

CECIL ROTH, noted historian and art authority, is the author of many books as well as a frequent contributor to scholarly and professional journals on both sides of the Atlantic.

A Zionist Experiment in the XVIth Century

By CECIL ROTH

I HAVE RECENTLY had occasion to re-examine the original sources regarding that strange sixteenth-century adventurer David Reubeni, who figures in all our histories as a sort of nondescript romantic charlatan. The rereading has made him appear to me in a different light, as a daring Zionist precursor, who audaciously tried to secure the reestablishment of the Jews in Palestine, through the action of a Jewish military force, with the support of the powers of Europe. As a preliminary however it is necessary to give a brief account of his curious career, as it is already known.

At the beginning of 1524, a vessel arrived in Venice from Alexandria with passengers and goods, and from it disembarked a man dressed in flowing robes after the Oriental style. A contemporary described his appearance as "short of stature, emaciated, and swarthy," to which he added that he was courageous, a great reciter of prayers, and one who was continuously fasting and afflicting his body. On his arrival in Venice, the ship's captain escorted him ashore and found him a room in his own house—not in the recently-established Ghetto, where all Jews were supposed to live. His first

preoccupation was to set about a series of penitential fasts, lasting, according to his own account, for six days and nights. On the last day, while he was finishing his lengthy prayers, he found a stranger in the room. It was a young Venetian Jew, whom his somewhat disreputable Cretan servant Joseph had encountered while prowling about the town. A short conversation ensued in Hebrew, ostensibly at least the only medium of communication between them. After a short while his visitor went away but soon returned—now accompanied by Moses da Castellazzo, a well-known Venetian Jewish artist-engraver of the period. The latter, greatly impressed, provided the stranger with money and took him back to his house to meet the leaders of the Jewish community. To them he unfolded a remarkable tale: how he was named David, being the son of Solomon, King of the Tribe of Reuben, which was still leading a warlike, independent existence in the Wilderness of Habor (wherever that was) together with the tribe of Gad and half of Menasseh, to the number of some 300,000 souls in all, the remainder of the Lost Ten Tribes being in the same region: and how he had been sent by his brother, the reign-

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ing King Joseph, and the severance of the tribe to seek the assistance of the Pope and the European powers against the constant warfare against the neighbors. He had a circumlocution to give of his journey five days' land to Italy disguised as a pilgrim, by way of Egypt and Syria, where he had of course passed the sepulchre of the Patriarchs and the Temple site in Jerusalem.

His tale inevitably aroused interest and enthusiasm among the Venetian Jewish community. Encouraged by them, he petitioned to him devoutly, they rewarded him lavishly, they provided him with money and an adequate escort. He was then dispatched on his way to Rome where he intended to introduce the Pope and propose joint action against the common enemy. He entered the Papal capital riding on a wave of popularity and found himself greeted everywhere with the utmost enthusiasm. In consequence, he had no difficulty in being received hospitably by the veritable Princes of the Church, that outstanding humanist Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, General of the Augustinian order, whose interest in Jewish studies extended even to the study of the Zohar and who had a Hebrew tutor residing with him in his palace. To his support, Reubeni was introduced to the Vatican by the cultured Pope, Clement VII. To him he was granted in private audience a trial of alliance and mutual assistance with his royal brother and the princes of Europe. In particular he requested that personal negotiations should be made on his behalf with Emperor Charles V and his brother Francis I of France—notwithstanding the anti-Jewish policy followed in those countries—to patch up their quarrels and give him assistance, by land and sea, with cannons and military aid; in addition he desired

ing King Joseph, and the seventy elders of the tribe to seek the assistance of the Pope and the European powers, in their constant warfare against their Moslem neighbors. He had a circumstantial account to give of his journey from his native land to Italy disguised as a Moslem pilgrim, by way of Egypt and Palestine, where he had of course prayed at the sepulchre of the Patriarchs at Hebron and the Temple site in Jerusalem.

His tale inevitably aroused enormous interest and enthusiasm among the Venetian Jewish community. They listened to him devoutly, they entertained him lavishly, they provided him with money and an adequate escort, and dispatched him on his way to Rome, where he intended to interview the Pope and propose joint action against the common enemy. He entered the Papal capital riding on a white horse, and found himself greeted by the Jews here too with the utmost enthusiasm. In consequence, he had no difficulty in being received hospitably by one of the veritable Princes of the Church, that outstanding humanist Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, General of the Augustinian order, whose interest in Hebrew studies extended even to the Zohar and who had a Hebrew tutor residing with him in his palace. Thanks to his support, Reubeni was invited to the Vatican by the cultured Medici Pope, Clement VII. To him he proposed in private audience a treaty of alliance and mutual assistance between his royal brother and the Christian princes of Europe. In particular, he requested that personal approaches should be made on his behalf to the Emperor Charles V and his rival, King Francis I of France—notwithstanding the anti-Jewish policy followed by their countries—to patch up their differences and give him assistance, by providing him with cannons and munitions of war; in addition he desired a recom-

mendation to Prester John, the quasi-legendary Christian Prince of Ethiopia.

