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Commentary Philip Weyers

Smuts and Weizmann

My great-grandfather's love of Israel and South African Jews

IN THE early 1920s, South Africa got to hear of a tragedy unfolding in Ukraine, affecting in particular the Jews. In the aftermath of the fall of the Russian czar, battles for control took place between the Red and White armies, and while these battles were not antisemitic by objective, it was the Ukrainian Jews who bore the brunt of battle casualties. The situation was exacerbated by famine and typhoid, but took a turn for far the worse with the pogroms, where Ukrainian and Polish peasants joined with the military forces to kill Jews wherever they found them, the final estimate being between 100,000 and 150,000 deaths. One of the tragic results of these pogroms were thousands of orphans whose numbers were estimated at 400,000.

Letters begging for assistance were smuggled to amongst others South Africa, and meetings were held across the country to muster support and assistance. Before any organized relief could be effected, a Russian-born resident of Cape Town, Isaac Ochberg took matters under his wing and approached my great-grandfather, Gen. Jan Smuts, who served as prime minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919-24, and the minister of the Interior, Patrick Duncan.

Smuts reacted with alacrity and granted permission for an unrestricted number of orphans, bring as many as could be saved, he said. In January 1921, Ochberg had persuaded the Smuts government to contribute on a pound-for-pound basis towards the rescue and repatriation effort, as a result of which 250 rather than the previously calculated 200 orphans could be rescued and brought to South Africa. Many of these orphans returned in later life to Europe, but many also remained in their adopted coun-

try and contributed inestimably to the South African economy and added massively to our heritage.

The "Oubaas" (Afrikaans for a person who is senior in years or rank), as he was called, was known to have a fondness and affection for South African Jews, and considered many to be his friends, often at a political cost due to the sometimes less than equally affectionate sentiments of particularly the more conservative elements of the then National Party.

Jews have historically played a major role in South Africa as indeed they still do. Non-professing Jews were amongst the first settlers in the Cape, dating back to the 1600s. It is said that today Jews make up 0.05% of South Africa's total population, and 2.3% of the white population, and yet despite this minority situation command an extremely disproportionate percentage of the economy. We are all certainly so much the richer as a country with them.

A significant friendship in the Oubaas's life was the one he enjoyed with Sarah Gertrude Millin, described as being South Africa's leading literary figure for more than 30 years. Born in Zagare, Lithuania, in 1936, she published two volumes entitled "General Smuts" and was a regular visitor at the Smuts home known as the "Big House."

What I might add as a personal note is that the second chairman of the General Smuts War Veterans Foundation was Dr. Henry Gluckman, who was appointed minister of Health of the Smuts Government in 1945. Other notables who were visitors to the Smuts residence that might be of interest are: Nathan Levi, of newspaper fame; Sammy Marks, the industrialist; and most notably, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the eminent

scientist who was to become Israel's first president.

The Oubaas met Weizmann in June 1917. Weizmann was at the time professor of Chemistry at the University of Manchester, and had just developed a simplified and more effective means of manufacturing TNT, which was to be of inestimable value to the Allied war effort.

The two were to become lifelong friends; they enjoyed one another's company, they were intellectually compatible and very importantly shared a vision, that of a home for the Jews. It is worthy of note that the Oubaas was a staunch Christian Zionist, a conviction he shared with both British prime minister Lloyd George and the Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour.

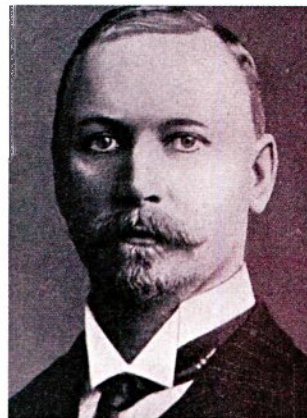
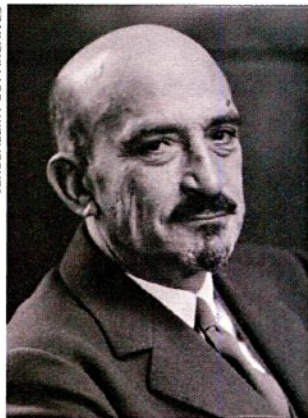
The Oubaas, having being raised in circumstances of conservative Calvinism, and having also at heart in this instance the principle of historic justification, believed that Palestine, being the Biblical home of the Jews, was where such a home should be. Weizmann naturally shared this vision, and had in the Oubaas a formidable ally.

