
Mario Kessler

Joseph Berger:
Communist Activist in Palestine and
Victim of Stalinism (1904–1978)

ABSTRACT

The Polish-born Joseph Berger took part in the founding of the Palestine Communist Party. The party had to operate under illegal conditions. Berger became deputy secretary of the party that joined the Comintern in March 1924. After the first Arab-Jewish civil war in August 1929 he became secretary of the party, but was, in 1930, expelled from the country by British mandate authorities. In Berlin he worked for the League against Imperialism. In 1932 he headed the Comintern's Near Eastern Department in Moscow. In 1934 he was dismissed from his post and expelled from the party without any given reason. In January 1935 Berger was arrested and charged with being a Trotskyite agitator. He refused to "confess" and spent the next sixteen years in various Siberian labor camps. In 1951, he was released, only to be banished to life-long exile in Siberia. His wife and his 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. Soon the family decided to immigrate to Israel. Berger 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 his memoirs to friends about his time in Soviet camps and prisons.

Keywords: *Palestine, Comintern, communism, Zionism, Berlin, Gulag, Israel*

Communist Activist in Palestine¹

Berger was born in Cracow, Austrian Poland. In 1914 his family fled the Russian army, which threatened to invade Cracow, for Vienna and moved in 1916 to Bielitz, Austrian Silesia. Young Joseph was brought up as an orthodox Jew and a Zionist and became active in the Zionist youth group *Wanderbund Blau-Weiß*. While still in Europe, he moved towards the left and became a member of the leftist Zionist organisation *Hashomer Hatzair* (The Young Watchman). In 1919 he immigrated to Palestine at the age of fifteen. There he first worked on road construction and then as a translator for an engineering firm. During his life, he learned to speak Yiddish, German, Polish, English, Hebrew, and Russian. He also picked up a good deal of Arabic and possibly French.

In Palestine, he soon became one of the first communists. His turn towards communism was mainly motivated by the fact that even left-wing Zionists overwhelmingly ignored or belittled the expulsion of the Arabs from their land by Zionist settlers. He looked for an alternative to what he soon considered as settler-colonialism. It was then that he assumed the name Berger.

Communist activities in Palestine started soon after the emergence of the first communist parties outside Soviet Russia in 1919. Communists in Palestine, as elsewhere, were convinced that a world revolution would soon resolve the Jewish Question by eliminating capitalism, which they considered the only source of anti-Semitism. They saw bourgeois Zionism as a reactionary anachronism that would cut off Jewish workers from the revolutionary class struggle. Consequently, the Communist International (Comintern) since its foundation in March 1919 regarded Zionism as a creation of the Jewish petty bourgeoisie and of misguided intellectuals. The Comintern criticised the perception that Palestine was a rather under-populated country, only waiting for Jewish immigration, and anticipated bloody conflicts with the Arabs. It characterised Zionism as a tool of British colonialism and saw the most leftist wing within the Zionist movement, the *Poalei Tsiyon* or *Poale Zion* (Workers of Zion), as an essentially anti-communist political movement under socialist or even communist disguise.

The Poale Zionists, however, saw the Comintern's negative attitude towards Socialist Zionism as a temporary mistake that could soon be corrected should the Socialist-Zionist workers join the ranks of the international communist army in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. At a congress of the World Federation of Poale Zionist parties, held in July and August 1920 in Vienna, a substantial part of the delegates founded the *Poalei Tsiyon Semol* (Left Poale Zion) and voted in favor of joining the International as a Jewish

1 For Berger's biography, see now Claudia Koch: *Joseph Berger: Grundzüge einer politischen Biographie* (M.A. Thesis: University of Leipzig, 2010) and his memoirs mentioned below. I am indebted to Mr. Terence Renaud for stylistic suggestions.

Section, that is as a supra-national body.² After a number of negotiations, the Comintern refused this proposal and accepted only individual members who would join the communist parties in the countries where they lived. These new members should strictly abandon Zionism of any form, whether “bourgeois” or “under socialist mask”.³

In Palestine, substantial parts of the Poale Zionists were willing to join the Comintern. In March 1919 they formed the precursor of the Communist Party, the Jewish Socialist Workers’ Party (*Mifleget ha-Poalim ha-Sotsialistim Ivriim* or MPSI). The MPSI had considerable success in the first election of the Executive Committee of the *Histadruth*, the Jewish Trade Union Organisation, in 1920, gaining six out of eighty-seven seats in the committee.⁴ In September 1920 one of its key members, Yaakov Meyerson, was invited as a guest speaker to a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) in Moscow. There he emphasised that the MPSI had started among the Arabs “a campaign for solidarity and unity of all the workers, and the creation of trade unions. [...] There we faced a big obstacle because we did not have enough intelligent Arab workers who could campaign in our spirit.”⁵

But the organisation was almost destroyed in the aftermath of its May Day demonstration in Jaffa in 1921. Non-communist rivals from *Abduth Ha’avodah* (Unity of Labour) attacked the MPSI demonstration. The clashes between the two Jewish groups provoked Arab attacks on both. The British mandate police arrested some MPSI members and deported them to Soviet Russia, the country of their origin. Since then, all communist activities in Palestine had to be organised under illegal conditions.⁶

The remainders of the MPSI formed the *Mifleget ha-Poalim ha-Sotsialistim* (Socialist Workers’ Party or MPS) and omitted the word Jewish in order to acknowledge the bi-national character of proletarian struggle. Later it adopted the name Palestine Communist

2 L. Tarnopler: *Poalei Tsiyon be-ma’avak ‘im ha-Komintern* (Poale Zion in the Struggle with the Comintern), in: *ba-Derekh* 4 (1969), p. 74. I am indebted to Ms. Eleanor Yadin for translation of Hebrew sources.

3 For details see Mario Kessler: *Zionismus und internationale Arbeiterbewegung 1897–1933*, Berlin 1994, pp. 114–23; idem: *The Comintern and the Left Poale Zion, 1919–1922*, in: *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 24 (2010), pp. 115–33. Hebrew translation by Eleanor Yadin: *Poalei Tsiyon Semol vaha-Komintern 1919–1922*, in: Tamar Gozanski/Angelika Timm (eds.): *Bead ha-neged!: ha-miflagah ha-komunistit ha-Yisreelit 1919–2009* (Against the Mainstream! The Communist Party of Israel, 1919–2009), Tel Aviv 2009, pp. 13–19.

4 See Peretz Merchav: *Die israelische Linke: Zionismus und Arbeiterbewegung in der Geschichte Israels*, Frankfurt-Main 1972, p. 293.

5 Le’on Zehavi (ed.): *Lehud o be-yahad: Yehudim ve-‘Aravim be-Falestinah, al pi mismakhe ha-Komintern, 1919–1943* (Apart or Together: Jews and Arabs in Palestine According to the Documents of the Comintern, 1919–1943), Jerusalem 2005, p. 27.

6 See Joel Beinin: *The Palestine Communist Party 1919–1948*, in: *MERIP Reports* 55 (1977), p. 6.

Party (PCP). It included around 450 members. In September 1922 a radical minority, led by Berger, split away from the PCP and constituted itself as the Communist Party of Palestine.⁷ It attacked vigorously the PCP for its supposed reconciliatory position towards Socialist Zionism. In February 1923 members of both parties were expelled from the Histadruth. This forced them to cooperate. In June 1923 the majority accepted the radical position of the circle around Berger. The party was reunited and adopted a programme that broke with Zionism in any form and characterised the Arab nationalist movement as a “cornerstone in the struggle against British imperialism”.⁸

Joseph Berger was one of the authors of the party programme. Together with Wolf Averbach, he was responsible for the unification of various small left-wing circles that had temporarily left the MPSI. The party assumed the Yiddish name *Palestinische Kommunistische Partey* (Palestine Communist Party). Averbach, Berger, Moishe Kuperman, and Nahum Lestshinski formed the Central Committee. Acting as Deputy Secretary, Berger was sent to Moscow in March 1924 to negotiate the party’s successful entry into the Comintern.⁹ In the same year he and his Palestinian comrade Ya’akov Tepper helped to establish a Lebanese branch of the party that would become an independent organisation.¹⁰ As a communist emissary, he also traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Transjordan while the Party Secretary Wolf Averbach met the leaders of the Syrian rebellion against French

7 See Alain Greilsammer: *Les Communistes Israéliens*, Paris 1978, pp. 27–28.

8 The programme is translated into German and printed in: *Internationale Pressekorrespondenz [Inprekorr]*, No. 136, 22 August 1923, pp. 1187–88.

9 For the history of the Palestinian Communist Party in the 1920s see Jacob Hen-Tov: *Communism and Zionism in Palestine: The Comintern and the Political Unrest in the 1920’s*, Cambridge 1974; Mario Offenbergl: *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der antikolonialen Revolution*, Meisenheim 1975; Musa Budeiri: *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism*, London 1979; Suliman Basher: *Communism in the Arab East, 1918–1928*, London 1980; Māhir ash-Sharīf: *al-umamiyah ash-shuyū’iyah wa-Filasṭīn: 1919–1928 (The Communist International and Palestine, 1919–1928)*, Beirut 1980; Alexander Flores: *Nationalismus und Sozialismus im arabischen Osten: Kommunistische Partei und arabische Nationalbewegung in Palästina 1919–1948*, Münster 1980; Mario Kessler: *Die Kommunistische Internationale und der arabische Osten 1919–1929*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leipzig, 1982; Sondra Miller Rubenstein: *The Communist Movement in Palestine and Israel, 1919–1984*, London/Boulder, Colorado 1986). For the social context see Zachary Lockman: *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948*, Berkeley 1996.

10 The Lebanese communists insisted to form an organization that should be independent from Palestinian guardianship. See Jacques Couland: *Le mouvement syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, Paris 1970, pp. 101–103; Māhir ash-Sharīf: *al-umamiyah ash-shuyū’iyah wa-Filasṭīn: 1919–1928 (The Communist International and Palestine, 1919–1928)*, pp. 255–256; Tareq Yousif Ismael/Jacqueline S. Ismael: *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, Gainesville 1998, pp. 7–8.

colonial rule.¹¹ In December 1924 Berger went again to Moscow to report to the ECCI about the situation in Palestine. The Comintern officials seemed very satisfied with the progress of the party and approved its policy.¹²

In Moscow Berger met Esther Feldman, a Russian Jewess.¹³ They married in 1925. It was also the time when Berger came in contact with Nikolai Bukharin whose New Economic Policy he supported. He also admired Bukharin's personality:

His ideas were wider than Stalin's [as Berger wrote decades later], he was more tolerant, less preoccupied with strengthening the Russian Party, and less inclined to thrust his views on others or to make a pro-Soviet attitude the condition of co-operation.¹⁴

Bukharin remained for many years the idol of the young intelligentsia, and this made him particularly vulnerable when Stalin, at first his ally, rose to unlimited power.¹⁵ Karl Radek, whom Berger also got to know in Moscow, was, in Berger's words,

[...] cultured, well-read and sophisticated, and I was struck by the unorthodox way in which he stated orthodox views. I had indeed been warned that what I would hear from him were Party truths, but in their 'Radek version.' [...] He poked fun at friends and enemies alike, with a confidence, which came of having got away with it for so long.¹⁶

In the same year 1925, upon his return to Palestine, Berger was detained by the British mandate police for illegal activities with the Communist Party and the Comintern, but was finally released and only fined. In general, the British authorities regarded all forms of communist activities as a criminal offense. They launched an oppressive campaign of police and secret police persecution, which included arrests, trials, deportations, and even torture. Ten communists died in British prisons during the mandatory period.¹⁷

11 Information given by Berger to the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*, 15 March 1965, mentioned in Musa Budeiri: *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* p. 9.

12 See ECCI letter to the Palestinian communists referring to Berger's report, 9 May 1925, mentioned *ibid.*

13 See Esther Feldman's memoirs: *Kele beli sugar (A Prison without Bars)*, Tel Aviv 1964, p. 20.

14 Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger*, London 1971, p. 100.

15 See *ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

16 Leonard Schapiro: *Joseph Berger, Shipwreck of a Generation*, in: *The Spectator*, 4 June 1971, p. 15.

17 For details, see the literature listed in footnote 9. See also the dates in the history of the Communist Party of Palestine/Israel, given in: Tamar Gozanski/Angelika Timm (eds.): *Bead*

Most rigorous forms of oppression did not affect Berger. Returning from another trip to Moscow on 16 August 1926, the police authorities of Palestine refused to let him in. As a stateless citizen, he had to remain aboard an Italian ship that sailed back and forth for six weeks. The International Aid Organisation for Arrested Revolutionaries, together with Labour Zionists, managed to get him a permit to enter the country. After that, he, his wife, and their son lived in an Arab village, Beit Safafa, under false identities. He continued to co-lead the party and meet with Comintern emissaries.

