

become a problem in search of a solution. We now know the answer to the problem. It is up to us to make it known, and to apply it. In the immortal words of a minister of the gospel of the first discoverer of these truths,

‘No man is an *Island*, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the *Continent*, a part of the *main*; if a *Clod* be washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the less, as well as if a *Promontory* were, as well as if a *Manor* of thy *friends* or of *thine own* were; any man’s *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for thee.’<sup>1</sup>

## JACOB WEINSHALL

# A CRANK IN ISRAEL

*Translator’s Note.* Dr. Jacob Weinshall is a General Practitioner in Tel Aviv, who has published several biographical works in modern Hebrew. His speciality is political cranks. The following case-history of his patient B was written by him at my request, in the form of a letter addressed to me, during my recent stay in Tel Aviv in search of material for a book on Israel. It should be borne in mind that B died in 1945, and that the events refer to a period even earlier than that date—the troubled years of gestation of the new state.

A. K.

YOU have asked me to put down the circumstances of the illness and death of B, that eccentric whom you met in my house during your last visit to Israel, which was then still Palestine, in 1944. I am not sure whether my account of his case will satisfy the requirements of objectivity and logics, for the manner of B’s death was, as you know, a profound shock to me. If I were only involved as a doctor, it would be relatively simple for me to call his disease by its name, to list its symptoms in general, and those symptoms in particular which my patient displayed, and to add that for some years I knew that there was no hope of a complete cure. But as you know, he was not only my patient, but also my friend, and probably even more: a symbol of something which glimmers at the bottom of our minds, and that we are reluctant to face and admit into our consciousness. For his eccentricities—and at the beginning they were indeed no more than eccentricities—were a

<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *Devotions*, xvii, 1624 (Nonesuch edition, edited by John Hayward), Random House, New York, 1928, p. 538.

true expression of the collective unconscious, if I may use this somewhat abstract term, of the people of this country.

As you remember, he was an arrogant and quarrelsome companion, ever ready to discuss problems which have no beginning and no end. He antagonized people who were his well-wishers, and was a stickler about words and a casuist. He never took an interest in drawing practical inferences from a given situation; he was too preoccupied with its philosophical implications. He defended his views with the brilliance of the Viennese café wit, and had an offhand way of producing striking epigrams. It was this intellectual brilliance, his ability to open new vistas with a sleight-of-hand as it were, which attracted me first and made him into such a fascinating study.

He always remained a lazy and sterile vagabond, though his eyes devoured millions of printed words. He studied the daily papers with the devotion of the Orthodox Jew to his Talmud, and pondered over the meaning of every word which seemed to convey an inconsistency. He had an infallible instinct for sensing insincerities and lies, which provoked a rage in him that shook every nerve in his body.

He also had a weakness for old maps. There was a period in his life when he was completely penniless. Unable to concentrate on any productive work, he spent the alms received from his not too numerous friends on maps, which he mostly found in old school-books and manuals of strategy. He kept his collection in strict chronological order. It included a number of old books in the original edition and their later reprints. These he cherished particularly; each deviation from the original in the modern reprint had its specific meaning and explanation. These torn and tattered maps which the antiquarians of Tel Aviv were delighted to get rid of for a few piastres, served as a proof for his theory that the whole history of the world could be reduced to a great swindle and juggling with the names of Peoples, Countries, Provinces and Towns. He was, for instance, infuriated by the nondescript Anglo-American term 'Middle East', which he regarded as a deliberate psychological ruse designed to rob all nations of this part of the world, but particularly the Jews, of their individuality and place in the sun. He did not recognize the Lebanon—for him it remained North Canaan. 'Transjordan' was a semantic trick of the British Colonial Office. Never, he explained, had the Jordan been

a state frontier; on the contrary, it was the Jordan which, like the Nile, had made this country into an indivisible historical and political unit. There was no such country as the Northern Hejaz either; it was called the Majdan as in Solomon's day. He was a jealous guardian of names and shook with rage if anybody said Nablus instead of Shekhem, or Sheikh Abrek instead of Shaarayim. He did not extend recognition to Haifa; its correct name was Shikhmona. To use the wrong name amounted in his eyes to high treason. It was a form of neurosis which I have never come across before—a geographical neurosis as it were.

