



The Organizers behind Operation Mercy

– Reading the Sources about the Organizers’
Thoughts and Plans

by **Kai Kjær-Hansen**

In his article on Operation Mercy, Gershon Nerel gives expression to some extremely radical views, namely that Hebrew Christians in Palestine were the object of a conspiracy from the Christian church’s side. The *intention of the evacuator* is to “save” the already assimilated Hebrew Christians in the Land and scatter them in other countries, which appears from the following quotation:

Therefore, the impression one gets from the authentic documents is that the personal intention of most of the evacuees – to immigrate and assimilate – was to a great extent synchronized with the intention of the evacuators to take the congregations out of the land and scatter them in different directions.¹

Secondly, Nerel alleges that prior to the implementation of Operation Mercy is a *logistical planning phase* of six months, beginning in November 1947, as evidenced by this quotation:

All of the evacuation stages of Operation Mercy were organized as military movements under the public cover of humanitarian actions. From the logistical planning phase until its full implementation, the operation lasted about six months – from November 1947 until May 1948.²

Thirdly, Nerel alleges that the church leaders in Palestine, not least personified by Bishop Weston H. Stewart of the Anglican Church, “stirred up the rumors that these people [the Hebrew Christians] could expect terrible persecutions in the new state, and even physical extermination at the hands of the normative Jewish society.” Yet Nerel claims that some people from CMJ in Palestine suggested “that a neutral body should care for the needs of

1 Gershon Nerel, “Operation Mercy on the Eve of the Establishment of the State of Israel: The ‘Exodus’ of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua from the Land of Israel in 1948,” *Mishkan* 61 (2009): 30.

2 Ibid.

the Jewish believers in Yeshua in the Land.” Following this Nerel says:

It was, therefore, suggested to turn to the United Nations or the International Red Cross, in order to appoint a particular authority to provide for their needs. However, this idea never came to fruition. In contrast, the leaders of the British CMJ, and primarily the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, Weston Henry Stewart, cooperated with other organizations and carried out another plan – the organized evacuation of Hebrew Christians from the Land.³

I find it difficult to accept Nerel’s description of the organizers and their intentions. The only solution is, as far as I can see, to go back to the sources and once more examine them and analyze their data in as unbiased a way as possible. As will appear, the organizers do not from the beginning have a ready-made plan. They seem, on the contrary, fumbling and insecure about how they can best help the distressed Hebrew Christians in Palestine. And Hebrew Christians abroad have influence on the developments.

Bishop Stewart in Jerusalem – the Villain?

Let us begin with Bishop Stewart and the group around him in Jerusalem. He did not see the State of Israel as a fulfillment of prophecy.⁴ In the present discussion, his stance on Zionism is only relevant insofar as it can be shown that there is a clear connection between this and Nerel’s claim that Stewart wanted and actively sought to promote Hebrew Christians’ departure from Palestine. Nerel has not historically validated this connection.

A Memorandum on Palestine

On July 11, 1947, Bishop Stewart and other church dignitaries⁵ obtain an audience with the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine at its meeting in Jerusalem. A memorandum, delivered beforehand, opens with the words: “The Christian case in Palestine is constantly in danger of being forgotten or understated.” Although the future in the region is uncertain, it is hoped “that the constitution will include a clause guaranteeing religious liberty to all.”

We speak from long experience of many individual cases when we say that in spite of theoretical religious liberty, converts to Christianity in Palestine are liable to be, and frequently are, deprived of their

³ *Ibid.*, 24

⁴ “W. H. Stewart . . . strongly criticising anti-Semitism in the Church, yet equally strongly opposing any connection between the proposed state of Israel and a fulfillment of prophecy,” cf. Kelvin Crombie, *For the Love of Zion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 207.

⁵ Apart from Bishop Weston H. Stewart, participants were W. Clark-Kerr, Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Archdeacon A. C. MacInnes, Rev. Dr. W. C. Klein, and the head of CMJ in Palestine, Hugh R. A. Jones.



inheritance, boycotted in or even dismissed from their employment, turned out of their houses, pilloried in the press, “framed” in their law-courts, and threatened with, and often subjected to, personal violence. It is simply an unreality to speak of freedom of religion when converts to Christianity, whether from Islam or Judaism, have neither freedom from fear nor often freedom from want.⁶

It is possible that Nerel considers this stirring up rumours; to me it seems that the Bishop shows concern for people in the region. He gives expression to sympathy for “the Jew in his suffering and in his passionate desire for refuge and renewal” as well as for “the Arab in his passionate fear of being decimated in the land which for a thousand years he has felt his own.”⁷

In other words, the Bishop fights for religious freedom for all parties in Palestine – also for Hebrew Christians, the “converts.”