Under the initials J. B. or the pseudonym Bob he frequently contributed to Comintern journals, mainly to the *International Press Correspondence*.¹⁸ While early in 1924 he wrote that all classes of the Arab people were struggling against imperialism, a few months later he made a clear distinction between landowners, urban capitalists, and proletarians.¹⁹ The Third Party Conference that was held in Beit Safafa in June 1924 reflected this characterisation of class struggle within the Arab camp. While the party was not supposed to become a missionary group, its duties involved influencing the speedy development of the division of classes in the Arab sector of Palestine.²⁰

The political line of the party, as it was developed by Averbach, rejected Zionism as a nationalist ideology, but accepted the *Yishuv* as a legitimate community that would continue to grow. The party would therefore participate in political activities in the Jewish sector of Palestine, fighting Zionist colonial-settler policy and expropriation of Arab lands. The party defined itself as a Jewish-Arab organisation. It adopted a clear position in support of Palestinian independence from British rule and in opposition to dispossession of Arab peasants, as well as a policy of joining the Jewish and Arab toilers in their daily struggles. The aim was “to radicalize Jews and push them beyond Zionism,

ha-neged!: ha-miflagah ha-komunistit ha-Yisreelit 1919–2009 (Against the Mainstream! The Communist Party of Israel, 1919–2009), Tel Aviv 2009, p. XXVII–XXXI.

- 18 The worldwide-distributed *Inprekorr* appeared in different languages. The German edition was by far the most extensive. Berger was one of 188 correspondents from 31 countries that contributed to the journal in the early 1920s. See Irén Komját: *Die Geschichte der Inprekorr: Zeitung der Kommunistischen Internationale: 1921–1939*, Budapest: Corvina Kiadó 1982, p. 6.
- 19 See, for example, J. B.: *Die Klassenkämpfe innerhalb der arabischen nationalen Bewegung*, in: *Inprekorr* 20, 17 May 1924, pp. 435–36; idem.: *Die Kommunistenverfolgungen in Ägypten und Palästina*, in: *Inprekorr* 113, 26 August 1924, pp. 1475–1476; idem.: *Die Bedeutung des Besuches von Lord Balfour in Palästina*, in: *Inprekorr* 66, 24 April 1925, p. 896, and many others. For a complete list of Berger’s Comintern publications, see Claudia Koch: *Joseph Berger: Grundzüge einer politischen Biographie*, pp. 105–108.
- 20 See J. B.: *Die dritte Konferenz der Kommunistischen Partei Palästinas*, in: *Inprekorr* 94, 23 July 1924, p. 1212.

while demonstrating to the Arabs that dissident Jews could become allies rather than enemies.”²¹

Within the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community of Palestine, the party devoted itself to a continuous fight against Zionism.²² This was the main concern of the party, as Berger frequently explained in his meetings with Comintern officials in Moscow or elsewhere. Karl Radek told him that the slogan “The success of the party depends on its becoming an Arab mass party” should become the guiding principle of political action.²³ It was soon called “Arabisation”. Berger, the liaison between the ECCI and the Palestine Communist Party, was told frequently that “the center of gravity of the PCP’s activity must be among the Arab toiling masses.”²⁴

In the spring of 1929 Berger was again called to Moscow. There, on 5 March, he had a five-hour meeting with Stalin. Then and also during shorter meetings he became familiar with Stalin’s “methods of work and his approach to various matters. [...] The first impression, I must admit, was great”, as Berger later wrote. But he also saw Stalin’s deficiencies. Stalin “was less alert than Zinoviev, he was not as talkative as Bukharin and he was not as familiar with the matters of the Comintern as other members of the Central Committee.”²⁵ Berger received the order to strengthen the ties with the Arab Executive Committee and other parts of the Arab nationalist movement. In August 1929 he returned to Palestine to take command of the party while Averbach stayed in Moscow.

- 21 Ran Greenstein: *Class, Nation, and Political Organization: The Anti-Zionist Left in Israel/Palestine*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 75:1 (2009), pp. 85–108, 88.
- 22 See *ibid.*, pp. 88–89; Johan Franzén: *Communism versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestine Communist Party*, in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36:2 (2007), pp. 6–24, especially pp. 9–11; Claudia Koch: *Joseph Berger: Grundzüge einer politischen Biographie*, pp. 38–42.
- 23 See Walter Z. Laqueur: *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*, New York 1956, p. 77, quoting *Di komunistische bavegung in Palestina* (Warsaw, Der Funk, 1930), located at this time in a private archive. The Yiddish pamphlet was written by Joseph Berger and printed illegally in Beit Safafa, Palestine, and not in Warsaw. See Mario Offenbergs: *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der antikolonialen Revolution*, p. 92. Information based on Offenbergs’ interviews with Berger on 21 and 30 December 1971 in Tel Aviv.
- 24 ECCI Resolution Regarding the Report on the Palestine Communist Party, 26 June 1926, Le’on Zehavi (ed.): *Lehud o be-yahad: Yehudim ve-Aravim be-Falestinah, al pi mismakhe ha-Komintern, 1919–1943* (*Apart or Together: Jews and Arabs in Palestine According to the Documents of the Comintern, 1919–1943*), pp. 83–84.
- 25 Y. Berger-Barzilai: *Ha-Ṭragediah shel ha-Mahpekchah ha-Sovietit* (*The Tragedy of Soviet Revolution*), Tel Aviv 1968, p. 28. In his interview with Mario Offenbergs Berger said on 30 December 1971, “Stalin’s knowledge [about Palestine] was terribly little.” Mario Offenbergs: *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der antikolonialen Revolution*, p. 362.

