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The Lausanne Office, December 1933

During this foundation period, McDonald skirted around the key issues involved in refugee assistance in order to deal with preliminary administrative matters. Before the High Commission could be formally constituted, the composition and membership of the Governing Body had to be agreed upon and support from member governments garnered. The backing of both Jewish and non-Jewish aid societies was critical for McDonald, as he would need to rely on their expertise, experience and, above all, financial commitments for his High Commission to have an impact. The composition of the Advisory Council was consequently also critical, but the decision on its membership was difficult and sensitive. The final selection of its members was deferred until the Governing Body had met for the first time.

This was scheduled for 5 December 1933 in Lausanne. As the governmental representatives of the Governing Body and interested private organizations gathered, McDonald's place within the broader network of political and communal interests became clearer. As an American, he moved within a milieu of seasoned European diplomats and hardened, sometimes cynical politicians representing their nation's particular interests. He was also from a country that had all but closed its borders to new immigrants when one of his tasks was to persuade the Europeans, who bore the brunt of the refugee problem, to do more for the refugees. And, although not a Jew himself, he was nevertheless drawn into the internal political conflicts between the traditional 'establishment' Jewish organizations in both the United States and Great Britain, whose approach was facilitating Jewish emigration and resettlement across many countries, and Zionists, who looked upon the High Commission as a means of promoting Jewish settlement in Palestine.

McDonald was therefore an outsider among the forces that he was trying to harness to a common cause. His lack of influence over individuals of greater prestige and political authority was clear on the morning of the Governing Body's

opening session. Cecil told McDonald that he could not accept his nomination as its permanent chair. McDonald approached the Uruguayan Alberto Guani. But the French representative, Henri Béranger, insisted on putting Cecil's name forward all the same, and after a private discussion with Cecil, Béranger had persuaded him to change his mind. As Cecil's main concern was the travel required for future meetings in Lausanne, it appears that Béranger agreed to withdraw France's objection to the Governing Body meeting in London. McDonald took no part in the discussions and was not aware of what Cecil and Béranger had agreed.¹

From the start, therefore, it would seem that McDonald carried little diplomatic authority into the Governing Body and would struggle to assert his will over its members. His authority as High Commissioner came instead from his public advocacy for the refugees, an approach that came through clearly in his opening address to the Governing Body. A large audience of aid organizations and the American and European press assembled in the Palais de Rumine at the University of Lausanne for the opening session to hear McDonald describe the extent of the refugee problem.

His address was as much a record of the perception of the refugee problem at the end of 1933 as an account of its size and nature. The Governing Body was a sign of international attention on the plight of a persecuted people, McDonald began. It was proof of the 'interest among nations' of the 'grave economic, financial, and social problem' of the refugees. At a time of acute economic crisis throughout the world, he continued, this situation could conceivably grow to 'such proportions as to be possibly unmanageable.'² The cautious approach of the League of Nations towards the refugee problem was not far from McDonald's mind, however. He reassured all those present that the refugees did not constitute a political problem; it was not the Governing Body's role, he declared, 'to interfere' in German affairs. The High Commission was instead an intergovernmental body that sought common ground to help the refugees. 'We have no wish to examine the reasons why these people have left their country'; they presented a 'purely technical problem, and its solution must be found by common agreement'.³

A summary of the distribution of the refugees from Germany was published (Table 1.1), drawn from figures obtained from the various national refugee aid societies across Europe. It showed that a total of 59,300 refugees had fled Germany between January and November 1933; just under half were in France. These were at best just estimates, however; many refugees were almost certainly double-counted, having been registered in one country before going to another

and being registered there. There was no way of knowing how many had decided to return to Germany when they found conditions difficult in another country, or could not obtain an entry visa, or were forced to leave because of an expired visa or having entered illegally.⁴ The figures nevertheless illustrated the serious imbalance in the distribution of the refugees across Europe, with France, the Netherlands and Czechoslovakia bearing a heavy responsibility, while the United States had scarcely been touched by the problem. In all, 86 per cent of the refugees were Jewish; the remainder were socialists, communists, trade unionists, pacifists and other political refugees. Until this point in time, McDonald declared, Jewish aid organizations had borne the cost of relief and assistance for both Jewish and non-Jewish refugees. A considerable proportion of the refugees held a nationality other than German. Some 16,520 were Polish in origin, or were stateless and without a recognized nationality.

