

FREE WORLD

1126

*This material was prepared for the use of the  
editors and policy staff of Radio Free Europe.*

NON-RULING CPs: Israel

● 14 September 1971

SOVIET APPROACHES TO "OUTCAST" ISRAELI CP

Summary: Moshe Sneh, leader of the Israeli CP (MAKI) has revealed that Soviet officials recently made covert approaches to representatives of MAKI -- with which the CPSU broke off relations in June 1967 -- to ask non-committally about "improving relations." Dr. Sneh suggests that this was primarily a "public relations" move, perhaps in connection with more flexible Soviet policies in the Middle East. Since one of the MAKI representatives involved, Esther Wilenska, has been a critic of Sneh's liberal-Zionist stand, it is also possible that this represented a Soviet effort to undermine his position.

A striking illustration of the transitional uncertainty which has become a feature of interparty relations in some sectors of the international Communist movement is provided by the revelation that Soviet officials have made covert approaches to representatives of the "outcast" Communist Party of Israel (MAKI), to make vague inquiries about an improvement (or, more precisely, a restoration) of relations between the two parties. The news was given by Dr. Moshe Sneh, the leading ideologist of MAKI and the party's only deputy in the Knesset, in a report in the English-language Jerusalem Post of 19 July 1971, now available here.

The significance of this development can be appreciated by a brief glance at the lonely position of MAKI in the international movement. When the Israeli Communist movement split in August 1965 -- not, as elsewhere, due to Sino-Soviet polarization, but

over attitudes toward Zionism and the Arab liberation movement -- the CPSU strove vainly for a reunification, and then maintained fraternal relations with both MAKI and the secessionist RAKACH. This transitional stage ended abruptly in June 1967, when MAKI supported the national forces in the "preventive war" against the Soviet-backed Arab states. The CPSU and almost all other foreign Communist parties promptly denounced MAKI, and from then on recognized only RAKACH as representative of communism in Israel. Thus MAKI, against its sharp protests, was not invited to the 24th CPSU Congress or to international Communist assemblies in Moscow and elsewhere (including the Moscow Conference of June 1969).

Clarifying "rather confused reports" which had appeared in local newspapers, Sneh told the Jerusalem Post that Soviet official had, indeed, made approaches earlier in the year to MAKI representatives in two different parts of the world. One meeting was held in New York in May between Yosef Lipsky, editor of the Yiddish Communist newspaper, Frei Yisroel, and a Soviet official named Tchourilin, First Secretary of the Soviet mission to the United Nations.

Sneh's account of the other approach -- as paraphrased by the Jerusalem Post -- is both more significant and more puzzling:

The other encounter about the same time was between Mrs. Esther Eilenska, MAKI Histadrut [trade union federation] faction head, at a cocktail party at the congress of the Hungarian Communist Party, when a former Soviet diplomat to Israel, a Mr. Kotov, came up to her and introduced himself. He had switched from the Soviet foreign service to the International Department of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. (1)

#### Budapest Meeting?

There are at least two difficulties here. The first, minor one, is that the Hungarian congress was not "about the same time" as the May meeting in New York -- it was six months earlier, in November 1970. The discrepancy is not, perhaps, too important. The second question to be asked about this paraphrased report is, however, more difficult: was Esther Wilenska in fact in Budapest at the time of the congress?

As one would expect (since the Hungarian party followed the Soviet lead in severing relations with MAKI in June 1967), she



was certainly not there in any official capacity: her name does not appear in the list of foreign delegates. (It may be noted here that no delegation of RAKACH was present either; the rival Israeli party was among those which merely sent greetings to the Hungarian congress.) But this does not mean that Mrs. Wilenska was not present in Budapest at the time in some unofficial capacity -- perhaps as a trade union leader. If the Soviets, for whatever reason, wanted to make contact with her, it goes without saying that the Hungarian authorities would have been ready to facilitate the encounter. The absence of her name from official lists, therefore, does not settle one way or the other the question of whether a private meeting took place between her and the Soviet official, Kotov.

As it happens, there is another explanation which clears up this difficulty too. Esther Wilenska was in Budapest -- not in November 1970 but in May 1971 (that is, at "about the same time" as the New York meeting, as Sneh stated), and not attending (even as a private observer) the Hungarian congress but as an official delegate to the meeting of the World Peace Council (2) (13-16 May). If we assume that Sneh (or the Jerusalem Post) inadvertently substituted the congress for the Peace Council, we are left with no reason to question Sneh's flat statement that the two meetings took place.

#### Non-committal

If we accept his statement, we move on to the more important questions of just why the Soviets made these two covert, not to say devious, approaches to representatives of a party which for four years they have treated as outcast from the communist family. The first point to make here is that, according to Sneh, the Soviet officials were very much non-committal:

In both cases the Russians asked almost identical questions -- How could relations be improved? -- to which they got the replies that the onus was on the Soviet Union to renew the ties it had broken, and that the Russians would stop their atrocity propaganda against Israel. "The Russians asked questions and listened, but said nothing," Dr. Sneh reported.

Noting that both meetings had taken place at the initiative of the Soviets, Dr. Sneh made it clear that he, for one, was extremely skeptical about the motives behind it:

He believed that the Russians were interested in creating the impression that they wished to renew relations without making any tangible move in this direction.

