

Japan's Early Encounters with the Zionist Movement

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I

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on Japan's early encounters with the Zionist movement. Japan and other East Asian nations are little noticed in most literature on the history of Jews and Zionism. However, if we examine the history more closely, we can find people who have left their footprints in it.

At the governmental level, the Japanese Government made clear its commitment to the Zionist movement. During World War I, on November 2, 1917, the British Government favored "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." After the issuance of this famous 'Balfour Declaration', the Zionists did their utmost to gain world-wide support for it. The Japanese Government was approached by the Jews in Shanghai, China. In January 1919, after Siam (Thailand) and China supported the establishment of the Jewish national home, the Japanese Ambassador to Britain informed Chaim Weizmann, president of the English Zionist Federation, that "(the Japanese Government) is pleased to learn of the ardent desire of the Zionists to establish in Palestine a National Jewish Homeland, and that it will accord its sympathy to the realization of your aspirations."

Moreover, in April 1920, when the allied powers met at San Remo, Italy to decide the peace treaty with Ottoman Turkey, the Japanese delegate attended the conference together with those of Britain, France and Italy, and approved the allocation of mandates in Syria and Lebanon to France and those in Mesopotamia and Palestine to Britain. Finally, the League of Nations confirmed the mandate agreement for Palestine in July 1922. In advance of this, the Zionists in Shanghai again requested the Japanese Government to express sympathy toward the Jewish cause. Faced with this, Japan's Foreign Minister Uchida Yasuya gave the Government's favorable response to the Zionist request for a sympathetic expression in the cause of the Jewish people. The Shanghai Zionists not only praised Japan's and particularly Foreign Minister Uchida's valuable contribution to the Zionist Movement in a two-

page account in their organ in July 1922, but also decided to inscribe the name of Foreign Minister Uchida in the Golden Book of Keren Kayemeth (Jewish National Fund) in Jerusalem. Consequently, on March 4, 1923, a ceremony of presenting the 'Diploma of the Golden Book', in which the name of Foreign Minister Uchida was inscribed, was held at a synagogue in Shanghai in the presence of Japanese Consul-General Funatsu Tatsuichiro. Uchida became the first high official of the Japanese Government who remained in Jewish memory. In 1927, on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, the Zionists again approached the Japanese Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tanaka Giichi, asking Japan to issue a renewed expression of sympathy with the objects of the Declaration and thereby demonstrate its goodwill toward the Jewish national aspiration in Palestine. In response to this, Prime Minister Tanaka transmitted his reply through Japanese Consul-General in Shanghai to the Zionists, "heartly congratulations on the steadily progressing organizations of the Zionists and on the remarkable advancement of the Jewish nationalistic institutions which they have achieved in Palestine."

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II

There is no doubt that Japan extended its sympathetic attitude to the Zionist cause after World War I. The problem is how fully the Japanese understood Jewish aspirations to a homeland. Indeed, at the San Remo conference, Britain, France and Italy were represented by their prime ministers and foreign ministers, while the Japanese delegate was represented by Matsui Keishiro, Ambassador to France. Furthermore, Matsui seemed to be reluctant to attend the conference. Matsui and Chinda Sutemi, Ambassador to Britain who participated in the previous allied conference in London in February 1920, each suggested the other go in their place. The Italian ambassador in London was irritated and asked the Japanese whether they would attend the conference or not. Actually, Japan's main concern in the peace conference was not in the Middle East, but in China and Germany's former territories in the Southern Pacific.

Anyhow, with the growing rise of Japan's great power status after WWI, the Zionist leaders needed to cultivate relations with Japan and other East Asian countries. Immediately after the conclusion of the San Remo conference, they lost no time in dispatching their first official mission to East Asia for

propaganda on Zionism and fund-raising. Israel Cohen, director of publicity and propaganda of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) was asked to undertake this mission.⁽²⁾ Cohen left London on May 15, 1920 and came back there on May 8, 1921.

What did the Zionists expect from Cohen's mission to East Asia?

Cohen carried letters of introduction from prominent Jewish and British figures such as Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolow, Lord Rothschild, Max Nordau, Sir Herbert Samuel, Lord Robert Cecil, W. Ormsby-Gore and Sir Alfred Mond. Moreover, Nahum Sokolow, Executive Director of the WZO, held a luncheon on behalf of Israel Cohen and wished him a safe and successful journey on the day before his departure.