It was fascinating to watch him poring over his stacks of daily papers. He was in a constant fury over the primitivity of our Hebrew phraseology and its inflated, cheaply ponderous style—made even more turgid by careless printing, which causes the Aramaic letters to look suspiciously like their Babylonian runic original. He felt responsible for the style, the political content, the quality of the printing, and lived the part of an imaginary super editor-in-chief, proof-reader and censor all in one. When he agreed with a phrase he nodded his head, brought the paper close to his eyes, and took off his pince-nez which, for a moment, made him look much younger than the man in his late fifties which he was. Sometimes he flew into a tantrum, flung the paper aside, and took slow sips of his coffee, which had meanwhile got cold; it was the only remedy and counter-poison against the misdeeds of politicians and scribblers—which were ultimately all his own responsibility. It was high time, he explained, for people to understand that we all live in a narrow space between two mirrors. Every unreasonable action is reflected and reproduced in them a thousandfold. We are under observation, we are being constantly weighed, though we are unaware of it and feel lighter than a feather. We can never step off the scale of the balance and should never cease measuring ourselves; but even when we do stop we retain our weight—a passive weight on an alien scale.

With all this he never made a ridiculous impression—not even when, in the middle of one of his tirades, it occurred to one that he was unable to leave his table at the café because he did not yet know who was going to pay his bill today, and also because his trousers were so badly patched on their seat that he did not dare get up and always had to leave as the last guest. He was pathetic in a singular manner—I would call it the pathos of responsibility.

An aging man with the glamorous past of a near-millionaire in Vienna, who had lost, like the rest of us, his possessions partly through his own, partly through alien, guilt, he felt utterly useless in this country of ours; only his pathos of responsibility kept him going and gave meaning to his life.

He tried to do some business deals; but he was always cheated, sometimes by people whom he had done great favours in the past. That was their right; they were younger, cleverer and more ruthless. But where the life of the spirit is concerned, no advantages of youth and ruthlessness are recognized. Here he could hold his own as a teacher, an expert on international relations, a Minister without Portfolio, and most of all as a seismograph which registered the slightest movements of the collective conscience.

You probably remember the episode of his overcoat. This overcoat was the only surviving relic of the golden past—of the cabarets of Budapest and Paris, the holiday trips to the Norwegian Fjords, the business journeys in sleeping cars to Berlin and Warsaw. It was an overcoat much too dazzling for Tel Aviv, of the type once called, if I remember rightly, an 'Ulster': made of a heavy black fabric, rather narrow in the waist, and with a breast-pocket from which a white handkerchief had once stuck out. It was particularly difficult to adapt to the Tel Aviv climate. And the more the body of B shrank under the effects of age and starvation, the heavier became for him the burden of that monster of an overcoat. Yet it was a carrier of happy memories—memories of a certain woman who had vanished into the unknown, and memories of the royal honours accorded to him on board the little cattle-ship of illegal immigrants whose passengers had taken a vow to scuttle themselves if intercepted, for they were nearing the end of their tether and the ship the end of its steam. Thanks to the magic of the overcoat, they had listened respectfully to his lectures during the three winter-weeks on the sea—the last week without food, the last three days without drinking water—and had gratefully accepted the healing balsam of his Viennese irony, until they were all thrown ashore somewhere on the dunes of Tel Aviv. Once he had reached shore, however, the overcoat was transformed into a vulgar garment and had to serve base utilitarian purposes. During the day its role was to cover the appalling rents and holes in his suit and even to camouflage, by its inordinate length, his torn boots. At night, one could sleep on it in the dunes

without waking up with a stiff neck. But first and foremost it fulfilled the role of a portable field- and café-library. Its ample and generous pockets seemed specially designed to carry books about. It had a pocket for bibliography, a pocket for History, pockets for Economics and Statistics, and so on.

