

## **Twenty-fifth North American LCJE Meeting Boston 7-9 April, 2008**

### **Operation Mercy – Palestine May 1948 – and a Merciful God Kai Kjær-Hansen**

These months, 60 years ago, it was not pleasant being in Jerusalem or Palestine. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations had passed a partition plan which implied that Palestine should be divided into an Arab and a Jewish state. The Jews accepted the plan, the Arabs rejected it. From then on there was an escalation of violence between Jews and Arabs and between Jews and the British. The British mandate ceased on May 14, 1948. The State of Israel was proclaimed on that same day.

For a description of conditions in Jerusalem from November 29, 1947, till December 3, 1948, I shall first of all refer to Hannah Hurnard's diary entries, which were published with the book title *Watchmen on the Walls*. She was a missionary sent out by the Church Mission to Jews (CMJ). I am also going to refer to Pauline Rose's book *The Siege of Jerusalem*. In this Rose tells how she and other Messianic Jews were kidnapped and interrogated by a Jewish underground group that suspected them of spying for the British.

Kelvin Crombie's book *For the Love of Zion* gives a number of examples of hardships Hebrew Christians were exposed to in the way of kidnapping, interrogation, etc.; due to acts of violence several people had to be "evacuated" from their homes to, for example, the Hostel at Christ Church inside Jaffa Gate or other "safe" places.

In his doctoral thesis (in Hebrew, Jerusalem 1996, 114-123): *"Messianic Jews" in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity*, Gershon Nerel devotes a major section to Operation Mercy. Distillates from this are accessible, for example, in Nerel's articles in *Mishkan*, nos. 27, (1997) 28, (1998) and 29 (1998).

### **Operation Mercy**

Information about the situation for Jesus-believing Jews in Palestine comes from the Anglican Bishop W.H. Stewart, Jerusalem, and Canon C. Witton-Davies, who is also a member of the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews, and from the Head of CMJ in Palestine, Hugh Jones, and others.

Bishop Stewart writes, among other things: "The Christian Jew – and the world does not realise how many there are or how many they would be tomorrow if they had real freedom – is told that he has neither part nor lot in Israel, and in fact has usually to get out of the country as soon as he can." It is feared that the new State of Israel will not grant Hebrew Christians freedom of religion.

Under the dateline March 16, 1948, Witton-Davies writes about a meeting that same day in the Bishop's house in Jerusalem and mentions "the really desperate situation confronting many Christian Jews in this country at this time. Some have managed to get out of the country, and some few are likely to be able to carry on in the present positions and dwellings, but there are, we think likely to be from 50 to 75 but possibly more, who are not going to be able to survive the coming months unless we do something for them."

Before that, the matter has been taken up at the Ecumenical Refugee Commission's meeting in Paris by the Swede Birger Pernow. The English and Scottish Jewish mission societies deal with the same matter at meetings in London. Different plans are discussed, and they decide to approach the English government through a three-member committee composed of representatives from the International Missionary Council (i.e. through the Committee on the Christian Approach to the

Jews), CMJ, and the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, with a petition that Jewish Christians whose lives are in danger be included in the British evacuation plan.

Which they were.

About the actual Operation Mercy only this: On May 1, 1948, groups of Hebrew Christians are transported from various locations in Jerusalem to St. George's Cathedral in the Arab part of the town. After a few days there, they are taken to the airport in Kalandia, north of Jerusalem, and flown to Haifa. Together with other Hebrew Christians, from Jaffo, Tiberias and Haifa, they leave on the troop ship *Georgic* for Liverpool on May 7. Others appear to have been evacuated to Cyprus first. These two transports seem to have included a total of about 70 persons. It is believed that altogether about 80 Hebrew Christians left Palestine (some had already left in April). We have to allow for the possibility that some Hebrew Christians are not accounted for. Not until the lists are found and the individuals identified, can we know the exact numbers. Be that as it may, due to Operation Mercy the small group of Jesus-believing Jews in Palestine/Israel had been further decimated.

CMJ's general secretary, C.H. Gill, gives a short account of the matter in the July 1948 issue of *Jewish Missionary News*. About the cause of the operation he says, among other things:

When the British Mandate for Palestine was nearing its close, it became clear that the worst sufferers from the clash between Arab and Jewish aims were likely to be the Hebrew Christians. The Arabs regarded them as Jews because of their race, while the Jews regarded them as Christians because of their religion. Food was in short supply and neither Community would provide for those outside its own membership. This meant not only danger of starvation, but going foraging for supplies in "danger" areas, where there was constant sniping.

