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Plans and Illusions

Funding appeals were falling on deaf ears. When McDonald spoke in support of new appeals in New York, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia during the spring of 1934, fatigue was evident. He could not stir the public and his appeals to humanitarian conscience had little impact. His allusions to even worse things to come should the public not rise to the current challenge had the opposite effect to what he had intended; he left his audiences feeling that there was no end in sight and that demands for their money would only continue. Christian opinion remained unmoved and the general public had no more offer. A woman told McDonald after one meeting that she had no more obligations to Jews than she had to 'negroes or any other unfortunate people in distress'.¹ A contributor to the Joint Distribution Committee gave McDonald his reason why the calls upon their generosity were unanswered: he was happy to make small donations but hesitated to make large ones, as other organizations would then approach him for contributions to their own campaigns.² The funding appeals therefore had little success. While one had secured subscriptions of \$230,000, it was largely due to a personal contribution of \$50,000 from Felix Warburg. Contributions from other philanthropists were disappointingly few.

There were now doubts in the United States about McDonald's capacity to carry out his responsibilities. There were encouraging signs that John D. Rockefeller III would authorize the Rockefeller Foundation to make a contribution to the refugee corporation, but only if there were definite refugee aid and resettlement plans, with specific ends and a finite budget to see them through. There were no definite plans, however. McDonald was utterly dependent on the work of the large Jewish relief agencies to devise them and work out their financial arrangements. His efforts were therefore channelled into funding drives to back the work of these agencies.

It was becoming clear, then, that McDonald's fundraising efforts were actually dissuading potential sources of capital. Felix Warburg therefore stepped in to negotiate with Rockefeller over contributions from his foundation in order that the High Commission's profile not muddy their financial arrangements. McDonald also had little impact in Washington. His report to the State Department on the High Commission's relations with the German government and the German Foreign Ministry's refusal to cooperate was simply noted, with the hope that there was no longer a Jewish refugee problem for the United States to deal with.³ Joseph Chamberlain, the American representative on the Government Body, had more influence with the State Department, however. He asked it to instruct the American Ambassador in Berlin to cooperate with the British embassy in entreating the German government 'to listen to James G. McDonald's plea on behalf of German Jewish refugees'.⁴ This it duly did on 9 June 1934, with the British embassy taking up matters in Berlin on the High Commissioner's behalf.

The outlook for funding in Britain was no better than it was in the United States. The most optimistic estimates were that £25,000 could be raised from public appeals over the remainder of 1934. In reality, this was a figure given more in hope than a realistic expectation of it being raised. The British organizations expected much from American sources, but the American Jewish organizations made it clear that they could not be expected to do more if British Jews was unwilling to share the responsibility. This was hardly reassuring for the British Jewish organizations, and did little to improve their feelings about the worth of the High Commissioner, whose appointment was originally based on the assumption that he could help unlock American capital resources.

A question was consequently asked privately whether the High Commission could play a more effective role in a different form. Louis Oungre had called the High Commission a luxury since private organizations such as his Jewish Colonization Association could do this work just as effectively. A permanent body of the League of Nations, with a definite budget and the backing of governments, would be able to achieve more, Oungre believed. It would have more authority in its intergovernmental negotiations, and could give a clearer direction. The fact that suggestions like these were being discussed strongly indicated that many were now contemplating whether the High Commission was worth the trouble, or indeed whether McDonald was in fact the best person for the job.

In the meantime, funding was still critical and dominated refugee efforts. No plans could proceed without money behind them, and in all likelihood the money would not be found. McDonald was therefore less active in the funding

efforts during the second half of 1934. Direct appeals for public donations were tried and trusted methods, but with diminishing returns. A new approach was taken, with direct discussions between leaders of the aid organizations and financiers and philanthropists to consider the ways in which contributions could be made as investments to realize a return. A loan scheme was one strategy, as was a system of long-term interest bearing debentures, although they would not accrue for possibly a couple of generations: 'Though [the investor] could not himself get his money back,' so the plans went, 'his grandson might have something'.⁵ For each supporter of these schemes, there was also a naysayer decrying the possibility of putting them into effect. They reached stasis as a result.