The overcoat was stolen from B in a café where he did not even owe money yet. It was stolen while his mind fought one of its great battles against our hopeless and talentless editorial hacks, and particularly against that bastard breed, product of the mating of a nightwatchman with a pulp-writer, the sub-editor. After his first anger had passed, he explained to me with the gently sarcastic smile of a Palestinian Count Bobby<sup>1</sup>: 'It was a bad thing to happen just now, when the rains are going to start. But I am comforted by the thought that my precious overcoat will remain in the country and participate in the circulation of goods, that is, our national economy. Patriotism is a comfort, or is it not?'

One day he arrived at my flat, happy and beaming, and explained that he had just come back from Safed, where, roaming through the old cemetery, he had discovered the grave of a mediaeval mystic, a saintly Kabbalist, who had beyond any possible doubt been one of his direct forbears. This was a great day in his life—a dramatic compensation for the humiliating anonymity which the cattle-boat of illegal immigrants had forced upon its passengers. He had come on a little hell-ship straight from hell; but in this country the devil of anonymity had been exorcized by the spirit of his sacred ancestors. A dead leaf drifting in the foul wind of illegality had become attached to the genealogical tree—and judging by the age of the tree, every Jew is of course an aristocrat.

His aristocratic character became particularly evident on those red-letter days when some friend, remembering B's generosity in the Vienna days, made him a present of a new suit with a couple of Palestine pounds tucked discreetly into a sidepocket. If the event fell on a sabbath when the bookshops are closed, B betook himself straight to the Café Pilz, our Claridge's of those days, and within an hour had spent all the money. He ordered the most expensive dishes and the rarest vintage wines—once I saw him in front of a bottle of Cheval Blanc 1904. He invited any acquaintance who happened to be round at Pilz's; but by preference

<sup>1</sup> 'Graf Bobby', the slightly gaga Austrian aristocrat of the old school, was a favourite character of the Vienna of the twenties. (Translator.)

foreigners of rank or spirit. On these occasions he was particularly brilliant; a tactful host and accomplished causeur, he played the part of a cultural attaché of our country, much in the style of an Austrian diplomat at the Congress of Vienna. In fact, he called these most civilized of his escapades his 'diplomatic flirtations'. Nobody watching from another table could have suspected that this delightful man would have to pay for his hospitality with a fortnight on breadcrusts and water; even less that in the dizzy lightheadedness caused by chronic hunger he would, as an antidote, devour thousands of printed words. I must confess that secretly I approved of all this, despite the fact that I was his doctor, and that I knew he would have to pay for an hour as a 'cultural attaché of Judea' with a pound of his already shrunken flesh. It was his way of protesting against the provincialism of this country, our whole trite and tasteless pattern of life.

The symptoms of our patient, as I have described them so far, seem confused and lacking a common denominator. This was also my own impression until one day the central motif of his eccentricities dawned on me and the whole puzzle fell into a pattern. History, like nature—and being part of nature—has a horror of the void. A new society like ours is incomplete and bubbling with voids—like airholes which make you sea-sick on a flight. What, then, was the function of the crank B in our society—the para-psychological meaning of his symptoms as it were? They all served one common purpose: to abolish the white spots on our social map. From morning to night he was busy filling the various gaping voids in our society, rushing from one danger-spot to another like an ambulance car. He was responsible for all disasters and accidents. He was the Super Editor-in-Chief of all our newspapers, the Supreme Proof-Reader in Command, the Guardian of Maps and Names, the Cato of the Jews, the Talleyrand of Israel. He must always be what the rest of us refused or forgot to be.

Above all, he was the secret chief of the Jewish Secret Service—precisely because no such thing exists. Ordinary lunatics are always somebody who exists or has existed in the past—Napoleon or Christ or the Emperor of China. But we have no Jewish Cultural attachés and no Secret Service. For twenty-five years we were passive objects in a confused game—like a freight car loaded with perishable material, we were slowly shunted from one rail-track to another and finally pushed forward and back on a dead line.

Our leadership did not function or was not taken seriously; except when from time to time it was asked to pay the fee for the absurd journey and to utter three cheers at the lovely view from the window. We were trained like harmless and obedient beasts—something halfway between a tame elephant and a screeching parrot—by the Foreign Office and its various Intelligence Branches.

