

**H**AD CHAIM WEIZMANN RETIRED in early 1939, he could have looked back on one of the most distinguished careers in modern Jewish history. By then, he had more than enough material to write an autobiography of considerable historical importance.

Born in 1874, Weizmann had played a major role in the formative years of the Zionist movement. At the landmark 1903 Zionist Conference, he had led the Russian students opposing Herzl's plan for a Jewish state in Uganda rather than Palestine. In 1917, he was a driving force behind the adoption of the Balfour Declaration, which committed Britain, if it prevailed against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine in World War I, to "facilitate" a Jewish national home there.<sup>5</sup> The following year, the British government appointed him to lead a commission to Palestine to plan the Jewish home, and in 1919 he met with Emir Feisal, a key leader of the Arabs, and entered into an agreement (later repudiated by Feisal's followers) to support Arab nationalist aspirations in exchange for Arab support of the Balfour Declaration. After World War I, he led the Zionist delegation at the Peace Conference at Versailles, and in 1920 became president of the Zionist Organization, which he led well beyond the usual retirement age of 60. He had gone from a small *shtetl* with a one-room school to study in Germany; then on to a prestigious university in Switzerland where he earned his doctorate in chemistry; finally to England as a researcher and lecturer, where his chemical work produced synthetic materials that significantly aided the British war effort in World War I. He became a British subject and enjoyed friendships with many at the highest levels of the government and in the aristocracy.

Weizmann's 482-page autobiography, *Trial and Error*, was ultimately published in 1949. It consisted of a single volume divided into two "books": "Book One," written largely in 1941, and "Book Two," written in 1948–49 at the end of the tumultuous decade following the disastrous events of

1939. Given his age—65 years old—and his long career, Weizmann was understandably weary in 1939, both physically and psychologically. But his eventful life in Zionism, which had begun in the nineteenth century, was about to enter its most challenging decade of all.

#### THE BRITISH RETREAT FROM THE MANDATE FOR PALESTINE

In 1937, the British Peel Commission—established after Arab riots and pogroms in Palestine had reached new levels of violence in 1936—recommended the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state, with a small area assigned to the Jews.<sup>6</sup> The Zionist Organization accepted partition in principle, but the Arabs adamantly rejected the existence of even a minuscule Jewish state.



*Peel Commission Partition Plan*  
Source: Jewish Virtual Library

Given Arab intractability, Britain began to consider a different plan: a single state, with an Arab majority and a one-third Jewish minority, with stringent limits on future Jewish immigration, which would be restricted to 10,000 a year for five years, with discretionary increases to a maximum of 25,000 during that period, but no immigration thereafter. The plan barred Jews from buying any additional land in Palestine, with minor exceptions. The new plan would effectively negate the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, and make a Jewish national homeland impossible to achieve.

In February 1939, the plan circulated within the British government in the form of a draft new White Paper on Palestine to replace the one of 1922, which had affirmed that the Jewish people were in Palestine “as of right and not on sufferance” of others, based on their “ancient historic connection” to the Jewish homeland.<sup>7</sup> Weizmann learned of the draft almost immediately, when a British official mistakenly sent a copy to him that had been intended for review by the Arabs. Although he may have been ready to retire a month earlier, he was now suddenly faced with the effective destruction of the central accomplishments of his life: the Balfour Declaration and the British commitment to a Jewish homeland, as well as decades of efforts to strengthen the Jewish economy and to foster the institutions in Palestine necessary for an eventual state.

On March 24, 1939, as he left London on a personal mission to Palestine, Weizmann wrote directly to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, with a plea to reject the proposed new plan:

Through all the ups and downs of more than twenty years, I have found support in the thought that, to quote Lord Balfour’s words, we were “partners in the great enterprise” which means life or death to my people. . . . Please consider the events of the past twelve months . . . [1] Hitler’s entry into Vienna; [2] the expulsion of Jews from Italy and from Danzig; [3] the Nazi occupation of the Sudetenland; [4] the November pogrom in Germany [Kristallnacht]; [5] the anti-Semitic measure in Slovakia; [6] the Nazi invasion of Bohemia and Moravia; and [7] now Memel [part of Lithuania annexed by the Nazis on March 21, 1939]. In times so deeply disturbed, could we not avoid adding to the turmoil?



*Hitler touring Memel in March 1939. The banner reads:  
"This country will always be German"*

Three weeks later, Weizmann cabled Chamberlain from Palestine, informing him that he had "found [the] Jewish community united [in] resolute determination [to] oppose with all its strength [the] contemplated new policy." He appealed to Chamberlain "out of deep anxiety for all concerned" and warned him that the new policy would lead to a "supreme tragedy":

Proposed liquidation of Mandate and establishment of independent Palestine State coupled with reduction [of] Jewish population to one-third total and with restriction [on] area [of] Jewish settlement to small sector [of] country are viewed as destruction [of] Jewish hopes and surrender [of] Jewish community [in] Palestine to rule [of] Arab junta responsible for terrorist campaign. . . . Jews are determined [to] make supreme sacrifice rather than submit to such regime. Feel it my solemn duty [to] draw attention of His Majesty's Government to grave consequences involved before irrevocable step [of] adoption and announcement of policy is taken.

Weizmann also cabled Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who had resigned from the Supreme Court in February 1939 after twenty-three years. Brandeis was the most prominent Zionist in the United States, and enjoyed a close relationship with President Roosevelt, who admired his long career and considered him a prophet (indeed, in his private letters to Brandeis, Roosevelt addressed him as “Dear Isaiah”). On April 19, 1939, Weizmann sent Brandeis a telegram:

Beg you make last minute effort [to] induce President [to] urge British Government [to] delay publication [of] their proposals and reconsider their policy. . . . [It] will drive Jews who have nothing to lose anyhow to adhere to counsels of despair. . . . If new policy imposed Jews will conduct immigration [and] disregard legal restrictions, will settle and without permission, even if exposed [to] British bayonets. . . . By violation [of] Mandate British Government loses moral and legal title [to] govern country and becomes mere coercive authority. . . . Please impress President [that] owing to advanced state matter no ordinary diplomatic representations but only extraordinary emphatic step can possibly produce effect.<sup>8</sup>

Brandeis appealed to the President more than once, but to no avail.<sup>9</sup>

On April 24, Weizmann sent a message to William Bullitt, the American ambassador to France, in the hope that he would convey it to the State Department, telling him the Jewish political leadership in Palestine had decided that “no sacrifice would be too heavy”:

I have conveyed all this in a telegram to the Prime Minister and warned him, in as restrained language as I could use in such circumstances, of what was here at stake. . . . I can only say this, that if the Government really adopts this policy outlined to us in London and endeavors to carry it into effect, it will bite granite. At a time when millions of Jews are undergoing a sadistic persecution such as the world has not known since the darkest ages, the Jews of Palestine will not put up with the land in which a National Home was solemnly promised to them by the civilized world being closed to their harassed brethren.<sup>10</sup>

On April 27, 1939, Weizmann wrote to the newly appointed British ambassador to the United States, Philip Henry Kerr (Lord Lothian), who

had been Prime Minister Lloyd George's private secretary at the time of the Balfour Declaration, and who was strongly sympathetic to Zionism. Weizmann told him that the British bureaucracy suffered from "a kind of pharaonic blindness" in its treatment of the Jews, and that it would eventually affect the entire British Empire:

The British Empire . . . cannot be run by the methods by which authoritarian states conduct their internal and external affairs. It lives essentially on the moral authority which it inspires, on its tradition of legality, on its attachment to its pledges. . . . I cannot emphasize enough the gravity of the situation and I have warned the Prime Minister of it. . . . I am conscious of having uttered it as much in the interest of the British as of the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

Weizmann continued his agitated correspondence into May, writing to as many influential friends as he could. On May 3, 1939, he wrote to Albert Cohen, the Zionist emissary to the League of Nations, to describe Britain's changed Palestine policy as "a sort of Munich [referring to Chamberlain's disastrous appeasement of Hitler] applied to us at a time when Jewry is drowning in its [own] blood":

[P]eople come in daily [to Palestine] on leaky dangerous boats, after having undergone untold suffering for weeks on sea; pirate captains exploit this poor human cargo, starve them, rob them, strip them of their belongings, but they are ready to undergo everything, as long as there is a faint chance of getting on land. . . .

[T]he British have no moral right to denounce a Treaty which has become part of International Law and of the fabric of history in the post-war troublesome period. They have no moral or legal right to jeopardize a great piece of constructive work, the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who have come to Palestine trusting to the promise of England, France and other civilized powers, sanctioned and ratified by the League of Nations.