McDonald then proceeded to outline his priorities as High Commissioner. In the face of this crisis, he said, he had two clear responsibilities: to coordinate the relief and settlement work being undertaken by private refugee aid organizations, and to negotiate opportunities for resettlement with governments. On the first, McDonald explained that the High Commission did not have resources of its own to provide relief and assistance, and it could not be the medium through which relief funds were collected and disbursed. His role was therefore to support and coordinate the activities of the many aid and benevolent organizations that were better equipped to carry out these vital functions. Rather than develop assistance programmes itself, the High Commission's functions would be instead to facilitate the strategies of other agencies that aimed at making the refugees more attractive to prospective countries of resettlement through retraining, or by investing in industries and jobs in which they could be placed. On the issue of resettlement, there were specific technical questions that required the agreement of governments. Among these were travel documents, identity documents and questions of property rights, critical issues that would also require negotiations with the German government.⁵

Fractures appeared when the Governing Body reconvened in a closed session later that day to deal with procedural matters. The question of membership of the Permanent Committee of the Governing Body, which McDonald had proposed in order to deal with important matters more quickly and efficiently between the formal meetings of the full Governing Body, drew scant interest from some governments. The representatives of Sweden, Italy and Denmark declined membership on the instructions of their governments. The Italian representative, Senator Giovanni Majoni, went further and pre-empted later

discussions. With 500 refugees from Germany in Italy, Majoni declared, it had reached the end of its tolerance and could accept no more. Italy's participation in the High Commission would therefore be limited.⁶

Majoni was the first of several representatives who declared that it was the intention of their governments to hold fast to their policies against the admission and settlement of more refugees. Bérenger also declared that the French government expected the High Commission to help relieve France of its existing refugee burden and to work for a more equitable distribution of the refugees among other countries. For this reason, France had suspended entry visas and residence permits from the date the League of Nations decided to appoint the High Commissioner. 'France and French private aid organizations,' Bérenger continued, 'have done more than their duty when faced with the humanitarian problem arising from the events in Germany'. France's position was therefore that it could not be 'indefinitely hospitable ... it will consent to be a clearing house but not a final haven for all refugees'⁷

Bérenger had in fact expressed the general mood of the Governing Body. The Swiss representative, Henri Rothmund, explained that his government had issued entry visas for expired passport holders in order to assist them to flee Germany, but it could not continue to do so. The Czechoslovakian representative, Prince Max Lobkowitz, said bluntly that the alternative to a travel or identity document for refugees was their repatriation to Germany.

A travel and identity document akin to the Nansen Passport issued to Russian and Armenian refugees during the 1920s was nevertheless considered unwarranted and undesirable in the circumstances facing the refugees from Germany. An intergovernmental conference would need to be held to agree on its terms and use; that would take time, when the problem was urgent. Moreover, it would raise 'difficult political questions' of interference in German affairs.⁸ It was recommended instead that the international identity and travel document adopted by the League of Nations Organization on Communications and Transit in 1927 be made available for the refugees from Germany. Although it was not in wide use, it provided a valid and recognized document for travel in lieu of a national passport. Governments could declare their intention to use it immediately without the need for an intergovernmental agreement. Italy and France objected, however, arguing that a travel document issued by the High Commission itself would be stronger than the 1927 document, and would command an obligation of states to receive refugees resettling from another country. The discussion progressed no further as, Cecil declared from the chair, there were too many matters of government policy that had yet to be determined, and representatives were

being asked to comment on issues on which they had not been instructed. The question was therefore held over for later consideration.⁹

