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YUN INTERVIEW  
WALTER EYTAN  
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JK: For the record, Mr. Eytan, could you please explain the role that you played during the time around the establishment of the state of Israel approximately between the years of 1947 and 1949? When did your involvement with Palestine begin?

Eytan: My involvement with Palestine began much earlier, in 1933. But in 1933 there was no UN and all these questions that you are raising don't really apply. In 1947 I was in Jerusalem. I was a member of the political department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. I came out then to New York as a member of the Jewish Agency's delegation at the meeting of the General Assembly in September, October, and November of 1947. I then went back to Palestine, and then when Israel became independent in 1948 I was appointed the first Director General of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. That was a post I held for eleven and one half years, until I became Ambassador to France. While I was Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more or less by a fluke I became the head of our delegation to the armistice negotiations with Egypt at Rhodes. So, from January 12th to February 25th I was in Rhodes. After that, if you are still interested in my UN involvement, I was the head of our delegation to the Lausanne Conference which was called by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine. I was in Lausanne

from April, 1949 til about July of that year. Then I came back to Jerusalem. And that about accounts for my doings in '47, '48' and '49.

JK: Good, that establishes a good base so that we can go on to some of the specific questions about that time. So, you were with the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and came to New York for the General Assembly in the fall of 1947. At that time was the Jewish Agency representing the Jewish community of Palestine?

Eytan: Absolutely, it was the one and only representative of the Jewish community in Palestine.

JK: Was there opposition to that representation?

Eytan: No, it was accepted by everybody.

JK: Who else worked with you in New York?

Eytan: Oh, there was a tremendous delegation. Everybody was in New York. I think that I should mention that the Jewish Agency of Palestine, just like the Jewish Agency for Israel which still exists in rather attenuated form, was composed partly of representatives of people from Palestine itself, as from Israel now, and partly from representatives from what is called world Jewry. One of the main spokesmen in the fall of 1947 was Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland who was a great man in his day, a big, tall, massive, handsome, and extraordinarily eloquent man and not easy to get on with. And there were others. From Palestine there were not only members of

the executive of the Jewish Agency like Mr. Moshe Sharett who at that time was still called Shertok. That was his original name. He was the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency of which I was a member. There were also representatives of the various political parties, some whom I remember and most of whom I don't remember. Just to mention two that I happen to remember, one was a man who at that time was called Zalman Rubashov. He Hebraized his name afterwards to Shazar. He became the third president of Israel. Another was a man who at that time was called Pinchas Rosenblut and he later shortened and Hebraized it to Rosen. He later became Minister of Justice in the Israeli government. I think he was the best Minister of Justice we ever had. There were other political representatives representing the different political parties. These were not particularly easy people to get on with because they represented different political views. They didn't always get along very well with each other. There was always a tremendous amount of argument.

If you are interested in what my job was at the time, my job was to organize the whole delegation in New York at this time. I was completely a non-political person. I belonged to no political party and I have not belonged to a political party since. I was and I saw myself as a civil servant and so everybody

was on more or less good terms with me. Everybody more or less trusted me. I did the organizing work for the delegation. That is to say, I hardly ever went to a meeting of the General Assembly. In fact, I don't think I went to the General Assembly which I think was at Flushing Meadows at that time. I went out there maybe once or twice just to get the scene, to see how things were running and how things were organized.

But, my job was in the office of the Jewish Agency in New York. We had a meeting of the whole delegation in the morning which I was responsible for organizing. And then we had a debriefing session in the evening when the people all came back from Flushing Meadows. When people came back in the evening they usually came back with requests. I remember once a man named Moshe Tov who was our expert for Latin America came to me.

The Latin American countries at that time formed more than one third of the total membership of the United Nations. The total membership of the United Nations then was 57 including 20 Latin American countries. So, they were very important for us and their votes were very important for us. I remember very well Tov came back one evening saying that the Argentine delegation had requested a memo on some topic that he had spoken to them about. They wanted to see it in writing. He asked would I see that he had it first thing the following morning

of the Special Committee which the Assembly had appointed at the extraordinary meeting in the spring of that year. The recommendation was for statehood. There were conditions for partition. But, in fact, and I think that this is an important point, the whole debate for the whole of the two months at the UN really did not so much turn on the idea of partition but, on whether or not there should be a Jewish state. No one was really interested in an Arab state because the Arabs had said they didn't want one. The debate was not for or against an Arab state or for or against partition as such, as an ideal. Whether or not there should be a Jewish state was the real topic of debate at the General Assembly. And 100% emphasis was on that.

