

Israel's Entry to Colonial Cyprus

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Abstract

The article provides an account of events describing the actions of the Israeli diplomatic service aiming to promote political ties with Britain and the British authorities in Colonial Cyprus, during the first years of the 1950s. Based upon Israeli diplomatic documents of that period, the article describes the tensions between Israel and Britain, the Israeli diplomatic initiatives leading to the opening of the Israeli General Consulate in Nicosia, the efforts for the revival of the local Jewish institutions and the role of Israeli entrepreneurs, enabling the consolidation of their country's presence on neighbouring British soil.

Keywords: Colonial Cyprus, Israel, foreign policy, international relations, Israeli foreign policy, British foreign policy, 1950s

Toward a British-Israeli Regional *Entente*

As a result of severe outcry on the Israeli Press and repeated protests by the Israeli administration,² the British Detention Camps in Cyprus, closed permanently on 9 February 1949³ and their last detainees, all of them Jewish Holocaust survivors, were permitted by the British Colonial Authorities of Cyprus to leave the island and settle permanently in the young State of Israel.⁴ This development was meant to conclude a sensitive aspect during a long period of rigid relations between Brit-

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² Cf. Helmuth Lowenberg, 'Israel' (1950) 51 *American Jewish Year Book* 399 available at http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1950_14_Israel.pdf (last accessed 2 September 2020).

³ 'Last Jewish DP's Leave Cyprus; British Soldiers Shout *'Shalom'* in Enthusiastic Farewell' *JTA-Daily News Bulletin* XVI(35) (New York NY: 11 February 1949) 1 available at http://pdfs.jta.org/1949/1949-02-11_035.pdf?_ga=2.38102243.1142929139.1599043423-1076808890.1598955470 (last accessed 2 September 2020).

⁴ British Colonial Authorities' decision came after Foreign Secretary's Ernst Bevin declaration at the House of Commons on 18 January 1949 according to which Jewish detainees interned to Cyprus were permitted to leave to Israel. Cf. 'Commons Postpones Palestine Debate; Bevin Announces Cyprus Detainees to Be Freed' *JTA-Daily News Bulletin* XVI(15) (New York NY: 19 January 1949) 1 available at http://pdfs.jta.org/1949/1949-01-19_015.pdf?_ga=2.7122930.1142929139.1599043423-1076808890.1598955470 (last accessed 2 September 2020).

ain and the Zionist movement, taking place in Mandate Palestine for years. With Israel declaring its independence on 14 May 1948 and the 1949 Rhodes Armistice Agreements coming into force, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had no desire to aggravate his government's relations with London, despite Britain's negative neutrality towards Israel, by abstaining from voting on both motions to allow Israel's full membership in the United Nations.⁵

Israel declared its independence in May 1948, with the end of the British Mandate in Palestine. However, this development did not immediately signal the start of full diplomatic bilateral ties between Israel and Britain. It was not until five months after the Jewish Detention Camps in Cyprus had closed that Israel appointed Mordechai Eliash, a jurist and academic, as its chargé d'affaires in London, who presented his credentials to King George VI of England on 10 June 1949,⁶ following Britain's official declaration regarding the *de facto* recognition of the new State, on 5 April 1949.⁷ Yet it took another twelve months for Britain to recognise Israel *de jure*, on 28 April 1950.⁸

Ben-Gurion knew very well that in order for Israel to earn the trust of the United States and the West, it would have to improve Israel's relations with Britain. This

⁵ On 29 November 1948 Israel submitted to United Nations Security Council its first application for admission in the UN. Although the United States and the Soviet Union voted in favour, Britain abstained, stating that this move might 'diminish the chances of an early settlement in Palestine. On 24 February 1949 Israel submitted its second application to the United Nations Security Council, and Britain abstained again. Cf. Louis Shub, 'Israel' (1950) 51 *American Jewish Year Book* 385 available at http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1950_14_Israel.pdf (last accessed 2 September 2020).

⁶ 'King of England to receive Israel's chargé d'affaires' (ל'ארשי ריצ תא לבקי ילגנאה ד'למיה), *Ha'Tzofeh* (Tel Aviv, 10 June 1949) 1 (in Hebrew) available at <http://jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/SharedView.Article.aspx?parm=dXFORtWvLQf9Gqs/TL6nbwD6Ml5hZJSUFQ01C5rPs1JS3TvX7Ii00gOFsKCL5SxNY-w%3D%3D&mode=image&href=HZH/1949/06/10&page=1> (last accessed 2 September 2020).

⁷ Cf. 'Dr. Mordechai Eliash, Israel Envoy to Britain, Dies. Burial to Take Place in Jerusalem' *JTA-Daily News Bulletin* XXVII(49) (New York NY: 13 March 1950) 6 available at http://pdfs.jta.org/1950/1950-03-13_049.pdf?_ga=2.225593690.192170799.1598955470-1076808890.1598955470 (last accessed 2 September 2020).

⁸ Besides proceeding to *de jure* recognition of Israel, on 28.4.1949 Britain also acknowledged East Jerusalem's annexation by Jordan. The Foreign Office appointed an Ambassador to Tel Aviv and two Consuls to Jerusalem, one in the Israeli (western) sector of the city and one in the Jordanian (eastern) sector. Cf. 'Britain recognised *de jure* the State of Israel and the Annexation' (הריו-הד הריכה הינטירב) *Davar* (Tel Aviv, 28 April 1950) 1 (in Hebrew) available at <http://jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/SharedView.Article.aspx?parm=o9Sbi1WIsHdoejWFtHsh3QUfr8tCAhiy8wZ8X-5uQda4Ov7mimzFHhMso66pt4gU%2BYw%3D%3D&mode=image&href=DAV/1950/04/28&page=1> (last accessed 2 September 2020).

fact was pointed out in several occasions, during Israel's initial contacts with Turkey – the only country in the Middle East and the East Mediterranean maintaining full diplomatic relations with Israel at that time.