After stopping at Palestine, India, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Shanghai, Cohen landed in Japan on December 7, 1920. During his ten-day stay in Japan, he held two meetings for local Jewish communities in Kobe and Yokohama. He was astonished to know the lack of knowledge of the Jews and Zionism among the Japanese media and people. Local newspapers devoted considerable coverage to his mission out of curiosity. Some papers printed sensational reports. *The Kokumin Shimbun*, for example, carried such headline: "The judgment of the reconstruction of the lost Nation at the meeting; Mr. Cohen, Jewish Royal family, weeping for the Holy Mission." He was also disappointed to find that most Jews in Japan had little enthusiasm for the reconstruction of their national home. In fact, in a report submitted to the Zionist Executive after returning in May 1921, he stated that he "cannot expect that Japan will be a reliable productive source of support,"⁽³⁾ because of the small and unsteady Jewish population and their less than enthusiastic attitudes. Nevertheless, this mission was a memorable achievement for the WZO. Some thirty years later, Cohen noticed "... it was the first time in Jewish history that the emissary of a great organization accomplished such an extensive and peculiar journey for the Jewish national cause."⁽⁴⁾

III

In the 1920s there were some Japanese who made the journey to Palestine. Most of them were Christian pilgrims. For example, in April 1922, Yanaihara Tadao, a Christian, economist and later president of Tokyo University, paid a visit to Palestine. The first work he published after returning to Japan was

on Zionism in *The Economic Journal* of Tokyo University. It is the first research on Zionism that appeared in Japanese academic journals. In it, Yanaihara analyzed and admired the Jewish national awakening and argued against critical views on Zionism.

There were, of course, some who wished to see the Holy Land but failed. In April 1921, Japan's Crown Prince Hirohito stopped at Egypt en route to Europe. He stayed two nights at the residence of British High Commissioner General Allenby. He was enthusiastically recommended to visit Jerusalem and the Dead Sea by Mrs. Allenby at the reception. Hirohito also received an invitation from Herbert Samuel, British High Commissioner in Jerusalem. However, he declined with regret to accept Samuel's invitation on the reason of his tight schedule. Hirohito, later the *Showa Tennou*, just stopped at the gateway to Palestine and smelled the milk and honey of the Holy Land.

In 1927, the Japanese Army dispatched its officer, Major Yasue Norihiro, to Palestine and Europe for a fact-finding mission on Jewish affairs. Yasue previously encountered the Jewish problem when he was attached to Japan's expeditionary forces in Siberia. His works on Jewish affairs caught the attention of the Army Minister General Shirakawa Yoshinori. Upon his recommendation, Yasue was sent to Palestine and Europe. While in Palestine in the winter of 1927, he met British High Commissioner Sir Herbert Charles Onslow Plumer and such Zionists as Frederick H. Kisch, head of the Political Department of the WZO in Jerusalem, and Hayim Kalwariski-Margokis, head of the Arab Bureau, and visited several Jewish settlements such as Ein Harod. He was escorted by Moshe Medzini, journalist of the *Haaretz*, during his tour in Palestine. Yasue admired the rapidly developing Jewish communities and the elated nationalist consciousness of the Jewish people.

After he returned to Japan, Yasue, as a leading expert on Jewish affairs in the army, contributed to journals and gave lectures on the topics at public gatherings. However, Yasue's image of the Jews was rather complicated, confused and even contradictory. On the one hand he openly praised Jewish national revival in their ancestor's land and translated Herzl's *Jewish State*, but on the other hand, he stressed Jewish global influence and translated such anti-Semitic literature as *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion* and Henry Ford's *International Jew*.

It was in the late 1930s that Yasue stood in the spotlight as an expert on Jewish affairs. With the influx of Jewish refugees from Europe into Japan's puppet state, Manchukuo, the Japanese Government faced the Jewish

problem. On the other hand, the Jews in Harbin approached the Japanese to make an attempt to hold a conference to unify the Jewish communities of the Far East and asked for permission. Although Japan was strengthening relations with Nazi Germany, the Japanese decided to use this opportunity to exploit the Jewish influential power for their own purpose, namely to introduce American capital into Manchuria to activate the Manchurian economy and improve the deteriorating American sentiment toward Japan. Therefore, the Japanese not only gave their consent to the Jewish conference, but also to allow the Japanese officials to attend the conference. The Far Eastern Jewish National Conference was held in Harbin in December 1937 with an attendance of twenty-one delegates representing the Jewish communities of the Far East and about five hundred local Jews.⁽⁵⁾ Army Major General Higuchi Kiichiro, head of the Harbin Special Service Agency, Army Major Kawamura Aizo of the Gendarmerie, Vice- Consul Taniguchi of the Consulate General of Japan in Harbin, Yuki Seitaro, Vice-Governor of Binjiang Province of Manchukuo attended the conference. Moreover, the Army Ministry dispatched Colonel Yasue to the conference from Tokyo specially to assist General Higuchi. At the opening ceremony of the conference, General Higuchi gave a congratulatory speech as the main guest. He said, "While we find quite serious Jewish problems in some European countries, Manchukuo with the national manifesto of 'Gozoku Kyowa (five-family harmony)' offers sufficient protection for the hard-working and righteous Jewish people and tolerates their peaceful existence just as Japan does," without mentioning Germany by name. The opening ceremony of the conference was impressive. Three national flags – Japan's 'Rising Sun', Manchukuo's five- color flag (yellow, red, blue, white and black representing five races) and the Jewish 'Magen David' were displayed at the hall and guarded by the members of the Harbin Betar (Brith Trumpeldor). At the close of the ceremony, three national anthems were played. This was the first time that the Zionist anthem 'Hatikva' was played in the presence of Japanese and Manchukuo high officials at the city under Japan's control.

The Germans were not pleased. The German Embassy in Tokyo filed a protest, but the Japanese ignored it. The Japanese and Manchukuo governments supported this Jewish conference in Harbin. They regarded Jewish affairs as important from the viewpoint of the relations with the US. Colonel Yasue played a pivotal role in the following Jewish conferences held in 1938 and 1939 in Harbin as the head of the Dairen Special Service Agency.

Actually, he worked for the Jewish communities in close cooperation with local Jews in the hope that it would extend help to both the Japanese and the Jews and pave the way for mutual cooperation between the two nations. Moreover, he had an idea of offering some lands and absolving Jewish refugees into Manchukuo

IV

However, this honeymoon did not last long. On September 27, 1940, Japan concluded the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. The Pact brought immediate changes to Japan's stance toward the Jews. Before Japan entered into the military alliance with Nazi Germany, the Jews under Japan's protection were regarded as a means of attracting American Jewish capital to Manchuria and improving the American public's image of Japan. However, since Japan decided clearly to take sides with the Fascist camp, this 'Jewish card' was no longer effective. In consequence, Yasue, head of the Dairen Special Service Agency was relieved of his post, and the fourth Jewish National Conference which was to be held in Dairen in December 1940 was suddenly cancelled.

Nevertheless, the Jews in Harbin showed their gratitude to Yasue by inscribing his name in the Golden Book of the Keren Kayemeth in July 1941. He continued to stay in Dairen to take care of the Jews as a reserve officer, but after Japan's surrender, he was taken by the Soviets to Siberia and died there in 1950.

These early Japanese-Jewish encounters were clearly the beginnings of contacts which would find their fullest expression in the postwar period in the establishment of formal Japanese-Israeli diplomatic relations. After the tragedy in the 20th Century, Japan and Israel embarked on a new step toward the future.

Notes

- (1) For Japan's early commitment to Zionism, see Naoki Maruyama, "Japan's Response to the Zionist Movement in the 1920s," *Bulletin of the Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan*, no.2, 1984.
- (2) Israel Cohen (1879-1961) was born in a religious family of Manchester. The

whole account of his mission is contained in his two books: *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller* (1925) and *A Jewish Pilgrimage: An Autobiography of Israel Cohen* (1956).

- (3) Cohen to the Zionist Executive of the Zionist Organization, dispatched from Harbin, December 27, 1920, Z4/2619, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- (4) Israel Cohen, *A Jewish Pilgrimage*, London, Vallentine, Mitchell, 1956, p. 175.
- (5) See Naoki Maruyama, "Facing a Dilemma: Japan's Jewish Policy in the Late 1930s," in Guy Podoler, ed., *War and Militarism in Modern Japan: Issues of History and Identity*, Kent, UK, Global Oriental, 2009.