But was the discrimination, experienced by Hebrew Christians, due to their faith or to their close association to the British, i.e. politically motivated? It can probably not be denied that in some cases it was their faith. But in most cases they seem to have been under suspicion because of the connection with the hated British.

This is, anyway, what is said as early as October 1948 in *Jewish Missionary News*:

Miss Brooke, writing from Jaffa, says they now have a service every Sunday, and the Jewish authorities know and allow it to go on. It seems that the Jews don't mind the missionary work going on, even by British people, as long as they think the workers are their friends and not against them. This, in spite of the strong and widespread feeling against Britain among the Jews in Palestine. It now seems, that the discrimination shown against the Hebrew Christians in recent months was political rather than religious, and they were suspect not so much because of their faith, but their being connected with the British.

In the light of this, one might ask if it was a wise decision to evacuate this group of Hebrew Christians, but then it is easy enough to be wise after the event. Those who approached the British government in London and asked that Hebrew Christians be included in the evacuation plans acted on a genuine conviction that human lives were in danger – in this case Hebrew Christians' lives. At the back of their minds was probably also the memory that Christians, only a few years before, had ignored the cry from Jews in Nazi Germany. They did not want to be guilty of the same mistake now that Hebrew Christians in Palestine were in danger.

I have not yet found anything in the sources to suggest that the people behind Operation Mercy should have regretted what they had set going. Maybe such sources do exist. I have,

however, found sources that give expression to a certain disappointment that not more of the evacuees returned to Israel. This matter requires further study.

With the benefit of hindsight, I have no problems with those who might interpret Operation Mercy as an unnecessary operation, even if other interpretations are also possible. I am also trying to be open to the disappointment, or indeed bitterness, which can be traced among some of the remaining Jesus-believing Jews.

But I am not open to a *collective* criticism of those who were evacuated. And I am in no way open to using these individuals' evacuation to pass sentence on their life in Christ.

With this I am moving into a minefield.

### **Moishe Imanuel Ben-Meir's sharp criticism of the evacuation**

A sharp criticism was voiced by Moishe Imanuel Ben-Meir, Messianic Jew and postman in Haifa. He was born in Jerusalem in 1905, studied at Moody Bible School in Chicago 1927-1930, and after that one of the leading figures in the Messianic movement in Palestine. He was a bitter opponent of Christian mission in Palestine.

With a few kindred spirits, among them Abram Poljak, he had set up the Jerusalem Fellowship and a few Messianic synagogues and struggled for a national Messianic community in Palestine/Israel. Below I am going to enter into critical interaction with Ben-Meir, which is why I want to emphasize that on some points he was ahead of his time, for example in his struggle for Jewish identity for a Jesus-believing Jew. He was also to put his fingerprints on the development of the Messianic movement in Israel – perhaps in a more moderate version than he would have wished himself, but nonetheless. He deserves credit for that, but this is outside the scope of this paper. And one more important thing: In my criticism of Ben-Meir I am not questioning his standing with God.

That Ben-Meir had some edges – as most of us have – and sometimes used language that was not conducive to a positive dialogue, and now and then was quick to pass sentence on other believers, is also shown by his reaction to Operation Mercy.

The article I am going to refer to is from the Norwegian journal Karmel, May 1949 (pp. 80-83). This issue celebrates the one-year anniversary of the State of Israel's establishment. I concede that some details may be inaccurate as I am referring to a text which was translated from Hebrew or English into Norwegian and then translated back into English, but I do not think it influences the main point.

What, then, does Ben-Meir write about Operation Mercy in this article with the title "The Liberation of Israel – a Time of Grace for Zion"?

On the situation in May 1948 he writes, among other things:

A sudden fear befell missionaries, hospitals, schools and mission centres. Those who had come from America returned there, those who had come from England returned there. Why? Did the Holy Spirit withdraw his calling? Do the Jews in the State of Israel not need the gospel? Was their return a consequence of fear? What had happened to the faith and the courage and the sacrificial spirit that they so often sang about? Can the Lord not keep them safe and sound also in the State of Israel?