The enlightened Pontiff, one of the most tolerantly inclined and the most ill-fated of the successors of St. Peter, listened to his proposals, it seems, with rare sympathy and much credulity, and appears in the end to have accepted his claims all but unquestioningly. Henceforth, Reubeni was the hero of Roman Jewry, who received him at his own valuation and were prepared to back him up to the limit of their ability. He was lavishly supplied with money, and when he rode through the streets on his white steed he was accompanied by a regular escort of ten Jews as well as many scores of Christians. Dona Benvenida Abrabanel, wife of the hard-headed financier Samuel Abrabanel, the head of the Jewish community of Naples, sent him a banner of precious brocade, which she had embroidered with her own hands with the Ten Commandments.

IT WAS SOME TIME before the Pope took action, and he thought it best in any case not to intervene between the Emperor and the King of France. But in due course he provided Reubeni with letters of recommendation to the Kings of Portugal and Abyssinia, asking these monarchs at the same time to make enquiries and if they convinced themselves of the truth of Reubeni's claims to support him to the utmost of their ability, in view of the undoubted benefits that would thereby accrue to Christendom. One might almost say that he hereby achieved a success similar to that achieved by Herzl when he was received in audience by the German Kaiser, and England put forward the Uganda scheme. His proposals, fantastic though they may have appeared at the outset, were accepted as being at least within the sphere of practical politics.

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and safe-conduct arrived from Portugal. This itself was a diplomatic triumph; for the preceding three decades, no professing Jew had been allowed to live in the country! At the royal court of Portugal, Reubeni was received with all honor, and a scheme was actually outlined to transport munitions of war to the East to arm the hosts of the tribe of Reuben. The Portuguese Marranos, victims of the forced conversion of 1497 and still faithful at heart to their ancestral faith, could hardly believe their ears and eyes, and somewhat embarrassed him by the enthusiasm with which they greeted him everywhere. One of them indeed, a royal official named Diego Pires, now became so eager that he circumcised himself, left the country, reverted to the Jewish name of Solomon Molcho, and was subsequently to have a career as fantastic as Reubeni's own. The result of all this was that the latter was compelled to leave the country, his mission unfulfilled. When his ship entered Spanish waters he was arrested and thrown into jail, but his status was still so high that he was set free after a short while on the personal intervention of the Emperor, and was able to continue his voyage. A little later, he was shipwrecked off the coast of Provence, imprisoned for two years by the Lord of Claremont, and released—this time at the request of the King of France and on the payment of a ransom by the Jewish communities of Avignon and Carpertras. Unhappily for himself later on he clumsily forged copies of the documents which he had lost in captivity, thus undermining his credit among many of those with whom he was in contact. By now, however, he had returned to Italy, being at Bologna at the time of the Emperor Charles V's coronation by his old patron Pope Clement VII, and no doubt in

high hope of being able to fish advantageously in the troubled waters. Meanwhile, he travelled about the country, received and entertained magnificently by the Jewish magnates, and visited curiously by the Christian aristocracy, on some of whom he continued to make a great impression. In the autumn of 1530, we find him back in Venice, still irrepressible and his head still filled with ambitious political schemes, which he laid before the Signoria and communicated as well to the Emperor. The Senate was so impressed by his proposals that it prepared to carry the matter further, and commissioned the noted traveller and linguist, Giovambattista Ramusio, to investigate his tale and make a report.

AT THIS TIME Reubeni fell in again with Solomon Molcho, who meanwhile had himself been involved in the most incredible adventures: studying the Cabbala in Salonica and Safed, rousing enthusiasm in the synagogues of Ancona by his eloquent preaching, sitting among the sick and maimed at the gates of Rome in order to fulfil in his own person the Rabbinic legends regarding the Messiah, and gaining the favor of the Pope, who actually saved him on one occasion from the clutches of the Inquisition. Henceforth, the fate and fortune of the two men were inextricably intertwined. But this was by no means to Reubeni's advantage. Hitherto, he had done everything possible to present himself as a man of affairs, a statesman, with solid political and military proposals (whatever their ultimate basis). Molcho, on the other hand, was a visionary, who believed in and relied on supernatural intervention. Moreover, he was an apostate from the Catholic church, and thereby if on no other account, liable to prosecution and capital punishment—and all