So my poor friend B had by force of circumstances no other choice but to become the secret head of the Jewish Counter-Intelligence. He accepted his new responsibilities without a murmur of complaint, and went to work with his usual enthusiasm. He had no collaborators—the top-secret nature of the work made it impossible to confide in anybody; his only help was a card-index system of amazing elaborateness. It was not confined to Palestine alone, but embraced the whole Colonial Empire, from Burma to Jamaica. All secret agents camouflaged as harmless missionaries, as hardy archaeologists, journalists and oil-prospectors, had their own cards. It was sufficient to mention a name like Parker-Woods to him and he would reel off all the Parker-Woods in the Colonial administration: the Parker-Woods of Mandalay, and the Parker-Woods of Cairo, the Punjab Parker and the Sudan Woods, including aunts and nieces. How had he gained access to the data of this occult science? The answer is simple. Sooner or later in his career every British Colonial servant publishes a book. Every one of them imagines he has in him something of Raleigh and something of Shelley and something of Gibbon and something of Cecil Rhodes; not to mention the dash of T. E. Lawrence. So their memoirs spread like a rash among the bookshelves. Nobody of course buys them any more than the works of our great philosopher Martin Buber. But when B started on his new job he bought them all—at the cost of forsaking hot meals for six months. Most of these books had been rotting for many years on the shelves and were in a dreadful state, moth- and worm-eaten, exhaling an odour of sour herrings. Yet these were the hieroglyphic clues to the secret of the British Empire, and the source of the card-index with its scholarly cross-references relating all Parker-Woods from Burma to Jamaica.

Both in life and literature we are only able to take an interest in a hero if he has a philosophy, however banal or even petty it may



be. There seem to be as many philosophies as there are vitamins, to keep people going. Even the cheapest detective story has a philosophy, served in an ultra-microscopic quantity—one cubic centimetre of Aristotelian dialectics diluted in gallons of turgid liquid. B would be a boring character had he been a man with an obsession but without a philosophy. In fact he had too much of it. The problem which dominated it was the question of our collective identity.

Every nation has a collective identity to which the individual owes a spiritual allegiance, which compels him to perform certain acts, to think in certain terms, to behave in a certain manner, to display certain virtues and faults. Yet however hard my patient tried, he could discover no forces in our social environment capable of imposing a definite pattern on his personality. How does the identity of a nation manifest itself? First, in a Constitution which it regards as sacred; in its jurisdiction, its moral and social order; in its literature and art; but most obviously in the architecture of its buildings, in its rules of courtesy, its costumes (particularly the men's headgear), in its way of preparing food, its humour and superstitions, its swear words and in the folk-lore of its police courts. I remember one particular outburst of B's:

'A nation of half a million people which knows no other invective than 'chamor' (donkey); and whose entire vocabulary for erotic and flirtatious purposes consists of the abstract statement 'I love you'—such a nation has no identity. Just look at the names of our streets! How can you talk of a nation with an identity in a town where Ferdinand Lassalle Street crosses Greengrocer's Lane, and Socrates Mews end in some Rabinowitch Avenue? Believe me, doctor, we have no identity, or none yet. We are not a solid body with sharp boundaries where every molecule has its defined place, but a gas of whirling atoms. We suffer from an excess of freedom for the particles and from the absence of a centre of gravity. We have no established frame of collective responsibility. Of course we are all Hebrews, we all speak Hebrew and worship our Prophets and Rabbis. But what sort of Hebrews are we, of which period in History? Weizmann thinks we live in the era of Ezra and Nehemiah, of the return from the Babylonian Exile; our socialists in the settlements think we are peasants of the time of the first Maccabean dynasty; Beigin thinks he is a reincarnation of Bar Kochba who led the revolt against the Romans. At what



precise moment did the clock of our History stop? At what period do we start ticking again? What is it that we have undertaken to continue? The traditions of Flavius Josephus who capitulated and made his peace with the Roman Procurators, or of Rabbi Akiba who was a philosopher and yet the leader of a hopeless rebellion against Rome? That is the question.'—I listened to my mad patient and I had to agree with him; for I am convinced that the identity of any existing nation can be established by the simple means of asking to which period of its past history it feels most intimately committed in the present.

