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LEVANT DUSK: THE REFUGEE SITUATION

By STEWART PEROWNE, O.B.E.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, May 16, 1956, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Stewart Perowne, who has kindly come to talk to us this afternoon, has as the title of his lecture "Levant Dusk," the subject is the Refugee Situation, and it will be illustrated by slides. Mr. Perowne, who is known to many here, first went out to Jordan about thirty years ago, and he has been for most of that time in Arab lands. He is now working with the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem in an endeavour to help the refugees. Mr. Perowne has recently written a book on the subject, *The One Remains*, giving an account of the situation, which today he will bring up to date. Shortly, I understand, another book by him will be published with the title *The Life and Times of Herod the Great*. Mr. Perowne.

DURING the past four years I have been working in Jerusalem with the Anglican Bishop, as one of his assistants on schemes for the welfare of the Arab refugees. I want to tell you today, as best I can, something of the present condition of these unhappy people. Then perhaps some of you may be interested to hear of a small experiment which the Bishop has made, not in providing a future for these people, but in trying to ensure that whatever their future may be, they may face it with confidence, self-respect and peace of mind. I should like to tell you of other enterprises, particularly those undertaken by Arabs for Arabs, such as those of Musa Alami, Mrs. Antonius, Miss Husseini and Miss Nasir. If I speak of the Bishop's work, it is because I have been closest to it.

The refugee problem was created in 1948 when, during the war with the Zionists, nearly one million Arabs fled from their homes. The massacre of Deir Yassin, the latest link in a chain of terror, had struck fear into the hearts of those civilians whose homes lay in the path of the Zionist forces. Just as in 1940 Frenchmen in their thousands fled before the advancing Nazis, so in 1948, before the Zionists, thousands of Arabs did the same, and for the same reason. As General Spears has put it in a letter published in the *Daily Telegraph* of November 16 last: "That an honest person should be expected to believe that anything but force or fear for their lives would drive peasants from their age-long holdings is an affront to common sense." I have talked to many refugees during the past four years. They all support General Spears' view. And I think they should know.

So there were these hundreds of thousands of peasants, with their wives and children, suddenly uprooted from the homes and lands which had been theirs for generations, and the quiet and peaceable possession of which Great Britain had repeatedly guaranteed to them. Overnight they became outcasts, and outcasts they have remained ever since. America recognized the new Zionist state almost before it had uttered its first cry. England,

playing a role sadly reminiscent of that of Aaron in the creation of the Golden Calf, of which we read in the 32nd chapter of Exodus, followed America. Nothing was done by either to obtain redress for the Arabs, whom they were, I repeat, solemnly bound to protect from wrong. To this day the Arab refugees have neither been permitted to return to their homes, nor have they received one penny in compensation for what has been taken from them by alien force.

> " In the corrupted currents of this world,
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice;
> And oft 'tis seen, the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law."

So there they are, this million of victims, " Strangers and afraid in a world they never made." For eight years they have waited, for eight years they have endured. Not one jot nor one tittle of justice have they received. Do you expect them to kiss our hands, to give three cheers for democracy, and to praise the policy of the United Nations?

As is well known, many of the refugees live in camps. But it is a mistake to think that they all do. In fact, only just over a third live in camps. Let me repeat that: only just over a third of the refugees—by which I mean registered refugees recognized as such by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency—live in camps maintained by that Agency. The remaining two thirds live in caves, with relatives, or anywhere they can find to lay their heads. But camp dwellers and independents alike, they are refugees and depend on their ration cards for their livelihood.

This picture is black, and I hope that no one thinks there is any way round the problem of the guilt of the West in having created it. There is not; but there is a compensation in this thought, that if we have done nothing to solve the problem, we have done a good deal to palliate it. I refer to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, generally known as UNRWA. To this agency the United Nations vote a large sum every year. It does not come out of the general budget, but is made up of special contributions voted for the purpose by certain nations. America pays the greatest part, between three- and four-fifths. England comes next, but with a far smaller contribution. How is this money spent?