Since both Israel and Turkey needed a powerful regional ally, in addressing the Israeli Ambassador in Ankara, Turkish Foreign Minister Mehmet Fuad Köprülü could not have been more specific, as he was quoted by Elyahu Sasson's report: 'You need to understand that military cooperation between Israel and Turkey is predicated on a military cooperation between Israel and Britain'.⁹ Fuad Köprülü repeated the same condition to the high-ranking officer of the Israeli Army, Moshe Dayan, when they met during the latter's official visit to Ankara in 1950. Similar incitations were expressed to Eliahu Elath, Israel's Ambassador to London, by his Turkish counterpart.¹⁰

The Israeli side was not indifferent to the Turkish suggestions. At the UN Headquarters, Israeli and British Delegations initiated contacts thanks to the intercession of the Head of the Turkish Permanent Delegation, Selim Sarper.¹¹ Meanwhile, intense consultations had been launched amongst Britain, the United States, Turkey and Israel on the possibility of establishing a Western joint defence mechanism in the Eastern Mediterranean, whilst Britain was already seriously considering the eventuality of shifting the focal point of its military presence in the region away from the Suez Canal and towards neighbouring Cyprus.¹²

Israeli diplomacy adopted the position that, in the event of a new war in the region, Britain would be called upon to take on the main bulk of defence in the Middle East, since the protection of the Suez Canal was not of interest only to Britain, but to all member-states of the Commonwealth. At the same time, London was bound by defence treaties entered into with the pro-Western regimes of Iraq and Jordan,

⁹ Israel State Archives /RG93/MFA/8692/3 Research Division (226/26 February 1951). Included in this report is an account by Eliahu Sasson, Israel's Ambassador to Ankara, on the working meeting he had in January 1951 with the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mehmet Fuad Köprülü.

¹⁰ ISA/RG93/MFA/8692/3 Research Division (215/11 February 1951). Excerpt from Sasson's report from Ankara referring to Dayan's meetings with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹¹ ISA/RG93/MFA/8692/3 Research Division (215/11 February 1951).

¹² ISA/RG93/MFA/8692/4 Research Division (380/16 October 1951). The report features an account of the progress made in the consultation between the US, Britain and Turkey in the matter of the establishment of the Supreme Allied Command Middle East (SACME) against the background of the possibility of Egypt also been taken into account as of that particular defence project. Egypt's ultimate refusal to be part thereto seems to have seriously impacted developments in that enterprise that was eventually doomed to fail.

while London was maintaining key strongholds in Cyprus, Basra, Aden and Alexandria.¹³ For its part, the Foreign Office saw an alliance between Israel and Turkey as ‘a reliable and effective support for British presence in the area in all possible aspects’.¹⁴ It also described Israel as a ‘Bastion of Democracy in the Middle East’ as well as ‘England’s Natural Ally’. At the same time, British diplomats believed that, in the event of a Soviet-backed attack in the Middle East, one could not say with certainty that the Arab states would fall on the side of the West. Moreover, their military forces – with the single exception of the Jordanian Arab Legion – were not considered battle-worthy, compared to the Turkish and Israeli armies.

In a retrospect, according to the Israeli point of view, when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, was addressing the Knesset on November 5, 1951 in order to give an account of his first official visit to the United States in May 1951, during which he met with the President of the United States, Harry Truman, along with other high-rank State Department officials, he considered it a given that Western countries were deluded into thinking they would ever find a reliable ally in the Middle East other than Israel. Specifically referring to Nasserist Egypt, Israel’s leading regional adversary at that time, Ben-Gurion precluded the failure of attempts by the US, Britain and Turkey to include Egypt in order to form a regional military alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean, an ambitious venture that never materialized.¹⁵

According to Ben-Gurion’s belief, it was only a matter of time before the West came to terms, not only with Israel’s importance, but also its dependability in the region. Despite the considerable size of their territories and their population, the Arab countries did not ideologically identify themselves with the value system of the West. Thus, sooner or later, any attempt by the West to collaborate with the Arab world would be destined to failure.

‘But how can the United States and England believe that Egypt will fight to defend Democracy and Freedom in the world, while at the same time, there is neither democracy nor freedom within Egypt itself? It was not Egypt’s army that saved

¹³ ISA/RG93/MFA/8692/3 Research Division (216/13 February 1951). Report by Eliahu Elath, Israel’s Ambassador to London, to the Western Europe Division.

¹⁴ Ibid. Particularly interesting was Elath’s assessment, according to which the financial and military assistance provided by the US to Greece, Turkey and Persia was not associated to any formal commitment to provide military protection to those countries in the event of a Soviet invasion. Elath concluded that Britain’s presence in the Middle East remains more important when compared to the US’s.

¹⁵ David Ben Gurion, *The Country’s Problems. Israel’s Foreign Policy* (הגידמה ליש תוייעב) (Jerusalem: Sherutey ha’Modiin, 1951) 16 (in Hebrew).

Egypt from Rommel. It was the armies of the British, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Indians and the Jewish Legions who fought on the side of the British army. If at some point Egypt were to take delivery of American or British arms, it would not use them for any other purpose other than to turn them against Israel. And that is exactly what we have already told the Americans and the English', said David Ben Gurion with particular emphasis in his speech before the Knesset on 5 November 1951.¹⁶

Israeli Diplomatic Presence in Colonial Cyprus; The Initial Steps

As diplomatic relations between Israel and Britain were normalised after Israel's *de jure* recognition on 28 April 1950, British Colonial Cyprus became the only administrative entity, several nautical miles off the Israeli Mediterranean coasts, with which Israel did not share any kind of dispute whatsoever. On the contrary, Cypriot harbours and airports could facilitate Israel's commercial contacts with the rest of the world, while an Arab economic boycott was about to be implemented. Cyprus might also serve as the closest transit point for the Jews from the Diaspora, on their way to permanently settle in Israel. However, this was predicated on the existence of good diplomatic relations between Israel and the British Colonial Authorities in the neighbouring island.