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What was the truth in all this tale?
Men were puzzled by it four and a half
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—was he (as would seem to be the case,
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ental Jew? And if so, where from? Where

was the wilderness of Habor from
which he claimed to have come—in the
Arabian Peninsula as he seemed to im-
ply, or in Central Asia, or in North-East
Africa, or in South India? His tales of
the Lost Ten Tribes were certainly un-
true. But were they pure invention,
or did he know something of semi-
autonomous Jewish groups with which
he was in touch—at Cranganore on the
Malabar Coast, or in the Yemen, or
Hadramut, or the Falashas of Abys-
sinia, then a formidable group? We do
not know, and we never will know.

But, as one rereads the record, one
begins to realize that there was a great
deal more than sheer charlatanry in
his activities, which were directed to-
ward an attainable national object. To
the Gentiles, he spoke of joint action
against the Moslems or the Turks. But
to the Jews he spoke in different terms,
and sometimes to others as well. "We
wish to go with God's help to Jeru-
salem, to capture the Land of Israel
from the Moslems, for the time for the
End and the Salvation have arrived,"
he stated, roundly, on one occasion.
His objects, then, were not mystical,
but military: he wished to recruit Jew-
ish troops for the purpose. As he travel-
led about, he assessed the military
qualities of the Jews of the various
lands through which he passed. Those
of the Moslem countries would not do
—he thought them timid, fainthearted
and unwarlike. But when he came to
Italy he found better fighting material:
well-built, hardy, and courageous—pre-
cisely what he needed for his force.
But they too were outdone in this re-
spect, by the Marranos of Portugal.
"Among these are strong, and warlike
and intelligent men, and artificers in
firearms, and I saw that they were
stronger and better than all the Jews
that I had seen before," he wrote in
his memoirs.

Hence recruits for the force he proposed to raise were potentially available in ample number. It remained, however, to arm them.

AS IT SEEMS, he proposed to achieve this by a superb audacity. He claimed as we have seen to have come to Europe on a mission from the independent Tribe of Reuben and its associates to ask for gunpowder, munitions of war—the only thing that they were lacking then—so that they should be able to fight against the Moslems. Once these had been obtained, they would presumably have been diverted, somehow or other, to arm the Jewish levies which he proposed to raise, especially in Italy and Portugal. Meanwhile, he hoped that the Christian powers would assist by diverting the enemy's attention by mounting an offensive from the West: and he had the good sense to perceive that the Papacy, whose very existence was threatened at this time by the advance of the Turks, would be highly interested in organizing such a diversionary Crusade, even if it were ostensibly in alliance with these remote Hebrew tribes, in order to weaken the common enemy.

Possibly he hoped that the military supplies for which he was negotiating would be sent as a spontaneous gift: but even if this were not so, he had hopes of being adequately supplied with money, for he had gone out of his way to be on friendly terms with the wealthiest of the Jews of Italy—Daniel and Vitale of Pisa, and Samuel Abrabanel (or at least the latter's wife, the noble Benvenida): though he was not so successful with Ishmael (Laudadio) da Rieti, who told him roundly that he was not interested in Jerusalem, and far preferred his beloved Sienna.

It is of interest to note that before

coming to Italy, David, notwithstanding his ostentatious piety and constant displays of asceticism (perhaps in penitence for what he had done) had travelled through Egypt and Palestine disguised as a Moslem—and claiming to be a descendant of the Prophet, thus obtaining access to places from which Jews were normally excluded: it may well be that he was spying out the land. He pretended to be a simple, uneducated man, but Solomon Molcho recorded that he knew far more than he liked to show. This too may have been part of his elaborate disguise. If we do not read his career in some such way as this, it makes no sense. We know, and he knew, that there was no such thing as the Kingdom of the Tribe of Reuben, and had his applications to the European powers been successful, this must in the long run have become apparent, bringing disaster to him in its wake.

Looking at the sources anew, however, in the light of the suggestions here made, it all makes sense, and he appears as a pioneer of the renewal of Jewish nationalism, pinning his hopes on a most ambitious and audacious scheme, but yet with his feet firmly planted on the ground. Perhaps a European, perhaps an Oriental Jew, he had in any case widely travelled in the Orient and possibly had been in touch with some quasi-autonomous Jewish tribes in this area. This put in his mind, it may be, the idea of solving the Jewish problem as it existed in his day by taking advantage of the rivalry between the Moslem and the Christian powers, nervous at the threatening advance of the Turks, and conquering Palestine by force of arms, by a *coup de main*. He travelled through the country disguised as a Moslem, observing all its defenses as well as its weak points. But it was out of the

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question to rally the local population to an armed revolt, from the fact that they were fighting material. Moreover, it would not have been difficult to obtain locally adequate or fair "cold" weapons—swords, bows, which were general—
—an ample supply of munitions, cannons, arquebuses and munitions of war, very needed in order to carry out the plan. In the circumstances, the supplies were obtained only in Europe.

