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ROADS NOT TAKEN



“Brit Shalom” (“Peace Alliance”), a drawing by Netta Lieber Sheffer.

Courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art

THE OTHER IDEAS FOR A JEWISH HOMELAND

Might things have worked out differently had the Jews established their state in another, less hostile part of the world, say Australia or Alaska? Should they just have settled for less than full-fledged statehood? Here’s a look at what might have been had other proposals drafted in recent centuries panned out

Judy Maltz

Deep in their hearts, even if they won’t say it out loud, many Jews have been pondering this painful question since October 7: Has the Zionist project – the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel – failed?

After all, wasn’t the point of having a state of their own that there would be at least one place on Earth where they could feel protected and live freely?

After so many Israelis were abandoned by their government on that horrendous day – with more than a hundred hostages still rotting in Hamas tunnels nearly a year later – and with civil liberties in jeopardy as never before under Israel’s far-right government, it is only natural to question whether Jewish self-determination is



Portrait of Theodor Herzl.

GPO

all it was cracked up to be. Perhaps the Zionist dream could have taken other forms? Might it not have worked out better had this experiment been conducted in safer places?

With Jews around the world beginning the annual season of soul-searching, just ahead of the High Holy Days, it is a fitting time to reflect back on the roads not taken – the different proposals for Jewish autonomy and sovereignty that, for whatever reason, never quite panned out. Here are some of the better-known initiatives.

Uganda Scheme

Arguably the most famous of all was the British plan to create a Jewish homeland in a part of British East Africa. The proposed territory then belonged to Uganda and is now part of Kenya. Conceived by British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, the plan was presented by Theodor Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, to the 1903 World Zionist Congress held in Basel. The plan was prompted by the Kishinev pogrom, in which 40

Jews were murdered and hundreds of Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed. Herzl presented it as a temporary solution to rising antisemitism in Europe – he had previously proposed Cyprus and El Arish in the Sinai Peninsula for the same purpose. Many of the delegates to the congress vehemently opposed the idea, believing that there was only one place pertinent for a Jewish state – the Land of Israel. Indeed, the controversy threatened to tear apart the fledgling Zionist movement. Nonetheless, a majority of the delegates voted in favor of sending a fact-finding mission to British East Africa to check out the viability of the idea. At the next congress, two years later, the proposal was rejected. But the idea that Jewish sovereignty did not require a specific piece of land would live on. Its supporters would eventually establish the Jewish Territorialist Organization. Founded by



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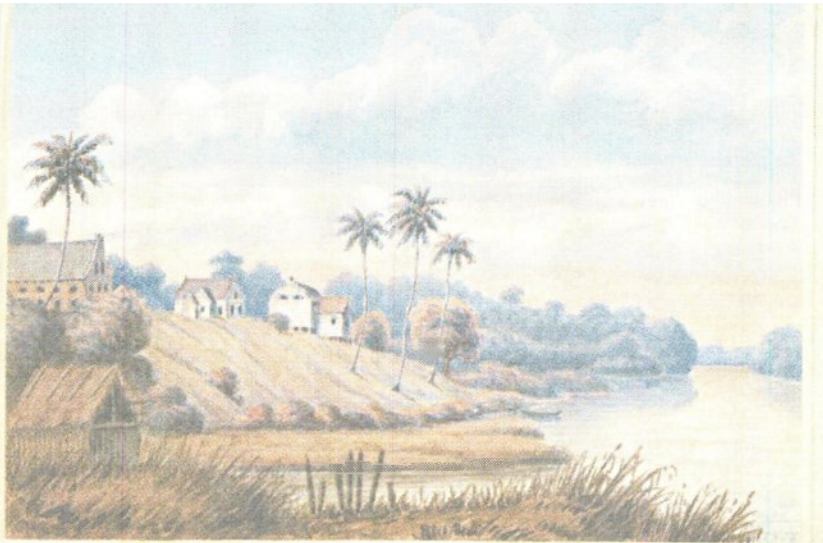
the British writer and activist Israel Zangwill, this new "territorialist" movement advocated for the creation of a Jewish homeland wherever land was available. Various attempts to locate land for such an endeavor (including in Galveston, Texas), however, did not bear fruit. The organization collapsed a few years after the British announced their support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, with the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

Ararat

Even before the modern Zionist movement was founded, a plan was forged to create a Jewish homeland at Grand Island in the Niagara River. Grand Island is located in Eerie County in Upstate New York on the U.S.-Canadian border. The idea, proposed in 1820, was the brainchild of Mordechai Manuel Noah, a prominent Jewish-American politician, playwright and journalist. He purchased the 27 square mile island and called it Ararat, after Mt. Ararat, the biblical resting place of Noah's ark. A monument erected on the island by the politician and later moved to a museum reads: "Ararat, a City of Refuge for the Jews, founded by Mordechai M. Noah in the month of Tishri 5586 (September 1825) and in the 50th Year of American Independence." Noah failed to rally the masses behind him and eventually ended up advocating for the creation of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

