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*Willi Münzenberg*

**FORUM**

# **Joseph Berger (1904-1978): The Comintern's and Münzenberg's Expert on Middle Eastern Affairs**

MARIO KESSLER

## **Die "Ulbricht-Verschwörung" gegen Münzenberg (1936-1938) / The "Ulbricht conspiracy" against Münzenberg (1936–1938)**

Joseph Berger-Barzilai (original name Joseph Isaac Zilznik, other form Zeliaznik) was a founding member and secretary of the Communist Party of Palestine and who fell victim to Stalin's purges.

Berger-Barzilai was born in Cracow, Poland in 1904 and grew up in Vienna and Bielitz, Austrian Silesia. He was brought up as an orthodox Jew and a Zionist. In 1919 he emigrated to Palestine. There he worked first on road construction and then as a translator in an engineering firm. During his life he spoke Yiddish, German, Polish, English, Hebrew, and Russian. He also knew some Arabic.

Originally a member of the leftist Zionist organization Hashomer Hatzair, he became soon a communist, took part in the founding of a communist groups that merged with other groups in 1923 to establish the Palestine Communist Party. The party had to operate under illegal conditions since the British Mandate Authority had outlawed all communist activities in May 1921. Berger became deputy secretary of the party that joined the Comintern in March 1924. For this mission, he was sent to Moscow. As a communist emissary, he also traveled to Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, and Transjordan. In December 1924 he went again to Moscow to report to the ECCI on the situation in Palestine. In Moscow Berger met and married his wife Esther Feldman, a Russian Jewess. The family, that included a son, Joseph, lived in an Palestinian Arab village, Beit Safafa under false identity. Under the initial 'J.B.' or the pseudonym 'Bob' Berger frequently contributed to Comintern journals, mainly to the International Press Correspondence.

In the spring of 1929, he was again called to Moscow. There he had a five-hour meeting with Stalin on 5 May. He received the order to sever the ties with the Arab Executive Committee and other parts of the Arab nationalist movement. He returned to Palestine to take command of the party after the first Arab-Jewish civil war in August 1929 in Palestine. In a first statement the party had characterized the troubles as a result of colonialism: that Britain, afraid of the unity of Arab and Jewish workers, had instigated racial hatred to divide the communities, and this was aided by Arab effendis and Zionist leaders. According to moscow's order Berger had to change the line: An ECCI directive from October 1929 characterized

the fights as an Arab anti-imperialist rebellion against Britain and the Zionists and demanded unconditional support of the party for the "revolutionary Arab toilers," notwithstanding their nationalist and religious slogans and their subordination under the violent anti-Jewish policy of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin El-Husseini. Following the ECCI directive, Berger helped to reorganize the party to include an Arab leadership.

In 1931, Berger was recalled to Moscow and sent from there to Berlin to work for Münzenberg's League against Imperialism. Berger now met such prominent members of the League as Jawaharlal Nehru. Together with Clemens Dutt he edited several publications of the League. Berger's direct cooperation with Münzenberg lasted, in all probability, less than a year.

In 1932, Berger was summoned to Moscow, where he became a Soviet citizen and, after a short period as lecturer at the University of Moscow, a Comintern official who headed the Near Eastern Department, a post which he held for two years. In 1933 he was given Soviet citizenship under the name Joseph Berger.

About this time Berger became doubtful of some aspects of the regime, although he still remained a convinced communist. In 1934 he was dismissed from his post and expelled from the party without any given reason. For some months he worked in a printing house. On January 27, 1935, he was arrested and charged with being a Trotskyist agitator. Interrogated for two months he refused to 'confess' and was sentenced to five years in a labor camp.

First he was in Mariinsk in Siberia, then he was sent to Gornaya Shoriya on the Mongolian frontier. In 1936 he was brought back to Moscow's Lubyanka prison as a potential witness in the trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev. The authorities, finding that they were unable to use him, sentenced him to death, but by a chance the verdict was changed to eight years in prison. He was brought to Vladimir, then to Solovki near the Finnish border, later to Dudinka on the Yenisei river and still later to Norilsk in Northern Siberia.

In 1941 Berger was charged with organizing a group of prisoners to overthrow the authorities and was, again, sentenced to death. He went on a hunger strike for 56 days and also refused to comply with the regulation that demanded he should sign his own death warrant; owing to the omission of this formality the bureaucracy did not ratify the sentence. Instead he was given a further ten years in prison. Among the places in which he was now confined were Alewxandrowsk, a top

security prison near Irkutsk, and Tayshet, a Siberian labor camp for particularly dangerous criminals.

In 1951, he was released, only to be banned to life-long exile in Siberia. His wife and his 16-years old son were also persecuted on his account, and they could see him only when they were allowed to visit him in Siberia.

In 1956 Berger was officially rehabilitated and allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Poland. His family accompanied him. He started working in the Polish Institute for Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, but soon the family decided to emigrate to Israel. Berger lived in Tel Aviv and assumed the name Barzilai. He was invited to give lectures at Bar Ilan University. Later the university appointed him as an associate professor of political science. Berger had completely abandoned his communist faith and had become religious. He nevertheless considered himself left-leaning. In the late 1960s he dictated friends his memoirs about the time in Soviet camps and prisons. The book came out in 1971 in Britain with the title *Shipwreck of a Generation* and in the United States as *Nothing But the Truth: Joseph Stalin's Prison Camps: A Survivor's Account of the Victim's He Knew*.