

Goodbye to PSC?

Francis Clark-Lowes (29th April 2011)

My interest in Palestine goes back to my undergraduate days in Birmingham when I had a Bengali landlord. He was a Muslim, his wife a Jew from Prague, so he had a particular perspective on the conflict in Palestine. Though I was very fond of Mr Rasul, I wrote off his support of the Palestinians as unbalanced and antisemitic.

In the early seventies I had the opportunity to study Arabic, and joined the Arab Society at the Central London Polytechnic. The focus of their interest was Palestine, a subject which was off limits for me as a civil servant. I also joined the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) at this time, and have remained a member every since. As a parliamentary lobby group CAABU is restricted in its range of thinking, but through it I have met many prominent campaigners for Palestine.

Then between 1975 and 1977 I walked from London to Cairo, and spent rather over three months crossing Palestine-Israel and working/living at Givat Brenner kibbutz. At this time I still had a 'balanced' view of the conflict, which in reality meant that when I was with Jews I sympathised with their story, and when I was with Palestinians I sympathised with theirs. A year in Cairo, where I met several Palestinians, increased my tendency towards the Palestinian view of the conflict.

But my strong conviction that a terrible injustice had occurred came to me during my nine years in Saudi Arabia, between 1979 and 1989. Very early on I got to know my Palestinian colleague, Said Hamdan, and he soon swept away my woolly liberal-minded view of a balanced and tragic conflict. From now on I could only see it as a crime. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, seen from an Arab perspective, only served to increase this feeling. On reflection, Mr Rasul had been right, and I dimly began to realise that my seeing him as antisemitic was part of the problem.

After my return to Britain I settled in Brighton and in 1991 joined Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC). In 1993 I started my doctoral research on the early history of psychoanalysis at Sussex University, and found myself, willy-nilly, a member of the Centre for German Jewish Studies (CGJS) which my academic supervisor, had just established. I felt some discomfort at this situation, which I had not intended, since I sensed that there might be a conflict between my support from the Palestinians and this new affiliation. But I argued to myself that an interest in the so-called symbiosis of Germans and Jews in pre-Nazi Germany was not inconsistent with support for the Palestinian cause.

In theory I was right, in practise wrong. For the atmosphere of the CGJS was chauvinistically Jewish, that is it emphasised Jewish talent and contrasted this with a decontextualised suffering. Jews were never to be regarded as in any way responsible for the problems that they encountered. Having studied sociology for my first degree, this seemed a wilful lack of

curiosity. Although the Centre specifically stated that its aim was not the study of ‘the Holocaust,’ the Nazi treatment of Jews, with all its claims to exceptionalism, came to dominate our proceedings. I sensed how helpless the Palestinians were against this narrative, and determined to do something about it. But my attempts to raise the issues which troubled me within the Centre caused a range of responses from patronising toleration to ostracism. So I looked beyond the Centre.

But before I write about becoming a campaigner for Palestine, I must mention a positive side to my involvement with the CGJS. Through it I gained a great deal of insight into the history and culture of Central European Jewry. This was particularly facilitated by commissions for a number of translations of German-Jewish texts, including a coffee-table pictorial biography of Theodore Herzl (translated with the help of my Viennese first wife), and the autobiographies of a rabbi, Caesar Seligmann, and his son Erwin. The latter illustrated particularly well the ‘antisemitic’ stereotypes which were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth century among westernised Jews vis-à-vis to their eastern compatriots, the so-called ‘Ostjuden’. I was also in the early 2000s involved in editing a German-Jewish autobiography and in translating essays on the Kindertransporte; these, together with the two autobiographies mentioned, gave me considerable insights into Jewish thinking about the Nazi period.

My friend, Gloria Adiba, had set up a ‘Friends of Palestine’ group in Brighton & Hove which I joined. Together we attended the PSC AGM in 1996 and to my surprise I suddenly found myself voted onto the national committee. But I was by then working hard to bring my doctoral research to a conclusion, and so my participation at committee meetings was limited to getting to know the ropes and an undertaking to revive the Sussex University Palestine Society.

And then mysteriously there were no more meetings. It eventually became apparent that PSC had been abandoned by its officers and coordinator, and was on the point of collapse. Membership cheques which had already run out of date were lying in piles of unopened envelopes. To this day I do not know quite why this happened, but PSC owes an enormous debt to Jo Beech, who managed to get hold of the keys of the office and with the help of John Hart, started to put things together again. That was when, again to my surprise, I was elected Chair, with Jo as treasurer and John as coordinator.

