

THE LETTERS AND PAPERS OF CHAIM WEIZMANN

August 1947 – June 1952

Volume XXIII, Series A

Introduction: Aaron Klieman

General Editor Barnet Litvinoff, Volume Editor Aaron Klieman in collaboration with Nehama A. Chalom, Transaction Books, Rutgers University and Israel Universities Press, Jerusalem, 1980

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Chaim Weizmann died at his home in Rehovot on 9 November, 1952, shortly before his 78th birthday. The restless hand which had penned so many thousands of letters, to fill these 23 volumes and encompass an epoch, at last was stilled. Between his earliest surviving letter as a ten-year-old schoolboy in Tsarist Russia and his final one as President of the State of Israel, are recorded not merely the drama and pathos, the achievements and disappointments, of one man's journey through a remarkable life, but the modern history of a people as it struggled for its identity. Others have left correspondence spanning the same period and dealing with the same concerns. They were Jewish voices; but Weizmann alone was the Jewish voice.

This volume opens in the summer of 1947, when the fate of Zionism still hung in the balance: the scales of power politics are not necessarily the scales of justice. Weizmann had been replaced by more militant, Zionist leaders, and they repudiated his policy based upon restraint and cooperation with Great Britain. The Jews, having suffered the loss of a third of their people in a holocaust, were changed; so was the world as a whole, by the Second World War.

Ten years earlier, the possible partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states had been under active discussion, but the scheme was thwarted by an absence of enthusiasm, or direct opposition, from the parties concerned, including Britain. Now it was being debated again, in an atmosphere of Britain's continued obstruction, fierce Arab resistance, a new activism on the part of Palestine Jewry (the yishuv), and the emergence of the Jews of America as a strong Zionist force. With the decline of British strength and the rise of America as the dominant power in the world, the Soviet Union assumed a role at the centre of the international stage as never before. In 1937 Weizmann had been the

undisputed spokesman of Jewry. Now he was virtually an outsider, having been deprived in 1946 by the Twenty-Second Zionist Congress at Basle of his position as President of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization.

He regarded his displacement as a betrayal, and his resentment found expression in forthright condemnation of his successors, David Ben-Gurion, the yishuv leader, and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of America. The years immediately preceding had been marked for Weizmann by personal tragedy, and chronic ill-health. His grievously defective eyesight threatened blindness. The septuagenarian might have logically and justifiably sought welcome respite in retirement, perhaps to live out his twilight years in the shelter of the Institute of Science he was building at Rehovot. Instead, he threw himself anew into the political struggle. He did not exclude the possibility of returning to a position of authority.

The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) produced, at the end of August 1947, the recommendation that Britain withdraw from Palestine and that the country be granted independence at the earliest practicable date. A majority of the committee further recommended its division into Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings as a *corpus separatum* under international trusteeship. This verdict was acceptable in principle though not in detail by the Jewish Agency. Weizmann had consistently advocated a solution through partition since its proposal by the Peel Commission in 1937. And his position within both the Jewish and the non-Jewish world was such that the Agency could not now ignore the strength of his advocacy. He was therefore invited to New York both to present the Zionist case before the Ad Hoc Committee of the United Nations and to play a supportive role in promoting the cause unofficially. Weizmann was regarded as a true statesman rather than a politician, not least by President Truman.'

Addressing the Ad Hoc Committee on 18 October, he reviewed the circumstances leading to the conferment of the Mandate upon Britain—a power which would be remembered with appreciation for its great services when the 'sordid consequences of the White Paper pass into forgotten history'. Weizmann contended that statehood was the inevitable and foreseen consummation of the Mandate. If not given independence the Jews would be subjected to the will of the Arab majority, and Jews already had

experience of minority status in Arab countries. Yet he retained his belief in the prospect of Arab Jewish co-operation once a solution based on finality and equality had received the sanction of international consent. Weizmann went on to describe the 'acute phase' of the Jewish problem as mainly concerning the fate of some one and a half million people in Europe and the Orient.

