

ARAB AND JEW TODAY

by Shulamith Schwartz

ONLY A very rash person would even attempt to prophesy the ultimate outcome of the Arab-Jewish situation in Palestine. Always subject to the influence of large external factors, the development of the relationship between Arabs and Jews is now inextricably bound up with the course the War will take. Even through the thick veil of censorship it was clear at the time of the fall of Crete that an Axis invasion of Syria and Palestine would be the signal for violent anti-Jewish riots efficiently planned and executed by a large machine under the control of the former Mufti of Jerusalem. The invasion did not take place, and we have continued to read and hear of increased Arab-Jewish cooperation in many places and many fields of activity. Certainly, a situation in which sincere and constantly growing friendship can at any moment be interrupted by bloody violence, seems no less than paradoxical. A very logical explanation of the paradox was offered some months ago by one of the keenest and best informed students of the Arab problem, Michael Asaph, of the *Davar* staff, whose analysis has almost the clear-cut quality of a formula. "There is a natural tendency to economic and social rapprochement between these two peoples living in the same country, but this tendency is constantly balked by political factors. As soon as British resistance in the autumn of 1940 made it clear that the war would be a long one and that the political aspirations of small nations would have to wait upon its end, the Arab emphasis upon, and interest in, politics declined sharply in Palestine and the natural tendency to rapprochement came into play".

The natural tendency to rapprochement, a survey of the past year indicates, was all the stronger because it had been suppressed during the three years of the riots. Throughout the country Arab and Jewish villages began to exchange visits, children from villages in the Emek and the Judean Mountains being taken for the first time in their young lives into the Arab schools and homes just a stone's throw away. Teachers invited the neighboring Arab school children and their instructors to holiday celebrations. Soccer teams arranged joint matches, and Arab athletes who had participated in a game at Tel-Aviv, were feted in a cafe to the accompaniment of friendly speeches. Read-

ing the newspaper you suddenly discovered an announcement of commiseration with the head of the children's village of Ben-Shemen upon the loss of a relative; the warm and friendly words were signed by three leading Arabs of Lydda, the Arab town which had made Ben-Shemen's existence so dangerous during all the years of the riots.

Cultural interchange, too, made unprecedented advances. The Arab press commented for the first time—and very warmly—upon a Hebrew play, "Michal, Daughter of Saul," Habima's new Biblical drama written by a Palestinian author. One of Palestine's leading Arab intellectuals, Araf el Araf, district commissioner at Gaza and author of an excellent work on the Beduins of the south, lectured at the Hebrew University before a large gathering including Moshe Shertok, head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. Invited earlier in the year to visit a Solel Boneh labor camp engaged on military projects in his district, Araf el Araf announced in his speech to the workers that he now regretted his attitude during the riots. He repeated that sentiment in Tel-Aviv as a participant in one of the regular Friday night "Living Newspapers" arranged by the Hebrew Journalists Association. The bulk of his talk there was in English but he began in good Hebrew, "the language I love and have long studied, the language that is sister to my own." There were as many as 1500 people in the audience, *Davar* reported, "and they all applauded the entrance of the visitor's wife who came in with her veil thrown back, surrounded by her children." Not only Araf el Araf and his family but a large number of Arab newspapermen were present that evening, for in honor of the distinguished guest's visit to Tel-Aviv the Hebrew Journalists' Association had invited the Arab newspapermen of Jaffa to tea in the afternoon and the meeting in the evening. It was the first time in Palestinian history that Arab and Hebrew journalists have ever met with each other. The Arab press, it will be remembered, played a particularly virulent role during the disturbances. *Falastin* was not the least venomous of the papers, but it was one of its editors who asserted at the tea that "it is the duty of the journalists to lead the inhabitants of this Holy

Land to unity." His speech was translated into Hebrew by another Arab journalist.

At still another Friday night Living Newspaper there was an Arab participant, this time a remarkable young scholar of Egyptian descent and with Egyptian cultural connections. He spoke in Hebrew on "Nazism and Islam" proving with copious quotations from the Koran, aided by the Bible, that the two were absolutely incompatible. His translations of Bialik, Achad Haam, Peretz and other Hebrew writers have appeared in Egyptian magazines, and the burden of his talk was an exhortation to Jews and Arabs to forget their differences and once more create jointly a great Semitic civilization. A rare young man with a rather individual point of view, he is, one hopes, a portent rather than a unique phenomenon. Certainly it must have been a memorable experience to hear his liquid Oriental Hebrew, uncorrupted by two thousand years of Europe. At a little gathering after the meeting he chose, in lieu of a speech, to recite Judah Halevi's wonderful ode to Jerusalem, "the beautiful of scene, the delight of all the earth, for whom my soul yearns from the end of the West," one of those poems that kept Jewish nationalism alive through the ages. "Perhaps," he said to a neighbor at the table, "I pronounce the words just as the author did."