I did not enjoy my two years in office (which actually consisted of two separate terms, with a gap into between). There were a number of reasons for this, but the chief one was the opposition I encountered to any discussion of Jewishness and antisemitism, indeed the opposition to any form of intellectual debate. ‘We are a campaigning organisation,’ I was told, ‘not an academic institution.’ This wore me down, because I was convinced that we badly needed to rethink the basis of our campaigning. I was therefore happy when an opportunity arose to hand over the Chair mid-term, my last act being to urge, against considerable opposition, the appointment of Betty Hunter in the newly created post of Secretary (later General Secretary).

As I saw it then, and still see it now, the problem for the Palestinians was that the accusation of antisemitism would remain a potent weapon against anyone who supported their cause. To assert with moral self-righteousness that supporting the Palestinians was *not* antisemitic simply involved us in a useless shouting match with those who cleverly, and with some justice, argued that it *was*. Meanwhile, those with the power to take any effective action against Israel would choose the easy option of accepting the latter argument. That is they would leave Israel well alone!

Going back a little, I had in 1997 re-established the Brighton (well Brighton and Hove, actually, BHPSC for short) branch of PSC, initially by resurrecting the recently abandoned Palestine Society at the University of Sussex in conformity with a decision of PSC's old committee. The town had not had a branch of PSC for many years, and as the number enrolling in the Palestine Society was insufficient to gain Union recognition (a sign of those post-Oslo times), a few colleagues and I were free to create a PSC branch which included both the non-recognised Sussex University society and town members. This arrangement lasted only a year, after which BHPSC became a town branch, with myself as Chair, a position I held for around five years. Sussex University then revived its own independent Palestine Society.

Our task in BHPSC was not all plain-sailing, but on the whole I had the feeling during those years that as a group we were making an impact on public opinion. My attempts to get the subjects of Jewishness, antisemitism and later Jewish power onto the agenda, however, always met with resistance. In 2002 I wrote an essay on the impossibility of the two-state solution, and this stimulated the formation of a group of prominent activists in London. But once again this quickly fell apart once the implications of my thinking on Jewishness sunk in. Also my attempts to engage in debate with the Jewish community in Brighton and Hove met with zero success. Not a single letter that I wrote to local Jewish leaders was answered.

You could, of course, argue that my lack of success in advancing discussion of Jewishness, antisemitism and Jewish power arose out of the right-thinking of most people that these subjects have no place in campaigning for Palestinian rights. Try as I might, though, I could not accept this way of seeing things; the path that I had trodden led me in another direction. In my view, the very taboo which surrounded these subjects was a major part of the problem. The fact that I was in a minority was, in the circumstances, to be expected.

The one person who spoke my language and with whom I could have stimulating discussion on the subjects which interested me was Paul Eisen, whom I met back in the late nineties. There is no denying that Paul's Jewish background 'enabled' me in a way that I do not think a non-Jewish thinker could have done. He spoke both as an insider and as an outsider, that is he knew whereof he spoke; and whereof he spoke he often did not like. To call him a Jewish self-hater is, however, far too simplistic. He is very Jewish, and has written with affection about his Jewish background.

As UK director of Deir Yassin Remembered (DYR), Paul organised significant events in London which I often attended, and through Paul I met, among others, Dan McGowan, founder of DYR in the US, the ex-Israeli jazz musician and campaigner for Palestine, Gilad Atzmon, Henry Herskovitz who runs the Synagogue Vigil Group at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Germar Rudolf, a chemist who had spent four years in German jails. Germar's crime was to prevent the publication of convincing evidence about the improbability of the gas-chambers story which he had collected at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

None of the people I have mentioned could remotely be described as foaming-at-the-mouth fanatics. I do not always agree with what they say, but I respect them and enjoy the stimulation of interacting with them. And yet these same people are branded by a powerful, influential and Jewish-inspired clique within PSC as being the most vile specimens of humanity. One only needs to mention their names to provoke – well, foaming at the mouth!

They would say that my friends and I are racists. But what exactly does this mean? When I was studying sociology back in the sixties we used the term racial prejudice, and there was supposed to be a type of person who had a prejudiced personality. I remember thinking back then, and I have marginal notes in the books I was reading about this, that insufficient attention was being paid to straight-forward personal opinions. These often had nothing to do with scapegoating, a pathological process which is presumably what we would wish to oppose. We might not agree with such opinions, but that does not invalidate them.

Opinions normally involve a degree of generalisation, and it seems that it is this aspect of thinking which is being confused with scapegoating. If I make a generalisation about Jews, for example about their power, this is not necessarily pathological; it may simply arise out of my experience of Jews as a collective. And *there* is another concept which we are not supposed to believe in, collective identity. It seems clear to me that if Jews did not have a collective identity, there would be no way of identifying the majority of them as Jews. The same argument applies to any group which is not legally defined.