National interests also dominated closing statements. Defending American silence on the refugee problem, Joseph Chamberlain explained that the questions the Governing Body faced were not of moving refugees from one country to another, or of charity. 'The refugees must be allowed to remake their lives, and this requires the cooperation of private organizations with governments'. The United States therefore welcomed the creation of the High Commission and its intention of coordinating the work of private organizations seeking the cooperation of governments.¹⁰ Lobkowicz indicated that the Czechoslovakian government was conflicted between the refugees' need for charity and the 'economic and social problems' they caused. For Bérenger and the French government, the obligations of refugee relief no longer rested with the countries of refuge on Germany's borders but with the High Commissioner and countries in the Americas: 'France, frontier of liberty, has not only done a work of charity but also a work of reconstruction and put into practice the fundamental principles of the High Commission itself'. But, again he stressed it could not continue to do this. 'It is above all on the American continents where the redistribution can be made ... It is for the High Commissioner to take up the torch that the League of Nations has passed to him ... It is now time that effective aid were apportioned by the great American associations and the High Commission'.¹¹ Robert Cecil concluded the proceedings, speaking on behalf of the British Government. 'It is as difficult in England [*sic*], as elsewhere, to find employment. Considerable amounts of money have been collected to assist refugees ... and to enable them to go to other countries ... Europe is full; we must turn to other continents ... countries in Africa and the Americas that can offer an outlet'.¹²

In summary, the Governing Body made no decisions at its first meeting. Its members returned to their governments with the recommendation on the adoption for the use of refugees of the international travel and identity document of the League of Nations Organization on Communications and Transit in 1927. However, there were no discussions on what the governments might do directly to assist refugees, nor approaches to the refugee problem that might help alleviate some of its worst aspects. Each representative defended their government's policies, while pleading for others to take the burden off them. The Europeans looked to the High Commissioner to assist in the emigration of refugees from their own countries and therefore firmly placed upon him the responsibility of finding openings in the United States and other places of resettlement.

Leaders of the major Jewish organizations were invited to Lausanne to address the Governing Body during its opening session. The session began, McDonald recalled, with brief and perfunctory statements that left little impression on their audience until Weizmann rose to make a 'very statesmanlike and moving address'.¹³ 'One must not be too hopeful', Weizmann began, 'in view of the disturbed economic position of the world [but] it should not be beyond human power to solve this problem'. He named regions where migration opportunities for the refugees from Germany existed. These were, in truth, established countries of immigration – the United States, the British Dominions, especially South Africa and Australia and some South American republics. But he also named the French dependencies and mandate territories, and added, 'we believe, to some considerable extent, in Palestine'. He continued: 'The Jewish community alone could not do what was required without the sympathy, without the political, moral and material support of the civilized nations'. He cast a moral imperative before his non-Jewish audience: 'A wave of anti-Semitism is sweeping over the world ... The peculiar social and economic structure of Jewry – forced on us by centuries of history during which we were merely in the role of passive sufferers – cannot be maintained in the face of a changing world'. He concluded: 'The success of our endeavour in Palestine is based on the determination of our people, especially our youth, there to found a life on a normal and productive basis'.¹⁴

Weizmann's advocacy of Jewish settlement in Palestine antagonized the non-Zionists attending on behalf of their own organizations. American Jewish interests were particularly annoyed. It seemed to them that Weizmann had 'pocketed' McDonald, and they took their complaint directly to McDonald. Joseph Hyman of the Joint Distribution Commission, with its European director Bernard Kahn, and Louis Oungre, European director of the Jewish Colonization Association, all insisted that McDonald moderate Zionist influence in favour of New York Jewish organizations by limiting Zionist representation on the Advisory Council. Discussions on the composition of the Advisory Council had dragged on; they were 'interminable and racking', achieving little for the time that McDonald devoted to them. Here was another reason why McDonald could not reach a final decision. Positions were firm and could not be swayed; he could only try to balance their conflicting demands as best he could, while maintaining a spirit of cooperation.¹⁵ There was the danger that if the final decision was left to drift, that cooperative spirit might be lost.