At that time, the Muslim authorities in Palestine tried to get the British mandate administration to confirm their rights over the Western Wall, including the part that was used by Jews for worship. Zionists, and especially the right-wing Revisionists, demanded in turn full control over the Wall.²⁶ On 23 August 1929, after provocations from right-wing Zionists, nationalist Arabs under the influence of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hadj Amin al-Husayni, launched attacks on Jews. The targets of these attacks were mainly not Zionists, but for the most part the Jewish communities that had lived in Palestine for several hundred years. Oriental Jews of Hebron, Jerusalem, Safed, and Moza were particularly targeted. After a week, British troops took control over the situation. In all, 133 Jews and 116 Arabs were killed. Most of the Arabs were killed by the British military police and some by the Haganah, the Jewish self-defence.²⁷ The Communist Party's self-defence, the *boyivka*, operating under Moishe Kuperman, managed to save Berger and the Czech Comintern functionary Bohumír Šmeral before they could be attacked by Arabs.²⁸

On the eve of the outbreaks the party had issued a leaflet that was pacifist in tone.²⁹ In an early statement Joseph Berger, on behalf of the party, characterised the civil war 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 that this was aided by Arab effendis and Zionist leaders.³⁰ An official party *communiqué*, which was mainly written

- 26 *Doar Hayom*, the Zionist-revisionist newspaper, summoned all Jewish patriots “to wake up and unite”, not to suffer indifferently the terrible possibility of losing control over the Western Wall but “to move heaven and earth in protest against this unprecedented and unspeakable injustice.” *Doar Hayom*, 12 August 1929, quoted from Walter Laqueur: *A History of Zionism*, New York 1976, p. 255. On the other hand, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist Party, regarded Arab resistance against Zionism as inevitable.
- 27 For the Arab-Jewish confrontation in August 1929 and the Communist Party see Jacob Hentov: *Communism and Zionism in Palestine: The Comintern and the Political Unrest in the 1920's*; Mario Kessler: *Die Augustereignisse 1929, die Komintern und die KP Palästinas*, in: *Asien-Afrika-Lateinamerika* 19:3 (1991), pp. 517–529.
- 28 See Y. Berger-Barzilai, *Ha-Ṭragediah shel ha-Mahpekhah ha-Sovietit* (The Tragedy of Soviet Revolution), pp. 92–93; Joseph Berger: *La Rupture Avec les Communistes*, in: *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 13/14 (1968), p. 37. See also B. Šmeral: *Mehr Aufmerksamkeit den Ereignissen in Palästina und in den arabischen Ländern!*, in: *Inprekorr* 103, 5 November 1929, pp. 2439–2440.
- 29 See “Do not change the Waling Wall to a wall of hatred between you!” Hebrew leaflet of the Central Committee of the Palestine Communist Party, quoted in: Musa Budeiri: *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism*, p. 18.
- 30 See J. B.: *Das Blutbad im ‘Heiligen Land*, in: *Inprekorr* 86, 6 September 1929, pp. 2092–2093. See also the similar statement of Alini [i. e. Yeshaya Derfel]: *Zu den Ereignissen in Palästina*, *Inprekorr* 83, 30 August 1929, p. 1960. Later Berger criticised “Alini” for his “con-

by Berger, confirmed this view. It claimed that the riots originated from the protest of expropriated and exploited Arab toiling masses against their deteriorating social conditions. It also stated that it was the British mandate administration that was able to succeed in transforming what was originally a radical anti-colonial movement into an anti-Jewish pogrom. Jewish and Arab reactionary leaders had contributed their share to what turned out to be a religious struggle by turning the Western Wall into a symbol of power.³¹

According to Moscow's order Berger had to change the line: an ECCI directive from October 1929 characterised 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 Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. The ECCI interpreted the riots as a "sharpening of the struggle between imperialism and the working masses of the colonial countries", as the Sixth Comintern Congress had envisaged in 1928. The ECCI resolution emphasised that

[...] notwithstanding the fact that in its initial stage the insurrectionary movement was a response to an Anglo-Zionist provocation to which Arab reactionaries tried to answer with a pogrom, notwithstanding the fact that in its initial stage it came under reactionary leadership, it was still a national liberation movement, an anti-imperialist all-Arab movement, and in the main, by its social composition, a peasant movement.³²

The resolution criticised the party leadership for being taken by surprise and underestimating the revolutionary potential of the Arab masses. It attributed this mistake to the

ciliatory" position. See Bob: Die KP Palästinas und der arabische Aufstand, in: *Inprekorr* 98, 18 October 1929, pp. 2348–2349.

31 See: Der Aufstand in Palästina, in: *Inprekorr* 90, 20 September 1929, pp. 2167–2169, and No. 91, 24 September 1929, pp. 2185–2187.

32 The ECCI resolution was not made public before January 1930. See "Resolution des Politsekretariats des EKKI zur Aufstandsbewegung in Arabistan, in: *Inprekorr* 11, 31 January 1930, pp. 258–261. English translation in: Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International: 1919–1943 Documents*, Vol. 3 1929–1943, London 1960, here p. 80. A more nuanced interpretation that was published in a Comintern organ was A[braham] Schlichter: Der arabische Aufstand in Palästina und die jüdische landwirtschaftliche Kolonisation, in: *Agrar-Probleme* 2:3–4 1929, pp. 544–80. In 1930, among several hundred party members there were only 26 members of Arab origin. See Musa Budeiri: *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism*, p. 62.

party's failure to recruit Arab cadres that would be suitable to lead the PCP.³³ It was due to the fact that the Jewish Labour Union, the *Histadruth*, constantly refused to accept Arab members, as Berger wrote, that the discontented came under the leadership of the "treacherous feudal-bourgeois leaders bent on strengthening their alliance with imperialism."³⁴ Foreign observers, however, noticed a "significant progress of Bolshevik propaganda among the masses of Arab workers."³⁵

From Engagement to Disgrace: Berlin-Moscow-Siberia

Following the ECCI directive, Joseph Berger helped to reorganise the party to include the Arab leadership even though some party members were "openly against" the Comintern's assessment of the 1929 events.³⁶ Now officially appointed as Party Secretary, he prepared a number of Arab party members who would be sent to study at the Comintern school in Moscow.³⁷ Nevertheless, the ECCI was dissatisfied with the policy of Arabisation

