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"...Namely the State of Israel"

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EVERY TIME I hear the voice of David Ben-Gurion uttering the words "Therefore we are gathered here..." I think of Issar Barsky, a charming youngster, the little brother of a girl-friend of mine.

The last time we met was in front of the dining hall of Kibbutz Hulda, on Friday, May 14, 1948.

In the coming night my company was to attack al-Qubab, an Arab village on the road to Jerusalem, east of Ramle. We were busy with preparations. I was cleaning my Czech-made rifle, when somebody came and told us that Ben-Gurion was just making a speech about the founding of the state.

Frankly, none of us was very interested in speeches by politicians in Tel Aviv. The city seemed so far away. The state, we knew, was here with us. If the Arabs were to win, there would be no state and no us. If we won, there would be a state. We were young and self-confident, and did not doubt for a moment that we would win.

But there was one detail that I was really curious about: what was the new state to be called? Judea? Zion? The Jewish State?

So I hastened to the dining hall. Ben-Gurion's unmistakable voice was blaring from the radio. When he reached the words "...namely the State of Israel" I had had enough and left.

Outside I came across Issar. He was in another company, which was to attack another village that night. I told him about the name of the state and said "take care of yourself!"

Some days later he was killed. So I remember him as he was then: a boy of 19, a smiling, tall Sabra full of joie de vivre and innocence.

THE CLOSER we come to the grandiose 60th anniversary festivities, the more I am troubled by the question: if Issar were to open his eyes and see us, still a boy of 19, what would he think of the state that was officially established on that day?

He would see a state that has developed beyond his wildest dreams. From a small community of 635,000 souls (more than 6000 of whom would die with him in that war) we have grown to more than seven million. The two great miracles we have wrought - the revival of the Hebrew language and the institution of Israeli democracy - continue to be a reality. Our economy is strong and in some fields - such a hi-tech - we are in the world super-league. Issar would be excited and proud.

But he would also feel that something had gone wrong in our society. The Kibbutz where we put up our little bivouac tents that day has become an economic enterprise, like any other. The social solidarity, of which we were so proud, has collapsed. Masses of adults and children live below the poverty line, old people, the sick and the unemployed are left to fend for themselves. The gap between rich and poor is one of the widest in the developed world. And our society, that once raised the banner of equality and justice, just clucks its collective tongue and moves on to other

matters.

Most of all he would be shocked to discover that the brutal war, which killed him and wounded me, together with thousands of others, is still going on at full blast. It determines the entire life of the nation. It fills the first pages of the newspapers and heads the news bulletins.

That our army, the army that really was "we", has become something quite different, an army whose main occupation is to oppress another people.

THAT NIGHT we indeed attacked al-Qubab. When we entered the village, it was already deserted. I broke into one of the homes. The pot was still warm, food was on the table. On one of the shelves I found some photos: a man who had obviously just combed his hair, a village woman, two small children. I still have them with me.

I assume that the village which was attacked by Issar that night presented a similar picture. The villagers - men, women, children - fled at the last moment, leaving their whole life behind them.

There is no escape from the historic fact: Israel's Independence Day and the Palestinians' Naqba (Catastrophe) Day are two sides of the same coin. In 60 years we have not succeeded - and actually have not even tried - to untie this knot by creating another reality.

And so the war goes on.

WITH THE 60th Independence Day approaching, a committee sat down to choose an emblem for the event. The one they came up with looks like something for Coca Cola or the Eurovision song contest.

The real emblem of the state is quite different, and no committee of bureaucrats has had to invent it. It is fixed to the ground and can be seen from afar: The Wall. The Separation Wall.

Separation between whom, between what?

Apparently between Israeli Kfar Sava and neighboring Palestinian Qalqilyah, between Modi'in Illit and Bil'in. Between the State of Israel (and some more grabbed land) and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. But in reality, between two worlds.

In the fevered imagination of those who believe in the "clash of civilizations", whether George Bush or Osama Bin-Laden - the Wall is the border between the two titans of history, Western civilization and Islamic civilization, two mortal enemies fighting a war of Gog and Magog.

Our Wall has become the front-line between these two worlds.