McDonald found himself in the midst of highly charged conflicts within the American and British Jewish communities. Since the Balfour Declaration on

Palestine in 1917, Zionism had emerged within both the British and American Jewish communities as a defining issue, socially, religiously and politically. It divided the traditional establishment Jewish communities, populated by families of the older Jewish migrations from Europe, from those who had settled during the mass migrations from Eastern Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. The establishment organizations were content with philanthropic aid for fellow Jews, in order to educate them and nurture their Jewish identity, and to protect them from persecution through their emigration abroad. To this end, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee raised funds in the United States to assist the rehabilitation of East European Jews during and after the First World War, while the Jewish Colonization Association bought up land in the United States, Argentina and Brazil with a view to establishing new Jewish immigrant communities. Zionists, on the other hand, tied Jewish identity with a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The differences between these two groups became a political struggle for influence and control over key Jewish institutions.¹⁶

The antagonism between the establishment and Zionist organizations had three immediate consequences for the resettlement of the German Jewish refugees. One was a struggle for influence over the work of the High Commissioner. Establishment American organizations were making the major contributions to High Commission's budget, which Weizmann interpreted as their 'pocketing' of McDonald. Weizmann insisted to the contrary that the most realistic prospect for the success of the High Commission was the resettlement of German Jews in Palestine. A second consequence was a struggle over the distribution of Jewish resources and financial contributions from philanthropists and benefactors. Should they be poured into schemes involving Palestine, as the Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Colonization Association worried, the community resources upon which they could draw would be considerably diminished. The third consequence was that should Weizmann 'pocket' McDonald and gain recognition for his Zionist plans in this sleight of hand way, the establishment organizations feared that the work for the refugees from Germany would be mired in unnecessary political controversies: the British government would not consent to any increase of Jewish emigration to Palestine for the foreseeable future despite Weizmann's urgings, and it would damage McDonald if Weizmann were to distract him with this in mind. McDonald's only response to these pressures was to try to hold himself aloof from any particular interests and to try to assert his authority over particular agendas.¹⁷ But Weizmann could only interpret this as McDonald giving in to the American establishment Jews, because he was utterly reliant on them for the High Commission's budget.

The first act of the newly selected Permanent Committee of the Governing Body was to decide on final membership of the Advisory Council. Eighteen organizations were invited to participate, half of them Jewish, representing Britain, France, the United States, the Netherlands and Poland. Three organizations were actively engaged in resettlement: the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Weizmann's organization; the Jewish Colonization Association, which was already investing heavily in overseas resettlement schemes and the Joint Distribution Committee. The Comité des Délégations Juives was also invited, despite protests about it adding even more Zionist influence over the High Commission. Non-Jewish organizations included the International Catholic Organization; the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, which comprised non-Catholic churches in Europe and America; the European offices of the Inter-Church Aid, a similarly federated organization of the non-Catholic churches; the Save the Children International Unit; the International Migration Service; the Society of Friends (Quakers); the International Federation of Trades Union, which represented the interests of political refugees, and the French National Refugee Relief Committee (Comité National de Secours). Two bodies assisting academic and professional refugees were also invited.¹⁸

The selection of these organizations reflected McDonald's desire to bring together a broad spectrum of interests, but their number and diversity could have made the Advisory Council unwieldy. McDonald therefore decided to select a smaller group of eight to form a 'bureau' of the Advisory Council, with which he could consult more regularly. The three Jewish colonizing organizations were selected, along with the Central British Fund, the French National Committee, one agency concerned with academic and professional refugees, Caritas Catholica and two non-Catholic Christian organizations. Caritas Catholica was apprehensive about participating, believing that the work of the High Commissioner even indirectly reflected political criticism of the German government.¹⁹

Even these eight organizations could prove difficult to manage as their interests diverged considerably. McDonald had decided to form this bureau not simply to establish a firm basis for inter-organizational cooperation, but also as a strategy to placate the interests of the more politically and financially powerful organizations, which would be expected to invest the most in refugee assistance and resettlement. These eight organizations, and particularly the powerful Jewish organizations, would dominate the eighteen-member Advisory Council, to such an extent that they marginalized smaller groups, which struggled to make their voices heard.