New appeals exposed a serious lack of confidence in the High Commission and its work. McDonald proposed making a broadcast to the British public on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to promote new appeals, but Cecil warned against it unless McDonald had a definite plan to present in order to demonstrate how public contributions would be used.⁶ The spending of hard-won funds also exposed the divisions between Jewish and Christian groups. Jewish groups were quite prepared to ignore the non-Jewish refugees when it came to spending money raised from Jewish sources. In turn, non-Jewish groups insisted that any money they raised should be used only for the relief of non-Jewish refugees.

The refugee finance corporation had stagnated in the United States for want of sufficient contributions. In Britain, it had simply ceased to be a part of the plans. There had not been a meeting of the European trustees since they were selected and no efforts had been made to encourage investors.⁷ By the end of June 1934, the American supporters of the corporation had decided to continue independently of the British, in the belief that they would be able to push ahead more vigorously without them. They anticipated as a consequence that the corporation would soon raise an initial sum of \$2.5 million from American sources alone.⁸ But this caused some misapprehension in Europe about the finances available in the United States, and mischievous rumours that American funds were not finding their way to needy European aid organizations started to do the rounds. The rumours turned eventually on McDonald. He was accused of raising more than he and the Americans would admit, shaking the confidence of his European partners in him even more. Louis Oungre, now proving to be quite troublesome, spread the word that McDonald was 'sitting on the money of the corporation' when he should be putting it to practical use.⁹

McDonald returned to Europe for the summer of 1934 with a changed attitude towards these kinds of attacks. He was more assertive in his relations with

Jewish leaders, even combative at times; he was prepared to counterpunch when the situation required. He answered Oungre with an accusation of his own: that he had heard other rumours, one of which claimed that, in 'eight or ten countries', Oungre was also sitting on a pile of money raised by his organization that was not being put to productive use.¹⁰

McDonald took a similar attitude into discussions about the work of the High Commission. At his very first meetings in London upon his return, McDonald made known his intention to reconsider the future of the High Commission, if he could not work effectively with his partners and with governments. This seemed to free him from the earlier binds he had found himself in when trying to manage Jewish demands. He also let his frustrations show more openly. There was still no progress in his key task of assisting refugees, nor was there anything to show from his negotiations with governments. His relations with the agencies upon whose assistance he depended were fraying. McDonald was more suspect in Britain and Europe now than any time since assuming his post. Mistrust had also grown between the large British, European and American Jewish organizations. Although well aware that new money for their work was hard to come by, the British and Europeans had always expected much more of the Americans, and so were quite prepared to believe that the Americans were not letting on about the true size of their financial reserves. Moreover, McDonald had fallen well short of the main hopes they had placed in him, that as an American he could persuade his government to do its share of carrying the refugee burden by lifting its immigration quotas. This, above all, was why the French government had placed its confidence in the High Commissioner. But in the summer of 1934, some nine to ten months after he had assumed his post, McDonald could only tell the British and Europeans that little progress could be expected over the short term.

The High Commission's lack of achievements also caused hurtful accusations from British Jews against McDonald's deputy, Norman Bentwich. Bentwich had grown depressed about the difficulties of their work and at the dim prospects ahead. McDonald also grew depressed about the lack of progress.¹¹ He confessed his concerns to Cecil, telling him that he would have to decide the future of the High Commission in the forthcoming months.¹² He made the same admission to Bernard Kahn, the European director of the Joint Distribution Committee, in Paris a little later. The only option for him now, he told Kahn, was to recommend the 'liquidation of the High Commission' unless promising resettlement schemes were formulated with sufficient funds to back them.¹³ He confided to Kahn the reasons why he had so little to show: 'My efforts had not been directly

concerned with the refugees but rather the somewhat extraneous Jewish matters ... there were no groups, nor for that matter individuals, to which I could turn who were wholly interested in the refugees'. His job, he admitted, had been settling Jewish problems rather than the care of the refugees.¹⁴

By the end of August 1934, the question about the High Commission's future was more or less resolved. The lack of funds made it unlikely that it could continue beyond the 'summer or fall' of 1935, McDonald acknowledged. He was now looking to his own future, inquiring with his American friends and colleagues about suitable appointments in the United States, if he decided to relinquish his commission.¹⁵