- 33 See Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International: 1919–1943 Documents*, Vol. 3 1929–1943, pp. 80–81. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) endorsed in a meeting on 24 and 25 October 1929 this position, although the speaker on this issue, Herman Remmele, admitted that among German party functionaries nobody had any detailed knowledge about the situation in Palestine. See Historical Archive of the KPD, Berlin, SAPMO-BArch, RY I 2/1/74, no pagination. The abbreviation stands for Foundation for the Archives of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR Under the Federal Archives of Germany.
- 34 J. B.: *The Class Character of the Palestine Rising, Part One*, in: *Labour Monthly* 12:3 (1930), p. 159, as quoted from: Paul Kelemen: *British Communists and the Palestine Conflict: 1929–1948*, in: *Holy Land Studies: a Multi-Disciplinary Journal* 5:2 (2006), p. 135.
- 35 Österreichisches Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Neues Politisches Archiv, Vienna, NPA 630, p. 279: Austrian Consulate, Jerusalem, Memorandum to Chancellor Dr. Johann Schober, 11 December 1929. According to Walter Laqueur, more than thirty Arabs were sent to the Soviet Union for political education between 1929 and 1935. See Walter Z. Laqueur: *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*, p. 87.
- 36 Y. Berger-Barzilai: *Ha-Ṭragediah shel ha-Mahpekhah ha-Sovietit* (*The Tragedy of Soviet Revolution*), p. 105.
- 37 In 1958 Berger said in an interview that the Jewish party members had been sent to the Soviet Union to facilitate the preparation of Arab communists whom Moscow considered more dependable. "At that time, when the massive execution of Palestinian Jews was taking place in the USSR, [...] the schools of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the NKVD were putting considerable effort into preparing cadres of Arab Communist agents.", in: *Novoe Russkoe slovo*, 11 April 1958, p. 3, quoted from: Vladimir Khazan: *Pinhas Rutenberg and Vladimir Burtsev: Some Unknown Aspects of the Connection Between Palestine and the Russian Emigration in Europe*, in: Jörg Schulte et al. (eds.): *The Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture, 1917–1937*, Leiden/Boston 2012, pp. 154–155, footnote 10.

and ordered the party to select a Central Committee that would constitute an Arab majority.³⁸ Although this majority could not be constituted, the first party secretary of Arab origin, Nadjati Sidqi, known as Mustafa Sadi, was elected in 1931. Two years later Radwan al-Hilu, known as Moussa, became party secretary. Berger managed to leave Palestine. In 1930 he went to Moscow.

From there he was sent to Berlin to work for Willi Münzenberg's League Against Imperialism. On 1 October 1931 he arrived in Berlin. He was appointed as a member of the newly structured International Secretariat of the League and assigned to co-organise an

[...] International conference of oppressed nations and national minorities. But on 21 December he was arrested and spent several months in Moabit Prison. Berger remained in Berlin after being released in 1932. He met prominent members of the League such as Jawaharlal Nehru. Together with Clemens Dutt he edited several publications of the League and, under the pen name *L. Haddad* [...] ³⁹

wrote the pamphlet, *Tag des Fellachen* [The Day of the Fella], which interpreted the Arab-Jewish clashes in Palestine as a purely anti-imperialist Arab revolt.⁴⁰ But Berger also learned from Münzenberg that the workers' living standard in the Soviet Union had fallen to fifty per cent below the pre-1914 level, that in many places the peasants were in open revolt, and that millions were dying of starvation.⁴¹

In January 1933 Berger and his family were summoned to Moscow. After a short period as a lecturer at the University of Moscow he became a Comintern official in charge of the Near Eastern Department, a post which he held for two years.⁴² In 1933 he was given Soviet citizenship under the name Joseph Berger and became a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks).

38 See Joel Beinin: *The Palestine Communist Party 1919–1948*, p. 9; Ran Greenstein: *Class, Nation, and Political Organization: The Anti-Zionist Left in Israel/Palestine*, pp. 90–91; and the documents printed in: Le'on Zehavi (ed.): *Lehud o be-yahad: Yehudim ve-'Aravim be-Falestinah, al pi mismakhe ha-Komintern, 1919–1943* (*Apart or Together: Jews and Arabs in Palestine According to the Documents of the Comintern, 1919–1943*) pp. 251–76.

39 See Fredrik Petersson: "We are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers": Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern: 1925–1933, Ph.D. Thesis, Abo Akademi (Abo/Turku, 2013), esp. pp. 440–41, 468–69.

40 See L. Haddad: *Tag des Fellachen*, Berlin 1932, 47 pp.

41 See Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger*, p. 89.

42 Laqueur mentions that Berger temporarily held a position of head of the Middle Eastern section in Jenö Varga's Institute for World Economics and World Politics. See Walter Z. Laqueur: *The Soviet Union and the Middle East*, New York 1959, p. 84.

Around 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 27 January 1935 he was arrested and charged with being a Trotskyite agitator. Interrogated for two months, he refused to “confess” and was sentenced to five years in a labour camp.

First, he was in Mariinsk in Central Siberia (*Oblast’* Kemerovo), 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 chance the verdict was changed to eight years in prison. Before returning to Siberia, Berger demanded to see his wife and went on a hunger strike for 44 days until he obtained permission for the meeting. After this he was brought to a prison in Vladimir that was reserved for criminals, then to Solovki near the Finnish border, later to Dudinka on the Yenisei River, and after that to Norilsk in Northern Siberia.

In January 1938 the left-wing Zionist journal *Jewish Frontier* reported that after his return to Russia Berger was arrested for allegedly misinforming the Comintern in regard to the situation in Palestine.⁴³ This was the only time that his fate was publicised. A few months later, however, a group of Polish dissident communists also mentioned in a manifesto the liquidation of the leadership of the Palestine Communist Party. The author of this manifesto, which remained unpublished, was in all likelihood the young journalist Isaac Deutscher, whom Berger would meet more than two decades later.⁴⁴ In 1938 Berger was probably the only member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Palestine who was still alive.

In 1941 Berger was charged in Moscow with organising 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 that 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 an additional ten years in prison. Among the places in which he was confined now were Alexandrovsk, a top security prison near Irkutsk, and Tayshet, a Siberian labour camp for particularly dangerous criminals.

