

Jewish Natl. Fund, 70 Yrs

JEWISH NATIONAL FUND-70 YEARS
By HERBERT FREEDEN, Jerusalem

It began in the Swiss town of Basle at the 5th Zionist Congress. A hush fell on the hall when at the afternoon session on Sunday, 2nd December 1901, a resolution was passed based on the proposal, of Zvi Herman Schapira, rabbi and professor of mathematics: "The Jewish National Fund shall be the inviolate possession of the Jewish people. It must be devoted only to the purchase of land in Palestine..."

The story which then unfolded, is remarkable from many viewpoints. Its beginnings have all the elements of a great human drama. The buying of land was merely the first step. Then came the occupation of the land, surrounded as it often was by hostile and suspicious Arabs. Every piece of land was redeemed not only through purchase but by the sweat and blood of the pioneers. Water had to be found, wells drilled, equipment bought, settlers trained for their new life, new ways and approaches tried out.

The years from 1921 to 1935, following the Balfour Declaration, were characterized by the "conquest of the Valleys." This great period of realization climaxed in reclaiming the country's four largest valleys which were swamp, sands and marshland - Emek Hefer along the coast; Emek Zebulun, the fetid fens of Haifa Bay; Emek Beth Shean, the subtropical low by the river Jordan; and the largest of them, Emek Yezreel, a malaria ridden plaque spot to be turned into a flourishing farming center.

In April 1936, the Arabs in Jaffa started off riots which rapidly spread throughout the country, developing into an attack on Jewish

settlements everywhere - first and foremost on agricultural villages. A new form of settlement was devised - the "Tower and Stockade." In the dead of the night, a group of pioneers would leave the nearest Jewish settlement point in trucks loaded with pre-fabricated watch-tower and huts, proceed speedily through hostile neighborhoods, put up temporary buildings, erect a bullet proof stockade and await the inevitable attack. Blood was shed, men were killed, water was lacking, fortifications were inadequate, reinforcements often cut off - but it was in those years that the Jewish National Fund opened up to Jewish settlement the Menashe Hills, the Western Galilee and the Beth Shean and Hula Valleys.

The crisis came in 1931 with the White Paper and one year later, with the Land Ordinance prohibiting or restricting Jewish land purchase in 95% of the country. Yet surprisingly enough, the very land law which barred to the Jews most of the country's soil, spurred the Fund to intensify its efforts. During this period it enlarged Jewish land holdings by half a million dunams, and initiated the establishment of 139 new villages. These were mostly border settlements which served as defense posts in the War of Independence and helped in freeing Galilee and the Negev.

The end of the Second World War did not bring the hoped-for change in British policy. The political future of Palestine was uncertain. But whatever changes might come about, the British were determined to control the Negev, for this was the land bridge connecting their Suez Canal base with their protectorate Trans-jordan. For the Jews it was the main land reserve, comprising more than half of the entire country. Without the Negev, any future Jewish State would be untenable. The struggle for the Negev was on.

The day after the "Day of Atonement" 1946, hundreds of young settlers, aided by veterans, headed south. This action came as a complete surprise both to the British and the Arabs. Eleven settlements were established with the help of the JNF on its land, widely spread, all in one night. The lights from their watch-towers were like rays of hope: the Jews were in the Negev to stay. And indeed, the land policy of the Jewish National Fund was amply vindicated when the United Nations in their partition plan in 1947 delineated the borders of the Jewish state-to-be almost exactly according to JNF land holdings - including the Negev.

Menahem Ussishkin remained President of the Fund until his death in 1941. His place was taken by a committee of three - Berl Katznelson, Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan and Dr. Abraham Granott. In 1945, Dr. Granott was elected Chairman of the Board and in 1960, World President, a post he held until his death on July 21, 1962. The Chairmanship of the

Board of Directors was taken over in 1960 by Mr. Jacob Tsur.

When the State of Israel came into being, emphasis shifted from land purchase to land reclamation. Out of a total area of 22 million dunam land, only 4-1/2 dunams were cultivated. The problem was whether the desolation could be restored to fertility. Soon the answer was found: an appreciable part of the wasteland could be revived and the JNF was allotted the tremendous task of "conquering" the desert. An important role was given to afforestation, and by 1969, the 100 millionth tree was planted, with plantings continuing at the rate of about 5 million saplings per year.

Thus, after 1948, the JNF turned its efforts to vast land reclamation projects to clear the way for the resettlement of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants pouring in, and in conjunction with Israel's defense army, to open border regions and to strengthen security by a network of roads. By that time, the JNF had acquired far above 1 million dunams and 87 per cent of all Jewish settlements were JNF lands. Between 1948 and 1970 - 542 new settlements were set up, twice the number that had existed when the State was established.

As it was important to conduct a unified land policy, and at the same time eliminate overlapping in administration, an agreement was signed in 1960 between the Israel Government and the Jewish National Fund, setting up a Land Authority for the administration of all Government and JNF holdings, and a Land Development Authority, to carry out all drainage, reclamation and afforestation work in the country. The former functions within the framework of the Israel Government, and the latter within that of the Jewish National Fund, with close cooperation between the two. The JNF is thus the exclusive agent for all land development tasks in the country.

When recently a legal separation between the institutions of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization was decided upon, the Jewish National Fund, in recognition of its strong ideological basis, was designated to remain within the province of the World Zionist Movement. The new structure which makes the JNF the only "Zionist" Fund, is an acknowledgement of its high educational values.


DENVER--Establishment of a Regional Headquarters of the National Jewish Welfare Board in Denver is announced by Mr. Morton Mandel, National President of the JWB and Mr. Jesse Feldman, Western Area Chairman of the JWB, of San Francisco.

NEW YORK--Construction was begun last month on a new IL 6,000,000 home and community center for the aged in Afula, in north-central Israel, it was announced by Samuel L. Haber, Executive Vice-Chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee.

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