Prof. Richard P. Stevens describes the Smuts-Weizmann relationship as follows:

"Perhaps few personal friendships have so influenced the course of political events during the twentieth century as the relationship between General Jan Christian Smuts, South Africa's celebrated prime minister and Chaim Weizmann, the charismatic Zionist leader and Israel's first president. But the importance and significance of this little publicized relationship far transcends the personal elements involved or its contribution to Zionist success; rather, it helps throw into perspective both the contradictions of Western liberalism and the psychological

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Chaim Weizmann and Jan Smuts, circa 1915

climate which rationalised the dominant position of a white minority in South Africa on the one hand and of a new European settlement in Palestine on the other."

Weizmann was quoted as saying that without Jan Smuts, who served a second term as prime minister from 1939-48, there would have been no Balfour Declaration.

"On the personal level it must be noted that during the entire 33-year relationship extending from 1917 to Smuts's death in 1950, both men took for granted the moral legitimacy of each other's respective position," says Stevens.

In his position as a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, and one whose counsel was sought and respected ahead of most, the Oubaas was in a unique position to add his voice to Cabinet deliberations and influence the direction of discussions and developments. In November 1949, the Oubaas was to see Weizmann, his friend of 32 years for the last time when, against all advice due to health reasons, he travelled from South Africa to London in order that he attend and make a speech at a dinner celebrating Weizmann's 75th birthday.

"In spite of the distance and heavy pressure on my time in South Africa, I have come here solely and specially to join with you in honouring a great friend, a great man, with whom I have had the privilege to be associated for much of a lifetime. At a time like this – at the consummation of his life work – we all feel the urge to do honour to a man who in the history of our age will occupy a place all of his own," he began.

"I love to think of that boy from the Polish ghetto rising to his destined place among the great men of his time. In spite of all the opposition he encountered in his hard quest there is not a harsh or bitter word against anybody. What a fine human spirit pervades it all! And what a story it is of the young chemist who, without any means or even working knowledge of English, an unknown stranger, came to Manchester University, set up his primitive laboratory in a

bare basement room and began his research work, which in the end was to carry him to his high place among the biochemists of the world, and to the part he played in our scientific activities in connection with the First World War. In the annals of science, I know of no more inspiring story than that of the early beginnings of Dr. Weizmann. And the rest of his life was in keeping with its strange beginnings.

"But he was more than a scientist. He owed a dearer allegiance. In his youth Herzl had appeared with his Zionist message, the return of Israel to the ancient homeland. Weizmann's imagination and heart were fired with the Vision, to which he remained faithful when many, even Herzl himself, began to quail before the enormous difficulties. He remained faithful right through to the final fulfilment. One can appreciate the doubts and misgivings which began to oppress others and made them waiver. Palestine had become a desert under Turkish rule, there were other more tempting territories. The political and international difficulties appeared almost insurmountable. Weizmann refused to renounce his vision and would not look at South America or Central Africa. It was all or nothing for him. The memory of the ghetto and the pogroms had been burnt into his soul, and even his subsequent preoccupations as a scientist could not turn his mind away from the lure of the vision.

"This unique little people which bequeathed to mankind the noblest spiritual heritage of all history, produced also some great leaders – Moses, the mysterious foundling who first led them out of bondage to this promised land; David, the shepherd king, the warrior, the musician and poet, the sinner beloved of God, the conqueror of

Jerusalem, which he made the capital of the country.

"To this select historic list we now add our contemporary, Chaim Weizmann, the scientist, the great Zionist, the indomitable leader who, after his people had been all but wiped out in the greatest purge in history, assembled the remnants,

led them back to the ancient homeland in the face of the heaviest opposition, and welded them once more into a state amongst the nations. Surely his achievement bears comparison with that of Moses! Among the leaders of our age we accord high place to this leader who wrought for his people a real miracle of history. We are privileged and proud to do honor tonight to a man who in his person and his record is an outstanding example of what we honor most in man, and who has added fresh luster to our human record."

IT IS for me significant, and I say this with great appreciation, that when the Smuts House Museum in Johannesburg is in need of assistance, the South African Jewish community are always the first to respond.

In closing, I wish to cite two quotations from a luncheon held at the Savoy Hotel in London in aid of German Jewish Women and Children. The first I believe might just apply to me: "I gladly consented to come and am here today, a bad Christian amongst good Jews. To me this is a most impressive movement, this opening up of Palestine once more to the Jews, it is one of the bright spots of the world, in the new world. I can see a vision of the new Palestine, see a stream of tens of thousands of Jews going back to their ancient homeland."

And a final quote about the Oubaas, just because I like it, from Alan Paton, the celebrated author of "Cry, the Beloved Country" and a noted political activist: "Even the great thought he was great!"

This article is based on a speech the writer gave at a StandWithUs/Telfed event in Jerusalem on November 2 to mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration