

By David Pryce-Jones

THE VIEW FROM PANORAMA ROAD

Panorama Road runs along the summit of Mount Carmel, the Table Mountain so to speak of Haifa. Just below the crest, the golden dome of the Bahai temple catches the eye. Below that, down the steepest of gradients, is the harbour and then the great sweep of the coast stretching towards Acre. I spent most of 1962 at Number 30, and from there the view of that bay is as varied and spectacular as any. In every way it was a place in which to experience the reality of Israel.

Longmans had just published my first novel, and it sold to Penguin, a story of good fortune unlikely to be matched today. What are you going to do now? Longmans asked. Write a personal book about Israel, I told them. The first post brought the offer of an advance of fifty pounds. The next post withdrew that offer because as they frankly explained, they had a large Arab market. Hearing of this, George Weidenfeld was willing to advance two hundred and fifty pounds. I had also come to know Wim Van Leer. A lifetime of amazing exploits began when the youthful Wim had disguised himself as a carpenter in order to enter Buchenwald and report on what was happening there. His father, a Dutch magnate in the steel barrel business, received immense royalties from having patented the way to seal an oil drum, and Wim received royalties from something to do with the wiring of hand-grenades. A pilot, he flew some Americans into Tibet in search of the Dalai Lama's treasure. "Zionism is a winter sport," is a much quoted remark, but Wim was the first to say it, on a day of sweltering khamsin. A joker, a farceur, he liked word play, for instance singing to the tune of Tipperary, "It's a long way to Petah Tikvah." Somehow Wim had acquired what had been his father's factory in Haifa. And he and his wife Lia lived at 23 Panorama Road.

I had wanted to come and see Israel for myself because the novelist in me expected to hear stories. People who in the world war had lived under the shadow of death had taken a collective decision to come together in a nation of their own. It's not an exaggeration to say that pretty well everyone with any interest in political events admired this experiment, partly on grounds of conscience that something was owed to Jews after what they'd been through while the world stood by, and more widely because it was a triumph of democracy over totalitarianism and tyranny at a time when this a rarity. Paradoxically the Soviet Union had approved the creation of this new state, providing the requisite credentials for the Left. I happened to alight in Panorama Road while nation-building was still in progress but had already succeeded in giving form to the distinctive Israeli character as it exists today. In so small a population, the creativity, the scientific and medical research, the military skills, the revival of the language, all spoke to a unique affirmation of the human spirit.

There was another factor as well. Between 1948 and 1967, the neighbouring Arab states blockaded and boycotted Israel, and this had the unintended consequence of allowing, positively stimulating, Israel to get on with the business of settling and defining itself. From the Arab point of view, was this really a productive way of resolving what at its origins was an issue of rival nationalisms, in the final resort a boundary dispute? A foreigner like me who wanted to go from Israel to the Arab world to take the measure of the rival nationalism, had to travel with two passports via Cyprus. In Jordanian-held Jerusalem, when my wife and I were tourists at the Wailing Wall, then abandoned and desolate, children emerged from the Old City to throw stones at us. They were doing only what their elders had taught them to do, a whole population oblivious to the reality that their hostility was conditioning Israel's Golden Age.

Next Generation, the book I published in 1964, tells the stories of people representative of that Golden Age. To do justice to Wim Van Leer and some others I met was beyond me. One such larger-than-life figure was David Hacoen, who took me up and introduced me to Zionists of his generation. In the course of a tumultuous career, he had been engaged on war-time sabotage missions with the British. One of his fellow-dynamiters was Adrian Bishop who as far as I know has not received the biography he deserves. A Trappist monk, he'd left his monastery out of determination to fight Nazism, and was assassinated in Iran by German agents. One day, David Hacoen, a member of the Knesset, took me to a meeting in Tel Aviv of Mapai, the governing party at the time. Ben Gurion, then Prime Minister, had me sit next to him, and kept up a running commentary sotto voce on the speakers. This really was an open society. On another day, Wim Van Leer received a telephone call from Ben Gurion. Some disease was affecting the Egyptian cotton crop, Nasser had appealed for help, Israel had the requisite spray, and Ben Gurion was ordering Wim to provide immediately enough barrels to ship the stuff. The Middle East was more complicated than I had appreciated.