Bishop Stewart's Article in "The Sunday Times"

In an article in *The Sunday Times* – presumably from the beginning of 1948⁸ – Bishop Stewart returns to the subject of “religious freedom” and of whether such freedom includes freedom of conversion in Palestine and the future Israel. The Christian Arab, as well as the Christian Jew, “is faced with a very difficult future.” He criticizes the United Nations for letting down Christians. But, “the Church, which was here long before the Mandatory Government, and will remain after the Mandatory Government has withdrawn, has rather to consider setting her own house in order.” The church is still committed “to missionary work among non-Christians, whether Muslim or Jew.”⁹

Regarding the prospective new states, Bishop Stewart sees no major problems for Arab believers in an Arab state. The situation is different for Hebrew Christians in a Jewish state:

On the Jewish side, the position will inevitably be more difficult. For while of late years the number of converts has been steadily growing, there are as yet no regular Jewish congregations, and the converts tend (for reasons that are quite understandable) to leave the country as soon as they can and to be regarded, by themselves as well as by their fellow-Jews, as no longer Jews at all.¹⁰

It is interesting that Bishop Stewart says that “there are as yet no regular

6 “A Memorandum to the United Nations Organization Special Committee on Palestine, Submitted by . . . W. H. Stewart . . . and W. Clark-Kerr . . .,” *Bible Lands* (1947):148–51.

7 *Ibid.*, 150.

8 Weston H. Stuart, “Freedom of Conversion,” *Jewish Missionary News* (1948): 25–27. Originally printed in *The Sunday Times*; no date is given.

9 *Ibid.*, 26.

10 *Ibid.*, 27.

Jewish congregations.” This could be taken to mean that *if* there were, the situation for Hebrew Christians in Palestine would have been much easier. For our present purposes, it is enough to remember that the Bishop *states* that Hebrew Christians are leaving the Land – a fact that cannot be denied, and was also confirmed by, among others, Moshe Ben-Meir¹¹; the Bishop also *states* that he understands these Hebrew Christians. Whether he is mistaken in his assessment of the situation for Arab Christians in an Arab state and for Hebrew Christians in the future State of Israel is a question that is open for discussion. One thing is clear, however: The Bishop does *not* express a wish that Hebrew Christians should leave the Land. He is *not*, in the beginning of 1948, in “a logistical planning phase” with a view to evacuating Hebrew Christians, as alleged by Nerel.

CMJ’s Perspective – in Jerusalem and London

In a letter of June 4, 1948, Hugh Jones has given a description of the situation in Jerusalem at the end of 1947 and beginning of 1948 (reproduced as the first article in this issue of *Mishkan*).

On *February 20*, three English nurses at the hospital which CMJ runs in Jerusalem send a letter to CMJ’s General Secretary in London. They ask him to advise them “now that the hospital is being handed over to a Jewish Body,” and continue, “It has been suggested that we work under the Jewish management, but that is impossible, as it defeats the purpose to which we are called.”¹²

Gill’s answer is not without interest for the matter which we pursue:

I am sorry that you do not feel that by helping the Jewish staff you could give such a witness by your lives and in private conversation that you might be doing an even more effective piece of missionary work than was possible under the old system. I pray that you may all be guided aright.¹³

The three nurses chose to leave the Land, which they did at the end of March – with their British passports in hand. Their General Secretary would have preferred that they stay.

During the first months of 1948, quite a few Hebrew Christians had to leave their homes – some in Arab areas, others in Jewish areas – and found shelter in the compounds of CMJ’s hospital or Christ Church. For security reasons some are, in April, even placed in hotels in the zone controlled by the British.

In the course of March, five Hebrew Christian families affiliated with

11 See my article “Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy,” note 11, in this issue of *Mishkan*.

12 C. M. Borland, D. L. Curson, and M. Newman to Gill, February 20, 1948, dep. CMJ c. 219, Bodleian Library, Oxford. References in the notes below omit “Bodleian Library, Oxford.”

13 Gill to Borland, Curson, and Newman, February 26, 1948, dep. CMJ c. 219.



Christ Church leave the Land. It is not quite clear to me what role Jones played in connection with getting visas for these.¹⁴

There is no doubt, however, that Jones fights actively for the Okos and Peter Newman, who had been exposed to some unpleasant things, to be able to leave the Land.

On *March 8*, Jones writes to D. C. Butcher, CMJ's Head of Mission in Egypt, presenting the matter of Mr. and Mrs. Oko to him. For two months Jones has tried, unsuccessfully, to get visas for them so they could leave the country. "Neither of them have been able to go outside this compound for many weeks and the position will become critical for them with the withdrawal of the British Forces and when, one presumes, disturbances will begin in earnest," Jones writes. Therefore, he asks Butcher to give them "temporary shelter say for a few months as I believe, once they get to Cairo, they would have good chance of obtaining visas for England. Both of them have good records of War Service in the British Forces."¹⁵

On *March 19*, Jones writes to Butcher again¹⁶ and makes a similar request for Peter Newman¹⁷ and Edith Smil.¹⁸ But Jones does *not* have a general evacuation of all Hebrew Christians in Palestine in mind. As late as April 16, he warns against "generalizations" of the situation and distinguishes between the prevailing circumstances in Jerusalem and in Jaffa.¹⁹

But a couple of days before the dispatch of the last letter to Butcher, Jones took part in a meeting in the Bishop's house in Jerusalem. Which plans were then made?