BHPSC had a discussion on these kinds of questions around four years ago following a number of exchanges on our email list. The atmosphere at the meeting was relatively cordial, but there was little meeting of minds. Then in January 2008 I invited Gilad Atzmon to give a talk about music and Palestine. Not wishing to cause dissension within BHPSC by asking them to sponsor such an event, I arranged the talk at a venue called the Brighthelm Centre under the auspices of my own organisation, Invitation to Learn. But apparently even that was too much for my opponents. Posters announcing a picket of the event were stuck without permission on the windows of the Brighthelm Centre, and realising the embarrassment this was causing the Centre I decided to change the venue to my own house.

By then I had had enough, and soon after withdrew from active participation in BHPSC. There were other reasons. I had other quite different projects which were never going to be attended to if I did not cut down on the number of my commitments. I felt I could quite reasonably say that I had done my bit for PSC. And I was diagnosed with prostate cancer at

the beginning of last year, and have been undergoing treatment ever since. I remain as committed as ever to the Palestinian cause, but I want to campaign more efficiently, by which I mean attacking the root of the Palestine problem, that is Jewish power. At the moment PSC seems to me like a soldier in a strait-jacket who cannot reach his weapons. It is a campaign which puts the sensitivities of Jews above the interests of the Palestinians.

My exasperation at this on-going situation finally brimmed over when on 30th March 2011 an email on our local BHPSC list invited us to contribute to a reading list on Palestine for the uninformed. I proposed a number of books, including *Speaking the Truth about Zionism and Israel* edited by the late Michael Prior, a close friend. This included essays by Dan McGowan, 'Why We Remember Deir Yassin', and by Paul Eisen, 'Speaking the Truth to Jews.' As I had half-expected, within two hours this particular suggestion was attacked on the grounds that Dan McGowan and Paul Eisen were 'Holocaust deniers'; this despite the fact that neither essay mentioned revisionism. Moreover, a quick check revealed that Dan McGowan had never declared himself a 'Holocaust denier', or even a revisionist. I therefore challenged the particular person who had attacked me to produce hard evidence, apart from association with known revisionists, for his statement. I stated, however, that Paul Eisen and I were proud to call ourselves 'Holocaust deniers,' and I attached a copy of Paul's essay. It seemed to me that there was no point in making a distinction between revisionism and 'Holocaust denial' because those who opposed us never did so. One might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb.

Well, of course, with that I had crossed the Rubicon, and the expected condemnations rolled in, not always in the most polite language. What struck me as strange, however, was that the people who were attacking me hardly ever mentioned that they had read Paul's essay, let alone Joel Hayward's MA thesis, 'The Fate of the Jews in German Hands,' which I had provided the link to. What I had said was grossly misrepresented, and lots of irrelevant criticism was made of positions which I do not hold. A curious twist to the story came about when one BHPSC member took it upon himself, without consulting the committee, to report me to national PSC, copying correspondence from the BHPSC email list without the permission of the people concerned. The committee reacted by removing this individual from the list, a decision which, as far as I know, has not yet been reversed.

On 12th April there was a committee meeting of BHPSC at which it was agreed that the three named officers would meet with me to discuss the compatibility of my views with membership of PSC. This happened a week later, on 19th April. At the meeting I gave each of the three officer the following letter (salutation and closing omitted).

We are here today to discuss whether my views are compatible with membership of PSC. Whatever the outcome of our discussions, I do not intend to resign. My reasons are as follows. Firstly I have a personal connection with PSC going back twenty years, during which time I was both the Chair of national PSC, for two years, and the re-founder and for some years Chair of our local branch. Secondly, PSC is the most significant NGO in Britain fighting for Palestinian rights, a cause which I care

passionately about. And thirdly I know that some people, especially my Palestinian friends, would regard my resigning as a sign that I no longer cared about their cause.

According to one's point of view, I'm an 'upper-class fascist twit,' an 'out of order' colleague or someone who has something important to say. If either of the first two hold water, goes the thinking, I should be asked to resign, and if I refuse, my membership should be rescinded. (I'm leaving aside the further complication of national and local PSC here, and the question of our email-list. The issues are the same.) But if I have something important to say, would it not be better to continue discussing these issues?

Let's try to encapsulate what this is all about. My reading of revisionist literature, and in particular my meeting with the revisionist Germar Rudolf, who served four years in German jails for his beliefs, have led me to the conclusion that the aspects of 'the Holocaust' story which give it a capital 'H' are false. To be precise I have ceased to believe in the 6 million figure, the planned extermination programme and the mass killings in gas chambers.

What would you have done in my place? According to one point of view, I should have realised that this was an absurd position and convinced myself that I was wrong. I confess I didn't try to do that, but if I had, I would probably have failed. The evidence against those aspects of 'the Holocaust' story is so strong that I very much doubt if I could have convinced myself to believe in them again.