Political developments in Europe added to the general gloom. The Nazi purge from 30 June to 2 July 1934, the 'Night of the Long Knives', that broke the back of the SA militia and destroyed the influence of SA leader Ernest Röhm, gave the impression that the Nazi regime was crumbling, that the Bolsheviks would soon take control or that Germany itself was on the verge of disintegration.¹⁶ Whichever way the events played out, McDonald foresaw, nothing good could be expected and the refugee situation could only get worse. Then came the reports of the attempted Nazi coup against Austrian dictator Dollfuss. Although Dollfuss was assassinated, the coup failed and the Nazis withdrew. It was nonetheless further evidence of the volatile and unpredictable political conditions across Europe, and the spreading threat of Nazism.

Overseas colonization now seemed the only option for permanently resettling refugees in sufficient numbers to satisfy the Europeans. Unwanted in Europe, and locked out of North America, the historic destination for Europe's unwanted, the potential of South America was a major factor shaping a belief in the viability of the colonization schemes. But schemes elsewhere were also put forward as real possibilities for giving the German Jews a new start in life. The proposals seldom went beyond general concepts, however – for example, placing refugees on undeveloped agricultural lands – and they did not yet have sufficient resources behind them. They were all plans for the long term, with no guarantees of success, and therefore offered no immediate solutions. Adjustment and retraining for the refugees was vital to make the schemes viable. Largely from the German middle class, the Jewish refugees were poorly prepared for a new life on the land, and while some retraining efforts were being made in Europe, much more had to be done.

Most of these resettlement schemes were also overly idealistic and displayed little sense of the difficulties that they would need to overcome in their implementation. A report into the various schemes prepared for the High Commission

by the Jewish refugee resettlement organization HICEM, and its British arm, Anglo-HICEM – organizations that brought together the emigration and colonization experience and expertise of a number of Jewish agencies – described their sponsors as ‘usually land agents or idealists who are in no way familiar with the economic laws and hardships of farming’.¹⁷ There was little optimism that any of these schemes could be realized. Most promising were the plans for refugee settlement on agricultural lands in Cyprus, southern France, Kenya, Syria and other ‘countries surrounding Palestine’. Proposals had also been made for refugee resettlement in Angola, Colombia, Russia and Tanganyika. In nearly every case, HICEM found that the cost of settlement was very high, approximately £500 per family, or at least £5 million (\$25 million) to settle 10,000 people. Indirect costs, for schools, places of worship, hospitals and the like, had not been factored in to the financial arrangements for any of the schemes and would add substantially to the overall costs. Funding on such a scale could only be found if the resettlement schemes were organized as business ventures, but the conditions of agriculture in the depressed international economy, which adversely affected even experienced farmers in productive regions all over the world, made it improbable that investors would be found.

The scheme proposed for southern France was the most practical. Land was cheap, the climate good and social institutions were more established than in far-off countries. However, the establishment costs were higher. The establishment of mixed farming on 20–25-acre lots for one family was estimated at £600 to £700, and would be much greater if a house had to be built. The HICEM report concluded on one factor commonly overlooked in these resettlement schemes: ‘It is questionable whether there are at the moment a large number of immigrants willing and able to become farmers. It must not be forgotten that those whom we should help are brought up as businessmen or professionals with brains above but bodies below average’.¹⁸

Recent experience had demonstrated the genuine difficulties and the prohibitive costs of agricultural resettlement schemes. Bernard Kahn recalled that Fridtjof Nansen, against Kahn’s advice, had insisted on pursuing refugee land settlement in Soviet Armenia. The lesson drawn from this was that failure was certain without ‘elaborate organization’ to follow up and support these schemes over the long term. The Jewish Colonization Association itself was conscious of the expense and difficulty of large colonization ambitions. It had successfully settled 4,000 families with outlays of around \$40 million, but that was over a period of forty years.¹⁹ The refugee resettlement schemes would need to place many more families, over a much shorter time frame, in new colonies developed

expressly for them. The risks would be so much greater, and the expenses so much higher. Moreover, the proposed schemes also overlooked the barriers of local immigration policies. As promising as the scheme in southern France appeared, the French government refused to contemplate anything that might lead to the formation of communities of foreigners. Successful education and retraining centres were closed down because they were seen as underhand ways of creating permanent Jewish communities.²⁰ An agricultural resettlement scheme in Brazil was one of a number of proposals for Jewish colonization in South America. In May 1934, however, the Brazilian government introduced new laws that further restricted immigration.²¹ Other South American countries insisted on tightly controlled immigration that would hamper any resettlement plans, no matter how well financed they were.