If you can ignore Ben-Meir's ironic tone, you can see that he has an important point. I, for one, try to understand the disappointment behind his words. Really I could stop here and put the question to us mission leaders who have sent people to serve in Israel today. What evacuation plans do we have for the workers we have sent to Israel? Do we have any? If so, have we used them over the last decades? I hope we can discuss this afterwards, or perhaps it would be subject for discussion at a future CEO conference.

In my interaction with Ben-Meir's words just this: What a relief if he had said: I do know that several Hebrew Christians connected with the mission remained in Jerusalem 1948-1949. What a relief if he had said: I am aware that at least three Protestant missionaries have been killed, two at the end of March, the third at the of April 1948. What a relief if he had said: I do know that during the siege of Jerusalem more than a dozen foreign missionaries remained in Jerusalem and others in other parts of Palestine/Israel – and then added: But I am, nonetheless, disappointed.

He does not do that. As far as I can see, Ben-Meir's aversion to Christian mission does *not* begin with Operation Mercy. It may have been increased by it, but his aversion goes further back.

In his criticism of the missionaries it is a simplification to reduce the problem to "fear". Money and stewardship of money also need to be mentioned. It is as if Ben-Meir supposes that a missionary society always has money enough.

In short: CMJ is in a financial crisis. Their mission schools were partly maintained by the fees of the students. Such fees fail to come when the students cannot attend school due to the violence in the area. Something similar can be said about the hospital. No patients come in. Instead CMJ hands over the hospital to the Jewish authorities – free of charge. But CMJ still has to pay pension to senior workers and compensate others for the loss of employment. CMJ is in such a financial crisis that, in order to meet their obligations, they have to raise four loans, 3,000 pounds each, in four Jewish Missionary Societies.

It is against this background that a large part of the staff at the school and the hospital in Jerusalem are called back to England, where some undergo further education for their future work as missionaries. And of course these matters need to be taken into consideration in a fair historical evaluation of CMJ's decision to recall most of their school and hospital staff.

Ben-Meir continues:

For many years the missions in Palestine have been a plague. Their working methods and their message were not right. Their work was often destructive. They had lost sight of the goal. They lead Jews to the baptismal font but not to Jesus Messiah. The missions were centres for assimilation and de-Judaization but not for salvation. During the painful birth of the State of Israel they realized their hypocrisy – that they could not perpetuate their play when they no longer had the English rifles to rely on. So they closed down and fled.

And these missionaries were followed by most of their converts, Jews that they had de-Judaized and deprived of the last particles of Jewish feeling and propriety.

Ben-Meir does have a point when he speaks about assimilation and de-Judaization of Jews who have come to faith through missionary societies. I acknowledge that it was a problem then, and no-one can deny that it still exists.

But Ben-Meir's statement is not just a criticism of the Christian mission. It is a devastating criticism of the Jews who had connection to the mission. Now I must protest! If I were a baptized Jew in 1948-1949, and there were those who did remain in the Land, and in childlike simplicity believed that I was a child of God for Jesus' sake, then I had to listen to this: the missionaries had led me to the baptismal font but not to Jesus Messiah, not to salvation!

I do not have the solution to all the identity problems that arise when a Jew comes to faith in Jesus. I do not think that a baptized Jew should become an ex-Jew. But I dare not question an assimilated Jew's standing *with God* if he or she lives in a faith relationship with the crucified and risen Lord.

What do you say?

Ben-Meir next mentions how the running away has cleared the way for the Jewish Messianic congregation's work. He accentuates the "mystical unity of Jews and non-Jews in the

body of Christ, but we do not believe in assimilation.” He and like-minded believers serve in the Israeli security forces. And: “If our faith that Jesus is the Messiah is regarded as criminal for a Jew in the State of Israel, then we are prepared to suffer for our faith . . . a confirmed Christian will be persecuted everywhere – even in the Christian countries.”

Ben-Meir concludes his article in this way:

God himself put an end to the British rule in Palestine – and to the work of several missions there. God let the unfaithful Hebrew Christians leave. Now Israel has been given a new beginning and new possibilities. God gave the Jews freedom in the State of Israel. And he has let the Jewish Messianic community bring the testimony about Jesus our Messiah out in the State of Israel. The days of the gentiles are over. Jesus Messiah will soon come again and sit on David’s throne. We are living in the beginning of the end. May we be ready!