To Europe therefore he went, way elaborating a complicated scheme which he hoped he would obtain the supplies that he needed, he said, as the representative of his brother, the King of the Tribe of Reuben, who needed such supplies in order to make headway against the Moslems then threatening him.

In those days, geographical knowledge was so imperfect that it appeared to be at least within the bounds of possibility. Many powers accepted it implicitly, including the Church, and even the Pope. Through his instrumentalities he went on to continue his negotiations with the King of Portugal. He obtained the supplies which he needed, which were to be sent to Jerusalem, Red Sea, they would have been used to arm the robust Jews of Marranos of Portugal, thus forming a Jewish army (whether it was assembled in the East or in the West) to march on the Holy Land. While, the Christian powers were incited to patch up their quarrels and attack the Ottoman Empire from the West. The sinews of war were provided by the Italian Jew

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the sources anew, notwithstanding the suggestions that all makes sense, and he was a pioneer of the renewal of Zionism, pinning his most ambitious and audacious yet with his feet firmly on the ground. Perhaps a man like an Oriental Jew, who had widely travelled in the East, possibly had been in some quasi-autonomous area in this area. This put in perspective the idea of solving the problem as it existed by taking advantage of the weakness of the Moslem and the Christians, nervous at the threat of the Turks, and convinced by force of arms, by David. He travelled through the East disguised as a Moslem, obfuscating his defenses as well as its ends, so that it was out of the

question to rally the local Jewish population to an armed revolt, quite apart from the fact that they were not good fighting material. Moreover, although it would not have been difficult to obtain locally adequate or fairly adequate "cold" weapons—swords, lances and bows, which were generally accessible—an ample supply of modern armaments, cannons, arquebuses, gunpowder and munitions of war, was obviously needed in order to carry out his plan. In the circumstances, these could be obtained only in Europe.

To Europe therefore he went, on the way elaborating a complicated plan by which he hoped he would be able to obtain the supplies that he needed: he came, he said, as the representative of his brother, the King of the Tribe of Reuben, who needed such supplies in order to make headway against the Moslems then threatening his kingdom.

In those days, geographical knowledge was so imperfect that such a tale appeared to be at least within the bounds of possibility. Many persons accepted it implicitly, including Princes of the Church, and even the Pope. Through his instrumentality Reubeni went on to continue his negotiations with the King of Portugal. Had he obtained the supplies which he solicited, which were to be sent to Jeddah on the Red Sea, they would have been used to arm the robust Jews of Italy, and Marranos of Portugal, thus creating a Jewish army (whether it was to be assembled in the East or in the West) to march on the Holy Land; meanwhile, the Christian powers might be incited to patch up their differences and attack the Ottoman Empire from the West. The sinews of war would be provided by the Italian Jewish finan-

cial magnates with whom he had carefully fostered an intimate relationship. Meanwhile, he bolstered his pretence of being an exotic Oriental prince by sedulously concealing the fact of his quite considerable Hebrew and Talmudic knowledge.

The scheme was of course audacious to a degree, yet it was at the same time practical, not visionary. Had Reubeni's mission to Portugal been successful, as at one time seemed likely enough, and the munitions of war been forthcoming, he would obviously have been in a position to carry his plans a step further, beginning by recruiting a Jewish military force.

But at this point his bluff was called. The King of Portugal, though not persuaded that he was an imposter, determined after long deliberations to do nothing to help him. He spent the rest of the free days that remained to him wandering about Europe, trying unsuccessfully to find some alternative supporter and support and in the end completely lost his credit, and died as we have seen at the stake. But, if one reads the documents in the new light suggested above, it becomes obvious that he was not an imposter, as he has always been considered. He was an ardent Jewish nationalist, who at one of the darkest hours in Jewish history endeavored to reconquer Palestine for the Jewish people by force of arms. But, his elaborate plans were founded on an elaborate gamble: and the ultimate penalty for his failure was not merely an agonizing death, but also the loss of his credit in the eyes of posterity. The present generation owes it to his memory to restore him to his place, as a precursor of Jewish nationalism.