It was evident by the summer of 1934 that few colonization schemes had any prospect of success. Practical matters aside, they offered no immediate solution to the refugee problem in Europe. Yet their advocates believed in their potential. McDonald realized himself that they were unviable after he met with the Vice-Governor of Tanganyika at the British Colonial Office. There were a few openings for doctors and dentists in the colony, the Vice-Governor advised, but 'no opportunities whatsoever for refugee settlers'. A community of 'poor whites' could not be countenanced; they would be shut out of the workforce, the land and trades, by the competition of local and imported Indian workers. This also ruled out other European colonies in East and West Africa. The South African High Commissioner to Britain also made it clear that his country had to be ruled out. Jews already numbered more than 4 per cent of South Africa's white population, the largest percentage of any country after Poland and Hungary. It followed that South Africa could not accept McDonald's belated invitation to join the Governing Body.²²

Colonization possibilities evaporated even before plans for them could be thoroughly devised. The opportunities for assisting refugees to re-establish their lives in new countries were extremely limited therefore. This was a stark realization for those who had put their faith and efforts into overseas colonization as a solution to Europe's refugee woes. A common feature of these schemes was their remoteness. They were usually far from Europe, in undeveloped regions; even plans within Europe centred on settlement in remote localities and areas in need of development. The refugees were best dealt with it seemed by getting them out of sight. Moreover, the colonization schemes were a distraction from the unavoidable truth that the only solution was the permanent settlement of the refugees in the European countries they had already settled in.²³

By the time a special committee on emigration opportunities met in London on 19 July 1934, McDonald found himself in the embarrassing position of having to remove from the agenda all discussion on group and agricultural settlement in France, Angola, Portuguese East Africa, Kenya, Tanganyika, South West Africa, the Belgian Congo, Mexico, Russia and Palestine. This left the agenda bare. The development of new industries in derelict areas of England and Czechoslovakia for the purpose of placing German refugees was one suggestion that filled the void. There was also some discussion on agricultural and industrial possibilities in Yugoslavia.

South America was still considered the most viable place for large-scale resettlement. It was therefore resolved that McDonald should now open negotiations on settlement opportunities in Brazil and Argentina, and other countries in Latin American.²⁴ McDonald noted in his diary afterwards what a discouraging meeting this was, but concluded, with as much optimism as he could muster, that 'at the end ... something tangible did emerge'.²⁵

With so much attention on the Jewish refugees, non-Jewish refugees were left to languish with no aid at all. Norman Bentwich quietly raised their plight with Jewish leaders in London, when discussing the poor progress of the refugee finance corporation. The view among the British agencies was that they would be helped only if non-Jews put up their money. Organizations such as the Save the Children Fund, the International Migration Service and the International Federation of Trades Union, participated in the Advisory Council but were marginalized by the dominant Jewish organizations. With the exception of Walter Schevenels of the International Federation of Trades Union, they rarely feature in the minutes of the Advisory Council or Permanent Committee of the Governing Body. The non-Jewish refugees – democrats, socialists, pacifists, liberal professors, journalists, Catholic priests and Protestant pastors, all political refugees in flight from Nazi oppression – were in an even more precarious situation than the Jewish refugees. Most had fled Germany without an entry permit for their country of refuge, and sometimes without a German passport. Many were forced to live and work illegally and spent their exile hiding from the police. They faced being forced to return to Germany if they were apprehended. For McDonald, they had a special claim to asylum. It was contrary to the principle of asylum, he insisted, that they should be driven from refuge simply because their papers were not in order. 'Hundreds of them', he reported to the Governing Body at its November 1934 meeting, 'are now reduced to penury in France, Czechoslovakia, the Saar, Switzerland and elsewhere'. The only solution was for their countries of refuge to relax restrictions on their right of residence

and work. 'Otherwise, thousands of the refugees must become utterly hopeless through perpetual insecurity'.²⁶

As more people became aware of McDonald's quiet musings to Cecil and Bernard Kahn about winding up the High Commission, McDonald received welcome encouragement. It was not so much personal support for his work, however, as much as regret that the one international organization closely engaged in Jewish affairs might be lost.