“You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favour to her; the appointed time has come” (Psalm 103:13).

So according to Ben-Meir, something good did come out of the evacuation. “God let the unfaithful Hebrew Christians leave.” From what he has said, “unfaithful” means unfaithful to both God and the Messianic cause. Consequently these Hebrew Christians do not become unfaithful by leaving the country. They are that already.

According to Ben-Meir, the “unfaithfulness” of these believers has resulted in the possibility of a new beginning for the proclamation of Jesus in Israel – without interference from foreign mission societies. “The days of the gentiles are over.”

It was not to be like that. The mission societies returned to Israel. And among the many immigrants who came to Israel over the following years there were also Jesus-believing Jews who continued joining the denominations through which they had come to faith in the Diaspora and who could not go along with Ben-Meir’s radical criticism of the Christian church and its mission among Jews in Israel.

That the Christian mission also in the period after 1948 made mistakes is something that goes without saying, for mission is carried out by *human beings*. Today in Israel, foreign mission societies have far less influence and indigenous Messianic congregation have, to a large degree, taken over. This is a development I very much welcome.

But when we are dealing with the period around the establishment of the State of Israel, I cannot help but think that it was good that the missions returned.

We also need to ask: what became of the inner circle around Abram Poljak and Ben-Meir? In the limited sources at my disposal I can trace six of those who all remained in Israel immediately after the founding of the State of Israel.

The first two are Baruch Karniel and Pauline Rose, the two who had been kidnapped and interrogated by the Stern Group. According to Gershon Nerel, Karniel adopted “a liberal doctrinal tendency” and “rejected the doctrine concerning Messiah’s return”. Nerel says further: “Pauline Rose stopped expressing publicly her faith in Yeshua, joined other Jewish circles and finally also left the congregation.” In his Autobiographical Sketches *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, written circa 1977 and published in English 2007, Ben-Meir does not mention that these two left the Messianic movement.

In other words: Remaining in the Holy Land in the hour of need is no guarantee that one will remain in the Messianic movement.

But in his Sketches Ben-Meir does mention three others who remained in Israel in 1948 but later left the country, namely Agnes Waldheim, Abram Poljak and Albert (Baron) von Springer. It is noteworthy that when Ben-Meir says that these three left Israel, he does not express criticism but

even shows “mercy”. About Poljak he says: “The Lord had a different calling for him, however.” And: “Jonah had to go to Nineveh, and Poljak had to go to Germany”.

I will forgo asking the question: “Did the Holy Spirit withdraw his calling? Do not the Jews in the State of Israel need the gospel?” Those three chose to leave Israel . So what? This must be a matter between them and God.

Time does not permit me go into details with Hebrew Christians who remained in Jerusalem or the foreign missionaries who remained in Israel – not only in 1948 but for many years to come. In conclusion I shall restrict myself to telling about two Hebrew Christians that left the country, two of those who in Ben-Meir’s opinion were “unfaithful Hebrew Christians”

Were they wrong to leave the country under Operation Mercy? I do not know and I have no need to sit in judgment over them. In their later life, however, I do catch a glimpse of God’s “mercy” to them.

### **Miss Ursula Nehab**

Ursula Nehab left Palestine in April 1948. She was born in Germany, presumably in the late 1920s. She participates in CMJ’s Summer School in England in 1949, where she gives her testimony. In this she says: “At the age of six I was baptised in a German Protestant Church and was called a Christian, but my father was a Jew, and religion, whether Jewish or Christian, was not discussed in our home, so that my profession of Christianity did not mean very much to me.”

In 1936 the family come to Jerusalem and Ursula is sent to the Jerusalem Girl’s College. “I learned for the first time to say the Lord’s Prayer as a prayer, and to read regularly the Old and New Testaments.”

She begins attending church in Christ Church and gets friends among CMJ’s staff. And yet she feels that something is missing. One day, during a long walk in the Judean hills near Jerusalem she feels that God is speaking to her, and she realizes that life without Christ is empty. A short time after that the Head of CMJ in Jerusalem, Hugh Jones, asks her if she would like to be prepared for confirmation. She says yes, and after he had prepared her she was confirmed in February, 1947.

