

Priestley & Gollancz on Future of Jewish Culture

Striking addresses on the future of Jewish Culture were delivered by Mr. J. B. Priestley, the famous novelist and dramatist, and Mr. Victor Gollancz, at a meeting of the Society of Friends of the Hebrew University, held at Palestine House, London. The object of the gathering was to form an Art Group to cultivate cultural relations between the Yishuv, especially the Hebrew University, and writers, musicians and artists in Britain.

MR. PRIESTLEY, whose Jewish hero in one of his last plays, "Desert Highway," spoke so eloquently about the Jewish past and spiritual heritage, began his address by saying: "I am not a Jew; I have never been to Palestine and I am not a scholar. I only represent the 'wide world,' and it is as a representative of this 'wide world' that I want to speak about the Hebrew University."

It might appear, he said, that the Hebrew University was only a new piece of nationalism about which most people were beginning to feel very doubtful. The Hebrew University was comparatively new, with a national background representing a new growing nationalism. But he did not mind a nationalism that kept in the right place. The right place for nationalism was in the cultural sphere to which it belonged, and even if economic and political nationalism had to go, which he hoped they would if civilisation was to be saved, at the same time he hoped that the strong nationalistic feelings which existed would operate in the sphere of culture, and culture, in order to be vital, must have its roots in the living soil, in those feelings of attachment to a certain kind of country and community and domestic habits and ways of living which all belong to a race and a nation, and the more culture represents that deeply-rooted attachment, the more vital it will be."

Nucleus of Jewish Mind

One of the ironies of their time, Mr. Priestley continued, was that the people who spent most of their time, money and natural cunning in strengthening political and economic nationalism, were the very people who were entirely indifferent to cultural nationalism. Any appeal for the Hebrew University represented nationalism of the best kind and the only kind which they could allow to endure. He thought the Hebrew University represented something that the Jew wanted; a nucleus, a certain outline of the Jewish mind. He could not help feeling that the powerful, brilliant and aggressive intellect of the Jew, in itself the product partly of centuries of persecution and partly of centuries of spiritual discipline, needed that routine, since it might to some extent become dangerous, just because of its power, brilliance and aggressiveness, when completely unrooted. The Jew was essentially the member of a community to which he was most intimately attached, and as a member of such a community he made the most valuable contribution to civilisation, particularly in the arts section, such as philosophy, metaphysics, scholarship and literature.

Let there be in existence that nucleus, that rallying point, which only a University can provide," Mr. Priestley concluded, "and let that University be in the ancestral home of the Jews. Let it be rooted in that land and existing in that community. Then I believe that the contributions that that University and of all those people leavened by its teachings will be more brilliant and enduring than ever. Let us see that this society of friends of the University on the Arts be firmly established and helped

in every possible way for enlarging the schools of Arts and serving as a valuable communication between our friends in Palestine and ourselves."

Gollancz's Passionate Plea

But the deepest impression was made on the whole gathering by Victor Gollancz, whose address may be described not only as a confession of faith in the future of the Jewish nation but, what was even more striking, as a passionate plea for a return to the spiritual aspect of Judaism. Mr. Gollancz explained how he himself became interested not only in the University, but in the whole life of Jewish Palestine, which was of importance not only for the Jewish people, but for the whole world. Like a great number of Jews, he said, he was first led to a real investigation of the Jewish question by the events which occurred shortly before 1933, and with increasing intensity continued afterwards. Before that he had taken very much for granted that he was a Jew and did not attach much importance to it, but that attitude began to alter after 1933, when he saw a threat to the existence of the whole Jewish people; not only insults and indignities, but the possibility of complete extermination.

The first thing he then asked himself was: does it matter very much? After all, the Jews were numerically a small people compared to others, and apart from the suffering caused to individuals, did it really matter whether Jews ceased to exist as a people? He then began to think about the famous old phrase, "the Mission of Israel." He thought no people had ultimately the right to exist as a separate people or community unless it had a mission, unless it had to give something distinctive to civilisation. Unless it had a distinctive contribution to make, it had no moral right to exist, and, quite apart from that, it certainly was bound to disappear in due course. If there was a "Mission of Israel," it was to make a distinctive contribution to civilisation. And unquestionably there was such a contribution to be made by Jews, which was of enormous value to the present time, and possibly the one thing which above all else might be able to save the world.

Spirit and Matter

The basic trouble of the present time, Mr. Gollancz thought, was that there had been a divorce between material things and the life of the spirit and the intellect, between the material and the spiritual world, which more than any other specific cause had led the world to its present impasse. "As I read the Bible and Jewish history," he said, "I find that the distinctive thing in Jewish life is precisely the refusal to differentiate between the material and spiritual side of life, but on the contrary, to stress the identity between the physical and the spiritual world, which is demonstrated in the fact that the material world is shot through with the Divine symbolised in one of the most beautiful things in Jewish life, the long series of blessings which are said on every kind of material occasion."

Mr. Gollancz thought that unless they got back to the conception of the unity of life and unless material existence became a religious thing, nothing at all could save civilisation. No pact or material device would prove of any use. That idea of the unity of life was the golden thread running through Jewish life and history which, in spite of everything that had happened since, had never vanished but had been preserved as a living idea. And it was the particular mission of the Jews to carry that idea to its fulfilment in conditions of modern life.

Example to World

Mr. Gollancz did not agree with Mr. Priestley that it was only in the cultural life, that was in the narrow life, that nationalism was unobjectionable. He agreed that insane nationalism was one of the greatest evils that ever happened to the human race, but to say that the only true and unobjectionable nationalism must be purely cultural was precisely making again that distinction to which he had already objected. "I want to see the Jews, or part of the Jewish people, in their homeland giving an example to the world of how the things of the mind and the spirit can be interwoven with the ordinary material existence, and how the whole life of a people can be modelled on the ideas of social justice which the Jews were one of the first people to give to the world."

He had found two extraordinary inspiring things in Palestine, Mr. Gol-

lancz concluded. On the one hand, the University, providing not only for the cultivation of the mind, but also for its living application; and on the other hand, that extraordinary experiment of the collective settlements which were a model of social righteousness and justice unequalled in present-day life. He felt that in the collective settlement he would find a home where men could live a life of freedom and righteousness in accordance with the Divine Law. Palestine was extraordinarily hopeful both for Jews and for the world as a whole. He asked Jews not to concern themselves over much with the combating of anti-Semitism by busying themselves with explaining to the world that Jews were not blackmarketeers, etc., but to help rather in expressing in a modern form that Jewish greatness, so superbly demonstrated in Jewish Palestine, before which the anti-Semitism of the world would crumble.

Viscount Samuel

Viscount Samuel, who presided, pointed out that in spite of local political difficulties, the terrible destruction of Jewish communities in Europe and the burden of relief for the surviving Jews, the upbuilding of Palestine and the University had gone on. "The more the body of the Jewish people is oppressed, the higher and the more freely soars its mind. In an age which is far too materialistic and plunged by wicked men into the worst barbarisms of a world-wide war, in which the Jewish people on the Continent of Europe have been the victims of what probably is the most atrocious crime in all human history, the Jews as a people have shown themselves to be the servants of knowledge and seekers of wisdom striving to spread throughout the world enlightenment and tolerance, the essential elements of Jewish civilisation and the central conditions of human welfare," he concluded.

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