"They are only going through the motions, but nothing commits them to real action," Dr. Sneh held. The MAKI leader believed that the Russians wished to create for themselves an international public relations image that they too were "fit to mediate in the Middle East." "They want to counter the argument that they cannot mediate like the Americans because they are not on speaking terms with the Israelis, while the US has the leverage of talking with both sides," he said.

Asked whether these approaches might amount to "a removal of Moscow's boycott of MAKI," he said: "If it is a removal of the boycott, then it is only by conversation, but not by action."

There may be something in Sneh's suggestion that these vague and non-committal approaches were in some way connected with a move toward greater flexibility in the USSR's Middle Eastern policies -- its existing ties with RAKACH are not going to help it much in any search for greater influence in Israeli circles. In this connection it may be worth noting two recent indications of marginal change: Victor Louis's visit to Israel and the invitation of a predominantly non-Communist Israeli delegation to the Soviet Union.

#### Subversive Intent?

It seems more likely, however, that the primary significance -- such as it may be -- of the approaches lies in the area of interparty relations. An examination of the question on this level suggests, however, that the Soviet approaches may have been at least as much directed toward causing dissension within the MAKI leadership as toward improving relations with it.

In this connection it is certainly significant that an approach was made to Esther Wilenska, the most prominent representative in the present MAKI leadership of a more



conservative line in international and interparty affairs. In the autumn of 1968 she and her husband, Zwi Breitstein -- both at that time Politburo members -- rebelled against party positions on two main issues: MAKI's approval of Israel's reprisal attacks against Palestinian terrorists and its denunciation of Soviet policies (this was just after its sharp condemnation of the invasion of Czechoslovakia). In September 1968 Breitstein published a series of articles in the party organ, Kol Ha-am (Peoples' Voice), in which he criticized the party leadership on these counts, calling for greater consideration of the Arab viewpoint and a less critical attitude to the Soviet Union. At the subsequent 16th Congress of MAKI in late October 1968 their more conservative faction submitted a minority resolution calling for corresponding changes in policies, particularly with regard to the Arabs. This was, however, heavily defeated by 159 votes to 34, with 12 abstentions; and, in addition, Breitstein, long head of the Control Commission, was dropped from the Central Committee, leaving Esther Wilenska to carry the burden of opposition in the top leadership.

Her position has become more important (and the Soviet approach more significant) in view of indications that differences, at least of emphasis, have more recently developed between Sneh and Secretary-General Shmuel Mikunis, who has been rather overshadowed by the former in his role as party spokesman. (3) The Jerusalem Post report did not fail to draw attention to this factor:

It is understood that the Soviet officials sought to undermine Dr. Sneh's position inside MAKI, but on this matter he was not to be drawn. But it would appear that the Soviet choice of Mrs. Wilenska was not a chance one. She belongs to the opposition to Dr. Sneh's policies in MAKI councils, and veers more to hard-line communism.

In this she is backed by Party Secretary-General Shmuel Mikunis, whose position is overshadowed by Dr. Sneh. Indeed, the two found themselves in a minority during the weekend discussions of the MAKI Central Committee here. Dr. Sneh's "peace plan," declaring that Israel must not return to the 4 June 1967 borders but secure defensible lines, earned 17 votes to 4. Other proposals of Dr. Sneh that were adopted included one calling for a federation between Israel and Jordan, free land passage across Israel between Arab countries and self-determination for the Palestinian Arabs, most probably in what is now called Jordan.

It is noticeable that when all the ten points were put to the vote as one program, Mr. Mikunis backed Dr. Sneh, while Mrs. Wilenska chose to abstain, together with two more committee members.

The Soviets would certainly seize any chance to undermine the position of Dr. Sneh -- who recently compounded his offenses in their eyes by revealing that, after being taken prisoner by the Red Army in September 1939, he managed to escape from a convoy of Polish officers -- bound for Katyn Wood. . . . The publicity he has given to the covert Soviet approaches in New York and Budapest in itself helps to block that purpose. Few know better than Comrade Sneh that to sup with the Russians one needs an uncommonly long spoon. If such was the Soviet intention there is no evidence that it has had any success. Preserving its relations with the handful of communist parties which still recognizes it -- notably the Rumanians (4) -- MAKI stands firmly by a position that has considerable bearing on the present pattern of interparty relations:

No party nor any combination of parties has the right to issue a verdict on whether another party is fit or unfit, nor which of the parallel parties existing in any country is the right and true communist party . . . . Only the Israeli working class is authorized to decide which one is its communist party. (5)

Kevin Devlin

- (1) Jerusalem Post, 19 July 1971.
- (2) See her article, "Why I Objected to the Resolution of the World Peace Council on the Middle East," MAKI Information Bulletin, July 1971, pp. 18-20.
- (3) It is relevant to note that MAKI's only Knesset seat, held by Mikunis in the last assembly, is now occupied by Sneh.
- (4) Last week Secretary-General Mikunis arrived in Bucharest for another of his regular visits as guest of the Rumanian party.
- (5) Resolutions of the fourth session of the CPI (MAKI) Central Committee; Information Bulletin, June 1969, p. 7.