As I write about my patient, the echo of some of his obscure pronouncements is still ringing in my ears:

'Nations are in the habit of making themselves younger by a kind of hair-do in front of the magic mirror of their history. The way they behave in front of the mirror determines their future fate. Stalin plays with the sceptre of Ivan the Terrible, Roosevelt blows his nose in the handkerchief of Tom Payne, Hitler treasures his Napoleonic lock. But as for ourselves, we talk against a dim mirror covered with drops of our condensed breath. Instead of some period coiffure it reflects our bald pates. We march like the inmates of a deaf-mute institution on their Sunday promenade, without walkie-talkies to connect us with our past and future. One day these people will drive me raving mad.'

They did.

He held that a nation without a personality, without a collective identity, is an *illegal nation*. Once I had grasped this curious idea of his I began to feel, in the streets, in the café, at political meetings, that I was living in the midst of a colony of spiritual nudists—dangerous nudists who did not realize the degree and causes of their nudity.

The manner in which B met his death was, as you know, dreadful. Seized by an attack of persecution mania he rushed naked into the street. Some young men gave chase, threw stones after him, bruised and scratched him and dragged him by his hair along the pavement. He died in hospital from the effects of the beating he had taken in the street and at the police station. It is strange that having talked for so long about our national nudism of the spirit, he should have perished in the streets of Tel Aviv covered with nothing but his starved, elderly body. It was an act of insane but perfectly symbolic protest.

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There was a second aspect to all this, about which I have been reluctant to talk. His death occurred in the period of mass-arrests according to pre-established lists: and there was a causal connexion between those arrests and his death.<sup>1</sup> Had the lists been established by the British themselves, the events would probably have had no effect on B. Or if at least it had been a case of common treason, committed for money or favours! But it was something different: it was treason based on principles, denunciation supported by ideology, sacred treachery committed in the name of self-restraint and self-negation. But self-negation instead of self-assertion is the death of any nation. Those lists once more effaced our identity; they were an act of spiritual nudism *par excellence*. They exploded like a grenade in the holy of holies of poor B's brain. Now the altar was defiled, the Temple smitten. He had been Editor, Minister, Attaché, Chief of the Secret Service—against this challenge from inside, this stab in the back, he felt for the first time helpless. And, rendered helpless, he fell.

He actually fell, six months before his death, out of a window. It was a first-floor window and he only broke his leg. But at the first-aid station to which he was carried, he refused to divulge his name and address, and implored everybody around him to prevent any mention of the accident in the papers. Somehow they found out that I was his doctor. When I arrived, he told me in an excited whisper: 'My name is no longer B, you understand? Things have come to a head. They came to fetch me. There were such a lot of them, you wouldn't believe it. On each street corner they had posted three to five men. They had arms and they had come to hand me over to the British. For at last they have understood that I was the main enemy of all this illegality, anonymity and impersonality. I had found them out and they had come for me—the people without an identity. Comedians and clowns. What a Comic Opera we have got ourselves into, doctor! Had I not jumped out of the window they would have got me—there were so many of them. And behind them, the British Police. My leg hurts, but for God's sake don't send me to a hospital—there they would find me and that would be the end . . .'

He became so excited that I had to give him an overdose of

<sup>1</sup> In 1944, following the assassination of Lord Moyne by members of the Hebrew underground movement, the official Zionist bodies handed a list of several hundred leading terrorists to the British police. (Translator.)

Pantopon; then we transferred him to the surgical ward. Early next morning the director of the hospital rang me up: could I come to see him at once? I thought poor B had died, or at least developed gangrene, and was moved by the considerateness of my colleagues. But when I arrived, the Director and the Head of the surgical ward were pacing up and down the mangy hospital garden with faces like thunder:

'Have you known this B for a long time? This is a very embarrassing matter. Can you guarantee for him?' And so on and so forth.

I asked them, out of sheer sadism: 'Since when is a doctor supposed to guarantee the civic virtues of his patient?'