JK: The recommendation of the Committee was for partition.

Eytan: It was a majority recommendation. I think it was something like by a vote of eight to three. It was a big majority but it had not been unanimous.

JK: Then the General Assembly did adopt that resolution.

Eytan: The General Assembly adopted the resolution by the requisite two-third majority. I remember the voting, 33 voted for and 13 against and 10 abstained and one didn't turn up. I think that was Thailand. It was Siam in those days. The job of our delegation was not merely to explain why a Jewish state was necessary but, also an

to give to them. So, it was that sort of job I did. I would then sit down until whatever time at night it required and prepare all this so I could equip the delegation with it. Of course they didn't all come every day with requests for memos but, I just give that as an example because it stuck in my mind.

So, I had really no personal experience, or hardly any, of the debates in the General Assembly itself. I did the dull work organizing the whole thing.

Incidentally, one of the people there was Abba Eban. He was also a member of that group. All together it was a pretty large group. I think in our morning meetings we something like twenty people.

JK: What was the policy of the Jewish Agency at the time? What was the position on statehood, for example, or partition?

Eytan: The policy was 100% support. We were not so interested in partition as such, partition as a principle or as an ideal but, we were very interested in Jewish independence and the establishment of a Jewish state which had been recommended by the UN Special Committee on Palestine at the very beginning of that session. They had been instructed to have their report in by September 1st and they had it in by September 1st. I think the session of the General Assembly started on September 23rd.

The debate in the General Assembly was on the report

important, practical job was to garner all possible votes. The idea of an independent Jewish state was new. Mind you, it had been recommended ten years earlier by the British Royal Commission, the Peel Commission in 1937. But, nevertheless, there were all kinds of objections and reservations. So, one had to make sure to get every possible vote because to get a two thirds majority for something that could be pretty debatable wasn't all that easy.

JK: Were there parts of that resolution that was passed by the General Assembly that the Jewish Agency did not particularly approve of but they went along with simply to pass the resolution?

Eytan: Oh sure, nobody on the Jewish side was thrilled with the way the UN Committee had drawn its map. They drew a very odd map. It was drawn in such a way that Palestine was divided into six parts, three to be Jewish and three to be Arab. It was drawn in such a way that they met at two points which were called kissing points. Where they just touched. You could go through the proposed Arab state without ever touching Jewish territory and could go similarly through the Jewish state without touching Arab territory. It was a very odd looking map. Still, that was it and it was better than nothing.

The other thing was the proposed internationalization of Jerusalem. About Jerusalem I'll

just say this. Speaking historically a long way before the UN, there was always a problem with Jerusalem. The problem of Jerusalem existed in the days of the Ottoman Empire long, long before there was the problem of Palestine. And it existed because there were so many different churches all fighting for leadership and for what nowadays we would call turf. Quite apart from all the many Christian sects there were Jews and Moslems and they weren't united either. So, Jerusalem was always a very difficult question. The British Royal Commission had tried to solve the question of Palestine by saying that the country should be partitioned, half Jewish, half Arab. Only each side wanted the whole. Incidentally, the basic recommendation, and this is actually written in their report, was based on the old saying that half a loaf is better than no bread. That was the way they put it in English. I still remember the English phrase. The recommendation was that Jerusalem and the area around Jerusalem should remain under British mandate. That was an elegant way of both evading the Jerusalem question and insuring for Britain a continued foothold in the Middle East. They had that in mind as well. When it came to the UN special committee they also took Jerusalem out of the rest of Palestine because it was so much disputed between the different parties. They recommended

that an international regime be established. Jews have always regarded Jerusalem as theirs, as their historic capital. It goes back to David, King of Israel 3,000 years ago. So, the thought of not being in Jerusalem was a terrible thing. However, if that was the price to be paid for Jewish independence we really had no choice but to swallow it. I will tell you something else on this subject. In spite of all the annoyance, anger, and reservations about Jerusalem, what made it palatable, or less unpalatable, was the proviso incorporated actually into the General Assembly's resolution of November 29th that this international regime should be instituted for a period of ten years. In fact, I think it said a period not exceeding ten years. After which by a referendum the people of the city would be asked whether they wanted it modified. At that time the population of Jerusalem was 165,000. It's much more now but then it was 165,000. Of this 100,000 were Jews and 65,000 were Moslems and others. The Jewish Agency had absolutely no doubt as to what the outcome of the referendum would be. So, they saw the internationalization of Jerusalem as something that they would have to swallow for as much as ten years and then afterwards the thing would right itself. In spite of all the reservations about it, it was accepted as part and parcel of the proposed settlement.