When Nasser moved troops into Sinai in May 1967, war became a certainty. John Anstey, editor of the Daily Telegraph Magazine, was willing to send me to cover it. A general sense of fear – more than that, panic – spread that the world was about to witness another Holocaust. Grown-up men and women were reported to be in tears over what seemed bound to come. The Six Day War that June proved that the Israelis already had a national identity strong enough to enable them to survive.

The most extraordinary thing then happened. Public opinion was reversed in exactly the process described by George Orwell in 1984 as the Two Minutes Hate. His model had been the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 whereby a stroke of the pen made allies of two totalitarian powers fundamentally hostile until then. In Hate Week as Orwell depicted it, the speaker switches from one line to the other in mid-sentence. “A large part of the political literature of five years was now completely obsolete,” wrote Orwell, showing, as he put it, that Ignorance is Strength. “Reports and records of all kinds, newspapers, books, pamphlets, films, sound tracks, photographs – all had to be rectified at lightning speed.”

Prior to that war, a very famous playwright had talked to me about the bloodthirsty Arabs and the imperative of smashing them. Next time we had a conversation, this same famous playwright was full of righteous indignation about Israel as an imperialist, colonising, American puppet and the need to rescue the Arabs from it. In objective reality nothing had changed but the roles of aggressor and victim had been switched as it were in mid-sentence for this man and millions like him. Purposeful lies really could manipulate public opinion. The Soviet Union had backed Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and had suffered a humiliating defeat along with its clients. Thousands of media outlets all over the world were outright Soviet mouthpieces or susceptible to the Soviet line in one way or another, and from now on with single-minded accord they got their own back by abusing Israel as Nazi and its leaders as new Hitlers. What had been the issue of a disputed boundary became fully intractable in the context of the Cold War. Since then, the mendacious representation of Israel as racist, illegitimate, analogous to Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa, has been a regular illustration of Orwell’s Ignorance is Strength

In the aftermath of the 1967 war, Palestinians were divided between those under occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, and those in exile in Jordan or Lebanon. I described this anomalous situation in The Face of Defeat, published in 1972. The majority of Palestinians, I found, had had quite enough of war and understood that they would enjoy peace only when Israel did too. But Yasser Arafat had taken over the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Like other Arab one-man rulers, he turned to the Soviet Union for funds and arms to empower him. On a hillside at Ajlun in Jordan, I heard Arafat address his guerrillas in the doctrinaire style of a rally of the Red Brigade or the Baader-Meinhof gang. An activist and propagandist undoubtedly skilled in the black arts, he did more than the Soviet Union, more than anyone, to persuade the world that Israel is a successful nation-state thanks to its oppression of the Palestinians and not on account of its virtues. The promise of revolution, the liberation of Palestine and the elimination of Israel, moulded the Two Minutes Hate into a fashionable cause, an ideology. Palestinians pay the price for this: their mobilisation and militarization on these lines has stranded their national identity in illusion and victimhood.

The impulse to write The Closed Circle, my next book with a Middle Eastern theme, had begun during the 1967 war when I happened to arrive at Aqabat Jaber, a huge refugee camp on the West Bank, at the very moment when the inhabitants were fleeing in their thousands. No Israeli soldiers were anywhere near. These people were abandoning everything, homes, possessions, their sheep, hens and dogs, even family members too old to walk far. They would have nowhere to spend the night, their future could only be desperate. Explanations for this mass flight were not very satisfactory. Had the Arabs won the war, they would have massacred the Israelis, and perhaps these people were only assuming that what they would have done to others, others would do to them. But something deeper than fear seemed to be in play. “In the grip of a collective response,” I was to write, “they were obeying codes of their own.” What might these codes be? Arab societies are one and all absolute. Rulers hold power through strong-arm methods and further justify power-holding as a matter of honour. Those running away from Aqabat Jaber were displaying the grip the cultural code has on all Arabs and Muslims, obliging them at all costs to avoid the shame of failure induced by bad decisions on the part of the ruler.