First, on the issue of rations to all those refugees who hold cards, wherever they may be living. Secondly, on the maintenance of camps. Thirdly, on education and health. The Agency is very well run. It must be one of the best-administered organizations of its kind in the world. It has a few foreign officers, American, French and English among them; but the great majority of its staff are Arabs, themselves refugees. It is, in fact, the limbo of that excellent administration which the mandatory government built up over thirty years and abandoned in a night.

The health services deal with sanitation and the care of " all women labouring of child, sick persons and young children "—to use a phrase which, even in these days, cannot be bettered. The education department provides excellent schools, excellent buildings, that is. The mandatory government never built anything half so fine. In or near every big camp

you find them; and outside Jerusalem there is the best Trade School (only, of course, it has to be called a Vocational Training Centre nowadays) that Palestine has ever known. In days gone by it was hard to induce people to send their children to a trade school because, in Palestine as in this country, no one wanted to work in a shop who could work in an office. But now things have changed. Offices pay very poorly in Jordan. Oil companies pay very well. So it is better to train as a welder, or an electronics expert than to become a clerk. Or a teacher, either. And that has had a bad effect on the schools. The cadre of teachers trained under the Mandate were the *corps d'élite* of the Levant. But they have all been scattered now. A few do remain in Jordan, but of those not all are in education. The rest have sought and found fortune in other lands. So their place has been taken perforce by untrained tiros, little more, often, than schoolboys themselves. Not all of them have resisted the blandishments of Communism. But, let us beware of cant: is it natural that they should? What must be the attitude and the feelings of those who for eight years have had nothing to do but brood on their wrongs, men and boys alike, without work, without hope? Think of them, looking daily across the truce line at their own lands, on which grow their own trees—the trees they planted with their own hands. Into their own houses where they were born and lived they see the stranger enter. Will these people, so used, and so circumstanced, praise the policy of the nations who drew that line? Will they not rather be inclined to favour the adversaries of those nations?

The Jordan Government absolutely discourages any attempt at individual revenge. When you read of frontier incidents, and, mercifully, during the last eighteen months they have been very, very rare on the Jordan frontier, remember this. The Tel-Aviv régime has repeatedly been rebuked by the Security Council—in fact no Government in the world has been censured more often—for permitting its armed forces to infringe the truce. On the other hand, such incursions as there have been from the Jordan side have been only the work of individual, dispossessed, privateers, seeking what, in their eyes, is still their own. You appreciate the difference? Remember this, too: that last year the Jordan Government imprisoned more than 900 of its own citizens who had been arrested trying to cross the truce-line.

Yes, the bitterness is there and the causes of it. A little over a month ago I was walking near Jericho, a town in the vicinity of which there are some 70,000 refugees living in three vast camps. Slums would be a better word. The squalid huts, the arid, listless streets, the daily round of nothing—no wonder that, despite UNRWA, they have created among a people famous, almost notorious, for its patience, a sense of despair which in the early days of this year showed itself in an outburst of destructive violence. (In the camps in the hills, where tents are still to be found as homes, the atmosphere of squalor, the awful contrast between school and home, are even more depressing.) As we were walking, we came up with a little lad who was conning his book. (This always has to be done in the open country, because there is no privacy in a camp, so that young wandering scholars are a common sight.) He asked me where I came from. He

was reading an English primer but we talked in Arabic. As soon as I told him, he loosed off a stream of abuse of England such as after thirty years of growing realization that we are not universally loved, took me quite aback. This boy had clearly listened to the Egyptian wireless and to nothing else, for a very long time. He had believed, or pretended to believe, all it told him. Finally, after tearing Britain to shreds, he said: "And then that Baghdad Pact . . ." "Listen," I said. "Mohammed, how old are you?" "Sixteen," he said. "Well, then," I said. "You come back in ten years' time and we'll have a good talk about the Baghdad Pact, because I don't talk politics with children." He laughed and, in that irresistible Arab way, said: "But can't we just be friends, we Arabs and you English?" That encounter ended in smiles; but I am convinced that Mohammed is only one of thousands who have been brought up to regard England as a villainous power, and who see around them no evidence which would persuade them to the contrary.