JK: Why was this resolution not implemented?

Eytan: It was not implemented for the simple reason that the Arabs refused it. The Arabs would never have anything to do with it. The Arabs claimed, as they still claim, the whole of Palestine and would absolutely not compromise. That was why the British Royal Commission recommendation in 1937 was not implemented, because the Arabs immediately rejected it. If you have a recommendation or a proposed solution which depends on the cooperation of the two sides and one side says absolutely not, I won't have anything to do with it, then there is nothing you can do. What happened, in fact, was when the day came we implemented our part and proclaimed the independence of Israel. On that same day the Arabs tried to subvert the whole thing by sending in their armies. Then there was warfare which lasted most of 1948.

JK: Shortly after the resolution was passed in the General Assembly that fall fighting broke out.

Eytan: The next day.

JK: Was this a reaction by the Arabs to the resolution?

Eytan: Of course. There is an area in Jerusalem which is called the commercial center. In fact, it wasn't the commercial center of the town but it was a commercial area and was known as the commercial center. That very night or the next day the Arabs came and burned it down and finished it. That was within 24 hours. That was their first sign that they were not going to knuckle under.

JK: Fighting continued after that point?

Eytan: All over the country, sporadically. Jerusalem came under siege. I was in Jerusalem throughout the siege. We were surrounded first by what nowadays would be called Arab guerilla forces. These were not the regular armies of any of the Arab states because the British mandate was still in force. The Syrians and the Egyptians and the others could not send in their armies as long as the British were there. But, there were all these Arab guerilla forces which were armed by the neighboring states but operated on their own. They cut off the main route to Jerusalem. After independence, after May 14th, that's when the armies came in. We were really cut off. It was very interesting to be a besieged city with nothing to eat and nothing to drink and no electricity, with extraordinary consequences. It went on for months.

JK: Why did the British decide to terminate the mandate at that point?

Eytan: Apparently out of sheer despair. They could no longer do anything about it. They had tried immediately after World War II to hold some kind of conference in London between themselves and the representatives of the Jewish and Arab sides but, that led to nothing. They had done the same before the war. It never could lead to anything and in the end they came to the conclusion that they were

just not capable of solving the question. They put the whole thing in the hands of the United Nations. It was then that the United Nations held the extraordinary meeting of the General Assembly in the spring of 1947 and appointed the Special Committee; that is when that whole process started.

You have to see it as if you were looking at it

historically against all that was happening to Britain after World War II. They were no longer a great imperial power capable of maintaining itself all over the world. IN that same year of 1947 India became independent. One of the reasons that the British had historically for holding on to the Middle East, Egypt, Palestine and so on, for as long as they could, was as an essential staging post on the road to India. When the Indian empire collapsed the Middle East became very much less important for them. So, they decided to let the United Nations struggle with this headache. Also, if you take a slightly more legalistic view of the thing, the British held their mandate from the League of Nations. The League of Nations had disappeared. So, what were they holding? They were really holding something that had lost its legitimacy, its legal basis. That was another reason for handing it over to the United Nations as a sort of successor to the League of Nations. So, that's what happened.

JK: Initially Great Britain seemed to support the idea of a homeland for the Jews. But, with the establishment of the White Papers they seemed to have gone back on that. What was the effect of the White Papers?

Eytan: Now you are taking me back into a very complicated history. To put it as briefly as possible, back during World War I the British really believed in having what was called at that time a Jewish national home. The British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George said at the time that it had always been the ideal to have the national home develop into a Jewish state. There were all kinds of reasons for being not only in favor of it but enthusiastic about it. There have been a lot of very good books about it. Incidentally the most recent of these books was not only about the Balfour declaration but about the whole of the Middle East settlement. It is a book by a man by the name of David Fromkin which appeared last year and which the New York Times chose as one of the 13 best books of the year in all categories. It appeared in 1989 called very sardonically A Peace to End All Peace. It tells the whole story, among other things, of the Jewish national home.