As early as the summer of 1949, immediately after the signing of the Armistice Agreements, which granted *de facto* borders to the young Jewish State, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs was already getting prepared to establish its presence in Cyprus by placing a Honorary Vice-Consul in Nicosia.

Initially, Gabriel Berdy, a British subject of Jewish descent and permanent resident of Larnaca, was selected to fill the position. Berdy and his family had settled in Cyprus in the early 20th century, in a small village named Marko at Nicosia Province, as part of the Jewish farming settlement project financed by the Jewish Colonisation Association (JCA) and Baron Maurice de Hirsch.¹⁷ In 1923, JCA decided to discontinue financing the programme and withdrew from Cyprus for good in

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Yair Seltenreich & Yossi Katz 'Between the Galilee and its Neighbouring Isle: Jules Rosenheck and the JCA Settlements in Cyprus, 1897-1928' (2009) 45(1) *Middle Eastern Studies*, 87 available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00263200802547693> (last accessed 2 September 2020) and Yossi Ben Artzi 'Historical Perspectives on Jewish Rural Settlement in Cyprus 1899-1939' in Giorgos Kazamias, Giorgos Antoniou (eds.) *Historical Perspectives on Cypriot-Jewish Relations* (Nicosia: University of Cyprus, 2015) 13-17.

1927, after selling off the large piece of farmland it had purchased at Marko. The Jewish families living in Marko and surrounding villages left, some of them for Israel, and others for Europe. The Berdy family were one of the few Jewish families to remain in Cyprus and settle in the village of Kouklia in Famagusta Province.¹⁸ No sooner had the British detention camps in Cyprus become operational during the period 1946-1949 than 30-year-old Gabriel Berdy offered his services to the detainees and, together with the rest of the few remaining members of the local Jewish community, saw to the maintenance of the Jewish cemetery in Marko.¹⁹ At the same time, Berdy himself worked closely with Prodromos Papavassiliou, then a member of the Municipal Council of Famagusta, and other Greek-Cypriots residing in Famagusta, assisting both the Jewish detainees in Karaolos and *Haganah* cells, that entered Cyprus secretly in a number of ways.²⁰

By way of a memo addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 19 September 1949, the Israeli Ministry of Jewish Immigration and Absorption (the 'Ministry of *Aliyah*') proposed that the duties of *Aliyah* Officer (Jewish Immigration Officer) be assigned to Gabriel Berdy along with the duties of Honorary Vice-Consul.²¹ The *Aliyah* Officer was responsible for decreeing whether Diaspora Jews applying for

¹⁸ Ata Atun, 'Initiative to colonise Cyprus with Jews in the 20th Century' (2011) 3(3) *International Journal of Academic Research* 790 available at <https://www.docdroid.net/YhTArF/initiatives-to-colonise-cyprus-with-jews-pdf> (last accessed 2 September 2020). According to civil registry sources, in September 1946 there were four Jewish families living in the village of Kouklia, Province of Famagusta. One of these was the family of Michael and Rosa Berdy. Their son, Gabriel Berdy, was 31 years old at the time. Since August 1974, Kouklia is controlled by Turkish military forces and it is renamed Köprülü.

¹⁹ About the preservation of the Jewish cemetery in Marko Cf. Yadin Rodan "The Forgotten Jews of Cyprus' (July-August 2001) *Eretz Magazine* 26 available at <http://www.erezt.com/NEW/article/Cyprus%20jews.pdf> (last accessed 2 September 2020) as well as Menachem Weinstein, *Religious Zionism in the Outskirts of the Land of Israel – 'Ha'Avodah' Movement at the Cyprus Detention Camps.* (צ'יסי'רפקב רצעמה רונחמב הדובעה תעומת. לארשי ירא ילושב תיתד תוניצ) (Nir Galim: Beit ha'Edot le-Moreshet ha'Tzionut ha'Datit ve ha'Shoa, 2001), 170 (in Hebrew).

²⁰ The Society for the Preservation of Israel's Historic Monuments (לארשי תשרומ ירתא רומישל הצעומה) maintains the website www.maapilim.org.il (last accessed 2 September 2020), which provides ample information on the Museum of Cyprus Detention Camps (Atlit, Northern Israel), including an alphabetical list of names of Greek-Cypriots who helped Jewish detainees, either during their detention in the Cypriot Camps of Karaolos, Dhekelia and Xylotymou or in their attempts to flee. Aside from Prodromos Papavassiliou, then Municipal Councillor at the Municipality of Famagusta, all other Greek-Cypriots are listed only by their first name or their code names. The database is accessible at <http://maapilim.org.il/search.asp?lang=HEB&dlang=HEB&module=notebook&page=criteria&rsrvr=1@1¶m=%3Cuppernav%3E-complex%3C/%3E¶m2=&site=maapilim> (last accessed 2 September 2020).