At the beginning of the German attack against the Soviet Union in June 1941 Berger hoped that, if Stalin should fall, “resistance would be organized by genuine communists

43 See: Editorial: Communist “Defenders of the Faith”, in: *Jewish Frontier* 5 (1938), p. 3.

44 The Polish memorandum that condemned the systematic killing of leading foreign communists, namely of Poland, Yugoslavia, and Palestine, can be found in: Archiwum Lewicy Polskiej, Warsaw, No. 247/III-1. In Israel, Berger told Deutscher about the circumstances under which he met Trotsky’s son Sergey Sedov in Butyrki prison in Moscow. See Isaac Deutscher: *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940*, Oxford 1980, pp. XII–XIII, 401.

and that Russia would hold and eventually counter-attack successfully from the East.”⁴⁵ He spent several of the war years in the hospital. “I was”, he wrote, “always on the border between life and death and was continually being told that I would not *last out* next winter or next month. The doctors were always predicting my death.” He emphasised:

One of the big differences between the Hitler and the Stalin systems was the treatment of the weak and sick. A man who fell sick in Auschwitz was at once gassed or shot. But in Stalin’s camps, for all their cruelty, the attitude to the sick prescribed from above was, if such a word can be used in this context, almost humane. Mass extermination did go on but it was not really intentional. The idea of death camps was not admitted. [...] The camp system was able to provide workers for remote regions and at the same time isolate those considered dangerous to the State, but it was not intended to kill them all off.⁴⁶

Berger conceded that there were some “monsters” among the doctors as well, but most of them “were good and devoted men who at great sacrifice saved many people from death.” The hospitals in the camps were, in Berger’s own words, “islands of humanity”.⁴⁷

In 1951 he was released, only to be sentenced to life-long exile in Siberia. His wife and his 25-year-old son Joseph were also persecuted on his account, and they could only see him after fifteen years of separation, when they were allowed to visit him in Siberia.

In prison and the camps Berger met inmates of different political convictions. In the early years of the Soviet regime, ideological discussions among prisoners were not forbidden. The regime’s aim, at least in theory, as Berger mentioned,

[...] was not to crush them physically or to put an end to their intellectual life, but merely to segregate them from the rest of the population and prevent them from spreading their ideas. But the experience of Tsarist days had shown – as it was to show again under such reactionary governments as Piłsudski’s in Poland – that when communists and other socialists were imprisoned together in conditions where they could exchange their views and write, they created what were virtually universities for the disaffected. Stalin had learned this lesson and when, at the end of the twenties, new *corrective camps* were set up and began to fill with communists who were suspected of disagreeing with the new régime in the Party itself, very different instructions were issued to the prison and camp authorities. Any privileges, which political prisoners had traditionally enjoyed, were abolished. To justify this, it was explained to us while I was still in at the Komintern that the new prisoners were not genuine ideological

45 Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger*, p. 180.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

opponents but *two-faced* criminals of a particularly vicious kind who merely masqueraded as communists; no treatment was too harsh for them.⁴⁸

Among those communists who Berger met in the camps were a significant number of members of the Society of Old Bolsheviks that had tried to defend a more objective narrative of party history against Stalinist falsifications.⁴⁹

During the long imprisonment Berger's worldview underwent profound changes. He was sentenced as an enemy of the people, but he still considered himself to be a communist. Thus, he did not agree when inmates in prison totally rejected what had happened in the Soviet Union since 1917. He criticised a former Tsarist official for being

quite unconcerned about the conditions of workers in the West and [that] his thoughts were only for the creative classes abroad upon whose shoulders he considered all cultural development [to rest]. In his view the October Revolution had hopelessly depressed the status of the upper reaches of society without in any way bettering the situation of the poor. We agreed to differ about this vexing question [...]. For me, he was a typical remnant of the past, hoping against hope that this 'disgraceful business', as he termed the Bolshevik Revolution, would soon peter out.⁵⁰

Berger's initial reaction to his arrest was that it must be an error:

The natural reaction of a communist arrested in 1935 was to take it for granted that he was the victim of a misunderstanding, which sooner or later would be cleared up. It was still believed that the population of Soviet prisoners and camps consisted overwhelmingly of class enemies and counter-revolutionaries.⁵¹

It took him years of persecution and humiliation to ask: "How could the Revolution have turned upon itself and become the instrument of its own destruction in the hands of the man whom the revolutionaries themselves had put at their hand?"⁵² He discussed this problem with imprisoned Trotskyites. None of those whom he ever met survived the bloody slaughter of the year 1937.

In Lubyanka prison, Berger met Trotsky's son Sergey Sedov who had recently been brought back from Vorkuta camp north of the Arctic Circle. Sedov told Berger that he had an intuition that he, Berger, would survive. He gave him a message for his par-

48 Ibid., p. 60. Berger wrote Komintern with a capital K.

49 See *ibid.*, p. 73.

50 Ibid., p. 21.

51 Ibid., p. 13.

52 Ibid., p. 65.

ents, should Berger ever see them. That did not happen. Sergey Sedov, who had never been engaged in active politics, spoke, as Berger recalled, with veneration of his parent's independence of spirit.⁵³ Among other inmates he met was the writer Pyotr Parfyonov, the author of the well-known partisan song from the civil war, *Through the Desert and Through the Mountains* (*Po dolinam i po vzgoryam*), who was very popular among the prisoners. Berger met also Yuri Yesenin, the son of the poet Sergey Yesenin, whom the prisoners gave a good place in the cell because they felt as though his father had come with him into their cell. Both were murdered in 1937, and through Parfyonov's official rehabilitation that was announced in the Moscow Journal *Literaturnaya gazeta* in 1962 Berger came to the idea to write about them.⁵⁴

With no less sympathy he wrote about camp inmates who espoused Bukharin's ideas or who remained Mensheviks but he also admired Christians and Muslims who stood by their religious conviction. What helped Berger survive was his turn toward Jewish religion. There was no abrupt change of his conviction, but the longer he stayed in the camps, the more he found comfort in the faith.

Official Rehabilitation and Emigration to Israel

It was only three years after Stalin's death, in 1956, that Berger was officially rehabilitated and allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Poland.⁵⁵ His wife accompanied him while his son already lived in Israel. In Warsaw Berger started working in the Polish Institute for International Affairs, but soon he and his wife decided to immigrate to Israel. He settled down in Tel Aviv, assumed the name Barzilai (or Berger-Barzilai), and lived the life of an orthodox Jew. Soon after his arrival he was invited to give lectures at Bar-Ilan University. Later the university appointed him as an associate professor of political science, a move for which he was very grateful.

In Israel Berger wrote a number of books about his long imprisonment in the Soviet Union. He insisted on not forgetting the fate of the innumerable inmates. His first book was a brief survey of *The Jews in the Soviet Union and their Fate* (1959).⁵⁶ An Italian

53 See *Ibid.*, p. 93–95.

54 See Iosif Berger: *Iz tyuremnykh vospominaniy* (From Prison Memoirs), in: *Noviy zhurnal* (1963), pp. 178–185.

55 The official rehabilitation certificate of 16 April 1956 is printed in: Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger*, p. 269.

