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Weimar in Jerusalem

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IN BERLIN, an exhibition entitled “Hitler and the Germans” has just opened. It examines the factors that caused the German people to bring Adolf Hitler to power and follow him to the very end.

I am too busy with the problems of Israeli democracy to fly to Berlin. Pity. Because since childhood, precisely this question has been troubling me. How did it happen that a civilized nation, which saw itself as the “people of poets and thinkers”, followed this man, much as the children of Hamelin followed the pied piper to their doom.

This troubles me not only as a historical phenomenon, but as a warning for the future. If this happened to the Germans, can it happen to any people? Can it happen here?

As a 9-year old boy I was an eye-witness to the collapse of German democracy and the ascent of the Nazis to power. The pictures are engraved in my memory – the election campaigns following each other, the uniforms in the street, the debates around the table, the teacher who greeted us for the first time with “Heil Hitler”. I resurrected these memories in a book I wrote (in Hebrew) during the Eichmann trial, and which ended with a chapter entitled: “Can it happen here?” I am returning to them these days, as I write my memoirs.

I don’t know if the Berlin exhibition tries to answer these questions. Perhaps not. Even now, 77 years later, there is no final answer to the question: Why did the German republic collapse?

This is an all-important question, because now people in Israel are asking, with growing concern: Is the Israeli republic collapsing?

FOR THE first time, this question is being asked in all seriousness. Throughout the years, we were careful not to mention the word Fascism in public discourse. It raises memories which are too monstrous. Now this taboo has been broken.

Yitzhak Herzog, the Minister of Welfare in the Netanyahu government, a member of the Labor party, the grandson of a Chief Rabbi and the son of a President, said a few days ago that “fascism is touching the margins of our society”. He was wrong: fascism is not only touching the margins, it is touching the government in which he is serving, and the Knesset, of which he is a member.

Not a day – quite literally – passes without a group of Knesset members tabling a new racist bill. The country is still divided by the amendment to the law of citizenship, which will compel applicants to swear allegiance to “Israel as a Jewish and democratic state”. Now the ministers are discussing whether this will be demanded only of non-Jews (which doesn’t sound nice) or of Jews, too – as if this would change the racist content one bit.

This week, a new bill was tabled. It would prohibit non-citizens from acting as tourist guides in East Jerusalem. Non-citizens in this case means Arabs. Because, when East Jerusalem was annexed by force to Israel after the 1967 war, its Arab inhabitants were not granted citizenship. They were accorded only the status of “permanent residents”, as if they were recent newcomers and not scions of families that have lived in the city for centuries.

The bill is intended to deprive Arab Jerusalemites of the right to serve as tourist guides at their holy places in their city, since they are apt to deviate from the official propaganda line. Shocking? Incredible? Not in the eyes of the proponents, which include members of the Kadima party. A Knesset member of the Meretz party also signed, but retracted, claiming that he was confused.

This proposal comes after dozens of bills of this kind have been tabled recently, and before dozens of others which are already on their way. The Knesset members act like sharks in a feeding frenzy. There is a wild competition between them to see who can devise the most racist bill.

It pays. After each such bill, the initiators are invited to TV studios to “explain” their purpose. Their pictures appear in the papers. For obscure MKs, whose names we have never heard of, that poses an irresistible temptation. The media are collaborating.

THIS IS not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon. All over Europe and America, overt fascists are raising their heads. The purveyors of hate, who until now have been spreading their poison at the margins of the political system, are now arriving at the center.

In almost every country there are demagogues who build their careers on incitement against the weak and helpless, who advocate the expulsion of “foreigners” and the persecution of minorities. In the past they were easy to dismiss, as was Hitler at the beginning of his career. Now they must be taken seriously.

Only a few years ago, the world was shocked when Jörg Haider’s party was allowed into the Austrian government coalition. Haider praised Hitler’s achievements. The Israeli government furiously recalled its ambassador to Vienna. Now the new Dutch government is dependent on the support of a declared racist, and fascist parties achieve impressive election gains in many countries. The “Tea Party” movement, which is blooming in the US, has some clearly fascist aspects. One of its candidates likes to go around wearing the uniform of the murderous Nazi Waffen-SS.

So we are in good company. We are no worse than the others. If they can do it, why not us?

BUT THERE is a big difference: Israel is not in the same situation as Holland or Sweden. Unlike these countries, Israel’s very existence is threatened by fascism. It can lead our state to destruction.