Alaska

After Kristallnacht in November 1938 – the first act of organized antisemitic violence by the Nazi regime – a plan was conceived to resettle European Jews in the vast northern territory of Alaska, which at the time had still not been admitted into the union. In presenting the plan a few weeks after the pogrom, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes proposed that the underpopulated territory serve as "a haven for Jewish refugees from Germany and other areas in Europe where the Jews are subjected to oppressive restrictions." Many Jewish-American leaders were wary of the plan, fearing it would divert efforts from creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Since it also failed to win the support of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, it was



View of the Jodensavanne on the Suriname.

IMAGO/piemags via Reuters

eventually scrapped. The idea of an autonomous Jewish enclave in the Alaskan region of Sitka did, however, inspire the alternative history contained in "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," a novel by the award-winning Jewish-American writer Michael Chabon.

Kimberley Plan

In the late 1930s, after the Nazis rose to power, a plan was conceived to resettle Jews fleeing Eastern Europe to the Kimberley region of Australia – a large stretch of sparsely populated territory located in the northwestern part of the continent. The plan was drafted by the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization, based in New York – the latest iteration of the Jewish Territorialist Organization – founded by Russian-born Nachman Steinberg. Steinberg traveled to Australia in 1939, a few months before the outbreak of World War II, hoping to ratchet up support for the plan. He succeeded in winning the backing of many prominent political figures as well as local Jewish leaders. Eventually, however, the plan was rejected by the Australian government, which informed Steinberg in 1944 that it would not "depart from the long-established policy in regard to alien settlement in Australia." The Freelanders later held negotiations with the Netherlands about the establishment of a Jewish settlement in Suriname, but the proposal never got off the ground.

Birobijan

The town of Birobijan is the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast,

'HAS THE ZIONIST PROJECT – THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT JEWISH STATE IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL – FAILED?'

which was established in the far eastern corner of Russia in 1934. The government had hoped to turn Jews away from Zionism by granting them cultural autonomy within the Soviet Union. The original plan had been to set up a Jewish enclave in Crimea, but the Soviet leaders feared this would create friction with the surrounding non-Jewish population. Consequently, they chose this sparsely populated stretch of land on Russia's border with China, in the hope of fortifying it through an influx of new residents. To encourage Jews to move to the district, the Soviet government lifted its ban on private land ownership there, but that apparently was not enough of an incentive. Due to its harsh terrain and climate, Birobijan never attracted a very large number of Soviet Jews, (although thousands of non-Soviet Jewish communists, driven by the dream of a Jewish utopia, settled there in the late 1930s and 1940s). The Jewish population of the district peaked at about 50,000 right after World War II. Even then, Jews did not account for more than a quarter of the region's population. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, most of the Jews of Birobijan emigrated,

mainly to Israel, and fewer than 2,000 are believed to still live in the region.

Madagascar Plan

Certainly not an initiative conceived by Jews or motivated by a desire to protect them, the Madagascar Plan was actually the brainchild of the Nazis. The idea – proposed in June 1940 by Franz Rademacher, the head of the Jewish department in the German Foreign Office – was to forcibly move European Jews to this large island off the eastern coast of Africa. The Germans hoped that the French, who controlled the island at the time, would hand it over as part of a peace deal. As originally envisioned, about a million Jews were to be transferred to Madagascar every year over the course of four years. The island was meant to be under the control of the SS, governed as a police state. The plan was shelved two years later, when the Nazis began implementing the Final Solution for the Jews of Europe.

Suriname

Jews banished from Spain and Portugal began moving to the tiny English colony of Suriname, situated on the northeastern coast of South America, in the early 17th century. They established prosperous sugarcane plantations that employed slaves. In 1665, the Jews were granted freedom of religion as well as the right to set up their own independent court and civil guard, and for roughly 150 years – and for the only period in history between the destruction of the Second Temple nearly two millennia ago and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 – Suriname was the only place on Earth where Jews enjoyed full autonomy. They continued to do so even after the English handed over control of the colony to the Netherlands in exchange for New Amsterdam, the original name for New York. During this period, these Jews owned more than half the plantations in Suriname. But eventually many of these plantations would hit upon hard times and their Jewish owners left, many of them to North America. In 1825, the Dutch abruptly ended the special autonomy privileges that had been granted to the Jewish population, and most of the remaining Jews left Suriname after it gained its independence in 1975.



A 1929 poster depicting Jewish laborers. Mikhail Oskarovich Dlugach, courtesy of The Wolfsonian



A map of proposed sites for the settlement of European Jews in Madagascar. Laczdoma