A week later, Weizmann cabled Chamberlain to inform him he was flying back to London from Palestine and would be "grateful for the privilege of an interview" the following day. He met with Chamberlain the next evening, but the meeting produced no results.<sup>12</sup> On May 13, the British Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, invited Weizmann to MacDonald's country house for tea; it turned into a bitter confrontation

in which Weizmann called the new British policy a “betrayal” and MacDonald himself a “hypocrite.”<sup>13</sup> Weizmann later said he “had never spoken so rudely and so straight to any man.”<sup>14</sup>

Weizmann’s increasing despair was reflected in a letter he wrote the following week to one of his oldest British acquaintances, Sir George King-Hall, in which he noted that for twenty years “we have cooperated, we have compromised, we have done our best to make the task of the [British] Administration [in Palestine] as easy as we could”:

And the result of all this—it is the policy to which I have given my life—has been the White Paper which, if it is carried into effect, will hand us over to our bitter enemies—a permanent minority within a virtually Arab State.<sup>15</sup>

On May 17, 1939, the day after the British issued the White Paper, Weizmann spoke to a Zionist conference. Departing from his usual understated rhetoric, he openly criticized the British:

[The British government] has found it necessary to formulate and inaugurate this policy in the blackest hour of Jewish history—at a time when our enemies, cruel and relentless, seek to destroy the Jewish people body and soul. . . . This document forgets, or tries to forget, all those noble motives which brought British statesmen in 1917 and 1918 to issue the Balfour Declaration. . . .

We have never relinquished our claim to Palestine; we have never ceased to maintain contact with that country throughout the thousands of years during which we have been forcibly separated from it. . . . [I]t seems almost—I will try not to use an unparliamentary expression—almost ridiculous that a White Paper should stand across the road of our return to this country which, it is written in the stars, will be Jewish one day. . . .

Weizmann also addressed the larger issues relating to the British betrayal of the Jews:

[I]t may be appropriate, in this tragic and solemn hour, to remind the Powers that they are in Palestine, that they were entrusted with the Mandate for Palestine, because of us. . . . [T]he moral right to be in Palestine today was conferred upon Great Britain by the civilized nations of the world for the explicit and

direct purpose of helping to build up the Jewish National Home. Long before the Balfour Declaration, God had decreed that our destiny is bound up with Palestine, and against this decree, all decrees of humans, however mighty they may appear to themselves and at the time, are as naught; they will blow away like chaff before the wind.<sup>16</sup>

Parliamentary debates on the White Paper were held on May 22 and 23, 1939, during which Winston Churchill opposed the new policy in a stirring address.<sup>17</sup> Afterward, Weizmann sent Churchill a two-sentence note: “Your magnificent speech may yet destroy this policy. Words fail me [to] express my thanks.”<sup>18</sup> Churchill’s words had indeed been eloquent and moving.<sup>19</sup> But on May 23, Weizmann cabled David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the *Yishuv*, the pre-State community of Jews in Palestine, with a one-sentence report about the rest of the debate: “Many friends readied for battle [but] failed to speak.”<sup>20</sup> The House of Commons adopted the new policy by a vote of 268–179.

On May 30, 1939, Weizmann wrote to Solomon Goldman, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, reporting that relations with the British government “are very strained, non-cooperation has already set in.”<sup>21</sup> Several weeks later, the British announced the suspension of all Jewish immigration to Palestine until March 1940—a ten-month period in which Britain would seek to block Jews from entering the place mandated as their homeland, at a time when Hitler’s existential threat was all too apparent.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE NEW WORLD WAR BEGINS

On August 29, 1939—two days before the Nazi invasion of Poland, as the international situation grew increasingly ominous—Weizmann wrote to Chamberlain to assure him that, in the event of a new European war, the Jews would “stand by Great Britain and will fight on the side of the democracies,” regardless of the ongoing dispute about Palestine:

In this hour of supreme crisis, the consciousness that the Jews have a contribution to make to the defense of sacred values impels me to write this letter. . . . The Jewish Agency is ready to enter into immediate arrangements for utilizing Jewish manpower, technical ability, resources, etc. . . .<sup>23</sup>



Chamberlain disregarded Weizmann's offer. In his September 2 reply—sent the day after the Nazi invasion—he wrote that he was pleased “that in this time of supreme emergency when those things which we hold dear are at stake, Britain can rely upon the whole-hearted cooperation of the Jewish Agency.” But, he said, “You will not expect me to say more at this stage than that your public-spirited assurances and welcome aid will be kept in mind.”<sup>24</sup>

On September 5, Weizmann wrote to the British Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, telling him that a “movement for the formation of Jewish volunteer units to serve on the side of the Allies has arisen in different countries,” and that the Jews stood ready to “take definite action, without delay.” Weizmann asked Hore-Belisha to spare him “a few minutes in the course of the next day or two” to discuss the subject, but no meeting was granted. The Secretary declined, citing the pressure of other problems.<sup>25</sup> Weizmann wrote again on September 11, yielding to the Secretary's assertion that the discussion was premature, but nevertheless enclosing a draft memorandum entitled “Arguments in Favor of Immediate Formation of a Jewish Military Unit.”<sup>26</sup> That memo, too, met with no response.

