

THE MAKINGS OF HISTORY / ZIONISM, UGANDA AND THE JEWS

By Tom Segev Haaretz 12 12 2011

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A Jew, a Swiss and an Englishman were on a train. This could be the opening of a joke, but the three were on their way from Basel to Trieste. From there they sailed to Africa in December 1904, to look into founding a state for the Jews in Guas Ngishu, northwestern Kenya. That venture mistakenly went down in history as the "Uganda Plan." The trio went at the behest of Herzl, following a decision by the Sixth Zionist Congress.

In the annals of the Zionist movement there was no argument more bitter and more formative than that over whether the Jewish state should be built within the Land of Israel, or whether it would be better off wherever possible. The Swiss scholar Alfred Kaiser and the engineer Nahum Wilbush, who came from the Land of Israel, ruled out settling Jews in Guas Ngishu; the British explorer Hill Gibbons thought the region might work and proposed setting up an experimental settlement.

A fascinating book by Gur Alroey maintains that the British explorer voiced the most serious, in-depth and credible opinion ("Seeking a Homeland," Ben-Gurion Research Institute). Alroey, a professor in the University of Haifa's department of Land of Israel studies, writes: "If we compare the condition of the Land of Israel to the condition of the region that the delegation investigated in those years, Guas Ngishu was not in the least 'a place that has nothing and with which nothing can be done,' as Wilbush claimed. It seems that had a similar delegation been sent in December 1904 to the lower and upper Galilee, the Jezreel Valley or the sand hills north of Jaffa, where Tel Aviv later arose, the sight would have been far worse than what the delegation found on the plains of Guas Ngishu. In this country - malaria stricken, rife with swamps and occupied by natives - they surely would have concluded against it."

Wilbush was among the country's industrial pioneers; this was his first visit to Africa. He spent about four weeks in Guas Ngishu, but got lost, needed a week to find his partners again, and did not leave the main camp at all for two more weeks. His rejection reflected his Zionist faith, not necessarily the possibilities in Africa. The opponents of "Uganda" played up his report and downplayed Gibbons' conclusions. Herzl was no longer alive by then.

Alroey writes that it is impossible to determine to what degree Herzl was faithful to the Land of Israel; maybe he would have voted in favor of Africa.

Either way, the view that Jews should be settled wherever possible did not fade away immediately. The worse the pogroms against East European Jews became, the more it strengthened the view that first and foremost they needed a territory

of their own, even if it was not in the Land of Israel. Proponents of this stance founded the Jewish Territorial Organization; many of them saw no contradiction between this approach and Zionist ideology.

In fact, the idea had many supporters in the Land of Israel, including Eliezer Ben Yehuda. Like the Zionist movement, the territorialist movement gave rise to a charismatic leader whom many idolized. This was the writer Israel Zangwill, who lived in Britain. Like Herzl, he launched a private diplomacy campaign in the hopes of finding some territory for the Jews.

Zangwill was an odd bird; in the 1920s he sought to "encourage" Arabs to migrate out of the Land of Israel to vacate it for Jews. As one of the main ideologues of the "transfer" idea, he met with great admiration. Several Israeli cities have streets named after him. His articles were collected in a Hebrew book ("The Road to Independence," 1938), but those expressing the territorialist argument disappeared without a trace. The editor was a veteran historian, Prof. Benzion Netanyahu. In 2003 Netanyahu cited Zangwill as one of the five founding fathers of Zionism.

The territorialists were pessimists from the start; they strived for salvation. Had they succeeded, perhaps fewer Jews would have been murdered in the Holocaust. The Zionists believed in national redemption; they aspired to establish a new society and independence in the Land of Israel, step by step, an acre at a time. To a large extent it was an argument between the fate of the Jews and the fate of the Jewish people. The territorialists failed first of all because they did not find territory suited to mass settlement. Their approach was scientific and rational. The Zionists knew how to nurture the historical myth; no national movement can win without it.