“It was at this time,” Ursula goes on, “ I was taken one day by an armed escort before the Arab Higher Committee in the Old City, but I was not afraid because I knew that Jesus Christ was with me. I was questioned for a long time, as they thought I was a Jewess, and I told them I had come to love the Lord Jesus. At last the questioning was over, the Arabs released me and they gave me a permit to pass in and out of the Old City.”

He who is without blame, let him be the first to throw a stone at Ursula, who in these circumstances presumably did not tell them about her “partial” Jewish identity but only that she believes in Jesus. Or how?

Ursula goes on:

“I knew that God was calling me to work for Him in some way and I wanted to come to England and train as a nurse and in April, 1948, I flew out in almost the last plane to leave Palestine. Here in England I have experienced more of Christ’s love and power, and at the Summer School last year [1948] I felt called to work amongst the Jewish people and yet I felt that God could not work unless I surrendered everything to Him, and so I did.”

At the CMJ’s Autumn Meeting 20 September, 1948, she hears the calling to service and offered herself to work for CMJ. Ursula continues her testimony in 1949: “The Committee of C.M.J. has accepted me for training and I am now at St. Michael’s, Oxford, a women’s theological training college. Next year I shall take my diploma in theology, and thus equipped partly as a teacher and partly as an evangelist, I hope to go abroad and tell the Jewish people of Christ, His love, His Power and His abiding presence.”

In conclusion she says: "I ask your prayer in the choice of a field. I appeal, too, to the young people here who may not know what to do for Christ. Once I did not know, but God has granted me great happiness in leading me to prepare for work among His Own People".

What then was going to be her field? In February 1952 she is back in Israel, where she works for CMJ. What happened to her on the personal level? On April 15, 1953, she marries Hugh Jones, who in 1947 had prepared her for confirmation. In November 1956 she gives birth to the couple's second daughter, Rhoda Helen.

And here I will leave her, Miss Ursula Nehab, who became Mrs. Ursula Jones – one of those who Ben-Meir calls unfaithful Hebrew Christians who left Palestine shortly before the end of the British mandate and the establishment of the State of Israel. Did God therefore leave her?

What would have become of Ursula if she had remained in Palestine? We cannot possibly know. But there she would also have been the object of God's "mercy". Her life shows that God's mercy is also active outside Eretz-Israel. Of course!

### **H. Z. Weinstock**

Zebulon Weinstock – sometimes with the first name John, sometimes with the initials H.Z. – is another of the Hebrew Christians who left Palestine in 1948. He is, already from the end of 1948, employed as a CMJ missionary in Hull, England. Also he gives his testimony at CMJ's Summer School in 1949.

In the summer of 1957 CMJ is "delighted" to inform that the Archbishop of York has accepted Weinstock as a candidate for ordination and that Weinstock has already begun his training at St. Aidan's College, Birkenhead. For that reason Weinstock has to leave the mission work in Hull, but they cherish the hope that he will return to CMJ as an ordained missionary. And then it is added: "This is yet another answer to those who say Jewish missionary work never does any good."

Then there is a brief account of Weinstock's course of life: He was brought up in a strict Orthodox home. He first heard about Jesus when he and a few other students secretly read Joseph Klausner's *Jesus of Nazareth*. At the age of 15, while attending the Orthodox Training College for teachers in Jerusalem, he sees a New Testament displayed in the window. He gets hold of one and reads it, "although not without some sense of guilt", as it is put. "Ten years later after some distressing personal experiences and a miraculous escape from being shot during the 'troubles' in Palestine he was brought to faith in Christ, and subsequently joined our mission staff. On coming to this country [= UK] in 1948 he became our missionary in Hull."

In a photo taken at CMJ's Summer School 1958, Weinstock is wearing a clerical collar and presented as "Rev. J. Weinstock."

And now I leave Weinstock and ask again: What would have become of Weinstock if he had remained in Palestine? I don't know. He chose to be evacuated. Did God show him mercy? Should he not instead have served his own people fully as an evangelist? Well, it is not up to us to say. This is a matter between Weinstock and God.

These two examples make me curious to find out what happened with the other Hebrew Christians who were evacuated in "Operation Mercy". What happened to them later on? Which of them returned to Israel? In some cases their lives would probably fill us with joy, in other cases with sadness.

But no matter what: I am still not prepared, on the basis of the evacuation of these individuals during Operation Mercy, to pass sentence on their lives in Christ. God's mercy in Christ surpasses these things.