His suite at the Plaza Hotel became the headquarters for this informal diplomacy, a style in which Weizmann excelled. He took the view, and this enabled him to play a key role in Israel's actual establishment, that the ebb of Britain's international authority included also the fading of her imperial impulse. Britain had already departed from India, and this robbed her of any justification for her continued presence in Palestine, which had become a burden to the British taxpayer and an offence to world opinion. True, he felt that 'if not for the British Government, we would be nowhere', but he saw that the Zionists could not anticipate the support of Britain as the General Assembly's debate on the UNSCOP plan approached. The United States, however, had the requisite strength, resources and prestige both to apply leverage against British opposition and to bring about realisation of the Zionist idea. Weizmann still hoped for a revival of the former Anglo-Zionist relationship, but for the present he concentrated on gaining Truman as an ally. He was to do this directly, through a personal meeting, while the American Zionist leaders largely placed their weight behind great demonstrations to enlist public support, and a sustained campaign in the lobbies of both Houses of Congress. But it was the President alone who could override the pro-Arab arguments of the oil and banking concerns, or of the Pentagon and the State Department.

Harassment from various Zionist groups, in which the threat of disaffection by a traditional Democratic bloc in the forthcoming Presidential Election was strongly intimated, had alienated Truman. Nevertheless he received Weizmann on 19 November, 1947, thanks to the intercession of the President's old friend and erstwhile business partner, Eddie Jacobson. Thus began a unique relationship between the Democratic President of the United States and the Jewish nationalist, involving four meetings and wide-ranging correspondence during the ensuing years.

Truman himself emphasised their shared interests and experiences. Writing after his surprise election victory of 1948 to acknowledge Weizmann's letter of congratulation,

he said: 'We had both been abandoned by the so-called realistic experts to our supposedly forlorn lost causes. Yet we both kept pressing for what we were sure was right—and we were both proven to be right. My feeling of elation on the morning of November 3rd must have approximated your own feelings one year ago today, and on May 14th, and on several occasions since then.

The General Assembly decision of 29 November, 1947 naturally had this effect upon Weizmann, but he was not oblivious to the trials ahead. Securing the requisite two-thirds majority (the U.N. had voted 33 to 13 for partition) had involved the Zionists in heavy persuasion among several wavering delegations. Nevertheless, as he wrote in a tone bordering on the messianic to William Rappard, an old friend from League of Nations days: 'This thing which is now coming to pass after nearly two thousand years of hope and prayer is not likely to be destroyed through the malevolence of a few people.' It had been touch and go, for the coalition of forces ranged against the demand for Jewish statehood included not only Britain and the nations she could influence, but also the anti-Zionists in the highest echelons of the American Government. Neither America nor Britain wished to incur the enmity of the Arab States, which were threatening the use of military force to nullify any move that would render the Arabs of Palestine less than paramount in the whole of the country. How ironic that Weizmann, a private individual and British subject, required a letter of introduction from his country's Ambassador in Washington before meeting Truman in his endeavour to range America against Britain! Much could intervene between a U.N. resolution and the actual acquisition of sovereignty. Did the British really intend to relinquish control over Palestine? Would the Arabs really go to war to prevent partition? Would the Jews be able to resist effectively? And could the U.S. be relied upon to help carry out the verdict of the world organization? Aware of the dangers, Weizmann urged the yishuv leaders not to hesitate, but to demonstrate before the world their resolve and preparedness to take the ultimate risk of life itself for independence.

He returned to England a very sick man immediately following the U.N. vote, but again consented to sail for America in January 1948, in response to urgent pleas from friends who had become alarmed at American equivocation. Some wished him also to

lend his name and presence to such activities as fund-raising. He complained that too many were using him 'as a sort of Wailing Wall'.

He was thus on the spot in March, to learn of American readiness to support a trusteeship solution in Palestine in place of partition. This was indicative of differences between Truman's own circle and those, particularly in the State Department, who feared the consequences of an announcement of Jewish independence. Evidently the President was either unable or unwilling to resist. At their second meeting of 18 March, the President reassured Weizmann. But the next day U.S. officials indeed proposed trusteeship. The worried Zionist leader wrote to Justice Felix Frankfurter: 'Every day some new hope is being dangled before our eyes, and when the sun sets, it is nothing but a mirage.' With barely a month left before the Mandate was due to expire, he had the feeling that this second visit to America had been a 'heartbreaking and futile waste of time'. Then, on 14 May, came Truman's announcement of de facto recognition of the Provisional Government of Israel, and Weizmann's strategy of personal concentration upon the President was triumphantly vindicated. A message from Tel Aviv quickly followed. It said that Chaim Weizmann had been chosen 'Head of the State'.

This crowning moment of his long career did not bring Weizmann contentment. The infant state was fighting for its life against invasion from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Britain's hostility had not lessened, and about this he wrote: 'I cannot believe it, but alas, I must.' He had a feeling of homelessness—his stay in America had no further point, yet he was unable to travel home to Rehovot and was reluctant to go to London. His wife Vera spoke wearily of their having slept in 19 different places since leaving Palestine in July 1947. They longed finally to rest among their own. They travelled to Europe, where Weizmann had to submit to yet another operation on his eyes. He spent some time in France and Switzerland contacting European statesmen in an effort to gain diplomatic recognition for Israel. But it seemed to him that his fellow Jews were often their own worst enemies, complicating the task of presenting Israel in a good light. On the assassination by Jewish extremists of Count Folke Bernadotte, the U.N. Mediator in the Arab-Israel conflict who seemed to be exceeding his functions by submitting his own territorial recommendations, Weizmann responded with anger: 'We seem to be doing our best in critical moments to make our task impossible.'

Ultimately, he and his wife arrived to take up residence in Rehovot late in September and Weizmann's thoughts in this final phase of his life, as reflected in his remaining correspondence, were preoccupied with the powers of his office and the nature of Israeli society, in addition to the country's international standing. He had entertained serious reservations about accepting the Presidency, for he was uncertain as to the intentions of David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister, and the other leaders of the state. Was it to be a position of true authority, or merely symbolic? He had no desire to be just a figure-head, but his constant enquiries of the Foreign Minister, Moshe Shertok, on this score elicited little satisfaction—indeed, some of his letters remained unanswered. He wrote sharply, in his own style of English: 'I am not offended, but greatly irritated, because this treatment meted out to me only indicates the lack of respect to your own institutions; and that is a Balkan trait, of which I did not think you would all acquire it so quickly.'

In this mood of exasperation, Weizmann confided to Meyer Weis-gal and Aubrey Eban, two advisers particularly close to him, of his desire to resign. They counselled patience, and no letter of resignation was despatched. But the plan was never entirely abandoned, for he drafted another letter of resignation to Ben-Gurion, unsent, in January 1951. Second thoughts again prevailed, this time because of his concern lest his resignation adversely affect Israel's image abroad. He remained President until his death. 'A constitution is like a straitjacket,' he had commented. And the Fundamental Laws endowed the President of Israel with only limited authority. While never reconciled to this, Weizmann did make the most of the prestige and moral authority of the office. As though invigorated by the very soil and atmosphere of Israel, a different man began to emerge from his letters. Gone were the depression and the fears for Israel's prospects of survival, to be replaced by a rejuvenating enthusiasm. He became filled with the excitement and the sense of history being made, and more tolerant of those conducting the affairs of government. In contrast to his earlier sensitivity to foreign opinion, he expressed the belief to Eban that 'we attach too much value to finding ourselves in the good company of other nations . . . losing too much energy on externals'. They would do better to make the state strong, intellectually powerful, 'a model of social and political organization'.

Amidst the casualties and damage inflicted in the War of Independence, he adopted a tone of confidence and pride bordering on chauvinism. He sought help in Switzerland to acquire anti-aircraft guns, of which Israel at the time had only 15: 'If we would have the necessary equipment,' he pleaded, 'we could finish the job in about a month.' To Leopold Amery, former Colonial Secretary and a constant friend of Zionism, he was led to conclude: 'I do not think that t. an inch of territory will be yielded by the Armies of Israel to anybody.' Soon he was to see Ben-Gurion in another light, resulting in an evaluation of the Prime Minister far different from his earlier assessment: 'He reminds me somewhat of Winston [Churchill], who is good t. in war and less so in peace,' having thus far shown himself to be 'thoughtful, calm, resolute and a man of enormous courage'. As to the government as a whole: 'Although many things seem somewhat amateurish and hesitant, they have done extremely well on the whole under very difficult circumstances.' Weizmann lamented the transformation in Israeli society caused by the influx of European and Oriental immigrants. He described this as arising from 'the moral state of the newcomers who are not imbued with the chalutz [pioneering] spirit, like the previous generation'.³ Despite such concerns his letters continued to reflect the optimism of Israel as the second year of independence approached: 'One feels for once that the Almighty is on the side of the Jews, and one realises how good a partner he can be if he chooses to.' In the sphere of foreign relations Weizmann was still able to exert considerable influence. Israel's precarious position, even after its admission to the U.N. in May 1949, demanded a continued struggle for legitimacy, security and international recognition. Such problems as a possible change in the status Israel had given to Jerusalem, the whittling down of territory under Israel's control, economic difficulties, the state's relations with Diaspora Jewry, were never far away. New world leaders had emerged who were unacquainted with the Balfour Declaration and the ensuing 30 difficult years. Weizmann had had understanding and encouragement from, among many others, Lloyd George, Jan Smuts, Thomas Masaryk, Leon Blum, Iraq's King Feisal I, but those were men of a previous era. He could still turn to Winston Churchill,, however, even before the latter's return as British Prime Minister in October 1951.

Weizmann felt that by ending Britain's estrangement, the pressure against Israel could be alleviated from the Arab states, which continued to receive military and

diplomatic support from a Britain still clinging to a position in the Middle East. Britain's commitment to the Arabs, combined perhaps with resentment at the success of the Zionist experiment, produced new tensions in January 1949, when London threatened military intervention. The crisis passed, with Britain modifying her position and extending recognition to Israel shortly afterwards. Weizmann offers posterity this capsule critique of the British in the Middle East: 'They over-estimated the strength of the Arabs and under-estimated the strength of the Jews. These are two serious mistakes which a Great Power in possession of all the facts should not have made.'

His last phase, clouded by the virtually complete loss of his sight, and the death of such old comrades as Baffy Dugdale, Stephen Wise and Judah Magnes, all of whom figured so prominently in the Weizmann story, was also marred by developments within the Weizmann Institute of Science. This establishment, so dear to him, was to be his personal legacy to Israel. But he was full of anxiety over its future, for as part of the Tishuv's total defence effort, the Rehovot scientists had switched to war work. This was not in keeping with his vision of the Institute, and there ensued a clash between Weizmann and his longtime scientific collaborator, disciple and friend, Ernst David Bergmann, resulting in termination of Bergmann's position as the Institute's director.

However, the appearance in 1949 of his memoirs, *Trial and Error*, had proved a significant publishing event. The book was immediately recognised as a classic of its kind: an intensely human story and perhaps the most important statement of the Jewish struggle to have come from one man's experience—this despite the many complaints from old Zionists wounded by their omission from the account, and the charges of inaccuracy levelled against it. Furthermore, the first Knesset convened that year and formally elected Weizmann as President of the State. Soon afterwards the old leader and his life-partner Vera, to whom he owed so much, left on an official visit to Washington and Paris, with a stop-over at the University of Fribourg, where Weizmann received an honorary doctorate from his Alma Mater. Late in 1949, in celebration of his 75th birthday, the greatly expanded scientific complex of the Weizmann Institute was inaugurated. Misgivings were temporarily put aside in a triumph the President was happy to share with his devoted collaborator Weisgal, who had shouldered the immense burden of bringing the project to fruition.

By 1950, his health worsening and his activities reduced almost to the ceremonial, Weizmann's increasingly infrequent letters contain only two enduring themes: inspiration and nostalgia. Like Moses of old, the political leader changes to teacher and guide. His thoughts return with a 'somewhat melancholy pleasure' to early battles in company with Israel Sieff and Simon Marks, who, like 35 Harry Sacher, recall for him 'the early days of Manchester and London—the years of uphill struggle and spade work'. Yet when required, he could still show that old pride, that old readiness for polemic, which permeate the entire range of this correspondence. Again and again, he availed himself of his special rapport with Truman to put Israel's case to her most influential friend when it seemed world opinion was running against the young state.

Chaim Weizmann took his second oath of office from his bed at Weizmann House in Rehovot on 25 November, 1951. The letter which terminates these 23 volumes was written in June, 1952. It took the form of a message to the Anglo-Israel Association in London welcoming the foundation of the organization. How appropriate that the last published statement of this man should record the reconciliation of the two nations that had so long shared his loyalties!

He died on Sunday, 9 November, 1952, and in the Cabinet of Israel specially convened in Jerusalem the Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, paid this tribute: 'Chaim Weizmann will take his place in the eternal history of the Jewish people alongside the great figures of its past—the Patriarchs and Kings, Judges, Prophets and spiritual leaders who have woven the fabric of our national life for four thousand years. The entire Jewish people will join in our deep mourning of the passing of the last President of the Zionist Organization and the First President of the State of Israel.'

AARON KLIEMAN