Honour demands that the shame of defeat be wiped out by victory, which is why Arab and Muslim violence is so repetitive and each time so self-harming in the identical way. It’s no use telling those who feel shame that there is no reason for it; emotions of the kind cannot be rationalised away. Israel was always going to find that its cultural values were hard to reconcile with those of Arab and Muslim societies. When in 1973 the Egypt of Anwar Sadat and

the Syria of Hafiz Assad launched another war, once again I was a correspondent for the Daily Telegraph. Honour was recovered in a measure enough for Sadat to make peace, not enough for Syria which instead has chosen to ally itself with Iran. The Islamist rhetoric of Iran may sound novel, but at bottom it too is all about the honour of victory and the shame of defeat.

The rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran happened to coincide with the end of the Cold War and the inability of the PLO to represent real Palestinian interests. Filling the vacuum left by these developments, the Islamic Republic sees itself not as a nation but as a cause whose fulfillment is the supremacy of Islam. The ayatollahs are provoking a civilisational clash they expect to win. They cultivate a complete Ignorance-is-Strength fantasy that the elimination of Israel is the preliminary to overcoming the United States, perceived as the power obstructing their ambitions for Islam. In a style that is genuinely Hitlerite, the ayatollahs and their officials first deny that the Nazi Holocaust took place and then promise to conduct one of their own. To all appearances, the regime is intent on wiping Israel off the map, developing a nuclear programme but refusing to allow inspection that would clarify whether its purpose is civilian as proclaimed, or military; financing and arming its proxies of Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza in order to wage war on diverse fronts at the moment of choice; encouraging the entire Muslim world to see itself as the enemy of the West and everything the West stands for. Mainstream Israeli commentators have taken it for granted that the ayatollahs will one day finalise their plans and the worst is therefore to be anticipated.

And here's another extraordinary thing. It might have been expected that the inflammatory war-mongering of the Islamic Republic would produce a comparable pre-1967 reaction of fear and even panic that another Holocaust is taking shape, and the world has no more room in it for Israelis than it had once for Jews. Not a bit of it. The view propagated by the Islamic Republic that Israel is a monstrosity fit only to be destroyed has acquired widespread currency, becoming almost a truism. Everywhere the radical Left and the radical Right unite in rehearsing Iranian propaganda that Israeli measures of self-defence against Iranian-led terror are crimes against humanity. Held to standards inapplicable everywhere else, Israel is the one and only state in the world whose right to exist is brought into question. Parliamentarians, academics, every kind of artist and intellectual, non-governmental organisations and charities, trade unions, work assiduously to turn Israel into an outlaw by proposing condemnations, bans and boycotts in one area or another of public life. People who consider themselves progressive agitate and demonstrate alongside Islamists proud to be bigoted, and all of them conscious or unconscious proponents of genocide.

How the Two Minutes Hate directed against Israel has been generalised is a complex phenomenon arising from Europe's interpretation of its past. The continent that gave the world Communism and Nazism seems to have decided that it risks doing something equally criminal all over again unless it junks the nationalism that gave each country its historic identity. By some logic so twisted that nobody is ever able to explain it, nationalism is the specific prescription for those in the Third World, for instance Palestinians, but original sin in everyone else, and quite especially Israel. The United Nations and the European Union exist theoretically to pursue trans-national aims, and hundreds of media outlets rally in a supportive chorus, with the BBC and the Guardian having the loudest voices in this country. Dissolving historic nationalisms into a new empire, the EU has dispensed with any idea of self-defence by military means. Throughout the continent, the lingering death of the basic instinct of self-preservation is in complete political, intellectual and emotional opposition to Israel's will to survive. The vilification and criminalisation of Israel for defending itself has the further consequence of making Jews out to be destroyers of the peace, and that is an indispensable step in normalising the 1930s and the Holocaust. Israel is currently presented by Islamism and its supporters with a test greater than any other in the state's history, but it has the life-force to deal with whatever materialises. I see no reason to change the conclusions I reached back in the Golden Age in Panorama Road.