Ever supportive, Felix Warburg commended his achievements in the face of overwhelming obstacles. 'You have unselfishly thrown yourself into the situation at a most difficult time and under the most impossible circumstances', Warburg wrote. 'The very fact that for the first time in history the attitude of governments has changed sufficiently so that they have taken an interest and part in the well-being of refugees ... is an innovation for which we have to be grateful ... You have done remarkably well and have been an outstanding figure in illustrating that Christian idealism is not dead'.²⁷ Bernard Kahn, however, focused on the ramifications should the High Commission fold. It would be a grave mistake to liquidate it, he told McDonald; it would be misunderstood and would discourage contributors. Kahn therefore offered to extend the Joint Distribution Committee's contributions to the High Commission, and he to assist in rearranging McDonald's office in such a way that he could spend more time in the United States.²⁸

Opinion among British Jews, who had never truly accepted McDonald as High Commissioner, was divided. For some, potential liquidation restored a sense of purpose. When McDonald turned to the British Board of Deputies for a show of firm support, its president, Sir Osmond d'Avigdor-Goldsmid, expressed his great interest in McDonald and his work and assured him that funds would be available to him through 1935.²⁹ On the other hand, Chaim Weizmann cynically dismissed McDonald's suggestion of a 'joint effort' to raise funds for immigration to Palestine because 'he didn't believe in being married to a corpse'.³⁰

In August 1934, McDonald and Bentwich returned to the High Commission's Lausanne office to work with their staff, Wurfbain and May, on a report of its activities over the previous year for the forthcoming League of Nations Assembly. McDonald's first duty in Geneva was to advise Secretary General Avenol of his progress and to confirm his draft report. Avenol's stance on the autonomy of the High Commission was unchanged; the League and the Secretariat, would therefore resist any moves to strengthen the High Commission politically. Moreover, Avenol told McDonald, the League could not possibly contribute financially or otherwise to the High Commission's work. This affirmed what McDonald

already knew, but he was pleased to hear it again. One criticism of his work among Americans, for whom the workings of the League of Nations were quite a mystery, was that he had not sufficiently developed the High Commission's relationship with it. Here was Avenol's confirmation that the League would still leave it to fend for itself and would be prepared to let it sink if it could not make its own way.

Yet, Avenol continued to set the bounds of what the High Commission could do. He had no concerns over some issues: on the relocation of the High Commission's office from Lausanne to London; on the High Commission's relations with Germany or on a statement of the League Assembly about the work of the High Commission. But he was adamant about issues that were at the heart of the High Commission's problems. It was futile for McDonald to seek funds from individual governments, Avenol told him, and it would create bad feelings if he used the Assembly to try to secure funds from the League or to seek a resolution on German policies towards the Jews. As far as Avenol was concerned, the worst of the crisis was over; attitudes towards the Jews in Germany, he believed, were calming down and anti-Semitism was dying down in other countries. Still, Avenol admitted, with no hint of his self-contradiction, that anti-Semitism was now so general that it was best for the League to continue keep the High Commission at arm's length in order to avoid a backlash.³¹

The press in Geneva was keen to hear McDonald's thoughts on Germany and the situation of the refugees. He faced a surprisingly large contingent of some forty-five journalists, who put awkward questions to him that he could not yet directly answer, about such matters as refugee passports, the High Commission's relations with Germany, where the refugees might go and whether the Jews had contributed as much as they ought to refugee relief. To this question, he replied that it was not appropriate for him to comment, but added sardonically that they 'had done infinitely more than the Christians'.³²

With so many representatives of the world's governments in Geneva at one time, it was imperative that McDonald use the time to consult with the foreign ministers of the governments represented on his Governing Body. McDonald wanted to find one government that might be prepared to take a lead and offer funding to the High Commission or make a commitment to admit more refugees. This required sensitivity as well as daring. He suggested that small changes to their restrictive policies would make a big difference to the conditions of the refugees. He requested small contributions to the High Commission's budget, against Avenol's advice, as even small contributions would ensure it could continue its work. He also appealed to national chauvinism by suggesting that other

countries would quickly follow the leadership of one, if one were bold enough to take the lead.

