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Remarks by Professor Hugo Bergman of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Leader of the Jewish Delegation from Palestine at the Asian Relations Conference

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Summary:

The first Asian Relations Conference took place in New Delhi, India, from March 23 to April 2, 1947, just prior to that country's independence in August that year. It was hosted by the head of India's provisional government, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Its goal was to study common concerns, rekindling Asian connectedness and fostering unity after centuries during which, as Nehru stated, European imperialism had separated Asia's countries. Its anti-colonial solidarity evinced important continuities with interwar relationships, as Carolien Stolte argues in "'The Asiatic Hour': New Perspectives on the Asian Relations Conference" (2014).

The conference was boycotted by late British India's Muslim leadership, however, and evinced differences in nature and outlook between the delegations. Thirty separate delegations came to New Delhi. Eight were from Caucasian and Central Asian Soviet republics. The other 22 were from Asian countries, most not yet independent. They included Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey (an observer delegation), and one Arab country, Egypt, which, though located in Africa, had for some time been in contact with Asian independence movements. Moreover, the United Nations, Australia, the United States, Great Britain, and the USSR sent observer missions; so did the Arab League.

Most Arab countries, however, declined an invitation, because India's Muslim leadership did not attend and/or because another invitee was the Zionist Yishuv in Palestine, which gladly accepted. To be precise, the Indian hosts had sent their invitation not to the Yishuvi leadership, the Jewish Agency's Executive Committee headed by David Ben Gurion (1886-1973), but to a leading Yishuvi institution, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This was because Indian nationalists had been critical of the Yishuv from the interwar years; on a separate note, in 1938 Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) stated that satyagraha, civil disobedience, was German Jews' best answer to National Socialism.

This outraged many, including the Austrian Jewish philosopher and Zionist Martin Buber (1878-1965), who among other things translated the Old Testament into German and republished Jewish and Asian mystical tales. Even so, he and some other European, especially German-speaking, Zionist and non-Zionist Jews in Europe and the Yishuv continued to locate the Jewish people's past and present and its postcolonial cultural and political future in Asia. They did so imagining that continent as not anti-Semitic, and/or as more spiritual than "the West," and/or as a rising political force in a decolonizing world. Some scholars, including Rephael Stern and Arie Dubnov in a chapter in the edited volume *Unacknowledged Kinships: Postcolonial Studies and the Historiography of Zionism*, have called this approach Zionist Asianism. To be sure, Zionist and Jewish Asianism assumed different forms, and a good number of Jews, for instance the father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), and the leader of revisionist Zionism, Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky (1880-1940), disagreed, emphasizing Europeanness. Still, Zionist Asianism was a real force. Hence, the Hebrew University happily organized a delegation to India, some of whose male and female members were from outside the university. It was headed by a German-speaking philosopher and Zionist activist who had migrated to Palestine in 1919, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann (1883-1975), who was the university library director—and whose English address to the conference forms the text printed here.

We thank Carolien Stolte for providing essential information about the Asian Relations Conference.

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Contents:

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[...]

Prof. Hugo Bergman of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and leader of the Jewish delegation from Palestine said:

It is a great privilege to me to convey to this illustrious gathering the greetings of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, of the Jewish Women's Rights Society in Palestine and of the National Council of the Jews in Palestine, the Vaad leumi, who acted as the convenor of our delegation. Those are greetings of the representatives of an old religion and an old Asian people which was driven from its Asian motherland 1,800 years ago by the force of the Roman sword, but has never ceased to be linked in thought and daily prayer with this holy land which is at the same time a holy land to Christianity and Islam. Again and again through all these centuries our people have tried to resettle in Palestine, and now, through the new means of communication and technology we succeeded in settling down in our old-new homeland. We are happy and proud to take part as an old Asian people at this Conference and we strive to be a loyal member of this great family of nations.

The Hebrew University sends its delegates to you, first of all to learn from you, to learn your problems and their solutions and to transplant this knowledge which we shall acquire here to our country on the Mediterranean Sea. The Asian system of multiracial, multi-religious and multi-cultural political organisation has stood the test of time. I was told by an Indian scholar whom I met here that mutual tolerance of religions and races is so self-understood and so obvious with you that your languages do not even know a word for 'tolerance'. For 'tolerance' is something negative, something given grudgingly. Tolerance is not enough. We have to learn to live together in a positive way and to co-operate in mutual benevolence and reciprocal help.

This lesson Europe was unable to teach us. We do not want to be ungrateful to Europe. We have learned very important lessons there. We learned to appreciate logical reasoning, methodical thinking. We have learned what was always in our blood that every individual soul whoever he may be, has an eternal value and has to be respected in its individual freedom. We have learned in Europe and transplanted to Palestine the teaching and way of life of modern socialism.

But one thing we could not learn in Europe: the mutual co-operation of groups of men belonging to different races and creeds. We have been everywhere a persecuted minority; and during the last war six millions of our brethren, the third part of our people-and the best part: babies, children, women and men, have been ruthlessly murdered in the gas chambers. This last lesson of Europe to us we shall never forget.

It is our hope that Palestine, notwithstanding present difficulties, will not go the European way of 'solving' so to speak, problems by dispossessing populations, but by a common effort to use the results of science and research to make room for more people. And it will mean more good neighbours, more co-operation more reciprocal help.

We have come to learn, not to teach. But if we may contribute actively to the aims of this Conference, it shall be on the lines just mentioned. Because in Palestine it was and is our first aim to enlarge the economic capacity of our small country, we have used to the utmost of our knowledge scientific methods to solve problems of settlement, to transform barren deserts into fertile soil and to work out such forms of co-operative and collective colonisation which would make it possible to intensify to the limit, the fertility of our land and at the same time our health and social services. In this respect we may say in all modesty that by transforming our settlements into one comprehensive scientific laboratory we have had a certain success and the experts in our delegation will be glad to offer their humble services to our common cause in the same way as our scientific research and our health service in Palestine desire to serve not only our community but the whole country and in a certain measure the Middle East.

I would also like as a member of the Hebrew University staff to mention our efforts to revive our old Hebrew language, the language of the Bible, and to make it suit modern purposes. It is one of the principal aims of the Hebrew University to achieve this. We were again and again told by the so called 'practical men' that we are Don

Quixotes, that it would be far easier and far more practical to introduce English as a language of instruction. We resisted the temptation, great as it was, because we thought that on going back to our Asian country this return would be senseless and in vain if we would bring with us a European language. This does not mean that we exclude English as the language of communication with the outer world. But first and foremost we want to be faithful to the language of our fathers. The language of the psalms and prophets became flexible and elastic to our late-born generation. Today we have translated into Hebrew the Koran, Plato, Aristotle and Kant, Hume and Russell, the works of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru. We have not yet translated the holy books of the East, but this day, I hope, will come soon. Also in this respect of the development of an old-new national language we may have to offer some experience to this Conference.

May God - God who is one to all his children - bless our Conference and its aims. We hope and pray that this Conference will open a new chapter in human history.

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