14 Cf. Jones to Gill, April 16, 1948, dep. CMJ c. 219. In parentheses, Jones gives the size of the families: "including the Corn's (2) Fermo (2) De Mayo (3) Powitzer (7) and Segl." Can Jones possibly have forgotten a bracket in connection with Segl, e.g. (2)? If so, it would fit with his information in the same letter that eight visas have been granted before those that are granted early in April. Anyway, according to the obituary of Hyman Corn, who for many years had been in CMJ's service, he was "a British Subject" and did not need a special visa; cf. *Jewish Missionary News* (1962): 29. Whether Jones actively helped to get visas for the others, I dare not say. Cf. what he writes about Powitzer: "I have been approached by Powitzer, a member of Christ Church congregation, who is hoping to leave for England very soon with his family. He is a Government employee." Jones to Gill, March 2, 1948, dep. CMJ c. 219.

15 Jones to Butcher, March 8, 1948, Conrad Schick Library, Christ Church, Jerusalem.

16 Jones to Butcher, March 19, 1948, Conrad Schick Library, Christ Church, Jerusalem.

17 About Newman, see my article on Weinstock, note 14.

18 About Edith Smil, Jones writes: ". . . a Hebrew Christian from Berlin and a teacher in Christ Church Girls' School. Mr Martin [in London] is in the process of getting her fired up for training at the Mount Hermon School," cf. Jones to Butcher, March 19, 1948. The first five – if you will – "genuine" Operation Mercy visas are given in April to the Okos, Newman, Miss Smil, and Ursula Nehab/Jones; cf. Hugh R. A. Jones to CMJ's General Secretary G. H. Gill in London, June 4, 1948, The Jerusalem and the East Mission Archives 18/5 at Middle East Centre, Oxford.

19 Concerning details in that situation, see my article about Weinstock.

March 16 – Meeting in the Bishop’s House in Jerusalem

In Jerusalem there are deliberations in mid-March 1948 about how best to help the Hebrew Christians *in Palestine* against the troubles they will face when the British leave the Land.

Canon C. Witton-Davies took these minutes from the meeting in Jerusalem on March 16:

There are a number of Hebrew Christians, probably 50 to 75 or more who are not going to be able to survive the coming months unless we do something for them. At a meeting just held in the Bishop’s house we came to the conclusion that it would probably be necessary to arrange small concentrations of such people in Jerusalem, Jaffa-Tel Aviv, and Haifa. We have not yet got as far as deciding exactly where, or when, or by whom, but it will all have to be decided fairly soon, and it is going to cost some money, for many of these people have no private means and will inevitably be cut off from the possibility of work for some time. Are there any funds at your disposal or that you can command for this purpose? Would you bring the matter to the notice of societies and bodies represented on the International Committee or likely to be interested? I will keep you informed about further decisions. Meanwhile I know we can count on your prayers that we may be able to do the right thing in this matter and not fail our distressed brethren.²⁰

In order to understand how things hang together and how they think “in the Bishop’s house” in Jerusalem two months before the expiration of the British Mandate, this passage is crucial. In the Bishop’s house, they show concern for the Hebrew Christians’ future in the Land and ask for financial support from abroad for the implementation of the planned relief work. Nerel turns this upside down when he accuses Bishop Stewart and others of carrying out “another plan – the organized evacuation of Hebrew Christians from the Land” (see above).

The fact of the matter is that Bishop Stewart and others in Jerusalem take the initiative and make themselves available for a future relief work *in Palestine*, since they do not, in the middle of March, imagine that a general evacuation of Hebrew Christians would become relevant. The fact that they barely one month later become active in this connection does *not* mean that Stewart and likeminded people “carried out another plan.” This was done by others in Sweden, England, Scotland, etc. From the beginning of April, Stewart and his people are requested to *implement* in Palestine what others abroad had decided. Among these “others” were not least

20 Canon Witton-Davies sends this decision to Conrad Hoffman, who in turn sends it on to Pernow; Hoffmann to Pernow, March 23, 1948, E VIIa: 2, Church of Sweden Archives, Uppsala. (Hereafter in notes shortened to CSA.) In a paraphrased form, Pernow sends it to Levison, March 30, 1948, CSA E56: 2. See below.



people with a central position in the International Hebrew Christian Alliance.

We shall return to that. But first we are going back in time a little in order to see how things had developed abroad.

The Situation Viewed from a Swedish Perspective

Early in January 1948, Nahum Levison, one of the two vice-presidents of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (IHCA) and chairman of the Jewish Committee of the Church of Scotland, is on a visit to Sweden.