This then was another change in McDonald's approach. He no longer appealed simply to humanitarian concern for the refugees; this had never been truly effective. He now appealed more overtly to national interests. He explained to French Foreign Ministry officials that France was diminished in the eyes of people abroad for the way it regarded its refugees: democrats, liberal and labour groups looked upon France with dismay because its policies were so inimical to their well-being. France's interests, he added, were not served by succumbing to anti-Semitism. It must instead show leadership, by seeing the refugees as an asset and not a burden. Others would follow when France had shown the way.³³

There was no moving entrenched positions, however. Although they gave their support to a statement of the Assembly acknowledging the work of the High Commission, governments were nevertheless not prepared to amend their immigration policies. Dutch foreign minister, Joncker de Graeff, who had initiated the resolution of the 1933 Assembly to establish the High Commission, moved the statement of support in the 1934 Assembly while representing a government that had effectively closed its borders and had begun expelling foreign workers. He had already told McDonald, furthermore, that it was impossible for the Dutch government to make a financial contribution to the High Commission; its support would be expressed in the Assembly instead. Other governments held similar positions. McDonald confessed his anxiety for the future of the High Commission to British undersecretary for foreign affairs, Anthony Eden, and expressed his desire to 'have some indication of continued government support and some direct governmental contributions' from Britain. Eden assured him that he would gladly support the Dutch initiative in requesting a statement from the Assembly, but he would need to check with the British Treasury whether a contribution was possible. He shortly advised McDonald that it would not be possible, as the parliament would need to pass a bill to authorize it.³⁴ The Canadian prime minister, Richard Bennett, and Czechoslovakian foreign minister, Edvard Beneš, also backed the statement. But they were also reluctant to go further. Both were altogether disillusioned at the standing of the League of Nations in international affairs. Bennett criticized the 'low state to which the Assembly had fallen', with political bickering more evident than at any other time, but amused McDonald on parting by telling him that it was a 'a relief to see your fine sensitive face in these surroundings'.³⁵ Beneš was of the view that the League had entered a second era, when it was no longer trying to build a new world but 'attempting to save this one' by erecting 'barriers against catastrophe'.³⁶

The statement in support of the High Commission was heard and passed in the Second Committee of the Assembly. It was made in the context of a review of the Second Committee's resolution of the previous year to create the High Commission, having received McDonald's report into its work over the past twelve months. The statement was made as an affirmation of the Committee's original decision; it expressed the Committee's appreciation of McDonald's work and gave him its continued support. Canadian Prime Minister Bennett closed the discussion with a further statement of the value the Assembly placed in the High Commission and 'the great importance it attached to [the refugee] problem'.³⁷

The expression of support, however, could not make up for the lack of practical assistance from these same governments. Shortly after it was voted, McDonald received a long letter from Orme Sargent of the British Foreign Office refusing McDonald's request for a contribution of £2,000 towards the High Commission's budget of £12,000 for 1935. Sargent's explanation gave the reasons why all governments, and not just his, preferred to keep the High Commission at arm's length. The British government could not be associated with the administration of the High Commission in any form, as it had been created as an entity funded by private sources and separate from the government. 'We have consistently held the view', Sargent wrote of the British government's position, 'that the cost of relief and settlement ... should be met entirely from voluntary sources and that no expenses should fall on public funds'. Sargent concluded in a manner that had become routine for all governments. 'The recent words of the British Delegate on the Second Committee ... will I hope have shown we are fully alive both to the important results that you have achieved and the difficulties which are still ahead of you'.³⁸

The statement approved by the Second Committee constituted international recognition of the importance of the High Commission, all the same, and McDonald could capitalize on it. He immediately used the publicity it brought to reinvigorate his mission by granting a long interview to the *New York Times* about the progress of his work. It was an opportunity to impress upon the newspaper's American readers the significance of the refugee problem, and by referring to the plight of the Christian refugees, he again appealed to American Christian sensitivities. The Christian refugees were most difficult aspect of the problem, he told his interviewer; there was 'nothing like the organized Jewish charities' for them, and there was no part of the world that was open to them. Their personal tragedies were too easily forgotten.³⁹