56 Y. Barzilai: *Ha-Yehudim ha-Sovyetim ve-goralam* (The Soviet Jews and their Fate), Tel Aviv 1959.

translation appeared one year later. Here Berger used the pseudonym Penimí, meaning insider in Hebrew.⁵⁷

Penimí gave a detailed insight into the political and social history of the Soviet Jews under Lenin and Stalin, the short-term support for the Jewish community in Palestine in 1947–48, the turn towards anti-Semitism during Stalin's last years, and the Doctor's Plot or, as Berger wrote, the "Great Trial".⁵⁸ On 3 January 1953 it was announced, he wrote, that nine professors of medicine, all employed at the Kremlin, were accused of having poisoned some of their prominent patients. The anti-Semitic campaign that followed under the pretext of fighting cosmopolitanism reminded Soviet Jews of the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazis. Only Stalin's death prevented a new wave of anti-Semitism under communist disguise.⁵⁹

The new Khrushchev era was, according to Berger, marked by an ambiguity in the treatment of the Jews. The equality of the Jews was upheld, but a strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism continued to exist. Instead of candidly acknowledging Stalinist crimes, Soviet policy would follow a zigzag course between coming to terms with the past and withholding information. Thus, the "shades of victims" would still overshadow Jewish (and non-Jewish) life in present-day Soviet Russia.⁶⁰

Midnight Shine: Jewish Prisoners in the Soviet Union (1962) dealt with the lives and deaths of inmates that Berger had met in the prisons and camps over the years. Three people whom he befriended and of whom he made particular reference were the Polish Bundist Mojsze Wajzman, the former member of the Zinoviev opposition to Stalin Josif Zadkin, and the medical biologist Avraham Charid.

Wajzman, an activist of the Jewish Workers' Bund of Poland during the interwar period, was a long-time critic of Stalinist communism and a proponent of Bundist-communist cooperation against the authoritarian Polish state. Zadkin belonged since 1926 to the circle around the former Comintern chair Gregory Zinoviev who tried in vain to stop Stalin after he had helped him oust Leon Trotsky from all political positions. Zadkin insisted that only in a country of low cultural development, such as Russia, could the party bureaucracy exercise absolute power over the rank-and-file members and the population in general. After Zinoviev's surrender to Stalin, Zadkin was asked to rejoin the party but, unlike Zinoviev, he refused.⁶¹

57 Penimí: Gli ebrei nell'Unione Sovietica, traduzione dall'ebraico di C. M.: Prefazione di Giovanni Rossi, Rome 1960.

58 Ibid., p. 32.

59 Ibid., p. 41.

60 Ibid., p. 90.

61 See Y. Barzilai: Zohar ba-ḥatsot: asirim Yehudim ba-tsafon ha-Sovyeṭi (Midnight Shine: Jewish Prisoners in the Soviet Union), Tel Aviv 1962, p. 20.

Avraham Charid, a former young professor at a biological-medical research institute in Moscow, was sent to a medical congress as late as 1936 in Nazi Germany. Charid had told Berger in 1939–1940 how astonished he was to see that German Jews lived with “false illusions” in a country that had already adopted the racial laws.⁶² They discussed the possible implications of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 when, even in the camps, the use of the term “German Fascism” was officially forbidden. Some prisoners were talking about a long-term compromise with Germany, but Charid did not see, as Berger wrote, “any possibility of compromise or peaceful coexistence with Nazi Germany, neither for the West, nor for the Soviet Union.”⁶³

Berger also met the Bulgarian Blagoy Popov, who in 1933 was, together with Georgi Dimitrov, accused as an arsonist in the Reichstag Fire in Germany. Like Dimitrov, Popov was, after secret negotiations, finally released and came to the Soviet Union, but, unlike the prominent Comintern functionary, he ended his life in the Norilsk camp. Berger had met Popov in Moscow in 1932. “From the time he [Popov] came to Norilsk [...] we had many mutual memories. We tried to dwell in close to each other and we succeeded to achieve places next to each other in the barracks in which we lived from 1939 to 1941.” Avraham Charid helped to bring up Popov’s spirit:⁶⁴ “Popov could not come to terms with the situation. He saw himself as innocent and put the blame of the suffering of the Russian population in the Soviet Union and the failure of the revolutionary movement in the whole world, on the tyranny of Stalin.”⁶⁵

Berger devoted a good part of his next book, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Revolution* (1968), to the events of Palestine in the 1920s that were discussed above. Without his report many facts about the internal life of the Left in Palestine and the communist party in particular would have been lost.⁶⁶

In the 1960s Berger dictated to friends in Tel Aviv and London another part of his memoirs about the time in Soviet camps and prisons. The book that was based on these recollections, *Shipwreck of a Generation*, came out in 1971 in London. In the United States the book appeared under the title *Nothing But the Truth: Joseph Stalin’s Prison Camps, a Survivor’s Account of the Victims He Knew*.⁶⁷ A Russian translation was pub-

62 Ibid., p. 76.

63 Ibid., p. 77.

64 Ibid., pp. 117–18.

65 Ibid., p. 118.

66 See Y. Berger-Barzilai: *Ha-Ṭragediah shel ha-Mahpekhah ha-Sovietit* (The Tragedy of Soviet Revolution).

67 Joseph Berger: *Nothing But the Truth: Joseph Stalin’s Prison Camps: A Survivor’s Account of the Victims He Knew*, New York 1971.

lished in Italy in 1973, but very few Soviet readers must have read the book at this time.⁶⁸ A French translation, *Le naufrage d'une génération*, came out in 1974.⁶⁹

The book was well-received by the public. Leonard Schapiro, one of Britain's foremost authorities on Soviet affairs, found it

[...] extraordinar[ily] informative and written with great humanity and perception; it is easily among the two or three best books there are on camp experience in human terms and from the point of view of the information which it provides for the historian or the student of Russian society.⁷⁰

The Marxist Ian Birchall emphasised that Berger gave a precise insight into the psychology of many prisoners: "Almost all believed the régime to be basically just, and hence saw their own cases simply as *mistakes* that would soon be corrected."⁷¹ An American reviewer wrote that Berger, although highly disillusioned, had "kept his left-wing sympathies; in its detail and its spirit the book will ring true to readers of Solzhenitsyn."⁷²

In Israel, Berger published a number of essays about his time in the Soviet Union and also on the history of the communist movement in Palestine. While not condemning his former comrades or his own actions, he now saw the party policy from a critical perspective.