On September 15, 1939, as Nazi forces swept through Poland, Weizmann formally requested that Britain admit 20,000 Jewish children from Poland into Palestine—a number within the 25,000-person quota established in the White Paper. Weizmann set forth his request to British Colonial Secretary Malcolm J. MacDonald in dramatic terms:

Hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland will have to face the Polish winter without a roof over their heads, dying of starvation. Whatever food can be removed from the Polish countryside will be taken for Germany; little will reach the towns, and still less the Jewish population. . . . [T]he [German] administration will be of the extremist anti-Semitic character. This is a catastrophe of a magnitude such as not even we have yet experienced.

In these circumstances, we ask you for immediate permission to remove these children from Poland to Palestine, say of the ages between thirteen and seventeen years. The economic burden of supporting them naturally will fall upon the Jewish people inside and outside Palestine. We pledge ourselves to provide for them. It therefore depends on your decision alone whether the lives of Jewish children shall be saved or not.<sup>27</sup>

MacDonald replied five days later, saying that although he sympathized with the plight of the Jews of Poland, he was unable to admit large numbers of additional Jewish immigrants to Palestine, because it might “seriously embarrass Great Britain and her Allies in their endeavor to bring the war to a victorious issue.”<sup>28</sup> These were code words, signaling British fear that bringing Jewish children into Palestine might cost Britain the support of the Arabs. Even though the number was within the strict limits set by their own White Paper, the British barred the children.

#### WEIZMANN PLANS HIS TRIP TO AMERICA

In October, as the war entered its second month, Weizmann wrote to Lazar Braudo, one of the founders of the Zionist movement in South Africa, about his plans for his trip to the United States:

My principal task in America will, naturally, be to do what I can to raise the funds so badly needed to meet the present critical economic situation in Palestine, but apart from this, my visit will, of course, have its political aspects. You know my view that this is a war in which we, as Jews, must bear a special and additional responsibility; it is with this conviction in mind that I shall approach my task in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Weizmann disclosed that his efforts in London to gain approval for a Jewish military unit “have so far met with no success.” He had accordingly lowered his sights: he wanted to establish a war industry in Palestine to assist the British, and to have the British consider training a few hundred Jewish officers in England for a possible future Jewish force.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, he knew—as he wrote in a letter sent the same day to Jan Christiaan Smuts in Pretoria, the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa and a World War I hero of the South African theater—that the new war “is going to be a grimmer business than most people realize”:

I have felt strongly that, for people like myself, the war has a double significance—we fight in it as British citizens, but also as Jews. Perhaps few people have realized, when the Nazi challenge was first thrown down to the Jews, that it was not a challenge to the Jews alone, but to the whole Christian world. But today, there can be few who fail to realize that what is at stake in this

war is the whole of Western civilization . . . I expect to leave early in November for the United States, and shall there do my best to bring home to my people this aspect of the situation, and the special responsibility which devolves upon them as Jews in the present conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Weizmann continued to send memoranda to his contacts within the British government, reiterating the desire of the Jewish Agency to provide a Jewish division for military service.<sup>32</sup> He wanted to put “on record” both the “readiness and ability of our people to make some tangible contribution to the British Cause in this war.”<sup>33</sup> He emphasized that Jewish support for Britain would continue notwithstanding the White Paper, but that the issue would not disappear:

I fully agree that Jewish cooperation with the Allied War-effort is, and will continue to be, unconditional. . . . [W]e all realize only too well the decisive role which England is playing in this gigantic struggle for the preservation of moral values forming the very foundation of our civilization. . . . [But] After victory has been won the Jewish problem will still be there in all its ghastly nakedness as a challenge to the new world which may arise, and I am deeply convinced that only in Palestine and through Palestine an equitable and lasting solution can be found.<sup>34</sup>

#### WEIZMANN'S VOYAGE TO THE UNITED STATES

Weizmann's trip to America was repeatedly delayed, as he addressed problems the White Paper had already created for the Jews in Palestine. He continued his correspondence and conversations with members of the British government, seeking at least preliminary approval of a Jewish military unit in the belief that it could help him make a favorable impression on American Jews on his trip. But no such British approval was in the offing. Eventually, on December 21, 1939, he left London, accompanied by his wife, Vera, heading first to Paris and then to Lisbon, where he planned to fly to New York on the Pan-American Clipper.

Lisbon was, in Weizmann's words, “the fire escape to the West,” a neutral city where people could still arrange transportation out of the continent.<sup>35</sup> When he arrived, he found transatlantic flights canceled because of weather and wartime danger, and he spent ten days awaiting new

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