McDonald's efforts on behalf of refugees were recognized twice more during 1934. On 7 September, as he was engaged in Geneva, the American newspaper

The Jewish Advocate published the results of a survey conducted by the Anglo-Jewish press that unanimously voted McDonald the 'greatest Christian friend of Jewry'. It cited his 'heroic efforts to prevail on the nations of the world to open their doors to the victims of the Nazi terror', his efforts to remind the 'Christian world' of its 'responsibility to the Jewish refugees from Naziland' and his efforts to impress upon 'the world ... the fact that Palestine offered the major hope to the reorientation of the Jewish exiles'.⁴⁰ Then, in November, he was awarded the 1934 American Hebrew Medal. The citation noted that 'with splendid devotion, he had 'fulfilled the large task' assigned to him, and that his 'vigilant and steadfast activity' had given a 'new lease on life' to tens of thousands of Christian and Jewish refugees. 'Humanitarian in the best sense', he has improved 'Christian-Jewish relations wherever his voice has been heard'.⁴¹

In October 1934, the High Commission relocated its office from Lausanne to London. It established itself at Sentinel House, 61 Southampton Row, a brisk walk from the Central British Fund and other Jewish agencies in Woburn House. McDonald took up rooms in the Russell Hotel, a block or two from Woburn House.

It was a sensible and logical move, but only possible once Avenol had told McDonald that the location of his office was no longer of concern to him. McDonald and Bentwich both spent most of their time and energies in London and Paris, and Robert Cecil continued as permanent chair of the Governing Body on condition that he did not have to travel regularly to the Continent. Here preparations began for the next sessions of the Advisory Council and Governing Body, due in late October and early November.⁴² In all, thirty private organizations had now been invited to attend the Advisory Council. It had grown with the addition, among other groups and societies, of a service for academic refugees attached to the High Commission, and national refugee committees of Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands. Some delegates represented more than one organization. Jacques Helbronner, vice president of the Central Jewish Consistory of France and the new French representative on the Governing Body, also represented the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the French National Committee of which he was an executive member as well as the Central Consistory. He could assert tremendous influence over discussions, advocating fiercely his hostility to the Jewish refugees in France because of the disquiet they brought to the good relations between the French and French Jews and the anti-Semitism that their presence nurtured.⁴³

McDonald had little to report beyond the hardening of governmental attitudes. One positive detail he could give, however, was that about half of the

refugees who had left Germany since 1933 had settled abroad. Emigration overseas had increased slowly and the movement of refugees within Europe was slowly decreasing.⁴⁴ This proved nothing other than the fact that refugees remained in limbo wherever they found themselves.

Coming into the Advisory Council, McDonald was keenly aware that some of those present – not only the Frenchmen Helbronner and Oungre, but also others he had less to do with during the regular course of his work such as Mme Schmolkova from Poland and Walter Schevenels of the Trades Union International – had openly criticized his failure to make an impact on the number and circumstances of the refugees. With this in mind, he concluded his report with the declaration that it would be impossible for him to continue as High Commissioner if he remained the figure of criticism for what, after all, was a larger, national and international failure to come to the aid of refugees.⁴⁵ He therefore announced that in the next few days he would make a recommendation to the Governing Body that the High Commission be wound up by 1 November 1935, or ‘a little later’, and that he would stand down. He also revealed that he had already made his intentions known to the heads of the principle Jewish organizations, and at their insistence he would seek at the next session of the League of Nations Assembly in September 1935 to put forward the question of the future arrangements of the High Commission with a view to the League taking over its functions.⁴⁶

The sudden announcement surprised those present and a number of them rose to express their support. Schevenels stood first. The League had created the High Commission under the pressure of German opposition, he said; this was why it could not itself assume the role of organizing direct refugee assistance, as the International Labour Conference had called for in its 1933 resolution. Schevenels, could only deplore the shortcomings of governments while the private organizations and the High Commission had made every effort they could. Helbronner followed, acknowledging McDonald’s efforts and his ‘generosity of heart’. The High Commission’s failures were not because of the man or the institution, he insisted.