²¹ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Ministry for Immigration and Absorption (Ministry of *Aliya*) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (027/142/462/7573 – 19 September 1949).

permission to enter and settle in Israel met the conditions for obtaining special travel documents in accordance with the Israeli Law of Return, and then issuing the relevant entry visas. This proposal was met favourably by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and on 21 September 1949 a letter was sent to Berdy, informing him in writing of his appointment as Honorary Vice-Consul of Israel in Cyprus and assigning him the additional duties of *Aliyah* Officer.²² The Israeli Foreign Ministry's Division for Consular Affairs then sent Berdy's credentials on to Israel's Diplomatic Mission in London to complete the necessary process at the Foreign Office in London, so they could then be forwarded to the Colonial Headquarters in Nicosia.²³

Though the Israeli credentials had already reached Gabriel Berdy in Cyprus,²⁴ the Foreign Office's International Treaty Division sent a document to the Israeli Diplomatic Mission in London on December 14, 1949 raising objections and invoking the opposition of the Governor of Cyprus, who purportedly found that Berdy 'may perhaps not be entirely suitable for appointment as Honorary Consul'. Moreover, Britain instructed Israel to appoint another person to the position and recommended David Slonim, a British subject of Jewish descent permanently residing in Cyprus. Slonim was the owner of the *Cyprus-Palestine Plantation Company Ltd.*, operating a plant nursery in Pisouri (Limassol Province), who it 'is believed, would be prepared to accept the appointment if it were offered to him'.²⁵ The Foreign Office letter unequivocally concluded: 'If your Government still desires to proceed with the appointment of Mr. Berdy, we should not wish to withhold recognition from him'.²⁶

The Secretary of the Israeli Diplomatic Mission in London, Mordechai Kidron, transmitted the British ultimatum to Israel, proposing that Berdy's appointment be cancelled, 'as the Government of Cyprus would only make life difficult for him', on

²² ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Gabriel Berdy (MH5990/21 September 1949).

²³ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Consular Affairs Division to Israel Diplomatic Mission in London (7125/20/1171/7/π – 28 November 1949).

²⁴ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Berdy to the Consular Affairs Division (1120/7/1-6 December 1949)

²⁵ The Cyprus-Palestine Plantation Company Ltd. had been registered with the relevant Cypriot corporate registry since January 1933. David Slonim, an agronomist of Russian-Jewish origin, ran the farming unit in Pissouri. Cf. Evangelia Mathopoulou 'Pioneers in a Stagnant Economy: The Jews in British Cyprus, 1899-1939' in Giorgos Kazamias, Giorgos Antoniou (eds.) *Historical Perspectives on Cypriot-Jewish Relations* (Nicosia: University of Cyprus, 2015) 39-41.

²⁶ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. British Foreign Office (SW1 Section) to the Israeli Embassy in London (T11876/31/385 – 14 December 1949).

the one hand; on the other, Kidron suggested that, for reasons of prestige, Israel should not conform with Britain's demand to choose whom it considered *most appropriate* to represent Israel's interests in Cyprus.²⁷

Despite repeated attempts by Gabriel Berdy to receive some kind of explanation from the local British Authorities,²⁸ the reason for which he had been rendered *inappropriate* for the duties of Israel's Honorary Vice-Consul was never officially specified,²⁹ nor did they ever explain to him why David Slonim was *more appropriate* than himself.³⁰ Nevertheless, their attitude was not groundless: In August 1948, Gabriel Berdy had been arrested by the British on suspicion of helping Jewish detainees escape from Karaolos Detention Camps.³¹ On the other hand, however, Israel was also reluctant to comply with London's orders, particularly after the increased strain on diplomatic relations preceding the definitive closure of the Cyprus Camps in February 1949.³² Thus, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to tacitly reject the *appropriate* candidate, indicated by London.³³ In an effort to put the whole issue to rest, however, the Israelis were ultimately forced to revoke Gabriel Berdy's appointment as well.³⁴

That was not the end of the matter, however. The Israelis did want a diplomatic representation on the island in order to upgrade Israeli-British diplomatic relations

²⁷ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Michael Comay, Head of the British Commonwealth Division, to Mordechai Kidron, First Secretary of the Israeli Embassy in London (ZL/PK/3568 -19 December1949).

²⁸ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Berdy to Zvi Avnon, Head of the Consular Affairs Division (not officially logged) and Comay to Kidron (FO/D/1120/17468 – 31 January1950).

²⁹ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Comay to Walter Eytan, Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1561/20/1120/3/π – 5 January1950) and Kidron to Comay (ZL/RK/35055 –16 January1950).

³⁰ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Kidron to Comay (ZL/RK/35171-22 February1950). Following the clarifications requested by Berdy in Cyprus, the British side reacted yet more vehemently to the prospect of Berdy's appointment. More specifically, in the cable cited above, Kidron writes from London to Comay: 'Dunbar (from the FCO Treaty Division) phoned me and in a most apologetic and hesitant manner said that the Cyprus Government had replied to his second enquiry in even stronger terms than the first. They now said that Mr Berdy would be definitely unacceptable to them, whereas the first time they had merely expressed the hope that his candidature would not be pressed. They again proposed Slonim'.

³¹ 'Imprisonment of Jewish Illegal Immigrants' (Φυλακίσεις Εβραίων Λαθρομεταναστών) *Eleftheria* (Nicosia: 6 August 1948) 1 (in Greek).

³² ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Comay to Kidron (FO/D/1120/20/13283-2 January 1950). Comay, in responding to Kidron, wrote: 'We feel no obligation to appoint Slonim based solely on the fact that the Cypriot authorities threw that particular name into the hat'.

³³ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Avnon to the British Commonwealth Division (28536/20/1120/1/π -12 March1950) and Comay to Kidron (FO/D/1120/20/23161 – 6 March1950).