Which means that, after eight years, the refugee problem is not only no better: it is actually a good deal worse. The refugees are fed and housed and looked after; many, but by no means all, of those squalid, tattered tents have gone, but only to be replaced by hopeless little huts. Meanwhile, the original refugees have become a grave social problem, not least for the Jordan Government, whose subjects they are, and their children, who increase rapidly every year, have been born and brought up to a life of aimless, resentful idleness.

I hope that no one will ask me "Why have the Arab Governments not solved the problem?" The answer is that they did not create the problem, we did. Every Arab, be he statesman or peasant, regards the refugees' problem as part of the Palestine problem in general. Without restitution of some kind, without either return or compensation—and by compensation I mean the payment of a just price for each piece of property alienated form its lawful owners—the problem never will be solved. That is our responsibility; so why should we try to shuffle it off on to the shoulders of the people whom we have wronged? It makes neither sense nor justice.

Now, I have said enough about the problem in general. I want to let you look at some of the facts of the case through the eyes of an artist, Mr. David Brewster, who has taken the pictures we are now going to see. Mr. Brewster is the representative on the Bishop's staff of the Cambridge Undergraduate Committee for Arab Refugees, and is at present a teacher and scoutmaster at St. George's School in Jerusalem.

[Then followed a number of slides.]

Given the fact that the refugees are peasants; given the second fact that their plight is a problem which can only be solved as part of a major political solution of the Palestine problem, the commanding question is: How can these people be helped? It is not a question of "Who is my neighbour?" There he is, wounded by the roadside: it is a question of "How can I help him?"

It was in this light that the Bishop of Jerusalem, among many others, both Arabs and their friends from other lands, viewed the problem.

First of all there was education to be thought about. St. George's School is famous. It has produced many of Jordan's best sons and is now

training many more. Education is the one door which may open on to a life of hope and self-respect for many a refugee, provided he can afford to obtain a good one. I have spoken of the UNRWA schools, of their merits and drawbacks. Many parents would prefer their children to grow up in the proven atmosphere of St. George's. So the Bishop set out to raise funds for bursaries to enable deserving boys to go to St. George's. And that scheme for bursaries is still, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most rewarding of the Bishop's contributions to the refugee problem. It is also one of the most expensive. Two-thirds of St. George's boys are now refugees.

Then, thought the Bishop, what about those who had nowhere even to live, except some dank cave? Could something be done for them, and even more for their children, so that in due time these same children might grow up healthy boys and girls, and perhaps become scholars of St. George's?

At this point the Bishop and Mrs. Stewart consulted a friend of theirs, someone with a long connection with St. George's, where his own first-born and many of his family are now at school. He is called Mahmud Abu Rish. He lives at Bethany, the village, you remember, in which the story of the Good Samaritan was originally told, the village which stands at the head of the very road in which that story is set. Mahmud is the head of a very ancient family, and he is a Muslim. So are all the refugees in the camps, every one of them. There are Christian refugees; but, as it happened—largely owing to an accident of geography—the chief centres of Christian residence and industry were untouched by the disaster, and so have been able to absorb a great number, in fact the majority, of their fellow Christians. Mahmud felt he had some responsibility towards, first of all, certain friends who arrived in his village. He soon had them looked after. Then his interest spread, and with his friends—the Bishop and the Bishop's wife, Mrs. Stewart—he decided that something might be done to make the lot of other refugees more stable and more hopeful. Mahmud is one of eight brothers. They are a typical Palestine family. One was killed in the Zionist war. One lives in Haiti, one is the representative in Beirut of a world-famous American newspaper, one works for the Jordan Government, one for UNRWA. That leaves three—Mahmud, Musa and Daud. They live at home in Bethany and devote their time and talents to work for their fellows.

