

●NON-RULING CPs: Israel

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### MAKI STRENGTHENS INDEPENDENT LINE

Summary: The 17th Congress of the Communist Party of Israel (Maki) has substantially confirmed its independent line -- against the resistance of a minority led by Secretary-General Mikunis, which favored a more conciliatory attitude toward the Arabs and toward the Soviet Union. This represents a posthumous victory for the former party chairman, Polish-born Moshe Sneh, who wrote the congress theses just before his death. Although verbal concessions were made to the dissenters, a majority spokesman made it clear that "it is not Maki that must change its positions in its argument with the Soviet Union."

Since August 1965 the Communist movement in Israel has been divided into two rival and deeply antagonistic parties -- the solidly Jewish "Maki" and the secessionist "Rakach," (1) which has some prominent Jewish leaders but is predominantly Arab in its membership and almost entirely so in its electorate. (2) If weighed in the balance of the international movement, they are unequal adversaries: since the June War of 1967 the overwhelming majority of the world's Communist parties have ignored or attacked Maki, granting fraternal recognition only to its rival.

Nevertheless, Maki has held its ideological ground, preserving a unique combination of independent communism and modified Zionism. This stand had been confirmed at the party's 17th Congress (April 20-22), despite the critical attitude of a minority led by Maki's veteran Secretary-General, Shmuel Mikunis.

This result, it might be said, was a posthumous triumph for a dead man -- Moshe Sneh, Maki's outstanding theorist, its only deputy in the Sixth Knesset (Parliament), and perhaps the only Communist of either party who could be described as a leading figure in Israeli political life. Sneh died at the age of 63 only three weeks before the congress, on March 1; but in his last weeks he had already written the main resolutions (Theses) for the Congress -- his political testament, so to say.

### Sneh's Political Odyssey

If Moshe Sneh has left his mark upon Maki, it is a very unusual mark. For a start, he was certainly the only Communist leader in the world who narrowly escaped death in the notorious Katyn Forest massacre. Seven months before he died he revealed that as a captain in the Polish Army (under his original name, Kleinbaum) he was captured by the Red Army in September 1939. As a group of 200 officers were being marched under Soviet guard to a train for "an unknown destination," he and another Jewish officer managed to escape. The unknown destination, he learned later, was Katyn. "I don't know what happened in Katyn, or how things developed there," he told a Tel-Aviv paper almost blandly. "I only know that nobody returned..." (3)

Arriving in Palestine in 1940, Sneh entered upon a remarkable political odyssey. He became a member of the Zionist Executive as representative of the left-of-center General Zionist Confederation, and then commander-in-chief of the underground Haganah force during the closing years of British rule (which made him No. 1 on the British police wanted list). After the establishment of Israel, however, he left the Zionist establishment and moved steadily leftwards -- through the Marxist Mapam party and its splinter-party to Maki.

In the early 1960s Sneh led a section of Maki's Jewish membership in reassessing the Zionist issue -- not only as a matter of principle, but also in recognition that this was the only way to broaden the party's appeal to the Israeli masses. This tendency was vigorously resisted by Maki's Arab membership and by an intransigently anti-Zionist minority of Jewish Communists, and after a prolonged struggle the final split came in August 1965, with the establishment of Rakach, led by a Jewish militant, Meir Wilner. The CPSU had tried to avert the split, and afterwards to bring the rival parties together again, but gradually transferred its favors to Rakach. The process was completed in June 1967, when Maki joined the other Knesset parties -- with the sole exception of Rakach -- in supporting the "preventive war."

### Independent Voice

If the June War made Maki something of an outcast among the world's Communist parties, the invasion of Czechoslovakia 14 months later strengthened its will to accept that challenge, and gave it an independent freedom it had not had before. It was freedom, in the first place, to criticize the USSR and the CPSU whenever Maki felt criticism was called for -- which was quite frequently. The party's spokesmen, led by Sneh, attacked Soviet policies on many scores, but particularly in connection with Czechoslovakia, (4) Middle East policies, the treatment of Soviet Jews and the CPSU's hegemonial attitudes to other Communist parties.