They became more embarrassed and explicit: 'This B is a particularly dangerous individual. He has admitted that the Police are after him. He is on a special list—you know—I mean—you know what sort of list. All this is terribly awkward. You know that the District Police Station was blown up yesterday at 10 p.m. And your patient was admitted one hour later—allegedly having fallen out of a window . . .'

The end of it was, believe it or not, that I had to sign a guarantee of civic respectability for a patient with a broken tibia in the surgical ward. Events seemed to conspire to convince me how logical B's insanity was.

The end came rapidly. His leg healed and he was transferred into the observation ward of a mental asylum. After a couple of months he was discharged, limping but apparently cured. And now his Viennese humour played a last, very subtle prank. B became, as it were, hyper-normal!

Only a few weeks before he had told me fantastic stories of how the C.I.D. had come to fetch him at night from the ward; they had tortured him and had tattooed with red-hot needles the initials 'E.P.—F.F.' on his chest. These letters stood for 'Enemy of the Present, Friend of the Future.'

But since he was discharged, no more of this nonsense for him. He fell into the opposite extreme. He behaved as if he had entirely reconciled himself to our sweet, anarchic, provincial way of life. He did not permit himself a single word of the mildest criticism. He found everything wonderful in this best of all possible little worlds and his tirades now became verbal orgies of conformism. Our newspapers were the best in the world, our radio programmes

subtle and witty, our public opinion upright and sincere. He praised the far-sightedness of our leaders, their mutual trust and absence of jealousy. Our architecture was lovely, our youth heroic, our public bodies soaked in the spirit of responsibility and virtue. In short, he was eating his words at the rate of several gallons per day. His fear had become so overwhelming that his mind had to go underground—where it celebrated orgies of sanity. But a mind which has gone underground, even if only to join the maquis of normality, is more deadly to its owner than atomic radiations.

Once I made an incautious remark. From then onward he avoided me, too. I knew too much about him; I, too, could become a menace. I could do no more for him. I learnt about his end partly from the papers, partly from the files at the police station. Charitable friends had put an empty basement at his disposal. One early morning he emerged naked from this basement, was chased, beaten, and died a few days later in hospital.

I wonder what it was that made his pursuers so angry. Of course he did hit back, scratch and bite them—according to one eyewitness he called them traitors and thieves who were stealing their own future. But that, after all, is no reason for lynching a naked, elderly philosopher. Did the Greeks beat their Diogenes? Would they have lynched him had he left his barrel to take a stroll in the nude through the markets of his native town, Sinope? I can't believe it. What a long way we have to go until we catch up with the Greeks of Alexander's day.

[*Translated by* ARTHUR KOESTLER]

MICHEL LEIRIS  
CONTEMPORARY  
SCULPTORS

VIII—THOUGHTS AROUND  
ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

To write of Alberto Giacometti as he himself has done of Henri Laurens: by allusion, analogy, by evoking images which have no obvious connexion with the characteristic to be defined—not theoretically or descriptively.

In 1933, shortly after returning from my first visit to darkest Africa (a visit which Giacometti held against me, as he said subsequently, because it was made under official auspices) I spent the summer in Brittany, in that region where menhirs, dolmens and cromlechs abound. There I had a series of dreams, parts of which I here set down chronologically:

—On the ground floor, or in the basement of a sort of museum. There is a gymnasium in which children are playing tricks. They have a construction reminiscent of the classic side-show of any fair or amusement park, known as 'The Ghost Train'. This one is called 'The Wedding', perhaps it is a variation on Aunt Sally. I get in by opening a door which is like a stage property. Inside there are lots of armchairs with seats that can be raised or lowered like *strapontins* in a theatre. In the distance, obliquely, I see a little theatre which is about the size of a toy and looks somewhat like one of those ornate organs covered with figures which are as a rule the central feature of any roundabout. Realizing that the laws of the game demand that I be whisked between all these chairs, without any personal control over my course or speed, and that if I touch any of them I shall certainly get an electric shock if not some even less agreeable surprise, I am gripped with fear and slip away, leaving the friend who is with me.

—Half awake one morning, a dream from which I had just woken (immediately or not?) turns into a rectangle of the colour of red ink. Its shape is clearly defined on a sheet of paper.