

8 April 1983

Dodging the issue

YURI ANDROPOV'S accession to the Soviet leadership has brought no softening in Kremlin attitudes, either on arms limitation or on human rights.

At the interminable Madrid talks, the Western diplomats continue daily to eat the fruits of the gullibility of their predecessors at Helsinki in 1975 who accepted as good currency the Soviet undertakings that, in return for a "basket" of recognition of their lordship over Eastern Europe, they would grant a basket of human rights and free communication.

The Western nations are reduced once more to pleading and protesting, yet, if only for the education of their own public, there is no escape from their duty to excoriate Soviet policy from every available forum. Such a forum was justly provided by the recent conference in Jerusalem.

The conference, however, was not called in order to protest Soviet human rights policy in general. Its purpose was to call for a change in policy towards Soviet Jewry and, most specifically, for re-opening the Soviet gates to Jewish emigration to Israel. Alas, in confrontation with Moscow on this issue, it is no longer Israel, nor the Jewish people, who have the strong case. It is the Soviet Union.

THE PRECISE reasons why the Soviets, more than a decade ago, opened a crack in their sealed gates to allow Jews to go to Israel can only be guessed at – though it is significant to recall that the first exit permits were issued precisely to those unbelievably courageous young Jews who defiantly – and independently of each other – proclaimed their identification with the Jewish nation and its state.

Unknown, too, are the criteria for the selection of the lucky applicants. But specific conditions the Soviet authorities laid down for granting exit visas were simple and concise. They were granted exclusively for travel to Israel – and only on production of an affidavit from a relative in Israel, guaranteed in effect by the Government of Israel.

The rest of the Iron Curtain remained tightly closed. Except in the case of a handful of troublesome dissidents, the Soviet Union has never agreed to allow its citizens to emigrate to the U.S. or anywhere else.

Whatever the deeper motives of the Kremlin, the stark fact is that after 50 years of suppression and repression, of imprisonment, exile to Siberia, forced labour and, in the end, often slow death meted out as punishment to Zionists, the Communist regime suddenly decided to make precisely its Jewish citizens and the Zionist state the exclusive beneficiaries of relaxation of its inhuman policy.

The boon to Soviet Jewry – and the concomitant moral victory for Zionism – were enthusiastically embraced by the Jewish people; and the long struggle began to influence Moscow to broaden and hasten the stream of emigrants.

It was unimaginable that any responsible executant of Israeli or Zionist policy should do anything that might possibly impede this historic new direction in Soviet behaviour, or provide the Kremlin with the least excuse for halting or slowing the process.

Yet that is precisely what happened. The Israeli Government and the Jewish Agency allowed themselves to be maneuvered and, in the result abetted passively in

developing procedures which, in time, resulted in the arrival of some 80 per cent of the emigrants each year not in Israel but in the United States. At their first stop outside Soviet control – Vienna – they “dropped out.”

THE PROMOTERS and apologists of the drop-out, largely identifiable as American Jewish “leaders,” at first ventured the infantile argument that by helping the soviet Jew go from Vienna to the U.S. they were saving him from the Soviet Union.

Subsequently, they raised the cry that the emigrants had the right to “freedom of choice.”

Such insensitivity to civilized values and accepted norms of honesty seems incredible. Would any of those “American Jewish leaders” – all reputedly upright businessmen or members of free professions – dare to claim “freedom of choice” as to whether to honour *or not to honour* their signature on a cheque?

No. The Soviet Jew, granted a most specifically conditional exit permit, and once arrived in Vienna, has one exclusive moral imperative: to proceed to Israel and thus fulfill the condition for his good fortune. Once in Israel, he may stay or leave as he pleases. There and then indeed he has freedom of choice.

Even if the claim for freedom of choice were not spurious, would the emigrant’s right to “drop out” in Vienna – instead of later, in Israel (if drop out he must) – supersede every other human consideration and public interest? Would it be so sacred as to justify the breach of the conditions laid down by the Soviet government, provide the Kremlin with an additional whip with which to lash the Jewish people, humiliate the Jewish State and jeopardize the chances of the remaining Jews to emigrate at all?

WITH ALL DUE reservation at his behaviour – the “drop out” himself is the least to blame. Not all the Soviet Jews – particularly those who lived in the areas under Communist control since 1917 – were touched by the Zionist miracle; nor were they left unaffected by the tremendous recent campaigns of anti-Israel denigration and intimidation.

They were certainly influenced by the glamorization of the United States. Above all, however, they learned – and this was confirmed for them in Vienna – that Jewish authorities themselves were offering them a choice – an offer in which the Israeli government was evidently acquiescing.

They learned that Jewish leaders were accepting the moral responsibility for their default, and were, moreover, providing the technical and financial means for the transfer.

Excited by their new-found freedom, bewildered and bedazzled, why should they not then try out the rich American land of unlimited opportunity?