On *January 9*, he has conversations with Birger Pernow, the director of the Swedish Israel Mission and also director of the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews (ICCAJ).²¹

In their conversation, Levison made it clear that the Scottish missionaries in Palestine “are planning to stay as long as possible since they fear that if they give up the work or if some go back home, it will be difficult for

them to return even if permission to do this is granted after the partition has been performed.” Levison is well aware that there may be unfortunate consequences if the missionaries leave the country in the hour of peril.²²

Pernow mentions this in a letter to the Swedish emissary Dr. Harald Sahlin in Jerusalem in an attempt to persuade him to remain at his post, but without success.²³ In

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the conversations between Levison and Pernow, an evacuation of Hebrew Christians is not mentioned.

But Greta Andrén in Jerusalem is concerned. Sister Greta was also in Swedish service and had a small group of “friends” in Jerusalem – some baptized, some preparing for baptism, people for which she felt a special responsibility. We need not at this point decide if her input was to her credit or not, but it cannot be ignored in an overall account of the circumstances which led to Operation Mercy. Her appeal was to influence Pernow and his stance over the following months.

On *February 12*, Sister Greta describes her friends’ situation in Jerusalem to Pernow. She claims that they will be in an extremely difficult situation when the British leave the country; they will lose their jobs and have difficulty keeping a roof over their heads. She continues: “I wonder if the Hebrew Christian Alliance could do something for them.” She explicitly mentions Alfred Nussbaum, who works for the British. What is to become

21 In Gershon Nerel’s list “Who Organized Operation Mercy” (page 24 of this issue), there is no reference to ICCAJ; cf. also the societies which are behind the decision that is taken on April 5, 1945, in London; see Memorandum below.

22 In May 1948, the Scottish Church, however, withdrew their workers from the country.

23 Pernow to Sahlin, January 10, 1948, CSA E VIe: 1.

of him and his wife and three small children when the British leave? "Do you think," she writes to Pernow, "that the Alliance could do something for these people? I think we have a tremendously big responsibility for them. And I cannot see how they should be able to live here."²⁴

Sister Greta's enquiry is not about all Hebrew Christians in Palestine, only the few individuals that she has a special concern about. Pernow received Sister Greta's letter immediately before he left for a conference in Paris. It made an impression on him and he took it with him.²⁵

WCC's Refugee Commission Meeting in Paris

On *February 26–29*, the World Council of Churches (WCC) Refugee Commission is in session in Paris.²⁶ Birger Pernow participates as a member of the commission.²⁷ The topic for discussion is refugees as such in post-war Europe; the Hebrew Christians are not forgotten here. It is even said that "they should be given some preferential treatment over a period," among other things as an "atonement for their sufferings" under the Nazi regime.²⁸ It is further recommended that the WCC deal with "the questions of religious liberty for Hebrew Christians in Palestine in the uncertainties of the situation in that country."²⁹ According to his own words, Pernow managed to put his fingerprints on this. He also mentioned Sister Greta's letter of February 12 to the Refugee Commission and the present representatives of IHCA.³⁰ But Pernow did *not* ask the Commission to consider a general evacuation of Hebrew Christians from Palestine. He cares for Sister Greta's little group and contacts IHCA, which subsequently promises to do what it can to get these people out of the Land.³¹

Developments from March 19 to April 5

On *March 19*, CMJ in London has a meeting about the situation in Palestine "without making any decision."³² They have, however, some ideas about how to proceed with the matter *in* Palestine, which they ask Pernow to implement (see below under March 22).

24 Greta Andrén to Pernow, February 12, 1948, CSA E VIe: 1. See also my article on Weinstock (note 11), when Jones in mid-April expresses the hope that Nussbaum can remain in the Land.

25 Pernow to Andrén, March 8, 1948, CSA E VIe: 1.

26 World Council of Churches Refugee Commission, *Minutes of the Annual Meeting*, Paris, February 26–29, 1948, CSA D IV: 1.

27 Conrad Hoffmann (ICCAJ) and H. Leuner and Harcourt Samuel (IHCA) were present as observers.

28 *Minutes*, Appendix VI, p. 45.

29 *Ibid.*, 46.

30 Cf. Pernow to Andrén, March 8, 1948, CSA E VIe: 1.

31 Cf. Harcourt Samuel to Pernow, April 1, 1948, CSA E56: 2, where Samuel writes: "We shall do what we can to bring the Nussbaum family and Mr. Katscher out of Palestine." Together with other friends of Sister Andrén, the family left on board the *Georgic* on May 7, 1948.

32 Cf. Pernow to Levison, March 30, 1948, CSA E56: 2.



On *March 20*, Sister Greta arrives in Sweden from Jerusalem. She continues her struggle for her friends and informs Pernow orally about their situation.³³

On *March 22*, Pernow approaches Elfan Rees, Executive Secretary of the Ecumenical Refugee Commission (WCC) in Geneva; he reminds him of the dangerous situation which Hebrew Christians in Palestine find themselves in and which he called into attention at the Paris meeting. About Sister Greta he writes: "She has stated that the Hebrew Christians really are in impending danger and must be saved out of the country soonest possible. That is the matter specially with the people you find in the enclosed curriculum."³⁴ One cannot help wondering at Pernow's choice of words. *Perhaps* the explanation is that Sister Greta, now back in Sweden, has pleaded for a *general* evacuation of Hebrew Christians from Palestine, a matter which he as director of ICCAJ does not really have a mandate to plead. But he has no problems pleading Sister Greta's "friends'" cause.