Another target of Maki's criticism was the Gomulka regime's harrassment of the remnant of Polish Jewry after March 1968. Relevant here was the fact that a considerable proportion of the party's members (and even more of the leadership, like Sneh himself) was of Polish origin, some being former members of the "old" Polish CP, dissolved by the Comintern on Stalin's orders in 1938 and "posthumously" rehabilitated 16 years later -- after most of its leadership had been liquidated. In a Knesset speech of 19 November 1969 Sneh tellingly linked Soviet and Polish treatment of the respective Jewish communities:

In Poland, in 1968, Wladislaw Gomulka decreed that citizens who are Jews only by origin should leave the country -- leave for Israel, of all countries, and for Israel alone. In Poland it was decreed that the Jews must leave, and in the USSR -- that they must stay. Is it conceivable that the same ideological doctrine, in the same era, concerning the same people in the same conditions, should lead to diametrically opposite conclusions? Clearly, a fundamental change is called for in the Soviet approach to the questions of the Jewish people, in the light of the lessons of reality in our times. (5)

Sneh's own solution to the complex problems of diaspora, assimilation and emigration was to claim for every Jewish citizen of a socialist state the right a) to emigrate to Israel if he so wished, b) to lead "a Jewish national-cultural life with the support of the socialist state," c) to maintain regular contacts with democratic Jewish institutions abroad, and c) to "assimilate into the nation of the majority, if he so desires." This formula was officially adopted as party policy at Maki's 16th Congress in October-November 1968.



This emphasis on modified Zionism applied also, of course, to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Briefly, Maki maintained Israel's right to both existence and national defense (including the right when necessary, as in 1967, to wage "preventive war"), while simultaneously urging steps toward a lasting peace with the Arab states; it opposed permanent annexations, while at the same time stressing that Israel should not abandon conquered territory in advance of an enduring peace settlement.

### Policy Challenged

This policy might have represented an acceptance of national realities, but it had its political and ideological drawbacks. It abandoned the Arab protest vote to Rakach, while Maki itself showed little sign of making much headway among Jewish voters; and it aggravated Maki's isolation in the international Communist movement. In the autumn of 1968 opposition to this line from a more militant or more dogmatic faction became evident; it was at that time headed by two Politburo members, Esther Wilenska and her husband, Zwi Breitstein. In September 1968 Breitstein published in the party organ, Kol Haam (People's Voice) a number of articles in which he argued that Maki had gone too far in supporting the Zionist government, that it should make more concessions to Arab viewpoints, that it should adopt a less critical attitude toward the Soviet Union.

At the 16th Congress in October-November 1968 this faction argued the case for change, but its amendment challenging the main policy resolution was defeated by 159 votes to 34, with 12 abstentions. Moreover, Breitstein, for many years head of the Control Commission, was dropped from the Central Committee, leaving Esther Wilenska as the only representative of the opposition in the leadership. At the same time the congress took measures for the reinstatement of certain "national Communists" who resigned or were expelled from Maki in its anti-Zionist days, before the 1965 split. The Sneh line of "independent-Communist-Zionism" had triumphed again.

More recently, however, opposition to this line emerged again, if in a less open way; and this time the leading figure among the dissenters or doubters -- those who sought at least a modification of Maki's policies -- was Secretary-General Mikunis. In an article published in Kol Haam in early February of this year Mikunis expressed coolly but clearly his desire for more conciliatory attitudes toward both the Arabs and the Soviet Union. (6) By the time this appeared, however, the ailing Sneh was already fighting back. In a sick-bed interview given to his follower, Kol Haam editor Yair Tsaban, he criticized the USSR's "unsuccessful policy regarding the Israel-Arab conflict," and declared that Israel had not wasted any opportunity to achieve peace -- "Have I to deny it because I am a member of the opposition? Opposition does not mean to be opposed to truth." (7)

When Sneh died on March 1, the policy dispute was already public knowledge in Israel. There were rumors that there would be an open split, that the Mikunis-Wilenska group would join Rakach, that Mikunis would not be re-elected Secretary-General, and so on. But the more recent Maki practice, associated with Sneh, of letting dissenters have their say and democratically out-voting them, prevailed.

### Posthumous Victory

It seems that the outcome was decided at three Central Committee sessions held just before Sneh's death, on February 5, 12 and 19. Sneh's theses were adopted by 15 votes to 6 (probably with several abstentions). After his death a further session of the leadership consolidated the posthumous triumph of his views, without humiliating the "leftist" minority. A strong supporter of Sneh, Raoul Teitelbaum, succeeded him as Chairman of the party. To balance that, Mikunis was given Sneh's Knesset seat, but two "Sneh loyalists," Teitelbaum and Herzberg, were appointed as his advisors on parliamentary policy.

