

My Journey with Jewry

1. I have watched events unfold in Gaza since 7 October 2023, and I have come to realise that I have always been biased in favour of Israel in its debilitating conflict with the Arab states. We CQ practitioners lecture incessantly about the malignant unconscious biases that stalk people, privately and professionally. But no - my bias was entirely conscious, so much so that I can date it back to the mid-1960s: to a love, the 1973 Arab – Israeli war, and professional engagements with Israelis and Arabs during my diplomatic career.

2. My first love was an Australian Mizrahi Jewess in the 1960s. Her family was an odd mixture of orthodoxy – “no cameras” - and modernity. They were generous, and her father was especially welcoming. Through them, I became aware of the ins and outs of Jewish history, the Judaic traditions, European persecution, Zionism, Shoah and Israel-Palestinian/Arab relations. Mizrahi Jews had lived alongside Palestinians for generations, but they, too, suffered humiliation and dispossession during the Nakba and the formation of the Israeli state in 1948 - though not on the same scale as the killings and evictions endured by 750000 Muslim Palestinians. Still, discrimination at the hands of Ashkenazi Jews persuaded them to emigrate. They were first placed in British-run camps in Cyprus, and because her father was well educated (from the American University of Beirut), the family later secured permission to migrate to Australia. My friend died about a year and a half into our togetherness, seeding an enduring emotional and political bias deeply in favour of Israel.

3. In 1967, Indian Prime Minister Gandhi visited Canberra. She gave an address at the Academy of Sciences in which she understated the agricultural difficulties India was facing. In fact, there was a near-famine in India. In the flame of youthful arrogance, I questioned her about refusing Israeli assistance – already famous for its micro-agricultural advances – condemning India’s non-recognition of Israel and her “pro-Palestinian” policies. She responded unconvincingly. I was persistent and argumentative.

4. My intervention was obviously noted in certain quarters. I was invited to the dinner in her honour at the Parliament House. That was partly because there were so few brown faces available in Canberra, and the PMO wanted to offset the visible impression, even if only slightly, of the prevailing White Australia policy. I was seated at a front-row table. Indira Gandhi stared at me with distaste. The next day, I was called in by the Indian High Commission. My Indian passport was confiscated. Legally, I was stateless. The Immigration Department threatened deportation. Some massaging back in New Delhi and a discreet intervention by ANU Vice Chancellor Sir John Crawford restored the *status quo*.

5. During my diplomatic career from the early 1970s onward, I was involved, one way or another, with Israel-related issues. And I met some leading figures.

6. In Beijing, I liaised with the World Council of Churches to facilitate the emigration of Christians out of Xinjiang. Periodically, I dealt with various offshoots of the World

Jewish Congress regarding the remnants of the Jewish communities in Shanghai and Harbin.

7. I was posted in Beirut and Damascus during the Lebanese war. Together with other Western diplomats, I liaised with local Sunni Muslim al-Mourabitoun, Druze and Maronite militias, as well as with floating Israeli interests and the UN (Fijian-led) peacekeepers on the Israel-Lebanon border.

8. Keeping abreast of developments on human rights in the Soviet Union was my major professional preoccupation in Moscow. The Embassy had been charged with a brief from Canberra to do what it could to support and secure the emigration of Jewish Refuseniks from the Soviet Union. I well recall the day in May 1984 being instructed that my focus should not be on human rights in general in the Soviet Union - "forget the Balts" - but specifically on the Refuseniks.

- Thereafter, we were much occupied with visits from prominent Jewish figures from Australia, including Isi Leibler, Justice Enfield and Sam Lipski. We worked closely with various Jewish organisations in Australia, but Isi Leibler, with a direct line to Prime Minister Hawke, was instrumental in setting the agenda for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Embassy in Moscow. It is a measure of this influence that, during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1987, PM Hawke focused on the plight of Soviet Jewry to an extent that surprised even Gorbachev, particularly given that his regime had considerably loosened the chains on refuseniks from 1986.
- Looking back forty years later, in the context of the present events, we functionaries in the Embassy and DFAT were naïve not to be aware of the extent to which we were being manipulated by vested interests. The prominent Soviet dissident, Sakharov and several other Jewish interlocutors in and outside the USSR cautioned us about the Ashkenazi Zionist agenda. I believe that we did not fully comprehend intra-Jewish sensitivities and conflicting views. For example, it was something of a mystery why we were dissuaded from including Jewish families, often in Siberia or Central Asian Republics, in our representations to the Soviets.
- I do now. They were not considered by the Australian Jewish lobbyists as being fit enough for settlement in the New Israel. This is consistent with the traditional Ashkenazi prejudice against 'Oriental' Jews who lived comfortably

Verified

The Anti-Semitism of Zionism

Chaim Weizmann
[later the first president of
Israel '49-52]
wrote in the Fall 1937 issue
of New Judea magazine:

*"Palestine is no solution for
the Jewish problem of Europe.
Palestine cannot absorb the
Jews of Europe. We want only
the best of Jewish youth to
come to us.*

*We want only the educated to
enter Palestine for the
purpose of increasing its
culture. The other Jews will have to stay where they are
and face whatever fate awaits them.*

*These millions of Jews are dust on the wheels of history
and they may have to be blown away. We don't want
them pouring into Palestine. We don't want Tel Aviv to
become another low-grade ghetto."*



with their Arab, Persian and Palestinian neighbours for centuries. It is perhaps no accident that Israel had no compunction in bombing the Rafi-Niya Synagogue in Tehran recently.

- I understood only later. They would not 'fit' New Israel. The Ashkenazi prejudice against the 'Oriental'/Arabie - as evidenced by the lack of compunction in the recent bombing of the Rafi-Niya Synagogue in Tehran – goes back decades. As does the prejudice against non-cosmopolitan Jews.
- Understandably, most emigrating refuseniks such as Nathan Sharansky, Begun, Slepak, and Bogomolny settled in Israel. Several Soviet refuseniks have emerged as supporters of Zionism and the ruling regime in Tel Aviv.
- At some point, it was mooted that the role of DFAT and the Embassy in Moscow should be publicly recognised by the Jewish community in Australia. This was rejected due to potential implications for Australian interests and diplomats in West Asia.
- Isi Leibler is now settled in Israel. Various public accounts suggest that he was recruited by Mossad while a student in Jerusalem in 1960 and then installed as an “agent of influence” within Australian political circles. However, no Australian government statement has ever publicly labelled him a Mossad agent. Still, Leibler’s back-channel role has been widely reported and accepted by commentators, making his possible affiliations an open secret.
- His son, Mark Leibler AC, is the National Chairman of the Australia-Israel Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC). His influence as a lobbyist in the Australian polity is widely acknowledged and indeed justifies the title of his biography, *The Powerbroker*. His son, Jeremy, is the National President of the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA). He publicly engages with federal politicians and media regarding Australia-Israel relations and antisemitism. Jeremy is a member of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

9. My interest in things Jewish continued in New Delhi, thanks to a French (Sephardic) Jewish friend. Essentially, this entailed visits to and maintaining contact with the 450-year-old Paradesi synagogue in Kochi and the Chabad House synagogue in Mumbai. The latter was attacked on 26/11; Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and his wife, Rivka, were killed by the terrorists.

10. I conclude with one overarching thought. Throughout my career, I had no doubt that protecting Israeli/Jewish interests on humanitarian grounds was part and parcel of advancing Australian national interests. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that my life has consisted of close friendships with Jewish women and men.