On *March 22*, Gill sends CMJ's proposal from the meeting on March 19 to Pernow. It is proposed that he, on behalf of ICCAJ, should approach "the Jewish Religious Authorities re this matter pointing out that the Jewry would be blamed the world over," if the Hebrew Christians in Palestine are discriminated against.³⁵ The statement is essential for it shows that the CMJ leadership in London has not given up hope that the Hebrew Christians can remain *in* the Land and that they will make another attempt to ensure this.

On *March 23*, in connection with the submission of Witton-Davies' minutes from the meeting in the Bishop's house on March 16, Hoffmann writes to Pernow: "I am wondering if you could do anything in this situation. We are appealing to the International Christian Alliance as well as to the North American Alliance, hoping that they will respond."³⁶

On *March 25*, under the impression of what Pernow reported to him on March 22 about Sister Greta's information, Levison writes: "On receipt of your letter I phoned to Samuel to call a special meeting of our Committee, and the Abraham's Vineyard Board, and we shall of course do everything possible to rescue our brethren."³⁷ With this, IHCA is really getting involved. What is done by Levison and IHCA in the following days will have decisive influence on the implementation of Operation Mercy and the evaluation of it. IHCA now takes responsibility.

At the end of March, the meeting mentioned by Levison is held. He writes: "We agreed to set aside five thousand pounds for helping bring

33 Pernow furthers information about this to Levison on March 22, 1948; cf. Levison to Pernow, March 25, 1928, CSA E56: 2. Levison comments: "What Sister Greta says is very perturbing."

34 Pernow to Rees, March 22, 1948, E I 56: 1. Curriculum for Alfred Nussbaum, Emil Lev Katcher, and Brigitte Goldschmidt, some of Sister Greta's "friends" who were evacuated on board the *Georgic* on May 7, has been preserved, CSA E I 56: 1.

35 Cf. summary of this in Pernow to Levison, March 30, 1948, CSA E 56: 2.

36 Hoffmann to Pernow, March 23, 1948, CSA E VIIa: 2.

37 Levison to Pernow, March 25, 1948, CSA E 56: 2.

out from Palestine, or in Palestine our Hebrew Christians there." It was furthermore decided that they should contact some named individuals in Palestine who could draw up lists of Hebrew Christians (see below).

In connection with the mention of this meeting, Levison gives the following important announcement:

I was at the Home Office and asked for the permission to bring fifty to sixty Hebrew Christians to this country, this matter is under consideration by our Government.³⁸

On *March 30*, Pernow maintains towards Gill³⁹ and Levison that he has no faith in Gill's proposal that they should approach "the Jewish Religious Authorities." To Levison he writes:

Such a step seems to me absolutely useless and of three reasons. Firstly because the Jewish Religious Authorities in the present situation have no power at all to influence the fighting Jewish organisations in Palestine. Secondly because they can reply that the whole Palestinian Jewry now is fighting for its life and existence and the Church is doing nothing in order to assist them in this fight and not even doing anything to protect the Holy Places from destruction. Furtherly the only result would be that we would make the Hebrew Christians still more suspected.⁴⁰

Instead Pernow suggests that Levison contact Gill and that these two approach the Archbishop of Canterbury, "that he, using his personal authority or in the name of the Anglican Church, may submit to the British government for evacuation of this small group of Hebrew Christians. Truly it is a small group and must be regarded as a small affair for the government of Great Britain."⁴¹

On *April 2*, Levison is back in Edinburgh, where he has a meeting in the Church Office with Mr. Urie Baird and Macanna, with Pernow's letter of March 30 before them. Levison has, as just mentioned, already been to the Home Office in London. In Edinburgh it is now decided, under the impression of what Pernow has had to say and the information received from Palestine from the Scottish Church's missionaries, that the Tiberias Hospital should be put under the Red Cross "and should be made a center to house

38 Levison to Pernow, April 2, 1948, CSA E 56: 2. Pernow says on April 20, that *he* wrote to Levison and Gill to make them request of the Home Office that "50–60 persons should be included in the English evacuation plan." Cf. Pernow to Göte Hedenquist, April 20, 1948, CSA E I 56: 1.

39 Pernow to Gill, March 30, 1948, CSA E I 56: 1.

40 Pernow to Levison, March 30, 1948, CSA E 56: 2. On Gill's proposal Hoffmann writes to Pernow on April 6, 1948 (CSA E VIIa: 2): "I agree with your reaction, namely that it would be absolutely useless to attempt anything of the kind that Gill suggests along this line."