Years ago. I believed that two miracles had occurred in Israel: the revival of Hebrew language and Israeli democracy.

The resurrection of a “dead” language has never succeeded anywhere else. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, once asked contemptuously: “Will people ask for a railway ticket in Hebrew?” (He wanted us to speak German.) Today, the Hebrew language fares better than the Israeli railway.

But Israeli democracy is an even greater miracle. It did not grow from below, as in Europe. The Jewish people never had a democracy. The Jewish religion, like almost all religions, is totalitarian. The immigrants who flowed to the country had also never experienced democracy before. They came from Czarist or Bolshevik Russia, from Josef Pilsudski’s authoritarian Poland, from tyrannical Morocco and Iraq. Only an infinitesimal part came from democratic countries. And yet: from its earliest beginnings, the Zionist movement fostered an exemplary democracy in its ranks, and the State of Israel continued this tradition (with one limitation: a full democracy for Jews, a limited democracy for Arab citizens.)

I was always worried that this democracy was hanging by a thin thread, that we must be on our guard every hour, every minute. Now it is facing an unprecedented test.

THE GERMAN republic carried the name of Weimar, the town where the constituent assembly adopted its constitution after World War I. The Weimar of Bach and Goethe was one of the cradles of German culture.

It was a shinningly democratic constitution. Under its wings, Germany saw an unprecedented intellectual and artistic bloom. So why did the republic collapse?

Generally, two causes are identified: humiliation and unemployment. When the republic was still in its infancy, it was forced to sign the Versailles peace treaty with the victors of the First World War, a treaty that was but a humiliating act of surrender. When the republic fell behind with the payment of the huge indemnities levied on it, the French army invaded the industrial heartland of Germany in 1923, precipitating a galloping inflation – a trauma Germany has not recovered from to this day.

When the world economic crisis broke out in 1929, the German economy broke down. Millions of despairing unemployed sank into abject poverty and cried out for salvation. Hitler promised to wipe out both the humiliation of defeat and the unemployment, and fulfilled both promises: he gave work to the unemployed in the new arms industry and in public works, like the new autobahns, in preparation for war.

And there was a third reason for the collapse of the republic: the growing apathy of the democratic public. The political system of the republic just became loathsome. While the people were sinking into misery, the politicians went on playing their games. The public was longing for a strong leader, to impose order. The Nazis did not overthrow the republic. The republic imploded, the Nazis only filled the void.

IN ISRAEL there is no economic crisis. On the contrary, the economy is flourishing. Israel did not sign any humiliating agreement, like the Treaty of Versailles. On the contrary, it won all its wars. True, our fascists speak about the “Oslo criminals”, much as Hitler ranted against the “November criminals”, but the Oslo agreement was the opposite of the Versailles treaty, which was signed in November 1919.

If so, what does the profound crisis of Israeli society stem from? What causes millions of citizens to regard with complete apathy the doings of their leaders, contenting themselves with shaking their heads in front of the TV set? What causes them to ignore what’s happening in the occupied territories, half an hour’s drive from their home? Why do so many declare that they do not listen to the news or read newspapers anymore? What is the origin of the depression and despair, which leave open the road to fascism?

The state has arrived at a crossroads: peace or eternal war. Peace means the foundation of the Palestinian state and the evacuation of the settlements. But the genetic code of the Zionist movement is pushing towards the annexation of the whole of the historical country up to the Jordan River, and – directly or indirectly - the transfer of the Arab population. The majority of the people is evading a decision by claiming that “we have no partner for peace” anyhow. We are condemned to eternal war.

Democracy is suffering from a growing paralysis, because the different sectors of the people live in different worlds. The secular, the national-religious and the orthodox receive totally different educations. Common ground between them is shrinking. Other rifts are gaping between the old Ashkenazi community, the Oriental Jews, the immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, and the Arab citizens, whose separation from the rest is increasing all the time.

For the second time in my life, I may have to witness the collapse of a republic. But that is not predestined. Israel is not the goose-stepping Germany of those days, 2010 is not 1933. The Israeli society can yet sober up in time and mobilize the democratic forces within itself.

But for that to happen, it must awake from the coma, understand what is happening and where it is leading to, protest and struggle by all available means (as long as that is still possible), in order to arrest the fascist wave that is threatening to engulf us.