

A Confession

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TODAY IS THE LAST day of the 93rd year of my life. Ridiculous.

Am I moderately satisfied with my life until now? Yes. I am.

If by a miracle I could be returned to, say, 14, and travel all this long way again, would I like that? No, I would not.

Enough is enough.

IN THESE 93 years, the world has changed completely.

A few days after my birth in Germany, a ridiculous little demagogue called Adolf Hitler attempted a putsch in Munich. He was put in prison, where he wrote a tedious book called *Mein Kampf*. Nobody took any notice.

The World War (no one called it World War I yet) was still a recent memory. Almost every family had lost at least one member. I was told that a remote uncle of mine had frozen to death on the Austrian-Italian front.

On the day of my birth, inflation was raging in Germany. My birth cost many millions of marks. Many people lost all they had. My father, a young banker, got rich. He understood how money works. I did not inherit this talent, nor did I wish to.

We had a telephone at home, a rarity. My father loved new gadgets. When I was three or four years old, we got a new invention, a radio. No one even dreamed of television, not to mention the internet.

We were not religious. We lit Hanukkah candles, fasted on Yom Kippur and ate Matzot on Passover. Giving this up looked like cowardice in the face of the antisemites. But it had no real meaning for us.

MY FATHER was a Zionist. When he married my mother, a pretty young secretary, one of the wedding presents was a printed document stating that a tree had been planted in the name of the couple in Palestine.

At the time, the Zionists were a tiny minority among the Jews in Germany (and elsewhere). Most Jews thought that they were a bit crazy. A current joke had it that a Zionist was a Jew who gave money to a second Jew in order to send a third Jew to Palestine.

Why did my father become a Zionist? He certainly did not dream of going to Palestine himself. His family had been living in Germany for many generations. Since he

had learned Latin and Ancient Greek at school, he imagined that our family had arrived in Germany with Julius Caesar. That's why our roots were in a small town (I have forgotten its name) on the banks of the Rhine.

So what about his Zionism? My father was a "Querkopf", a contrarian. He did not like to run with the herd. It suited him to belong to a lonely little group. The Zionists.

This quirk of my father's personality probably saved my life. When the Nazis came to power—I was just nine years old—my father decided immediately to leave for Palestine. My mother told me much later that the trigger was a young German who told my father in court: "Herr Ostermann, we don't need Jews like you anymore!"

My father was deeply insulted. At the time he was a highly respected court-appointed receiver, a person in charge of bankruptcies, famous for his honesty. For years a terrible economic crisis had ravaged Germany, and bankruptcies were plentiful. This helped the demagogue called Hitler, the same one, on his way to power, shouting "Down with the Jews".

I was an eye-witness to the Nazi victory. Brown shirts could be seen everywhere in the streets. They were not alone: every major party had a private army, wearing uniforms. There were the Red Front of the communists, the Black-Red-Gold Flag of the Social-Democrats, the Steel Helmet of the Conservatives, and more. When the time came, not one of them lifted a finger.

I never attended kindergarten and was sent to school when I was five and a half years old. At the age of nine and a half I was sent to the Gymnasium, where I started to learn Latin. I was in a Zionist youth movement. Half a year later I heaved a profound sigh of relief when the train carried us across the Rhine to France—some 2000 years after my forefathers had crossed the Rhine in the opposite direction, according to family legend.

For many years I suppressed the memory of these first years of my life. My life started when I stood on the deck of a ship and saw in the early daylight a thin brown strip appear in the east. I was ten years and two months old. It was the beginning of my new life.

OH, THE bliss! A large boat with a huge, dark boatman brought me from the ship to the shore of Jaffa. What

a mysterious, magical place! Full of people who spoke a strange, guttural language, who gesticulated wildly! All around the wonderful smell of a market with exotic foods! Horse-drawn carriages in the streets.

I mention these first impressions because later I read the biography of David Ben-Gurion, who had arrived at the same place some years before me. What an awful place! What a guttural language! What barbaric gesticulation! What disgusting smells!

I LOVED this country on first sight, and I still love it, although it has changed beyond recognition. I cannot imagine living anywhere else.

People keep asking me if I am a “Zionist”. I answer that I don't know what “Zionism” means these days. To my mind, Zionism died a natural death when the State of Israel was born. Now we have an Israeli nation, closely connected with the Jewish people everywhere—but a new nation nevertheless, with its own geopolitical surroundings, with its own problems. We are bound to world Jewry rather like, say, Australia or Canada are to Britain.

This is so clear to me, that I can hardly understand the endless debates about Zionism. To me, these debates are empty of real, honest content.

So are the endless debates about “the Arabs”, debates neither real nor honest. The Arabs were here when we arrived. I have just described what I felt towards them. I still believe that the early Zionists made a terrible mistake when they did not try to combine their aspirations with the hopes of the Palestinian population. Realpolitik told them to embrace their Turkish oppressors instead. Sad.

The best description of the conflict was given by the historian Isaac Deutscher: a man lives in an upper floor of a house that catches fire. In desperation the man jumps out of the window and lands on a passer-by down below, who is grievously injured and becomes an invalid. Between the two, there erupts a deadly conflict. Who is right?

Not an exact parallel, but close enough to inspire thought.

Religion has nothing to do with it. Judaism and Islam are close relatives, much closer to each other than either of them is to Christianity. The catchphrase “Judeo-Christian” is bogus, an invention of ignoramuses. If our conflict turns into a religious one, that would be a tragic aberration.

I am a complete atheist. In principle I respect the

religion of others, but, frankly, I cannot even start to understand their convictions. They look to me like anachronistic relics of a primitive age. Sorry.

I AM an optimist by nature, even if my analytical mind tells me otherwise. I have seen in my life so many totally unexpected things, both good and bad, that I don't believe that any thing “must” happen.

But looking at the daily news, I could waver. So many stupid wars all over the place, so much awful suffering inflicted on so many innocent people. Some in the name of God, some in the name of race, some in the name of democracy. So stupid! So needless! In the year 2017!

The future of my own country fills me with anxiety. The conflict seems endless, without a solution. Yet to me, the solution is completely obvious, indeed so obvious that it is hard for me to understand how anyone in their right mind can avoid seeing it.

We have here two nations—Israelis and Palestinians. Innumerable historical examples show us that they cannot live together in one state. So they must live together in two states— “together” because both nations need close cooperation, with open borders and some joint political superstructures. Perhaps some kind of a voluntary confederation. And later on, perhaps some kind of union of the entire region.

All this in a world that is compelled by modern realities to unite more and more, moving towards some kind of world government.

I won't live long enough to see all this—but I am already seeing it in my mind's eyes on the eve of my 94th (a nice number, all in all.)

I realize how lucky I have been throughout. I was born into a happy family, the youngest of four children. We left Nazi Germany in time. I was a member of an underground organization, but never caught and tortured like some of my comrades. I was severely wounded in the 1948 war, but fully recovered. I had an attempt on my life, but the assailant missed my heart by a few millimeters. I was for 40 years the chief editor of an important magazine. I was elected three times to the Knesset. I was the first Israeli to meet with Yasser Arafat. I have taken part in hundreds of peace demonstrations and was never been arrested. I was married for 59 years to a wonderful woman. I am reasonably healthy. Thanks.