41 When Pernow writes this, he does not know that Levison has already initiated negotiations with the Home Office about visas.



all Hebrew Christians needing protection and home, and that the I.H.C.A. should be responsible for the expenditure. (I said we would go to the extent of two thousand pounds if required, subject to my committee agreeing, and the Bank of England given the permission for the expenditure.)” The following is furthermore decided:

That Macanna and I go down to London next week, and arrange with the Colonial Office and the Home Office, that the Hebrew Christians who want to leave Palestine should be received in this country, and that the I.H.C.A. should make itself responsible for their support till they get work or leave this country.

Levison concludes his letter to Pernow:

I think we have taken every possible step to meet the situation, and I should be glad to hear from you if you can make some contribution towards this scheme, for the carrying out of the scheme will fall on the I.H.C.A.'s shoulders. All I will add is, that you can rest assured that we will do all in our power to deal with the matter.⁴²

IHCA's Vice-President Nahum Levison now shows himself as a man of strong character. At a meeting a few days later, on April 5, the significant decisions are made together with the other mission societies. The minutes from this meeting are reproduced *in toto* below.

On the morning of *April 5* in London – before the meeting in CMJ's headquarters – Nahum Levison and Harcourt Samuel negotiate with representatives of the Colonial Office about “what they would do to help.” This is what Levison writes to Pernow a couple of days later; the matter itself has naturally been communicated to the participants at the meeting that same day.

We found that the High Commissioner for Palestine had communicated with the Colonial Office, and the Colonial Office consulted the Home Office, and they agreed to permit any Hebrew Christian who is in danger to be evacuated to this country [UK]. My heart sung with Joy on hearing this, for it will save us so much trouble with individuals, and it will all be done in Palestine.⁴³

“My heart sung with Joy.” These words were not uttered by the Bishop in Jerusalem but by a leading figure in the International Hebrew Christian Alliance. And he has backing from other “heavyweights” within IHCA.

What happened later on that day, April 5, at the negotiations in CMJ's

42 Levison to Pernow, April 2, 1948, CSA E 56: 2. Pernow thanks Levison in a letter, April 8, 1948, for this with the words: “I can hardly express the great joy Sister Greta and I felt by reading about all you have done to rescue our Hebrew Christian friends,” cf. Pernow to Levinson, April 8, 1948, CSA E 56: 2.

43 Levison to Pernow, April 7, 1948, CSA E 56: 2.

Memorandum of Meeting⁴⁴

1. At the suggestion of Rev. R. Clephane Macanna (Scotland), an unofficial meeting of representatives of Jewish Mission Societies interested in Palestine was hurriedly convened at 16 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, on Monday, 5th April, at 2.30 p.m.
Present: Rev. H. Samuel and Rev. N. Levison (I.H.C.A.), Rev. A.G. Parry (B.J.S.),⁴⁵ Rev. C.H. Gill and Rev. H.W.L. Martin (C.M.J.), Representative of Mildmay Mission, Rev. Dr. D. MacDougall and Rev. R. Clephane Macanna (C. of S.).⁴⁶ Mr. Macanna was asked to take the chair and constituted the meeting with prayer.
2. The Chairman stated that Rev. N Levison had been in correspondence with Pastor B Pernow, Sweden, Chairman of the I.M.C. Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews concerning the position of Hebrew Christians in Palestine. A letter had been received by Mr. Levison from Mr. Pernow on which he passed on a quotation from a letter of the Rev. Canon Witton-Davies, Jerusalem, to Dr. C. Hoffmann. Mr. Witton-Davies reported that, at a meeting on the Bishop's House, Jerusalem, the safety of Hebrew Christians in Palestine had been considered, and the suggestion made that small concentrations of Hebrew Christians should be made at Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. An immediate decision would require to be made soon, but the question of funds arose, as most of the Hebrew Christians were without money of their own and would be out of work. Canon Davies wished to have the matter brought before the notice of Societies represented on the I.M.C. Committee. Dr. Hoffmann in his letter to Mr. Pernow stated he had appealed to the I.H.C.A on the matter.
3. The representatives of the I.H.C.A. stated that the question had been considered by that body and that a sum of £5000 would be available to assist Hebrew Christians. It was also intimated that negotiations had begun for the permission of the Bank of England being given to transfer money to Palestine on account of Hebrew Christians, and that there was every likelihood that such permission would be granted. It was further reported that the Colonial Office had stated that the High Commissioner for Palestine had cabled asking permission to issue visas to Hebrew Christians to Palestine who were in danger. The matter had been discussed with the Home Office and agreement reached that if the High Commissioner for Palestine was satisfied that there was danger to a Hebrew Christian a British visa should be granted and transport made available.