In a 1965 essay about the 1929 riots in Palestine Berger wrote that the party's first reaction was one of confusion, but then it distinguished between the reasons underlying the attacks, the Arab fear to be dispossessed by the Jews, and the form it took – a clash which reminded the Jewish communists of a pogrom. Berger emphasised that it was the Comintern and not the party leadership that called the riots an anti-imperialist uprising. He saw this over-simplified view within the context of the Comintern's so-called Third Period of Turns and Revolutions in which the organisation foresaw an economic collapse of capitalism and a massive radicalisation of the workers and oppressed masses in the colonies.⁷³

68 Iosif Berger: *Krushenie pokoleniia: Vospominaniia* (Shipwreck of a Generation: Memoirs), Firenze 1973.

69 Joseph Berger: *Le Naufrage d'une Génération*, translated by J. Bernard and P. Monod, Paris 1974).

70 Leonard Schapiro, Joseph Berger, *Shipwreck of a Generation*, in: *The Spectator*, 4 June 1971, p. 15

71 Ian Birchall: [Review of] Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation*, in: *International Socialism* 51 (1972), pp. 32–33 (also available on the internet).

72 [Unnamed review of] Joseph Berger: *Nothing But the Truth*, in: *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 October 1971 (also available on the internet).

73 See Yosef Barzilay: Jerusalem, August 1929, in: *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (1968), pp. 16–32, originally published in: *Keshet* 8:1 (1965), pp. 122–137.

On 19 April 1970 Berger wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*:

In 1925 the Comintern asked me to keep in close contact with Jamal Husseini, who was the right-hand lieutenant of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin El-Husseini, the revered leader of the Palestinian Arabs. [...] In the name of the Comintern we promised these Arab leaders organizational and financial help to consolidate the Arab national movement, and to unify the Arab people, which was under British rule in the Land of Israel and in Egypt, under French rule in Syria and the Lebanon. [...] We, the Jewish communists of the Land of Israel, really believed then that, with the help of the Comintern, we would take our place in the government of the Palestinian State where we would defend the rights of the Jewish minority.⁷⁴

Israeli and Palestinian communists criticised such statements as falsifications in the interest of Zionist propaganda.⁷⁵

Late in life Berger was deeply impressed about what he considered a “miracle of Jewish awakening”, that is the wish of Soviet Jews to immigrate to Israel. Soviet Jews would, as he wrote, fight “to realize their basic demands for national self-determination, as embodied in the Soviet constitution, against a harsh bureaucracy putting innumerable obstacles in their way, and against the full blast of the official propaganda machine.”⁷⁶

In retrospect, contemporary witnesses in Israel see Joseph Berger as a person who was disillusioned with Soviet communism but had not completely abandoned the ideals of his youth. He considered himself as part of a moderate, independent Left and supported the peace camp in Israel and negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organisation – an idea that was very unpopular in Israel in the 1970s.⁷⁷

74 Joseph Berger-Barzilai in *Haaretz*, 19 April 1970, quoted from Maxim Ghilan: *How Israel Lost its Soul*, Harmondsworth 1974, pp. 144–145.

75 See Māhir ash-Sharīf: *al-umamiyah ash-shuyū'iyah wa-Filasṭīn: 1919–1928* (The Communist International and Palestine, 1919–1928)p. 161–62, footnote 31, who gives an otherwise well-balanced and fair evaluation of Berger’s political activities. The semi-official documentation *Communist Party of Israel: Sixty Years of Struggle* (Tel Aviv, 1980) does not mention Berger at all. *Zo ha-derekh*, the newspaper of the party, published in 1979 a series of articles about Palestinian communists from the 1920s and 1930s, but neglected Berger, too. See *Zo ha-derekh* 44 (31 October 1979), 46 (14 November 1979), and 48 (28 November 1979).

76 Joseph Berger-Barzilai: The “Neo-Zionist” Revolution in the USSR, in: *The Jewish Quarterly* 19:1–2 (1971), pp. 9–10.

77 See my interviews with Riva Ben-Eliezer and Ruth Livnit, Tel Aviv, 17 and 18 March 1994 (handwritten notes). Professor Shlomo Avineri confirmed this view in a conversation with the author on 20 March 2012 in Jerusalem. After his immigration to Israel in 1956, Berger felt very much at home in this country. He left it again only for visits to Paris and London: In 1959 he took part in a conference on Soviet Jewry in Paris. Other participants of the con-

Berger wrote his memoirs, as he emphasised, for a young generation in the Soviet Union that may not read them but would, nevertheless, undergo a process of rethinking Stalin's bloody legacy:

This process is not limited only to the students or to the intellectual élite, but is spreading to various levels of the working class and even to some parts of the peasant youth. [...] I have the feeling that the conclusions to which the new generation in the Soviet Union is coming will be more far-reaching and more surprising for most outside observers than anything that has been written or said on the subject until now.⁷⁸

This was in a way similar to what Berger's long-time friend Leopold Trepper – a communist in Palestine, a leader of anti-Fascist resistance in Belgium and France, and a victim of Stalin who finally, like Berger, settled down in Israel – concluded:

I do not regret the commitment of my youth, I do not regret the paths I have taken. In Denmark, in the fall of 1973, a young man asked me in a public meeting, *Haven't you sacrificed your life for nothing?* I replied: *No*. Not on one condition: that people understand the lesson of my life as a communist and a revolutionary, and do not turn themselves over to a deified party.⁷⁹

Mario Kessler, born 1955, works at the Center for Contemporary History (ZZF) in Potsdam, Germany, and as associate professor at Potsdam University. His main areas of research are the history of German communism, the attitude of the European labour movements towards anti-Semitism and Zionism, German refugee scholars in the United States and problems of historiography. He is the author of nineteen books that includes biographies of German communist politicians Ruth Fischer and Arthur Rosenberg and of Ossip K. Flechtheim, a renowned German-American political scientist.

ference that was organised by Nahum Goldmann were Martin Buber, Jeanne Hersch, and Lionel Trilling. See Yaacov Ro'i: *The Struggle for Soviet-Jewish Emigration 1948–1967*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 141–142. In 1962 he wanted to meet Leon Trotsky's widow Natalya Sedova in Paris to give her information about circumstances of her son's life and death in Stalin's prison cell, but she died before he arrived in Paris. See Joseph Berger: *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger*, p. 96.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

79 Leopold Trepper: *Die Wahrheit: Autobiographie*, Munich 1975, p. 345. Berger wrote the entry on Trepper in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Supplement 17 (Jerusalem: Keter/New York 1973–1982), cols. 586–587.