As time went on and as the Arabs were much more numerous than the Jews, and therefore, more important and with more natural resources, oil and so on, the British tried more and more to appease them, not only tried but

did appease them. That period between the two World Wars was a period of appeasement by the British and by the French. They were always giving in to others. And the more they appeased the Arabs, automatically the more they retreated from the policy of the Jewish national home.

**JK:** The British mandate was to expire on May 14, 1948, and up until that point the United Nations who had been handed that issue had not been able to come up with a solution other than partition. So, on that day Israel declared its independence. What other choices did Israel have and how was that decision arrived at to declare independence on that day?

**Eytan:** I told you just now that I was in the siege of Jerusalem. Being in a besieged city surrounded by enemy forces means that you are completely cut off from the rest of the world. Having practically nothing to eat or to drink and no electricity also meant that you really had no news because the radio wasn't working. We were very cut off in Jerusalem. We had no clear idea what was happening in Tel Aviv. It was in Tel Aviv that the decisions were being taken. I did not hear the news. I assumed that independence would be declared that Friday afternoon the 14th but, I had not heard that it had happened until sometime the following morning, Saturday morning May 15th. It was known all over the world in a few seconds but, in Jerusalem by pure chance a CBS correspondent was

walking by my house in Jerusalem that Saturday morning and said hello and he told me. I couldn't believe it. Of course, I believed it but, this was about 16 to 18 hours after the rest of the world knew it. And we were only thirty miles away. So, I honestly cannot tell you what went on in those debates. I can tell you roughly what the ideas were. There were people who had cold feet when they saw the Arab opposition and they saw that the Arabs were fighting and they thought terrible things were going to happen. They even thought that a Jewish state would never be able to defend itself. So, people came up with other ideas. One of them was the United States. The United States in May only a few days before all this in May, 1948, came up with the idea that instead of partition and the establishment of the two independent states which the General Assembly had recommended, Palestine should come for the time being under a trusteeship regime. In other words that the two independent states should not be proclaimed, should not be established.

There were people, a man that I knew who was called Nahum Goldmann, who was one of the representatives not from Israel. I think he was an American citizen but who held a position in the Jewish Agency. He said how can we proclaim the independence of the Jewish state at a time even when the United States is having doubts and very

likely will not support it. That was one alternative, anyway. We had the General Assembly's recommendation but, he said, we don't have to carry it out now. The United States is proposing something different.

So, there was quite an internal debate on the subject. However, I never doubted that the independence of Israel would be proclaimed. It was too silly not to. This was the one great historic opportunity and who could tell if it would ever recur, given the international situation and also our physical situation vis-a-vis the Arabs. Remember we had practically nothing in the way of arms. We were surrounded by Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. All of them with armies, not armies as strong as they have now but, they had greatly more than we had. There must have been plenty of people who said this is taking a risk and our people are going to be slaughtered. We can't carry the moral responsibility for that.

As I say, I was not present for those arguments but, that was roughly what went on.

JK: What kind of effect did the declaration of the independence of Israel have on the people there?

Eytan: Enormous, enormous enthusiasm. This was a decisive step and with hindsight historically it was absolutely the right thing to do.

JK: There would have been a vacuum. Nothing had been decided.

Eytan: The British were leaving that very day. You said a vacuum. There was a vacuum. It was a very curious thing. You know there is never supposed to be a vacuum in power. The British High Commissioner for Palestine left Jerusalem at 8:00 on the morning of May the 14th. The independence of Israel was not proclaimed until 4:00 that afternoon. So, during those eight hours from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon there was, in fact, a vacuum. Legally there was nobody in charge. In practice people were very much in charge on the ground.

JK: Did the acceptance of the State of Israel by the United States and the Soviet Union which happened immediately after the announcement of independence affect the Arab intentions?

Eytan: Absolutely not.

JK: What were their intentions?

Eytan: Their intentions were to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state. To put it in dramatic language, "throttling the infant state at birth," to prevent it from coming into existence.

JK: Had they offered at any time any solutions for a peaceful settlement?

Eytan: No. Never.

JK: Did the British attempt at all to maintain law and order?

