

The Breach In The Wall

• by Shulamith Schwartz

TO THOSE who read foreign press dispatches on Palestine it will probably seem incredible that even now, during the worst crisis yet precipitated by what we call the "Arab-Jewish problem", there are signs which point to the possibility of an eventual rapprochement. That there are any such, is in large measure due to the difficult, up-hill work in this field done for years by the Histadruth's Department of Arab Relations. The policy underlying that work is well-known: the Histadruth has consistently advocated one hundred per cent employment of Jewish labor within the Jewish economy but tried to help organize Arab labor in separate, parallel unions within the Arab economy and to organize Jews and Arabs jointly where they are employed jointly, as on the railroads or in Haifa harbor. The Riots of 1936 interrupted the slow progress that was being made in this direction and brought Arab workers in Palestine closer to the level of those in Egypt, Syria, Transjordan and Iraq where, it is safe to say, no organization of workers worthy of the name, exists and where increasing political independence seems inevitably to bring Fascist or semi-Fascist tendencies in its wake. Yet with all the bloody unrest of the last two years the contact between the Histadruth and Arab workers, though more limited now and more difficult to achieve, continue to exist, and Haifa even witnessed a joint First of May celebration in its Histadruth Center. Despite the very real possibility of terrorist reprisals, almost two hundred Arabs—including one woman!—attended, and one of them read a poem he had written in honor of the occasion while three made speeches in which the brotherhood of all workers competed as a theme with simple but keen analysis of the Arab nationalist leadership "talking in the name of the nation and, at the same time, exploiting it."

Arab-Jewish relations in Haifa have always been better than elsewhere, for Haifa is a city whose Jewish population belongs largely to the ranks of organized labor and it is, furthermore, a city of large-scale enterprises—the harbor, the railway workshops, the Neshet Cement Factory, the Iraq Petroleum Company—where Arab and Jewish workers come into close contact with each other. But most of the Arabs of Palestine never come into such direct contact with Jews and owe their ideas about them to a notoriously inaccurate and chauvinistic press which has done as much as events themselves to build an almost impenetrable wall of hatred between the two races.

The need for an Arab paper to present the Jewish case fairly has long been recognized by the Zionist Organization. It started to publish one

some years ago, but the paper was short-lived. The difficulties are many, almost insuperable. There is the inevitable question of finances, so embarrassing to a movement with little money and many functions. There is the problem of the staff, of finding able Jewish journalists who can write Arab—i. e. naturally and well and know Arab affairs and the psychology of the Arab public intimately. Nor is linguistic and sociological knowledge sufficient: there is still the vexed question of style. Literary Arabic is highly rhetorical and derivative, full of reminiscences of the Koran—the simple reader or rather, in a country with so high a rate of illiteracy, the simple hearer, is often likely to be at a loss. Yet the paper that wishes to gain his respect dare not write in language clear and colloquial enough to be easily understood. It must remind him of the high-flown rhetoric he hears on Fridays at the Mosque, while at the same time somehow or other enabling him to grasp exactly what it means.

A few years are a long time in Palestine and in their course even such complex requirements as those just outlined may be met. After April, 1936, Arab-Jewish relations reached their worst point, and the need for contact and for sane propaganda became so pressing that the money question was solved by the generosity of an American Zionist. The man-power had meantime been developed in the person of "Davar" 's self-made expert on Arab affairs, a former worker and primary school teacher of Eastern European origin who had lovingly mastered the intricacies of Arabic language, political intrigue and social and national development. He and his collaborator, the Damascus-bred secretary of the Histadruth's Department of Arab Relations, have even worked out a style commended by Arabs for its traditional nature and yet considerably simpler than that of the Arab press.

Thus on March 24, 1937 there appeared the first issue of the Histadruth's Arabic weekly, "Haqiqat al-Amr" (The Truth of the Matter"). Its leading article was a proclamation of purpose: "Every unprejudiced person must admit that Jews in Palestine, their eternal and only homeland, are engaged in a great, creative task which benefits all the inhabitants of the land. The Jews have increased the economic possibilities of the country, and so the Arab population has grown and become more prosperous. Organized labor is the backbone of the Zionist movement and it calls to the Arab to work with it for peace and for the upbuilding of the land. We hereby extend the hand of friendship to every real Arab nationalist

—to every Arab, that is, who is concerned with the good of his entire nation and not only of a small group of it. This paper opens its columns to honest expression of opinion whether under real or assumed names, and is certain that in so doing it fills a long-felt need."