The economic field would obviously be one of the first to be affected by the spirit of rapprochement. All differences between Arab and Jew were forgotten by the citrus growers overwhelmed by their common difficulties: the loss of markets, the scarcity of shipping space to the few that remain, the slowness with which the Palestine Government came to their aid. Cables brought us news through the year of joint conferences, joint delegations to Government House, joint plans and joint achievement of at least some of the objectives. The rich human background behind the cables is delightfully pictured in two descriptive sketches by M. Kapeluk of *Davar* whose work is unfailingly characterized by erudite knowledge of Arabic and Arab customs and by keen, humorous understanding and a quick eye. The first joint conference took place in one of the most elegant homes in the village of Sheikh Munis, and swarthy Sudanese servants brought cold lemonade to a group in which tribesmen, spectacled members of kvutzot, rich city-bred effendis and erstwhile Polish textile manufacturers mingled easily with each other. "The South African orange grower constantly passed around cigars made in his own factory and, totally ignorant of Arabic and rather weak in Hebrew, expressed in homely Yiddish his admiration of the eloquence of an urbane young descendent of Beduins."

There were even more incongruous contrasts at the spring conference held in the magnificent new cinema at Jaffa. Before a sea of two thousand heads in every variety of oriental and occidental headgear, the mayor of Jaffa, himself a great land-owner, opened the meeting in the name of Allah the merciful. There was a

profusion of oratory, the Arabic more rhetorical and the Hebrew more lucid and factual. By the time the muezzin's noontime call was heard, the chairman felt it proper to suggest that no more delegates be given the floor. But then the unexpected happened, and the Arab half of the audience suddenly came face to face with the feminism that is one of the very foundation stones of Jewish Palestine. A tall, middle-aged woman with a weather-beaten face and hands made her way to the speakers' table. Before the chairman could decide how to react, she had begun in a clear voice, "I trust the Arab members of the audience will pardon me. I know that women do not speak in public at their assemblies, but after all I am no longer young." There was a burst of laughter, and she conquered the crowd as no speaker had before, making a convincing, hard-hitting speech. "Long may she live!" murmured an Arab journalist who understood Hebrew, and the interpreter, before proceeding to translate her remarks, felt compelled to insert a typically Arabic rhetorical flourish: "How can I, the weak of wit, translate the glorious words of this illustrious one among womankind?"

The inevitable compulsion of circumstances is responsible for the cooperation of orange growers in a time of emergency, and even the other types of cooperation previously mentioned might be considered more or less spontaneous. Certain other significant developments in the field of Arab-Jewish relations are due to a very conscious policy on the part of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. Aside from publications in Arabic and regular political work it is devoting itself particularly to the problem of education. There is now, for the first time, a supervisor of Arabic studies in the Hebrew school system; he happens to be particularly suited for the post, since he is Palestinian born, acquainted with Arabs from his childhood days, and formerly a professor in an Egyptian university. Even where Arabic has been conscientiously taught in the past, classical rather than modern Arabic has been stressed and the student has still found it difficult actually to converse with Arabs or to read their daily press. Hence the great importance of a little sixteen-page manual just published as the first of a series subsidized by the Education Department of the Vaad Leumi and selling at little more than a nickel. Called "Selections from the Arab Press," the manual, arranged by a group of Jewish teachers of Arabic, and equipped with a vocabulary and notes, contains recent items from Arabic papers. It is intended not only to teach the student journalistic Arabic but to acquaint him with the social, economic, and cultural life of Arabs in Palestine and neighboring countries.

At the same time the Agency's Political Department has been making an interesting experiment in adult education through the appointment of special instructors for Arabic and for "the development of proper relations with Arab neighbors." These instruc-

tors function in twenty-five of the newer villages which, unlike those of the Second and Third Aliya, have not yet been able to build up a tradition of cooperation with neighboring Arabs. Because of lack of funds, the most pressing cases have been selected; none of the twenty-five settlements is near older villages which might serve as guides in Arab relations; all of them are far-removed from centers of population—either on the Syrian or Transjordan border or in the extreme south, and all of them are surrounded by Arab villages, in one case by as many as eight.

The Political Department's aim in appointing these instructors is to bring matters as quickly as possible to the point where there will be no settlement without a number of members who know Arabic. In each village the instructors are working intensively with those most apt and eager to learn, who will later be able to guide and teach the other villages. As soon as such a group of students has been adequately trained, the instructors move on to other settlements in need of their services. They are creating their jobs as they go along, for their work is absolutely uncharted and includes not only classroom study of a language but guidance in such delicate matters as the understanding of Arab psychology and mores, the proper way to receive Arab guests, the inculcation of a tactful—

rather than an over-eager—approach to the Arab. All this is done under difficult circumstances; there is little time for set study and the teacher must accompany the students to the fields and workshops and there teach them the terms most needed in intercourse with their neighbors. Furthermore, the teachers are each responsible for a few villages and must constantly journey from place to place in all types of weather and through desolate countryside. It is pioneering of a new and significant kind, pioneering that has called out the talents and peculiar capacities of a group which has hitherto contributed very little to the life of the Yishuv—Iraqian Jewry. Almost all the instructors are from Baghdad and they have begun through this new undertaking to play an integral part in the realization of Zionism, a part for which no other Jews are so well fitted.

Only isolated incidents in a large-scale, country-wide movement have been mentioned here. It is a movement towards a more thorough-going and realistic kind of rapprochement between Jews and Arabs than any Palestine has yet known. Surely, whatever the political developments of the future may be, the increased interracial cooperation and understanding of this year cannot fail to have some permanent and ameliorating effect.