That set the pattern for the 17th Congress in late April. During the debates the Mikunis-led minority of 20 to 35 (depending on the issue) out of 163 voting delegates voted against each of the five chapters of Sneh's theses. But on the final vote there were no dissenting voices -- just 21 abstentions. The party's monthly organ summed up complacently:

The theses elaborated by the deceased Maki leader Moshe Sneh -- his last work -- were approved by the 17th Party Congress; only 21 out of 163 voting delegates ... abstained at the final vote... The party that its rivals on the right and on the "left" (8) had considered as split held genuinely democratic debates and demonstrated its unity in the struggle for a left bloc on the basis of working-class loyalty and national responsibility. All discussions were open...

The differences of opinion were no secret. They found their expression during the congress, too. Comrade Shmuel Mikunis and others explained their objections.... (9)

The new leadership elected by the congress reflected this outcome. The top bodies -- Central Committee, Politburo, Executive Commission and Central Control Commission -- were solidly Jewish (not even a token Arab member, to judge by the names); and, if each of them contained a few representatives of the minority, notably Mikunis and Wilenska, they were heavily outnumbered by the Sneh loyalists.

This triumph of "unity in diversity" was, however, evidently obtained at the cost of some (perhaps largely verbal) concessions to the minority. The final resolutions soft-pedalled Zionism and balanced commitment to "the national defense of Israel's security and rights" with rejection of "a policy of annexations." Similarly, criticism of the Soviets was distinctly muted, in comparison with the previous congress in 1968. It came only indirectly, in the third resolution, expressing "appreciation of the diplomatic activities of the Rumanian Socialist Republic in connection with the Israel-Arab conflict and of her readiness to offer her good services in order to promote an agreement":

The diplomatic activities of Socialist Rumania may serve in this respect as an example for the other socialist countries.

The Congress of Maki calls on the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the other socialist countries to re-establish diplomatic relations with Israel and to reconsider their one-sided policy in our region, so that they can play a constructive role in the promotion of an agreement between the parties concerned. (10)

But the fact that such verbal concessions did not mean abandonment of majority positions was demonstrated when Yair Tsaban, Kol Haam editor and now Secretary of the Central Committee, tackled the same subject in his keynote address to the opening session of the congress. Praising Rumania's "courageous, independent policy," and instancing the invitation to Premier Golda Meir, he said:

Whatever its result, it is obvious that only a state with an independent policy like Rumania can achieve practical results. In any case, it is not Maki that must change its positions in its argument with the Soviet Union. Therefore, we are going to reject firmly every attempt at a revision in the positions of Maki. (11)

That, surely, is unequivocal enough. Moshe Sneh is dead; but the "new" party which he helped to shape stands by his heritage of independence.

Kevin Devlin



- (1) "Rakach" comes from the Hebrew words for "New Communist List," the title under which the secessionist party contested the 1965 Knesset elections. Similarly, "Maki" comes from the Hebrew words for Communist Party of Israel -- which the CPSU and most other Communist parties accept as the rightful title of "Rakach." For further details of the split see Kevin Devlin, "Israel," in C. D. Kernig, ed. Die kommunistischen Parteien der Welt (Freiburg, 1969, pp. 255-271).
- (2) At the Knesset elections of October 1969 Rakach got only 0.2% of the Jewish votes but around 30% of the Arab votes (its total percentage was 2.84%, which gave it three Knesset seats, as against one for Maki with 1.15%).
- (3) Interview in Maariv, 22 July 1971. The previous day's issue of Maariv had carried an interview with a former inmate of a Soviet labor camp, Avraham Vidro, who claimed that a Jewish Russian major told him the Russians had carried out the Katyn massacre. When the Germans announced discovery of the mass graves near Smolensk in 1943, the Kremlin counter-charged the Nazis with responsibility for the killings.
- (4) Maki has frequently repeated its firm condemnation of the August 1968 invasion as "brutal violence," "cruel interference" and "entirely unjustified breach" of interparty principles" (Politburo statement, 22 August 1968). Thus, on the anniversary of the invasion the party organ declared that the "normalized" Husak regime "is completely isolated from the masses of the [Czechoslovak] people," adding: "We are sure that the ideas the invaders sought to suppress will still flourish, and freedom shall triumph in Prague." (Kol Haam, 21 August 1969).
- (5) Maki Information Bulletin, December 1969, pp. 15-16.
- (6) S. Mikunis, "Let Us Not Miss the Opportunity of Peace!", Kol Haam, 2 February 1972.
- (7) "M. Sneh on Israel's Foreign Policy," Kol Haam, 19 January 1972.
- (8) The inverted commas around "left" represent a sneer at the revolutionary pretensions of Rakach.
- (9) Israel At Peace, No. 5, May 1972, pp. 1-10.
- (10) Ibid., p. 7.
- (11) Ibid., p. 8.