44 Sent by R. Clephane Macanna to Conrad Hoffmann, April 6, 1948, copy in CSA E VII: 2.

45 British Jews Society.

46 Church of Scotland.



4. Discussion followed and it was clear that not all Hebrew Christians wished to be evacuated from Palestine.
 - (a) Those who were found eligible for evacuation and came to Great Britain should be the responsibility of the I.H.C.A., or of the Society with which they had been connected in Palestine, or of such other Society or group in Britain as would accept responsibility for them if they had not already been attached to any particular Society or church.
 - (b) Those Hebrew Christians remaining in Palestine should be concentrated in the various areas named in paragraph 2, and the Church of Scotland intimated that the Tiberias Hospital might also be considered as a concentration centre. It was pointed out that, although funds might be made available, the purchase of food would be a difficulty. It was suggested that the International Red Cross might take responsibility for seeing that food reached the groups, provided that funds were made available. It was also suggested, that if the International Red Cross could not accept responsibility the Hebrew Christians should be evacuated, but on this it was emphasized that the decision lay with the High Commissioner through the Director of Migration, Jerusalem.
5. It was finally agreed:-
 - (a) That intimation be made to Rev. Scott Morrison (Jaffa), Rev. H.R.A Jones (Jerusalem), Dr. H.W Torrance (Tiberias), and Mrs. Rohold (Haifa) that they should list the Hebrew Christians in their area who should be evacuated from Palestine on account of danger, and transmit these lists to Canon Witton-Davies (Jerusalem) for appropriate action with the Direction of Migration. It was expected that Canon Witton-Davies would keep the Societies informed of the number of Hebrew Christians being evacuated, and the Rev. H. Clephane Macanna was to inform Mr. Witton-Davies of the decision and to request co-operation.
 - (b) That Rev. H. Samuel and Rev. R. Clephane Macanna should interview the Bank of England re transfer of funds for Hebrew Christians in Palestine.
 - (c) That Rev. R. Clephane Macanna inform the Very Rev. Dr. J. Hutchison Cockburn, head of the World Council of Churches Department of Reconstruction at Geneva, of the scheme proposed for feeding and housing Hebrew Christians in Palestine, and invoke his aid in approaching the International Red Cross Geneva. It is understood that Dr. Cockburn be authorized to offer funds for the purpose of sending food to Hebrew Christians in Palestine provided the International Red Cross would guarantee that the food would reach the groups concerned.
 - (d) That copies of the Memorandum of meeting be issued to all those taking part in the meeting that the various Societies represented might be fully informed of the steps taken and decide what measure of support could be given to the scheme.

- (e) That Rev. B. Pernow and Dr. C. Hoffmann be fully informed of the meeting and of the action taken, and invited to give whatever aid was possible from Sweden and the U.S.A.

Closed with the Benediction.

R. Clephane Macanna
Chairman
5th April, 1948

Developments after April 5, 1948

On *April 6*, Macanna sends the Memorandum to, among others, Hoffmann, and writes:

I am enclosing a memorandum of a meeting, which explains itself, and follows your letter to Pernow, quoting Canon Davies. You will see that action has been fully taken.

To-day I confirmed the remittance of money to Palestine at the Bank of England, and this afternoon, in discussion at the Home Office, discovered that the number who will be allowed to come to Britain under the evacuation scheme will be strictly limited. In addition, Societies will be held responsible for the upkeep of these people while they are here, and that will probably limit further the enthusiasm of some of the groups for general evacuation. The key scheme is that suggested by Canon Davies of concentrations in Palestine, and, as noted above, the Bank of England and the Treasury take a very favourable view and will agree to the transmission of funds. I think that this is all that can be done in the meantime. If there is anything further, I will notify you.

Macanna's words that the financial aspect of the matter "will probably limit further the enthusiasm of some of the groups for general evacuation" are remarkable. The aim is to help Hebrew Christians *in* Palestine. "The key scheme is that suggested by Canon Witton-Davies of concentrations in Palestine."⁴⁷ (Cf. March 16; see above.)

At the same time, Levison's negotiations with the Home Office in London have had the result that visas may be obtained for Hebrew Christians "who were in danger." And on behalf of IHCA, Levison has declared that they will guarantee the project financially.

Lists are made in Palestine of individuals who are "in danger." At first only fourteen visas are granted, which induces Bishop Stewart, Witton-Davis, Clark-Kerre, and Jones to appear before the Chief Secretary in Jerusalem on April 12. Here the Bishop called attention to the fact "that many more than fourteen visas were needed and said that at least fifty,

47 Macanna to Hoffmann, April 6, 1948, CSA E VIIa: 2.



probable more, Hebrew Christians throughout Palestine were in need of being evacuated."⁴⁸ It would seem that the Chief Secretary had not been informed by the Colonial Office in London "that all Hebrew Christians nominated by Witton-Davies should be given visas for the U.K. and facilities provided for travel."⁴⁹ Only about a fortnight later were we "informed that any Hebrew Christian considered to be in danger could be granted a temporary visa for the United Kingdom," writes Jones.⁵⁰ That this was made possible was due to the fact that Gill and Samuel in London had been to the Colonial Office "to again make representations on behalf of the Hebrew Christians," Levison writes. This happened as late as about April 26.⁵¹

In Palestine they follow the criteria that Levison in particular has devised. Not least Pernow, influenced by Sister Greta, has urged him to this. But without IHCA's financial backing, that which became Operation Mercy would not have been feasible. Neither the Bishop in Jerusalem nor ICCAJ had the financial resources for this. IHCA had. More than others, they bear the moral responsibility for this.