So there was the team: the Bishop, Mrs. Stewart, Mahmud and the two brothers. They decided to help a group of villagers from the plain—who were living in such filth and overcrowded squalor that they could not, tough as they were, long survive in such conditions—to build some houses. The villagers saw no objection. After all, they said, the Bishop was a man of religion and he had nothing to do with their future, which was the business of the politicians (you see, this attitude is universal); all he was offering was the means of facing the future, whatever it might be, as healthy householders, with healthy children. Why not do it? That was how the Bishop's housing scheme originally started, and that is how it works today. The first village was built nearly four years ago, with funds raised in England in response to a letter in *The Times*. Since that small beginning, the Bishop and Mahmud Abu Rish have built five other villages.

The general idea was that the new villages should be built so as to harmonize with the existing ones. Funds for them have been contributed by individual friends, in England, America and Canada, by Arab refugees who have made good in other lands; by the Arab statesman and businessman, Mr. Emile Bustani, and by three Oil Companies—the Arabian-American, or ARAMCO; the Iraq Petroleum Company; and the Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company, or TAPLINE. The American Episcopal Church and the American Congregational Church jointly have given one village. The American Gulf Oil Company, which is one of the owners of the Kuwait Oil Company, has recently given the Bishop a sum of £2,000, a large proportion of which is being devoted to the afforestation of the villages with fruit trees, vines and shade and fuel trees. Altogether this project has received a sum of some £35,000 with which it has been possible to provide decent homes for some 1,000 souls. This is not a big achievement; but it does show that homes can be provided—and the sort of home that seems to meet the wishes of the people; and the individual cost is not high.

First a site is bought, and surrounded with a ring-wall, to protect it from goats. Then the building begins. From the start, the new villagers help to build their own homes. Here is a Bedu, a refugee from Beersheba, and his little boy. You can see from his face how earnest and anxious he is: is it really possible that, after shivering for eight winters on these cold hills, he is to have a house to live in? Yes, if he helps to build it. So he sets to work.

The stonemason is a professional. Here he sits under his improvized sun-shade, cutting with a practised instinct the stones which are to form the new house. They are soon laid in position, and the walls begin to rise—with astonishing speed. For before the eyes of the workers are the finished houses in the background: when are WE going to have houses, they say? As soon as you finish them, is the answer.

Soon the house looks like this. It is a two-roomed block, each room about 13 feet square. Each room will house a couple, and adjacent rooms are occupied, of course, by members of the same family, who will not mind sharing the verandah and the kitchen—which, like the verandah, they will build themselves to the design of the head of the house, or more likely of his wife.

At last the top course is reached, the stones being passed up from hand to hand and shoulder to shoulder.

The mortar is made of earth and lime mixed. Cement is used to point the outside and to make it watertight. Here is a load of mortar being brought up by one of the younger generation. He will always remember the day he helped to build the house. Whatever the future may be for him and his children, whatever other dwelling, old or new, he may acquire, this will always have an appeal for him.

The house is measured for its doors and windows. When it is finished it looks like this. The roof is corrugated iron on a wood frame, coped with stone. The group grows until it begins to fit into the landscape. When the ground round the houses—and there is half an acre to each block—is cultivated, and when the hundreds of trees which have been planted round the walls and along the streets of the villages come up, the

houses will look even more appropriate. You notice that they are not set in straight lines, but in groups, which is the way houses are in Palestine.

Finally comes the day when the stone of dedication is engraved and set up. This one is an old Roman pillar which gives its name to the village. The inscription starts, as all of them do, with a verse from the Quran. It reads: " God is the surest protector." Then " Al-'Amudiya " (the name of the village, meaning " the Village of the Pillar.") " It was founded by the American-Arabian Oil Company." And then comes the date according to the Muslim and the Christian calendars—1374 and 1955.

And here is a mother at home in her house with her baby. It is one of the oldest and best pictures in the world, so I will say no more about it. Only that the rolls of mattresses in the alcove, neatly stowed away by day, are the family's beds at night. They are, of course, exactly the same as they were in the days when the once lame man was told to take up his and walk.