This good will did not last long, however. The question of work permits for refugees brought both the Advisory Council and the Governing Body to a stalemate. Helbronner resisted any attempts to force concessions from France, and restated the French view, which had been put many times over, that it had done more for refugees than any other country. He now went further, defending France from criticisms he felt were implied in McDonald’s reports. The French government continued to issue work and residence permits despite the

economic crisis, he declared. The 'Catholic Church in France held the hand of the persecuted Jews from Germany, and for the first time in the Church's history, the Archbishop of Paris, Jean Verdier, ordered public prayers in every church for the persecuted Jews'.⁴⁷

Helbronner's persistent defence of France's record alone rendered both the Advisory Council and the Governing Body ineffective. He interjected whenever the discussion turned to ways in which refugees could be absorbed into the economic life of the countries where they were now found. One motion, moved by Edith Pye of the Society of Friends and approved by the Advisory Council, and then put to the Governing Body, called for an organized system of retraining and 'readaptation' to make refugees employable in their countries of settlement. Helbronner jumped in to proclaim that 'the High Commission was specifically created to resettle the refugees in other countries', so that those bordering Germany were not left to bear the burden alone. 'France has done more than its duty', he repeated again, 'and more than any other country. It is impossible for it to absorb any more of the refugees who remain in its territory'. He further insisted that any initiative for 'professional readaptation' could only delay their emigration, and should therefore only serve to improve the refugees' suitability for emigration to another country.⁴⁸ Helbronner was not alone in stifling the debate on the question of work permits for refugees; he was merely the most vocal.

The Governing Body, in truth, had ceased to have any real purpose. National representatives were seldom inclined to take its resolutions back to their governments to try to influence policy. Their role was in fact the opposite, to bend the High Commission to the will of their governments. It was noted again in the November 1934 Governing Body that the recommendation of a passport for refugees under the 1927 League of Nations Convention on Transit and Communications, accepted at the first meeting of the Governing Body, had not been adopted. To the contrary, the return of refugees without passports to Germany was becoming common practice as governments made greater efforts to rid themselves of unwanted and clandestine foreigners.⁴⁹

Reflecting privately, McDonald recalled the 'depressing debate' of the opening session of 1 November 1934. Helbronner proved a most disruptive force, objecting even to procedural matters, insisting at one stage that a resolution be written in French rather than in English, as McDonald had drafted it.⁵⁰ Cecil had had enough, and told McDonald in confidence that he was wasting his time and that he would advise the British government to name someone to replace him.⁵¹ Voicing his frustrations, Cecil jumped in at one point during proceedings to say

that the debate was going nowhere, that the meetings were 'perfectly useless', and their governments could share their views just as well by other diplomatic means.⁵²

Moreover, each representative felt slighted by even general motions if they believed that they implied any criticism of their government's policies. Helbrunner believed that France was the target of a motion of the Advisory Council that called for governments to lift restrictions on work permits and to absorb refugees into the economic life of their countries. Cecil noted pithily that no country was mentioned and that he could just as well feel aggrieved at an implied criticism of British policy. Nevertheless, an alternative wording was agreed upon to satisfy Helbrunner, with the phrase 'without expressing any opinion' included.⁵³ The Swiss delegate, Rothmund, was then dissatisfied, and interjected to ask McDonald directly what countries he had in mind when the resolution plainly stated that some were not doing their duty.⁵⁴ Was the resolution aimed at the Swiss practice of return? he asked.⁵⁵ McDonald answered meekly that he was in no position to criticize any government's policies.⁵⁶

Despite fraying tempers, McDonald could note later that, at the end of the day, the Governing Body 'adjourned in an atmosphere of good will', helped by a timely break for tea.⁵⁷ Cecil said no more about asking the British government to replace him. The strains, however, were real. Norman Bentwich, who worked with governments and private organizations throughout on technical and procedural matters, had taken a leave of absence to return temporarily to his academic post at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. McDonald's own immediate future was in doubt.⁵⁸ He had declared his intention to wind up the High Commission during 1935, but the ineffectiveness of the Governing Body, and failures to persuade governments to support his work financially, could only make him doubt the feasibility of continuing for another year.