The editorial was followed by a simple but telling description of five murders committed by terrorists during the previous week; it was entitled "Is This the Way to Revive the Glory of Islam and the Arab World?" and was accompanied by a picture of one of the victims, a shepherd in the mountain settlement of Kfar ha-Horesh, photographed with two of his lambs. An account of the growth of the Tel-Aviv harbor came next, and then columns on Labor throughout the world and on international politics, in which last the choice of topics for discussion—the rearmament of Britain, the defense loan floated in France and the strong fight put up by the Spanish Loyalists—was motivated by the necessity of providing an antidote for the Arab press' constant exultation at the strength of the dictatorships as contrasted with the weakness of the democracies. Another column used official statistics to refute a number of characteristically false statements made by the Arab press, among them the old reproach that Jewish settlement had created a landless peasantry. Again official statistics appeared in an Oriental setting: the number of marriages registered in each of three religious communities for the years 1935 and 1936 showed, it was pointed out, a particularly large drop among the Moslems in 1936, the year of the riots, as contrasted with 1935, the year of large Jewish immigration. "And who is it that cannot marry in a year of riots, the rich man or the poor man?" Even stronger Oriental flavor characterizes the last feature in the issue, a sketch called "Thirty Victims and Two Tears", describing a Jew and an Arab sitting together in a Haifa cafe and listening to a radio broadcast the official communique of the day's events—thirty Arabs had been killed in an encounter with British troops. "And the Jew and the Arab, each letting fall a tear, lamented the loss of these innocent but misled souls.

The first issue definitely set the pattern for the rest. In each we find interpretation of world news stressing the democratic angle and, again in opposition to the Arab press, emphasizing the factors making for peace rather than immediate war; in each there is labor news which, like the paper as a whole, teaches Socialism by implication, giving the reader not formal Socialist terminology but rather something much closer to the Moslem mentality—the ethical basis of the struggle against economic injustice. In each issue, too, there is a sort of "Behind the Scenes" exposure of what is going on in the Arab political camp, news of a sort

that never enters the Arab press, and there is constant and necessary debate with that press. In order to stress the fact that Jewish constructive achievement in Palestine has gone on uninteruptedly even during these years, each issue contains a list and description of new undertakings—the building of the Hadassah—University Hospital, the establishment of a fountain pen factory, the founding of a German-Jewish settlement, the appearance of a new Arabic Text-book for use in Jewish secondary schools. Then there is the column called "What Is the Histadruth?", describing its various functions and institutions in detail—editorial support is of course always given to Arab workers in case of labor disputes. Letters from Arab readers—often very illuminating ones—never fail to appear, nor is any issue without a story, a story in the moralizing, almost fable-like vein that appeals to a more or less unsophisticated Eastern audience. Curiously enough, the story is almost always a translation of a Western classic. The Arab readers prefer it—their own life is familiar material and it is Europe and America that seem romantic to the East. So Haqiqat al-Amr offers Tolstoy and Gorki, Maupassant and Jack London, Shalom Asch and Peretz in Arabic.

Under the present conditions of unrest and suspicion the distribution of the paper naturally presents many problems. It is easiest in Haifa where the joint Railway Workers' group serves as a base. Several hundred copies are distributed throughout the city, despite the fact that Arab political leaders brought pressure upon the Government to ban the paper in the railway workshops. By one means or another—mainly by mailing the paper in a sealed envelope—a few hundred more copies are distributed in Jaffa and Jerusalem, but the bulk go to the rural districts and get to their Arab readers through the discreet efforts of neighboring Jewish settlements. The need for the paper and the efficacy with which it is fulfilling its purpose are indisputably borne out by the fact that it has managed in the course of one troubled and abnormal year to win as many readers as the most widely circulated Arab paper in the country—a total of about three thousand. Five hundred more go to the neighboring Arab countries and there, too, serve at least partially to counteract the misrepresentations of the Palestinian Arab press.

Hundreds and even thousands of readers for "Haqiqat al-Amr" are still no answer to the complex question of Arab-Jewish relations. Nobody knows this better than the editor himself. "But," he says, "we are doing our duty." It would be wrong to let the Arab press go unchallenged. At least we are furnishing an antidote to the poison, we are making a breach in the wall, we are laying a foundation for the future."