or creed. Arab women, used throughout the centuries to giving birth at home

and without medical assistance, were at first reluctant to come; now, having heard of the wonders of modern medicine, they are arriving in increasing numbers. I saw Arab women of all classes in various parts of the hospital. The presence of these women impressed me. You read so much, these days, of the insoluble differences between Jew and Arab. In this Jewish hospital, unobtrusively and without any fuss, patients were sick people whom it was desired to heal, and there were no differences.

We had to leave Jerusalem early in the afternoon in order to report back to our air-trooping draft, but on returning to camp we learnt that we were to have yet another day in Palestine.

I returned to Jerusalem early the next morning, for there was so much I still wanted to see. Most of all a room that means a great deal to Jews the world over, to Palestine's Jews even more, and that had for me a great personal interest: The room from his house in Vienna where Theodor Herzl worked for Zionism. It had been transferred bodily to Jerusalem and was situated in the building of the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund.

It is difficult for me to describe my feeling as I entered that room and saw, for the first time, all those belongings of which I had heard so much. Loving hands had arranged everything in the precise way it had been in Vienna, forty-one years ago: The pens, the rulers, the blotting paper on the desk were exactly as they had been left. The very building itself had been altered structurally to permit the addition of the alcove window which had been in Herzl's home. The books, the tables and chairs, all were there, and the topee which he had worn during his visit to Palestine, and in which, in Roman letters, he had written his Hebrew name: Benjamin Ze'ev. I could have spent many hours in the room.

I was shown the golden books of the Jewish National Fund, enormous in their beautiful bindings. I went into the vaults where the Herzl archives are kept. I saw the original manuscripts of *Der Judenstaat* and of the Diaries,

and other writings; files of personal documents and letters, all kept with loving care and devotion. I met the head of the archives and other officials. From Leib Jaffe, that Grand Old Man of Jewry, I heard many tales of the early Congresses. Together with him I visited the Hebrew University. Together we stood in the amphitheater where Balfour had declared this Jewish university open, and we looked for miles across the hills to the Jordan and beyond. Together we stood at Pinsker's grave. He, too, had a vision. Independently, and indeed, before Herzl.

Throughout the centuries of the diaspora, Jews had had that vision: It was given to a few to express the prayer and the dream that had been in the heart of every Jew, if not in his mind.

And now the dream was coming true. Daily, hourly, it was becoming more of a reality. A new land was growing out of this old, old country, and it would continue to grow, as surely and irresistibly as the passing of time.

Wenn ihr wollt, ist es kein Märchen—if you will it, it will be no fairy tale.

You willed it, Jews, with your hearts and with your souls, with your minds and with your bodies, with your work, with your sweat and with your blood, with all the sorrow in your hearts—yes, and with your gladness too. And see, it is no fairy tale.