³⁴ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Avnon to Berdy (24001/20/1120/7/π-9 March1950).

and facilitate Jewish Immigration (mainly from Iraq) through Cypriot ports and airports. At the same time, it became a matter of honour to teach the Foreign Office a little lesson, which insisted on having a say as to who would be suitable or not to defend Israeli interests abroad - and particularly in Colonial Cyprus. Thus, despite the financial cost, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs eventually decided to place a career diplomat in Nicosia, rather than an unpaid, Honorary Vice-Consul. By so doing, the British would not be able to raise objections as to the person selected to fill the post.³⁵

After a relatively brief period of training, Yerachmiel (Ram) Yaron (born Robert Lustig), a police officer until that time, joined the Israeli diplomatic corps on June 1, 1950 in order to serve as Israel's Consul in Cyprus. The selection of this particular person was by no means fortuitous: Yaron had served as Head of Police Interrogations when Palestine was under British Mandate. At the same time, he was a *Haganah* informer, a fact possibly already known to the British. After the declaration of Israel's independence, Yaron was appointed to the Israeli Police General Staff as Head of Interrogations.³⁶ The phrasing of a letter sent on 29 July 1950 by Zvi Avnon, Director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Consular Affairs Division, to the Israeli Ambassador in London, Avraham Kidron, explained why Yaron had been selected specifically to serve in Cyprus:³⁷ 'For reasons of order, may it be reminded that given the aforementioned is an Israeli citizen, commissioned to Cyprus as an ordinary Foreign Affairs Ministry officer, there can be no issue of his arrival being predicated on previous approval by the competent British Authorities'. When London learned of Yaron's placement, the Foreign Office remained absolutely silent for two weeks. Finally, on 14 August 1950, the *Agrément*³⁸ approving Yaron's appointment was issued, but not before a number of reminders by the Israeli Diplomatic Mission to the British Foreign Office.³⁹

The Israeli Consulate in Nicosia became operational on 28 August 1950, provisionally housed in a room of the Ledra Palace Hotel. The act of provisional recogni-

³⁵ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11 Memo from Avnon to Comay (26894/20/1120/1/π-6 March 1950).

³⁶ About Yaron's biography and diplomatic career see David Tidhar (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Yeshuv Pioneers and Builders* (יינובו בושייה יצולחל דיפולקיצינא) (5) 2288 (Tel Aviv: 1952) (in Hebrew) available at <http://www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/5/2288> (last accessed 2 September 2020).

³⁷ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11 Avnon to Kidron (67981/20/1120/7/π - 29 July 1950).

³⁸ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11 Kidron to Comay (20/1171/7 - 14 August 1950).

³⁹ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11 Avnon to Kidron (MH10322 - 21 July 1950) and Comay to Kidron (MH10501 - 6 August 1950).

tion of Yerachmiel Yaron as Consul General of Israel in Cyprus was published in the Cyprus Gazette two days later.⁴⁰

The inauguration of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia was greeted with by the Israeli Press, touting the fact that in Cyprus, a strong reminder of the years of hardship in Mandate Palestine, the Jewish state now enjoyed its own official diplomatic presence and could interact 'on equal terms with its former jailers'. Extensive coverage by the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* gave the impression that numerous Jewish families filed papers with the newly appointed Consul to be allowed to settle permanently in Israel and that local Cypriots were massively rushing to the Consulate to obtain their visas as soon as possible in order to seek care at Israeli hospitals. No other Israeli diplomatic mission abroad had created such a stir amongst Israeli journalists. Typically, *Maariv* even listed the name of the sole consulate employee – the personal secretary to the Consul, '*Mrs Shoshana Mizrahi from Jerusalem*'.⁴¹

In 1950, the diplomatic corps in Colonial Cyprus comprised a total of six career Consuls - representing the United States, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel - as well as fifteen Honorary Consuls, all of Greek-Cypriot origin.⁴² Israel's Consulate General acquired permanent premises in October 1950,⁴³ at 2, Adonis str. in Nicosia.⁴⁴

The Role of the local Jewish Community

Yerachmiel Yaron's first concern, when he started his service as Israel's Consul General in Cyprus was to rally the local Jewish element and establish a legal status for

⁴⁰ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia. September 1950 (not officially logged).

⁴¹ T. Levita, '*The First Day of the Israeli Consulate in Cyprus – Family of Jewish immigrants requested entry visa to Israel, Patients Want to Be Cured by Our Doctors – Y. Yaron's Duties in Moddle East's Monitoring Centre*' (ישארה מוידה) 'ניסירפקב לארשי תיילוסנוקב וישארה מוידה' (*Maariv* (Tel Aviv, 17 September 1950) 3 (in Hebrew) available at <http://jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/SharedView.Article.aspx?parm=E11RkzkwrzmJ/WOSX4nlvUdf/gRHTAVKP8DKc2dFcro8dHYloundoQp820qv2HYg5Y-w%3D%3D&mode=image&href=MAR/1950/09/17&page=3> (last accessed 2 September 2020).

⁴² ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate at Nicosia, September 1950 (not officially logged)

⁴³ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia, October 1950 (not officially logged).

⁴⁴ Israeli Consulates Directory (1953-1954) *Government Year-Book 5714* (Jerusalem: Government Printer, 1953) 160.

the local Jewish Community. According to his first monthly activity report for the month of September 1950,⁴⁵ there were a total of just 200 Jews living on Cyprus – people of ‘Jewish national conscience’, as he stated. Of these, 30% were British citizens permanently established on the island, 5% had Israeli citizenship and the rest were citizens of third countries or were stateless. Of Cyprus’ Jewish dwellers, 20% spoke Hebrew, while most lived in Larnaca. Yaron had contact with the local Jewish Welfare Committee, which was set up during the period 1946-1949, in order to provide humanitarian aid to inmates of the Detention Camps in Karaolos area.