THE “DROP-OUT” is a devious process, honed and polished over the years by the zealous hands of the American HIAS organization, whose functionaries suddenly discovered a new instrument for what was once a really humanitarian undertaking: helping Jewish immigrants from oppressive Europe settle in America.

When the Soviet Jew arrives in Vienna, representatives of the Jewish Agency urge him to join the plane for Israel. If he expresses a preference for not going to Israel he is transferred to the HIAS agents; and they take him to Rome. Rome is the “station” for the U.S. How does he achieve admittance into Italy?

The Italian authorities grant him a temporary stay – on the grounds that he *is* proceeding to Israel – as shown on his Soviet exit document.

How thence does he reach the U.S. – through the mesh of its immigration regulations? The U.S., Government itself solves the problem. It opens up for the Soviet Jew the one category that legitimizes easy entry into the U.S. It accords him the status of a *refugee*: a person, that is, with nowhere to go.

By this little stratagem, the Jew who but yesterday, on the way to Vienna, was returning proudly to his Homeland materializes in Rome in the pitiful guise of a fugitive from his country, seeking asylum. His Israeli visa might never have existed.

THE KEY to the maneuver is thus in Washington. The decision to turn a blind eye to the deceit, to pretend the emigrant is a refugee and that the visa of the Jewish State is non-existent or worthless, must have been taken at a high level of government. Democratic regimes do not normally subvert their own immigration principles and regulations, certainly would not lightly collaborate in a transparent hoax – bearing with it, moreover, a flagrant insult to a friendly state.

The roots of such a decision are no doubt entwined in the complex of historical American attitudes to Zionism and current policies towards Israel. They need to be studied and analyzed. But they are far less immediately important than the fact that the U.S. would certainly not engage in this transaction without connivance, at least passive accommodation, by the Israeli Government.

Unequivocal insistence, if necessary publicly announced, by Jerusalem, that Washington refrain from treating an Israeli visa as a non-document would put an end to the process; could surely have prevented its ever being adopted.

There is no valid explanation for the Israeli Government's behaviour (initiated in the days of the Alignment) but a combination of mental inertia, then failure of political will, compounded by ethical woolly-mindedness.

It was, finally, manifestly bulldozed – by the threat (adopted by some of the Jewish moguls and fund-raisers in the U.S.) – that it would be branded as “illiberal” if it did not recognize the principle of “freedom of choice at Vienna,” and was presumably overwhelmed by Washington's ready response to help consummate that “freedom.”

A CONFERENCE on Soviet Jewry was indeed long overdue – for consultation on the central crucial need to find ways and means to put an end to the running sore of the drop-out. Such a conference *inter alia*, should have sent an unequivocal message to the Israeli Government and to the Jewish Agency to bring about this consummation; and to HIAS and to Washington not to hinder it.

The subject was not even mentioned. Its proceedings were simply a humiliating demonstration of mass make-believe, the participants vying with each other in Zionist rhetoric as though they had never heard of the drop-out – and as though they did not know that they were not deceiving Mr. Andropov, who knows all the facts.

The silence of the conference on the real problem, its frozen pretence, bodes chilling implications for Israel far beyond the issue of Soviet Jewry.

Reader's letter, 26 April 1983

THE DROP-OUT PROBLEM

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – I refer to Shmuel Katz's article of April 8 about the recent Jerusalem Conference on Soviet Jewry, in which he claims that the subject of drop-outs was not breached.

This is not correct. The Chairman of the Jewish Agency, Mr. Arye Dulzin, who was also the Chairman of the Conference, spoke of the drop-out problem among Soviet Jews in his speech to the plenary. He called the problem a tragic phenomenon which gave the Kremlin authorities a pretext to close the gates.

In the course of his speech, Mr. Dulzin returned to the subject and said that the drop-out problem was most important and that, for the Soviet authorities, the emigration of Jews to the U.S. was heresy, as it undermined the Soviet system and its ideology, and the very concept of Soviet superiority. He also said that the Russians allowed Jews to go to Israel on the basis of family reunion and on Soviet acceptance of the concept of a Jewish homeland, to which they allow the Jews to go. Dulzin asked that the problem be dealt with since the drop-outs were harming the prospects of Jews who wish to leave the Soviet Union for Israel.

In his speech, MK Dror Zeigerman also called on the government of Israel to fight the drop-out phenomenon and appealed to Jewish organizations to withhold their help.

ZVI EYAL, Spokesman

The Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization

Jerusalem.

Sir, – I wish to express my appreciation both to you and to Shmuel Katz for his article, "Dodging the issue."

Mr. Katz gives a lucid analysis of the drop-out problem. By breaking their agreement to travel to Israel, these Jews have broken faith with both Israel and Russia, and all Russian Jews are now captive.

Y. BREEN

Tel Aviv.