'Looking back', Norman Bentwich, McDonald's deputy later recalled, 'the eagerness of the organizations to send representatives to the Advisory Council seems a little remarkable'. Sectional and national prestige played a major part in the Council's composition. A few members showed little concern for the High Commission once the Advisory Council was formed, and they made only minor contributions. On the other hand, Bentwich believed, some organizations that were not invited to sit on the Advisory Council did much more for the refugees.²⁰

For McDonald, the bureau was a way of working more effectively with the main organizations, but it suggests a flaw in the structure and purpose of the Advisory Council. While trying to balance all interests, he opened it up to too many agendas that vied with each other for influence. The bureau was an acknowledgement that the Advisory Council's effectiveness was doubtful. For his part, Weizmann interpreted the bureau as an attempt to stymie his influence. Privately, he questioned McDonald's abilities to manage the affairs of the High Commission. In the weeks before the Governing Body, he expressed how he intended to impose his ambitions on McDonald. 'I think now', he wrote to Arthur Ruppin, head of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, 'we shall be able to exert considerable influence on him. London is, after all, nearer than New York ... he now intends to form an Executive of this Advisory Committee [i.e. Council] ... It may be assumed that I am to be one of the three Jewish representatives.'²¹ Privately as well he insisted that his influence had indeed shaped the High Commission: on his insistence, Robert Cecil accepted nomination as Britain's representative on the Governing Body, and his own nominee for a post of significance on McDonald's staff, Norman Bentwich, had been appointed Deputy High Commissioner. This was all to the good for Weizmann's influence over McDonald. Although the British Government refused to recognize any role for the High Commission in relation to Palestine, Weizmann believed that McDonald would nevertheless 'soon be forced by circumstances' to pay close attention to the Jewish Agency, which was created by the British Mandate to regulate Jewish emigration there.²²

The final selection of the Advisory Council and its bureau, however, incensed Weizmann because McDonald had given the American organizations a standing equal to his own. He was scornful of McDonald for representing American interests. 'The Jewish organizations did very well', he wrote to his wife during the third day of the Governing Body, 'but the trouble is with the Americans, probably with Felix [Warburg], who keeps cabling which of the Jewish organizations should and which should not be admitted to the Advisory Council ... The Americans are a great misfortune. Poor McDonald is at a loss. [He] is scared stiff of Felix. I don't care any more and am leaving now'.²³

Weizmann saw McDonald's efforts to moderate differences as a weakness. If left to fester, however, these differences could have fractured McDonald's relations with the Jewish organizations on whom he depended.²⁴ The selection of organizations to sit on the Advisory Council, and then the bureau, was indeed an attempt to moderate the influence of the larger, more powerful organizations, or more accurately, the ambitious individuals leading them, and to give a place to the smaller but none the less important organizations. But Weizmann certainly exaggerated; he did not leave Lausanne before the meeting of the Governing Body had ended, if that indeed was his intention. He attended a lunch on 7 December with McDonald, Cecil, and 'a group of friends' from the League Secretariat. The next day McDonald met with Weizmann for over an hour, and left with no hint of the scorn that Weizmann had expressed privately to others.²⁵ In truth, Weizmann had little more to do with McDonald. He had gained most of what he had sought from the High Commission. The Jewish Agency was on the Advisory Council, as was the other major Zionist organization, the Comité des Délégations Juives. He also had the opportunity to sit in on the meetings of the Governing Body as a member of the Advisory Council's bureau.

Suspicion nevertheless persisted among the leaders of Jewish Colonization Association and the Central British Fund that McDonald was allowing Weizmann to speak on behalf of all British Jews. Overall, Joseph Hyman advised McDonald, the feelings and opinions among the British Jews were altogether confused, about Weizmann, about the High Commission, about their role in it, and about McDonald's intentions and the way he had structured the role of the private organizations.²⁶

Would McDonald have looked upon this first meeting of the Governing Body as a success? Its first meeting was over, but it had set no clear direction, having proposed no initiatives and with no advancement on the primary task of ameliorating the conditions of the refugees. McDonald nevertheless expressed satisfaction with the outcomes. His nominations for the Advisory Council were approved and the great efforts of negotiation, argument and compromise had been resolved in the way he wanted. He was also satisfied that Cecil had committed himself to the role of permanent chair of the Governing Body and had proved himself a 'jewel beyond price' during its first meeting. McDonald was also satisfied with the contributions of the national representatives. He was uneasy all the same with their apparent 'eccentricities', which were large enough for him to worry about 'possible future dangers'. He was most satisfied with the contribution of the representatives of those countries from whose citizens 'must come the largest financial resources' upon which the work for the refugees would rely.²⁷