On September 10, 1950 elections were held for the Board of Directors of the Jewish Community of Cyprus, though its members seemed less than willing to become more actively involved. Indicatively, only 32 people came to vote. Furthermore, it was not long before intense divisive trends were manifested between members of the newly elected four-member Board of Directors of the Jewish Community and a sizeable number of Jews who insisted that the Jewish Welfare Committee continue to remain active and represent them. In September 1950, acting on Yaron’s encouragement, the newly elected Board of Directors completed all legal formalities and obtained approval from the local authorities, establishing the legal status of the Jewish Community of Cyprus, based in Larnaca.⁴⁶ After numerous attempts, Yaron managed to rally the Jews of Cyprus around the Israeli Consulate. In December of that year, the few Jews living scattered through the island’s larger towns were convinced to attend the traditional religious ceremonies held at the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia in observation of *Hanukkah*.⁴⁷

As was the case in other countries where Israel maintained diplomatic missions, so too in Cyprus, the Israeli Consul’s first priority was to determine whether the local Jewish element was in a position to effectively exert any influence over the decision-making centres. This approach came in accordance with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion’s conception of how local Jewish Communities living abroad might become an important and effective diplomatic tool, enabling Israel to promote its interests to foreign governments and decisionmakers. This fact was pointed out dur-

⁴⁵ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia, September 1950 (not officially logged).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia, December 1950 (not officially logged).

ing his address to the Knesset in 5 November 1951 when he divided the countries of the world into three main distinct categories, depending on the possibilities of their associating with Israel's interests and policy. The first category included countries not wishing to establish relations with Israel, either because they were hostile towards it, or because of agendas of their own which were not directly linked to Israel. Ben-Gurion mentioned the Arab countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia as the typical examples of this specific category. The second category involved states with whose governments Israel retained relations but not with their citizens, or with the Jewish communities living there. Such cases were the Soviet Union and the People's Republics in Eastern Europe. The third category included the States with which Israel maintained relations, both with their governments, their citizens and the local Jewish communities. The common characteristic of those countries was that they were all Western-type Parliamentary Democracies. Given all the above, and due to the crucial role Jewish Diaspora should play in shaping Israel's foreign policy and interconnection with foreign governments, it was essential that Israel should maintain constant contact with the Jewish Communities abroad, which might be in a position to exert influence on local authorities, decisionmakers and government officials. In Ben-Gurion's opinion, this could happen more easily and effectively in the countries belonging to his 'third category of state', benefiting from pluralism and a Western-type Parliamentary Democracy.⁴⁸

It is obvious that, according to Ben-Gurion's '*categorisation of countries*', Britain belonged to the third category, enabling the Jewish Community in Britain to communicate in an effective way with decisionmakers in London. Nevertheless, the 'Britishness' of Cyprus did not change the fact that the island was under colonial rule and the local administrative system did not match Ben-Gurion's conception of a Western-type Parliamentary Democracy. Despite this important fact, due to the extremely low numbers of Jews residing in Cyprus at the beginning of the 1950s', the local Jewish community was practically unable to become an effective mediator before the local British Colonial Authorities, in order to promote Israeli interests – a reality that the first Israeli Consul General in Nicosia, Yerachmiel Yaron, was facing during the very first period of his service in Nicosia. In fact, according to Yaron's monthly reports, the Jewish community in Cyprus practically had no influence over the local British authorities, nor over the leadership of either of the two major ethnic communities on the island – Greek and Turkish. In 1950, the Jews living on the

⁴⁸ Ben Gurion, *Beayot ha'Medina*, 5-8.

island were scattered around various Cypriot towns and were seemingly reluctant to cultivate any sense of cohesion amongst themselves. Despite concerted efforts by the Israeli Consuls who succeeded Yaron over the next few years, international Jewish organisations were not eager to financially support the local Jewish Community, mainly because of its limited number of members.⁴⁹ Specifically, Consul Avraham Kidron, Yerachmiel Yaron's successor, wrote to the Chief Rabbi of the British Armed Forces in November 1954 in an effort to convince him to provide practical support for the Jewish presence on Cyprus. Kidron's main argument cited the significant number of Jews living on the island who, he said, should not be neglected. According to Kidron, in late 1954, a total 59 Jewish families (126 people) lived in Cyprus: 25 Jewish families (52 persons) in Nicosia, 20 families (44 persons) in Larnaca, six families (12 persons) in Limassol, four families (seven persons) in Famagusta, two families (six persons) in Kyrenia, a family of two persons in Morphou and a family of three persons in Marko.⁵⁰ Ultimately, Kidron's endeavours were for naught and the number of Jews living in Cyprus diminished all through the 1950s'. Therefore, Israeli diplomacy was obliged to find alternative ways to establish an effective presence in Cyprus, in order to consolidate a framework of sustainable common interests with the local British Colonial Authorities. But still, this was not exactly easy – at least not during the initial period of the Israeli diplomatic presence on the island.

Unforgotten British-Israeli Tensions of the Past

Over the first months of the Israeli Consulate's operation in Nicosia, British Foreign Office's objections as to the person to be appointed Israel's Honorary Vice-Consul on the island still echoed in the air. Britain may have recognised Israel *de jure* in April 1950, but the chill in their bilateral relations persisted.

Typical of the unpleasant situation was the incident that occurred when the local Customs Authorities announced that diplomatic pouches addressed to the Israeli Consul would be subject to special controls. The announcement triggered a most

⁴⁹ ISA/RG93/MFA/2155/4 The persistent pleas by Avraham Kidron for financial and institutional assistance to the Jewish Community of Cyprus over the second half of 1954 and through to early 1955, directed at Israel's Embassy in London and other Jewish bodies based in Britain and in Israel, fell on deaf ears: Kidron to Rekhavam Amir, Israeli Consul in London (1254/4/7 – 22 September 1954), Kidron to Amir, (1311/4/7-8 October 1954), Kidron to the Jewish Agency/Department of Education and Culture of the Jewish Diaspora (1619/4/7 – 17 December 1954) and Kidron to London's Anglo-Jewish Association (CSS/PR-23 December 1954).