The "small concentrations of Hebrew Christians" around Palestine that the Bishop and his collaborators had suggested on March 16 (see above) – and that were underlined by Macanna after the meeting in London on April 5 with the words: "The key scheme is that suggested by Canon Witton-Davies" – were never made. The reason is probably that the organizers in Palestine were convinced that all who were "in danger" had been entered in the list.

It is difficult to determine whether the criteria for being "in danger" were followed exactly. I dare not say that they, in all cases, were applied with the same rigor; I rather suspect that some of the evacuees got through the needle's eye fairly easily.

After Operation Mercy has been carried out, its organizers rejoice that they have "saved" human lives. And even after the operation, Levison can write the following at the beginning of June:

The number of Hebrew Christians still left in Palestine must be considerable, I know personally a good few who have stayed, the majority of them are very strong Zionists, and Jewish nationalists, but there are some who do not belong to this group, but cannot get out because they have no passports, or for some technical reasons. I am doing my best to get them out.⁵²

48 See Jones' letter of June 4, 1948, printed as the first article in this issue of *Mishkan*.

49 Jones to Gill, April 16, 1948, dep. CMJ c. 219.

50 Cf. Jones' letter of June 4.

51 Levison to Pernow, May 1, 1948, CSA E 56: 2. It is said that Macanna asked the two persons to go to the Colonial Office "at the beginning of the week." The week began on Monday, April 26. Levison does not know the result of this meeting when he writes. On May 1, the first stage of Operation Mercy is initiated in Jerusalem.

52 Levison to Pernow, June 2, 1948, CSA E 56: 2.

Again, this is not the Bishop in Jerusalem speaking!

But there is also some self-reflection. Already in October, CMJ missionary Miss Brooke writes the following from Jaffa: "It now seems that the discrimination shown against 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."⁵³

And as Gershon Nerel correctly says, in April 1949 Jones sends a letter to the Archbishop of York in which he says that in "the present much calmer and more settled atmosphere that now prevails here," it is "possible to see things that happened a year ago in a truer perspective." After having mentioned some examples of interrogation of Hebrew Christians and the ensuing fear, he comments that "these fears, understandable at that time, have proved to have been exaggerated," which is shown by the fact that "Christian Jews" who did remain in the Land were unmolested.⁵⁴

However, this does not mean that Jones regretted what he was involved in. At CMJ's Anniversary Meeting in May 1950, he said the following:

It is enough to recall but one incident – that which is known as "Operation Mercy," in which many Hebrew Christians were evacuated from Palestine at the eleventh hour just before the end of the Mandate – from a position in which they seemed to be "between the devil and the blue sea" – acceptable to neither Jew nor Arab. No one who witnessed the unfolding of the long chain of events which comprised this whole operation could doubt that the hand of God was guiding throughout.⁵⁵

"It now seems that the discrimination shown against Hebrew Christians in recent months was political rather than religious. . . ."

When Lives Are at Stake

Having presented and interpreted some of the documents which the organizers behind Operation Mercy have left, I see a quite different picture than the one Gershon Nerel has presented. But I am not done with the adverse effects that Operation Mercy also had on the Messianic movement and its reputation in Israel. It leads to existential questions such as: What do you do when lives are at stake? And: How do you judge a person who, in a given situation, acted on the conviction that lives were at stake (although subsequent historical research may be able to show that this hardly was the case)? I hope others will take up these subjects.

In conclusion just this: The fact that Sister Greta and Birger Pernow are so

53 Cf. *Jewish Missionary News* (1948): 183.

54 Jones to His Grace, the Lord Archbishop of York, April 4, 1949, Conrad Schick Library, Christ Church, Jerusalem.

55 Cf. *Jewish Missionary News* (1950): 103.



concerned for their “friends” in Palestine, believing that their lives are at stake and taking action at an early stage, may be explained by what they experienced some years earlier. In the years around 1940, Sister Greta helped to save 3,000 Jews out of Vienna. As director of the Swedish Israel Mission, Birger Pernow was responsible for this.⁵⁶

It is easy to imagine that even if you had done absolutely all that you could to save lives in Vienna, and even risked your own life, you might later have to live with self-accusations: If only I had done this or that, if I had acted differently, if I had seen the signals a little earlier, then that child, that mother, that family would have been saved.

Such observations must also be taken into account when the story of Operation Mercy is assessed.

In any case, Gershon Nerel’s theory – that the Hebrew Christians in Palestine were the object of a conspiracy from the church’s side – is to my mind, and with reference to the “authentic documents” that I have presented, a construction which lacks historical foundation.

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⁵⁶ See Birger Pernow, *Sjuttio år för Israel. Svenska Israelsmissionen 1875–1945* (Stockholm: Svenska Israelsmissionens Andelsförenings Bokförlag, 1945), 30–51.