

READERS, you may recall that my column of March 26th was titled "The many what-ifs of history." Recently, the gift of a book, "Why there were Jews in Nakuru" by Tommy Joseph has reminded me of another dramatic example. The Jewish homeland Zion, that is, the modern state of Israel might have been created not in Palestine but East Africa. If that had happened, the whole course of 20th-century history in the Middle East and Africa would have been different.

To understand how this might have happened, readers need to know what Zionism and Zionist are. From the second century AD, when the Jews were finally driven out of Palestine by the Romans, they always prayed that the Messiah would deliver them and lead them back to Zion, the land of Israel. Wherever they lived, religious Jews turned in the direction of Zion when they prayed. Zion became synonymous with the idea of reuniting Jewish people in their own, original homeland.

Seventh centuries of persecution, of fleeing from one country to another passed by with the Jews in the Diaspora (in Hebrew *galus*) no closer to Zion. At the end of the nineteenth century, several European Jewish philosophers approached the intractable problem of the Jews searches for Zion from a revolutionary new perspective. They shifted responsibility from the Messiah to the Jews themselves. They could not continue being bound from nation to nation, they must establish their nation. Theodore Herzl's famous book "The Jewish State", published in 1896, became the "bible" of the philosophy of Zionism. The believers in this philosophy called themselves Zionists and they implement their cause; they convened the Zionist Jewish Congress in Basle, Switzerland in 1897.

Congress resolved that the Jewish state must be found in Palestine, then a province in the Turkish Empire. There were then twenty thousand Jews in Palestine, the majority of the inhabitants were Arabs and a small minority of Turkish administrators and landowners. The Zionist Congress set up the Zionist Jewish National Fund to buy land from Arab and Turkish landowners. The purchased land was the least fertile, often desert and a small group of Jews who began to migrate to Palestine from 1897 had to work very hard to make a living from the land. By 1903, a Jewish state in Palestine remained a distant dream.

At this time, in Russia, the usual brutal persecution of Jews carried out by the church, army and administration (pogroms) escalated. The government of the U.K and other European nations protested to the czar and the government of Russia, to no avail. Hoping to capitalize on the British sympathy for the Jewish fleeing Russia, Herzl approached the British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, in 1903 for his support in obtaining a colonization charter for the Sinai Peninsula for the Zionist congress. Unable to persuade the British authorities in Egypt, Chamberlain who saw Jews as enterprising agents of colonization, offered them instead territory in British East Africa, which he had visited in December 1902. The proposal envisaged a Jewish colony, in what became Uganda, in control of religious, domestic and municipal matters under overall British control, but with no British financial investment. All costs were to be borne by the Jews.

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Zion(ists) in Africa

The Zionist Congress set up the Jewish colonial trust to examine the prospect of a Jewish colony in British East Africa. A three-man commission sent to enquire into the feasibility in 1989 expected that the land available was not suitable "for purely Jewish settlement".

The congress thanked the British government for its offer and desire to help the Jews. It reiterated that it, too, buys the principle of the establish-

"That is true," I said, "but we had Jerusalem when London was a marsh." He leaned back and continued to stare at me.

Ironically, just fifteen years later, the British found itself for the Mandated Authority controlling Palestine. The peace treaty after the First World War dismembered the Turkish Empire (Turkey had allied with Germany). Under British control, Jewish settlement in Palestine expanded dramatically. The Arab population in Palestine protested against the increase. The British response was to strict quotas on immigration. At the same time, while Hitler was in control in Germany, the number of Jewish refugees seeking entry into Palestine, the U.S, the UK etc. also increased. Britain set a limit on entry into the UK as well as Palestine but was prepared to give visas to Jewish refugees who would go to British colonies and East Africa as agriculturists.

In that way, a thousand Jewish refugees settled in Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Malawi. Some of them, after the war and after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, moved to Israel, including the author of the book I mentioned above—Tommy Joseph—he was born and brought up in Nakuru in Kenya and wrote a book about the Jewish community. It is, thanks to the book, that I can tell you about the last link of Zionist to East Africa before Palestine became the state of Israel, there were bitter conflicts between the British and the Zionist Nationalist Organization, whom the British called "terrorists" to detention camps in Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. The one in Kenya was at gil-gil, a small town 109km north of Nairobi near Nakuru. In 1947 there were 272 Zionist freedom fighters in the gil-gil camp, including a Yaakov Meridor who had previously escaped from the camp in Somalia but was recaptured in Ethiopia.

In 1947, Meridor organized a brilliant escape with the help of local Jewish residents. He and six others were safely back to Palestine before their escape was discovered.

Palestine finished in 1948, the detainees were repatriated. Their Zion, the new nation-state of Israel. Thus ended the East African connection with Zion(ists).

May I conclude with a story about Weizmann from a different source.

Chaim Weizmann, who later became the first president of Israel, was an ardent Zionist. As an illustrious scientist, he had access to many important European personages. One day, he visited Paul Ehrlich, the discoverer of '606', a drug used in the treatment of syphilis. Weizmann sought to convince Ehrlich of the importance of the Zionist cause and to enlist his support. He spoke earnestly and at great length until Ehrlich broke in. "You know, Dr Weizmann, hundreds of people come to see me each week, I never give them more than five minutes each. You have already taken up to forty-five minutes of my time!"

"The difference, Dr Ehrlich," replied Weizmann, is that they come to get an injection — and I, to give you one."

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ment of a legally secured publicly recognized home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

One of the members of the Congress, Dr Chaim Weizmann, a lecturer in chemistry at Manchester University managed to get an appointment with Prime Minister Balfour to explain what the Zionists wanted.

Palestine, not East Africa. As Weizmann later recalled, "I plunged into a long harangue on the meaning of the Zionist movement... that nothing but a deep religious conviction expressed in modern political terms could keep the movement alive and that this conviction had to be based on Palestine and Palestine alone. Any defection from Palestine was well, a form of idolatry ... I was sweating blood and trying to find a less ponderous way of expressing myself... suddenly I said, "Mr. Balfour, supposing I was to offer you Paris instead of London would you take it?"

"He sat up, looked at me and answered: But Dr Weimann, we have London."