⁵⁰ ISA/RG93/MFA/2155/4 Kidron to Y. Levi, Chief Rabbi of the British Armed Forces (letter dated 22 November 1954, not officially logged).

vehement reaction – both verbal and written – by Consul Yaron to the Assistant Secretary on Consular Affairs at the British Foreign Office.⁵¹ In the end, all diplomatic pouches were delivered to the Israeli Consulate unopened and the Secretary of the Colony apologised in writing. Nevertheless, British authorities did not reassure that such an incident would not be repeated in future – a fact Yaron noted in his report.⁵² Such a treatment of the Israeli Consul reserved by the British authorities was probably related to Yaron's resistance actions as an undercover *Haganah* informer, when Palestine was then under the British Mandate.

In the public sphere, local British media were not friendly toward Israel either. A clear indication was felt when English-speaking Cypriot newspapers were espousing the positions of the local British Authorities, which were openly critical of the Israeli government. Characteristic was the approach of an article, published on January 12, 1951 by the local daily newspaper *Cyprus Mail* under the title *150 Jews turned back from Israel*, which had as follows:

‘150 Jewish men, women and children on board the s/s *Buntaş* when she called at Limassol last week were a sad party indeed.

Their plight recalled that of so many emigrants to Palestine during the period of the Mandate. More bitter, in fact, for they have been turned away from the «Promised Land» by their own Jewish State, and not by a foreign mandatory Power.

They had not been allowed to land and were returning whence they came on the steamer which brought them to Israel. The reason appears to be that the young State of Israel, unable to feed its rapidly growing population, has to refuse entry to unauthorised immigrants, just as did the British during the much-vilified Mandate.

To make this state of affairs more tragic, one hears of Jews wishing to leave Israel owing to lack of opportunity there and being prevented from doing so.

The ‘Wandering Jew’ of the Biblical legend does not seem as yet to have escaped his misfortunes’.⁵³

⁵¹ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division (2/2/7/7 – 8 November 1950).

⁵² ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division. Monthly Activities Report of the Israeli Consulate in Nicosia, November 1950 (not officially logged).

⁵³ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 ‘150 Jews turned back from Israel’ *Cyprus Mail* (Nicosia: 12 January 1951).

This newspaper article drew strong reaction from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which rushed to refute it as a fabrication,⁵⁴ and Consul General Yaron responded to the newspaper's Chief Editor with the following strongly worded and lengthy letter, dated 17 January 1951:

'Dear Sir,

In the issue of your newspaper, dated the 12th January, 1951, there appeared an item under the heading '150 Jews Turned Back From Israel' which, I am authorised to state, is completely untrue. The *s/s Buntaş*, a Turkish ship of 350 tons gross weight, arrived in Haifa Port on the 27th December, 1950, carrying on board 202 immigrants, four returning residents and two tourists – all of whom were allowed to land without any difficulty or delay.

One of the fundamental laws of the State of Israel (the *Law of Return*, 5710) expressly confers on every Jew the privilege of returning to his Homeland – thus entitling every person who professes to be a Jew, to enter the State of Israel and to settle in it. Since the inception of the State not a single Jew has been refused entry into Israel and, it might be added, members of our Knesset, irrespective of party affiliation, are rigorously on their guard that this basic constitutional privilege should never be infringed.

It is true that the State of Israel has to strain its resources to the utmost to provide means for the absorption of immigrants (over 500.000 have migrated during the 31 months of the existence of the State, almost doubling its Jewish population) and a strict scheme of rationing is being enforced to ensure fair distribution of supplies to all. So far, Israel has managed to feed its population by abiding by the strict regime of rationing, willingly undertaking every sacrifice for the liquidation of the Diaspora. The comments contained in paragraph 3 of the above item seem, therefore, rather malevolent, tending to cast a slur on the people of Israel and its Government. They are certainly not based on true facts: Not a single person, Jew of Gentile, has ever been turned back from the shores of our country because of the, admittedly, difficult food situation.

As to the second last paragraph of the 'news item': Persons desirous of leaving Israel in order to return to their former countries of residence or with a view of settling elsewhere, are absolutely free to do so; nobody has ever been forced to live in Israel against his will. I also venture to suggest that the implication of a tendency to 'prevent Jews wishing to leave Israel from doing so' is somewhat

⁵⁴ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Comay to Yaron (3979/17 January 1951).

inconsistent with the imputation that Jews are being turned away. Certainly not a very logical strain of thought.

It is to be regretted that your Limassol correspondent acted rashly, upon misleading information obviously supplied to him by an ill-disposed source, and that you have found it practicable, without checking the veracity of the story, to print the item, which betrays a tendency to disparage the epic struggle of the Jewish nation for the redemption of its Diaspora.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Yours truly,

(Y. R. Yaron)

Consul of Israel'.⁵⁵

During the second half of 1950 and early 1951, underlying tensions were high between the Israeli Consulate and the British colonial establishment. However, a few months later, everything seemed to be forgotten.

Israeli Entrepreneurship in Colonial Cyprus: An Effective Apparatus

With the normalization of the diplomatic relations between Israel and Britain, Colonial Cyprus was gradually proving itself to be quite welcoming to Israeli investors. Given the circumstances of the time, the presence of Israeli entrepreneurs on the island throughout the 1950's was especially important, particularly in the public works sector. A report to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' British Commonwealth Division, dated 7 May 1953 and signed by the Israeli Vice-Consul in Nicosia, Eliezer Merom, who was in charge of economic affairs of Israeli businesses and individuals abroad, is quite revealing as to Israeli entrepreneurship in Colonial Cyprus.⁵⁶

Already by mid-1950, British military and political analysts had been designating Cyprus as the most likely alternative to be opted for in the event of relocation of a sizeable volume of British military forces, in case of evacuation or partial withdrawal from the Suez Canal. In that same year there was the procurement proceed-

⁵⁵ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Yaron to *Cyprus Mail* Chief Editor, 17 January 1951.