In the older established villages it has been possible to provide communal amenities. This is the inscription of one of them. It reads: " The Children's House " (between two dates, 1374 and 1955). " It was given to the model villages of Al-Mansur, Al-Bustan and Al-Manara by the employees of the Near-East Arab Broadcasting Station, themselves children of this land." The last phrase is a modest cloak for the fact that although they are all refugees, they wanted to help their less fortunate countrymen and so contributed the very considerable sum of money necessary to build this infant welfare centre.

This is the inside. The blackboard shows the number of children who have on that particular day come to the centre for their daily ration of milk.

Another amenity, particularly loved by the ladies, is the communal oven, or *furn*. In biblical times, as still in most villages, the pots had to be made hot with thorns, which means this particular thorn. It takes hours and hours of arduous work for the women to go out on to the hillsides and gather enough fuel even for one week. And think of the harm it does to the countryside by encouraging dessication and denudation. How much better and more convenient to have a general oven, which can be lighted with just one bit of thorn, like this, and then fired with *jift*—the residue left after the olives have been crushed; such a good, oily, hot fuel. All the ladies now have to do is to take down each her own prepared dough, made from the flour which UNRWA provides, and the baker does the rest of the baking. The gossip is the province of the ladies, and I assure you they do it to perfection. This bakery was the gift of two English friends whose names I should like to tell you, only I know they would not wish me to.

There stands a finished village—our second, Al-Mansur—with Bethany in the background.

Here is a group of villagers in the neighbouring Al-Bustan, three generations of them.

This is a picture of the headman of Al-Bustan.

And this is the baker's father, from down near Hebron. He has known bewildering changes in his life. Born under the Turks; seeing the coming of the English as a young man. And now, in his old age, a refugee. What

do they think of, these men? What do they look forward to? I do not know all their thought. But I can tell you this: they are never vindictive. Critical of governments, yes. But you never hear them—at least I have never heard them—say one revengeful word as individuals about those who now occupy their homes and lands. They think of them not in the mass, as Zionists, but individually, as Jews; which is a wholly different thing. It is also an extremely important thing. It was Weizmann himself who said that the ultimate test of the Zionists would be their ability to get on with the Arabs. In the long run, it cannot be alien arms that can maintain a minority amid a majority of different race and religion. It can only be civility and decency and sympathy. My own belief is that if ever the Zionists come to realize that, and act towards their neighbours as man to equal man, they will find that reciprocal sympathy will not be lacking.

But what these people chiefly think about is work. How can they get a livelihood? It is remarkable how the mere fact of once more possessing a home stimulates this desire to be independent and self-respecting. Even more remarkable is their success. They travel all over the kingdom, these men, to find work, and every cultivable inch of the gardens is planted. The result is that the first village is to all intents and purposes now an independent community, as the Bishop always hoped it would be. The second has gone a long way in the same good direction. The third and fourth in a lesser but encouraging degree. There is every prospect that, in a matter of a few years, these people will be as stable as their neighbours, and that their children will grow up free—loved and happy.

Here is one of them. He is called Faris, which means knight or horseman. He is known as the Crown Prince, and is a great character. If only for his sake, and the likes of him, surely the Bishop's work is worth doing.

Somehow, in Palestine, life always renews itself. Here in Jericho, today's refugees are at work bringing to light the oldest town yet known to have been built by man, 8,000 years ago.

Here, in the forsaken street of Jerash, the hyssop still springs from the wall.

Here, in the Garden of Gethsemane itself, are the sweet flowers of this very spring. However hard it may be at times to hope, it is far harder to despair.

The CHAIRMAN: I am afraid we have no time left for questions and, in any case, as Mr. Perowne has wisely said, he does not think he should be asked political questions on this subject, and it certainly would be difficult to ask any questions which are not political. Therefore, it is my very pleasant task to thank Mr. Perowne on your behalf. We have spent a most wonderful hour listening to very forthright speaking. I feel most of us agree that in these days there is need for a good deal of straight speaking, whether we agree with it or not. We have also listened to a most wonderful description of the generous voluntary work being done to help these unfortunate people, unfortunate not through their own fault but through outside influences. What Mr. Perowne said at the conclusion of his talk was most encouraging. I thank him very much indeed for what he has said and for the pictures he has shown.