

From Dream To Reality-- Jewish National Fund

By L. Enny

Now beginning its ninth decade of operation, the Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael (Jewish National Fund) was begun by a small group of visionary Zionists in Europe, and has become a multi-million dollar organization which has literally transformed the face of the State of Israel.

Over these years of meeting diverse challenges, the Jewish National Fund has developed the ingenuity and expertise to meet Israel's land reclamation and afforestation needs, wherever they arise. In the process swamps have been drained, roads have been built, the desert has been pushed back, new villages have been planned and constructed, millions of trees have been planted and a network of recreational facilities has been created in a variety of natural settings for an increasingly urban population.

In the early 1900s, when the JNF was founded, its purpose was to purchase land in faraway Eretz Yisrael. Its guiding principle was to create a territorial basis for the eventual reestablishment of a Jewish national homeland in its historic setting, in addition to holding this land in perpetual trust for the Jewish People. In time, the Fund provided Zionists with the opportunity

of looking beyond the prayer book, by creating a personal link with the Land through individual projects which expanded its infrastructure and improved its ecology -- and hence the quality of life of its inhabitants.

JNF land purchases prior to independence largely determined the eventual borders of the newly created state. In the beginning, large tracts were acquired in Lower Galilee, Judea and the Jezreel Valley, and networks of farming villages were built. By the '20s and '30s, land reclamation was tackled in the great valley of the north where topography varied from malaria-infested swamps to barren, rocky hillsides. With the growth of towns like Rehovot and Rishon LeZion on the coastal plain, a country was beginning to take shape.

Branching out north and south, the JNF responded to the needs of the last decade before statehood by creating a chain of tower-and-stockade villages on the northern border in the mid-'30s. With the pioneers barely in place at what were to become veteran kibbutzim such as Hanita, Yehiam and Ga'aton, JNF planners shifted their emphasis to the endless sands of the south, engineering "Operation Negev" -- which established 11 outposts in the desert with the same urgency that characterized the earlier creation of the tower-and-stockade villages in the north.

After independence, the NJF helped absorb the masses of new immigrants who came to the new homeland by creating work villages and, most importantly in those difficult years, by providing work in afforestation. Today, many of the former work villages have matured into flourishing communities, while the nearby forests tower over them -- in silent testimony to the productive endeavors of a previous era.

In the first decade of statehood, the JNF was involved in draining the swamps of the Hula Valley, while also beginning comprehensive regional planning in the Lachish region southwest of Jerusalem. Another region planned in this manner is the Arava -- the long, narrow rift valley stretching between the Dead and Red Seas, which comprises the frontier with Jordan. The JNF rejected the decree that nothing would

ever grow in this barren region. Its perseverance has since paid off, with produce and flowers from Arava farms now gracing tables in Tel Aviv, Frankfurt, London and New York.

In recent years, JNF land reclamation has focused on three major projects. First came the urgent need to prepare infrastructure for a cluster of farming villages in a western Negev region known as the "Peace Salient," where many of the Israelis forced to evacuate Sinai in accordance with the peace treaty with Egypt chose to rebuild their homes.

Before the last earth mover had completed work on this immense project along the new border with Egypt, the JNF was busy blasting rocky hillsides to create roads and sites for a network of mini-villages (mitzpim) in Central Galilee. In this picturesque area with a Jewish minority, these new mitzpim are perched strategically atop rugged hillsides, their young inhabitants creating a colorful mosaic of novel pioneering lifestyles.

Today's focus is on the Yatir region -- a barren expanse now under development on the periphery of the Negev sands northeast of Beer-sheba. Centering around the Yatir Forest, whose 3.5 million trees skeptics predicted would never take root, a network of roads and villages is gradually arising on arid, rocky hillsides.

In the midst of all this activity, the JNF has remained true to one of its initial aims -- afforestation. Parks and recreation areas have become another priority. From the Tannur and Dan Forest Reserves in the north, to Timna Valley Park and the Yeruham Forest and Lake in the south, the JNF is involved in improving the quality of life for Israelis of all walks of life. In the process, the 160 million trees planted with the help of supporters from all over the world now cover almost 200,000 acres of once barren terrain. The City of Jerusalem will soon be encircled by a forest belt, and urban residents can now enjoy a quick escape to any number of forests and recreation areas all over the country.

The development of the south now looms as the JNF's major challenge, with scientific ingenuity leading the battle to push back the desert.

In fact, having begun with the notion of holding the Land of Israel in trust for the Jewish People, the JNF has moved from dream to reality.

RIO DE JANEIRO (WNS) — Arnaldo Miskier, an author and former Rio de Janeiro government official, has been elected a member of Brazil's Academy of Literature. He is the first Jew in the history of the Academy to have attained this honor. The vote to accept him was unanimous. The son of immigrants from Poland, the 49-year-old Niskier was born here. He is a director of the Board of the Bloch Publishing Company and was twice secretary of the Rio de Janeiro government's department of science and technology and department of culture and education.

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