The wall is not just a structure of concrete and wire. More than anything else, the wall - like every such wall - is an ideological statement, a declaration of intent, a mental reality. The builders declare that they belong, body and soul, to one camp, the Western one, and that on the other side of the wall there begins the opposing world, the enemy, the masses of Arabs and other Muslims.

When was that decided? Who made the decision? How?

102 years ago, Theodor Herzl wrote in his ground-breaking oeuvre, *Der Judenstaat*, which gave birth to the Zionist movement, a sentence fraught with significance: "For Europe we shall constitute there [in Palestine] a sector of the wall against Asia, we shall serve as the vanguard of culture against barbarism."

Thus, in 22 German words, the world-view of Zionism, and our place in it, was laid down. And now, after a delay of four generations, the physical wall is following the path of the mental one.

The picture is bright and clear: We are essentially a part of Europe (like North America), a part of culture, which is entirely European. On the other side: Asia, a barbaric continent, empty of culture, including the Muslim and Arab world.

One can understand Herzl's world view. He was a man of the 19th century, and he wrote his treatise when white Imperialism was at its zenith. He admired it with all his soul. He endeavored (in vain) to arrange a meeting with Cecil Rhodes, the man who symbolized British colonialism. He approached Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, who offered him Uganda, then a British colony. At the same time, he also admired the German Kaiser and his so well-ordered Reich, which carried out a horrible genocide in South-West Africa in the year of Herzl's death.

Herzl's maxim did not remain an abstract thought. The Zionist movement followed it from the first moment on, and the State of Israel continues to do so to this very day.

COULD IT have been different? Could we have become a part of the region? Could we have become a kind of cultural Switzerland, an independent island between East and West, bridging and mediating between the two?

One month before the outbreak of the 1948 war, seven months before the State of Israel was officially founded, I published a booklet entitled "War or Peace in the Semitic Region". It began with the words:

"When our Zionist fathers decided to set up a "safe haven" in Palestine, they had the choice between two paths:

"They could appear in West Asia as a European conqueror, who sees himself as a bridgehead of the 'white' race and master of the 'natives', like the Spanish conquistadores and the Anglo-Saxon colonialists in America. Like, in their time, the Crusaders in Palestine.

"The other path was to see themselves as an Asian people returning to its homeland - seeing themselves as an heir to the political and cultural tradition of the Semitic region."

The history of this country has seen dozens of invasions. They can be divided into two main categories.

There were the invaders who came from the West, such as the Philistines, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, Napoleon and the British. Such an invasion establishes a bridgehead, and its mental outlook is that of a bridgehead. The region beyond is hostile territory, its inhabitants enemies who have to be oppressed or destroyed. In the end, all of these invaders were expelled.

And there were the invaders who came from the East, such as the Emorites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians and the Arabs. They conquered the land and became part of it, influenced its culture and were influenced

by it, and in the end struck roots.

The ancient Israelites were of the second category. Even if there is some doubt about the Exodus from Egypt as described in the Books of Moses, or the Conquest of Canaan as described in the Book of Joshua, it is reasonable to assume that they were tribes that came in from the desert and infiltrated between the fortified Canaanite towns, which they could not conquer, as indeed described in Judges 1.

The Zionists, on the other hand, were of the first category. They brought with them the world-view of a bridgehead, a vanguard of Europe. This world-view gave birth to the Wall as a national symbol. It has to be changed entirely.

ONE OF our national peculiarities is a form of discussion where all the participants, whether from the Left or from the Right, use the clinching argument: "If we don't do this and this, the state will cease to exist!" Can one imagine such an argument in France, Britain or the USA?

This is a symptom of "Crusader" anxiety. Even though the Crusaders stayed in this country for almost 200 years and produced eight generations of "natives", they were never really sure of their continued existence here.

I am not worried about the existence of the State of Israel. It will exist as long as states exist. The question is: What kind of state will it be?

A state of permanent war, the terror of its neighbors, where violence pervades all spheres of life, where the rich flourish and the poor live in misery; a state that will be deserted by the best of its children?

Or a state that lives in peace with its neighbors, to their mutual benefit; a modern society with equal rights for all its citizens and without poverty; a state that invests its resources in science and culture, industry and the environment; where future generations will want to live; a source of pride for all its citizens?

That can be our objective for the next 60 years. I think this is what Issar would have wanted, too.

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