This sense of satisfaction, however, did not suggest success. There was consensus on the strategy he outlined – the coordination of the work of private organizations, cooperation with governments and negotiations with Germany – but the one clear message from the Governing Body was that national governments looked to the High Commission to solve their refugee problems. European countries expected McDonald to do what was necessary to facilitate the emigration of the refugees abroad, while the United States and Uruguay, the only two countries from the Americas represented on the Governing Body, did not intend to relax their immigration policies. Moreover, despite the energies that McDonald expended on forming the Advisory Council and establishing a solid cooperative basis on which he could work with selected member organizations, they were uncertain about the role they would play in the structure and activities of the High Commission. McDonald had insisted from the outset that he would need their advice on activities and programmes, but the early enthusiasm of Jewish organizations seemed more to do with their expectation of influence and their hope that the High Commission would facilitate their agendas. Once it was clear this would not be the case there was, as Hyman had anticipated, much confusion.

There was, however, little time for McDonald to reflect on the outcomes of the Governing Body. Almost immediately upon its conclusion, he left Lausanne to return to New York for the Christmas holidays, but on his way back through France he was distracted by two controversies that undermined the efforts he had put into nurturing confidence in and support for his High Commission.

The first controversy came from within the High Commission itself. A junior member of its staff, James Parkes, an Anglican clergyman who had been recommended by Felix Warburg for his work in the International Students Movement and his promotion of Christian–Jewish relations, publicly complained that McDonald's salary and the salaries of the other staff in the High Commission were 'indefensibly large'.²⁸ McDonald could not ignore the accusation, fearing that, at a time when aid societies were struggling to raise funds for their relief work, it could undermine his personal credibility. Norman Bentwich, who drew his salary from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, reassured McDonald that American salaries, on which his was based, were large by British standards. In his own defence, McDonald explained that the choice he had faced was between accepting a salary from the High Commission's budget based on his needs, or accepting a payment from private individuals and therefore compromising his independence. André Wurfain, his Secretary General, agreed to a lower salary, equivalent to what he had been paid in his previous position in the League of Nations. The difference went back into the High Commission's budget.²⁹

The High Commission was never greatly endowed with funds. In the forward budget for 1934 tabled at the December 1933 Governing Body, salaries were around half its operating expenses. Total contributions from all sources amounted to 275,107.34 Swiss francs. Salaries were budgeted at 139,662.98 Swiss francs, out of a total expenditure of 236,326.43 Swiss francs. McDonald's salary for 1934 was listed as 60,000 Swiss francs, around \$2,150 per month (£435).³⁰ Yet, sensitive to the accusation of an indefensibly high salary, he pledged a private contribution to the High Commission of 7,500 Swiss francs to be drawn from his 1934 salary.

The second controversy was again over Palestine. Before he returned to London, McDonald had already been confronted with a newspaper report of an earlier argument with the British Foreign Office on the question of emigration to Palestine. It related to a meeting with the colonial minister, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, and two senior members of the Colonial Office. McDonald claimed that the report was completely unfounded, but he again found himself having to defend his relationship with Weizmann and the arrangements he had made for his Advisory Council. He also faced a stern lecture on the British Government's position on Palestine. The British government, Cunliffe-Lister began, could not permit itself 'to be used to set up a Jewish hegemony in the Levant'.³¹ Cunliffe-Lister was not the first to tell McDonald that Weizmann was as unrealistic as he was idealistic in his Palestine settlement plans, yet the British Government was nevertheless concerned about the strength of Zionist influences on High Commission and the persistent tittle-tattle that McDonald had allowed Weizmann to 'pocket' him. The latest accusations of Weizmann's influence further antagonized the head of the Jewish Central British Fund and president of the Board of Deputies, Sir Osmond d'Avigdor-Goldsmid. The deep suspicions of British Jews over the influence of American Jewish agencies, which financed the High Commission, and British Zionists who exerted influence over it, jeopardized McDonald's good relations with them all and with the British Government.³²

Only when sailing for New York could he leave Jewish politics behind momentarily, breathe some fresh air and reflect upon this first phase of the High Commission.