⁵⁶ ISA/RG93/MFA/2155/10 Eliezer Merom, Vice-Consul in Nicosia to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division (031/101/7 – 7 May 1953). The report was prepared following a question from the Ministry of Finance regarding the taxable assets of Israeli entrepreneurs doing business in Cyprus.

ings launched towards the construction of an extended camp, featuring permanent military warehouses, in Dhekelia, a project of an estimated budget of £10 million. Works on the development of the first section of the Dhekelia camp construction project, worth £2 million, was launched in November 1952. *Solel Boneh*, Israel's most important construction company was party to the venture, together with *CY-BARCO* (Cyprus Building and Construction Co.), a Cypriot construction company funded by Israeli investors. *Solel Boneh* had Israeli foremen and logistical staff dispatched and permanently located in Cyprus through to the completion of the project. By mid-1953, *Solel Boneh* managed to make its presence felt in Cyprus even more, through maintenance works at the RAF hangars and by taking on other public works, while gradually, it began to expand its activities into the private sector as well.

In 1952, *Ha'Khevera ha'Merkazit le-Shikun u-Vinian*, another Israeli company, founded a Cypriot subsidiary under the name *Panta Seltfer*, as well as establishing the *Cyprus Middle East Constructing Co. (CYMEACO)* in a joint venture with local Greek-Cypriot entrepreneurs. That same year, the Israeli *Cyprus Drilling and Engineering* was registered with the Cypriot company register and embarked on the construction of infrastructure to provide electricity to the island's British military camps. In light of strong reservations manifested by British officials, as to whether Cyprus was indeed sufficiently equipped with appropriate infrastructures, in the event of British forces having to relocate from their actual base in Suez, the launching of extensive public works was absolutely necessary, in order to ensure the possibility for Navy war crafts docking, the loading and unloading of military ammunitions, a more fluid movement of military forces throughout the island etc. Serious consideration was being given to building military warehouses and airports and to extending the existing road network.⁵⁷ The Israeli construction companies saw the extensive public works in Cyprus as a major business opportunity. Since they were unable to conduct business in the neighbouring Arab states, Cyprus was the only option open to them – with the exception of Turkey, where *Solel Boneh* had already succeeded in developing a sizeable presence. In mid-1953, as the British authorities started developing a major military base in Episkopi, Israeli construc-

⁵⁷ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3 Mordechai Gazit, First Secretary of Israel's Embassy in London to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, West Europe Division (65437/362/21 -25 March 1953) Comments on presentation at an event hosted by the Royal Central Asian Society in London entitled: 'Cyprus Since the War and to this Day'.

tion companies were eager to take part in the venture. At the same time, other Israeli investors had also begun taking an interest in the Cypriot market, notably in the area of farming.

Israeli business presence in Cyprus was to become even more visible on 9 November 1950 when, in cooperation with the *Louis* Greek-Cypriot travel agency, the Israeli national air carrier *El-Al* inaugurated regularly scheduled flights connecting Nicosia, Tel Aviv and Istanbul.⁵⁸ Within this encouraging environment for Israeli investors, the Israeli Coastguard in March 1951 acquired a second-hand boat from the British Coastguard in Cyprus,⁵⁹ whilst the island's airports and seaports were developing into crucial transit hubs for Jews fleeing Iraq and Eastern Europe to settle permanently in Israel.

By 1954, while Cyprus was becoming the most important British stronghold in the Eastern Mediterranean, all signs pointed to the likelihood that this development would attract even more Israeli investors and entrepreneurs to the island. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, therefore, considered it essential for the new Consul, who was about to succeed Yerachmiel Yaron in autumn 1954, to be able to handle efficiently trade-related issues.⁶⁰ At the same time, though, the new Consul General would also have to act as military attaché, since the regional cooperation between Israel and Britain was then in the fore.⁶¹ The culmination of this rapprochement was the joint Israeli-British-French military operation in Egypt, which was meant to happen two years later, during the Suez Crisis.

Conclusion

In the very first years of its independence, Israel considered Jewish Diaspora as one of its foreign policy main apparatus, in order to promote bilateral diplomatic relations with foreign governments. Colonial Cyprus, which was the nearest British soil, situated just a few miles off the Israeli Mediterranean northern coastline, was of great importance due to its strategic position, able to facilitate Jewish Immi-

⁵⁸ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3. Yaron to Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division, Activity Report for November 1950. Ceremony at the Nicosia Airport on 9 November 1950, date of EL-AL's inaugural flight from Nicosia to Tel Aviv.

⁵⁹ ISA/RG93/MFA/2156/3. Yaron to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, British Commonwealth Division, Activity Report for March 1951 (225/100/7 -16 April 1951).

⁶⁰ ISA/RG130/MFA/2584/11. Gideon Shomron of the British Commonwealth Division to Arthur Lourie, Deputy General Secretary of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (6 March 1954, not officially logged).

⁶¹ Ibid.

gration from Eastern Europe and the Arab world. Furthermore, Cypriot ports and airports were of crucial importance for Israeli imports and exports, given that the Arab economic embargo was in effect.

Israeli diplomatic presence was essential, not only for the completion of bureaucratic procedures but also for promoting bilateral political relations with Britain, the most influential international power in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, uneasy relations between Israel and Britain just after the Jewish armed struggle against the Mandate and the First Arab-Israeli War in 1948 on the one hand, and on the other hand the lack of an influential Jewish presence in Cyprus itself, were not facilitating Israel's willingness to improve its relations with Britain.

Gradually, the right answers were given by Israel's private sector. Israeli entrepreneurship in Colonial Cyprus created an effective background for both Israeli and British decisionmakers, enabling them to strengthen ties between Israel and Britain within the local Cypriot economic realities and to further consolidate their *Entente*.

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