According to another point of view, I should have quietly kept this conclusion to myself, realising that to speak publicly about it would inflame 'antisemitism' and bring PSC into disrepute. This argument is a tactical one. Never mind about the truth, the reality is that 'the Zionists' (I would say 'the Jews') are so powerful that they would use our dabbling in 'Holocaust' denial as evidence of our antisemitism.

This is a curious way of arguing. On the one hand the concept of 'Jewish power' is regarded as illegitimate because Jews are said not to have a collective existence, on the other hand Jews (call them Zionists if you like) are said to be so powerful that they could crush our movement with evidence of our wrong thinking. The possibility that this very power derives from the prohibition on talking about 'Jewish power' or revisionism (or indeed antisemitism itself) seems to have escaped many people's notice.

But let's just consider what a Palestinian might think when presented with the evidence which I have read and heard. Most Palestinians are well aware that 'the Holocaust' has been used as a deadly weapon against them, and for this reason they are suspicious of it. Some think it is an invention, others believe it happened as we are told (and not surprisingly sometimes say it was justified), but that it has been used illegitimately as a propaganda weapon.

Surely any evidence suggesting that ‘the Holocaust,’ with a capital ‘H,’ didn’t happen would be music to Palestinian ears. They know that they are fighting an idea, of which Zionism and Israel are only a part, and in which ‘the Holocaust’ plays a central role. And yet we want to keep them ignorant of any counter-evidence to that story. Indeed we want to keep ourselves ignorant of it. And we are told that it has no part in the campaign for Palestinian rights. Can this really be the best way to help the Palestinians?

If I were not convinced that any reasonable person looking at the revisionist evidence would at least wobble, I would not suggest following this line of argument and campaigning. But think about it. If ‘the Holocaust’ didn’t happen as we are told, if the undoubted brutal persecution of Jews and others by the Nazis was of a more banal character, if it was not unique, then the reality would become clear that Jews, collectively, have nurtured and massaged that story on a colossal scale for political reasons. Perhaps, indeed, we might conclude that ‘Jews [collectively had been] self-pitying liars and manipulators’ as Naomi put it on the list. As a society we would become less reverential towards them, and this would correspondingly reduce Jewish power. The Palestinians could not fail to benefit from such a situation.

Like any other group, Jews are quite entitled to a reasonable share of collective empowerment, but in my view the power Jews wield has become disproportionate, and therefore oppressive. It needs to be opposed, and at the moment that means denying its main motive power, ‘the Holocaust.’ If I am wrong, and ‘the Holocaust’ happened exactly as we are told it did (do you really believe that?), there is still the question of its distorted presentation, its lack of context and the colossal ‘Holocaust industry’ which Finkelstein speaks about. Just attacking that would be a great start.

So, let me have my thoughts, let me express them from time to time, let those who disagree with me have their say as well, and let PSC as a whole consider these matters and develop its position over time and after cool reflection. All I ask is that what I say is not distorted beyond all recognition by certain parties who cannot distinguish between questioning aspects of German history, and denying that Jews suffered at all under the Nazis. I said that I was proud to call myself a ‘Holocaust denier,’ and I later explained to Irving that this should probably be punctuated ‘Holocaust’ denier instead. It is the capital ‘H’ which I believe we must question. Other massacres don’t have a capital letter. It’s not so difficult to work out why this one does, and to conclude that we should oppose this unique construction.

I am convinced that we need to be bold! We owe it to the Palestinians to distinguish between their friends and their enemies.

The proceedings of the meeting can be summarised as follows. I was told that there had been almost unanimous condemnation of my position at the committee meeting. I was asked whether I would retract anything which I had said, and I declined to do so. I was then asked if I would resign, and I refused for the reasons given in the letter. I was told that as a result my

membership of BHPSC would be terminated, and indeed the next day I notified that it had been.

I am sure that any reasonable person who knows me, or has read what I have written, is aware that I am not denying that Jews suffered terribly under the Nazis, and that large numbers died. What I am denying is the special status implied by that capital 'H'. This derives from the three iconic elements of the 'Holocaust' narrative, the six million figure, the mass killings in gas chambers, and the systematic plan of extermination. Of course, it is possible that I am wrong about this, everything is possible, but what I have read about the so-called death camps strongly suggests to me the 6 million figure is exaggerated and the gas chambers and the plan of extermination are a fiction. Is it a crime to stop believing in something if the evidence for it seems inadequate and the evidence against seems conclusive? The trial of Galileo comes to mind. Or McCarthyism.

At the time of writing I am still a member of the national organisation. This has a much more elaborate procedure for terminating membership and it remains to be seen whether the powerful clique I spoke of will succeed in persuading PSC to expel me. If so the officers of the national will be compounding the lapse of common sense which so far only BHPSC has suffered. Such irrational purges will certainly not serve the Palestinian cause.