Eytan: No, the British played a very despicable role during

those last few months and especially the last few weeks. They not only allowed things to wind down as they gradually evacuated and stopped the public services but, they deliberately sabotaged things. They were almost going to leave something like scorched earth. They were getting out and they wanted no Jewish state. They were extremely uncooperative with the United Nations. I will give you one example. The United Nations appointed what it called the Palestine Committee right early on in the course of this period which consisted of representatives of five countries whose job it was to go out to Palestine and insure orderly and peaceful transition from the hands of the British into the hands of theoretically both the new states. This commission never came. The British never allowed it to come.

What the UN did was, it sent what was called an advance party. The advance party consisted of six people. The head of it was a man called Pablo da Azcarate. Azcarate was a Spanish Republican who had been the last Ambassador from the Spanish Republic in London, to the Court of Saint James's. He was the head of this group and he was the political man. The other three were a Norwegian military man called Colonel Rosher Lund, an Indian economist called Ghosh, and a Greek legal adviser who afterwards became legal adviser to the United Nations, Stavropoulos. These were the four members of

the advance party. They were accompanied by two lovely secretaries for secretarial services.

When these people came the British were supposed to welcome them properly and facilitate things for them to start their work. They were supposed to lay the foundation for the transition of authority. Instead of which the British put them into a cellar. Every time I pass that house in Jerusalem I think about them. It was an underground place where there were about six rooms. It was a cellar. They installed themselves there the best they could. They couldn't do anything. The British prevented them from doing anything. Azcarate came with a suitcase, if you are looking for picturesque details for this oral history I can give you some, and in this suitcase he carried the whole of Spain with him. That was the first thing that he unpacked. He had not been back to Spain since Franco had won. He had not been back to Spain since 1939 or before. He was in exile. He never returned to Spain. He died many years later in Geneva. In this suitcase he carried pictures of Spain and all kinds of memorabilia and knickknacks. The first thing he did was to decorate his room with all kinds of Spanish symbols. It was very touching, very moving. He carried his own Spain with him in a suitcase. He was a very sweet man but, inevitably he was completely

ineffective, ineffective because he wasn't the most effective man in the world anyway but, he was a gentleman. He could have done his job if the British had let him.

Stavropoulos and Ghosh didn't do anything very much. Rosher Lund, the Norwegian Colonel, was in his element. He couldn't do anything but, being a military man he enjoyed the fighting. A lot of fighting was going on, snipers and shelling. All that interested him. He also went foraging all the time, sometimes with my help, for whiskey and other strong drink which he could not do without and which the British would not supply. There was very little of it in Jerusalem at the time.

The Jewish Agency had two liaison officers with this group, one was I and the other is the man who is President of Israel today, President Chaim Herzog. He was a military man then and I was a civilian. I was a member of the political department of the Jewish Agency. It was our job to maintain the liaison with this group and to get whatever benefit we could out of them and to help them in any way we could. The two girl secretaries, in fact, became cooks because the British had done nothing in the way of food. So, these people stayed in this cellar for a few weeks and after Israel became independent they went back to New York. If you had seen this you would have seen what was meant by the British

not cooperating. They were deliberately treating these UN representatives with disdain. The British were all very angry and they vented their anger on these people.

JK: At that time the Secretary-General of the United Nations was Trygve Lie. How actively involved was he in the Palestine issue? Was he supportive?

Eytan: I don't know. I had seen Trygve Lie in New York in 1947 but, I doubt if I even spoke to him. As I told you my job was an inside job and I have no recollection of that.

JK: There were some unsuccessful calls for a cease-fire by the Security Council and then finally a truce was accepted on June 11. They set the truce for a four week period. Do you have any idea why they decided on a four week period?

Eytan: A truce is always a temporary thing. A truce is a glorified cease-fire. There are various stages of not fighting, one is a cease-fire, the next is a truce, the next is an armistice. Between fighting and not fighting, between war and peace there are all these intermediate stages. So, this was called a truce. I also imagine that if they had called for a longer truce I assume they wouldn't have gotten the Arabs to accept it.

JK: Fighting broke out again and am I correct in saying that the Arabs began the fighting a day before the truce expired?

Eytan: I don't know if it was the day before but, at that time the truce was maintained for four weeks. The Arabs said they would not renew it and so the fighting began again.

JK: What did that period of time mean for Israel?

Eytan: Those four weeks, well, for me it meant that I was able to get out of Jerusalem for the first time. I got out the first night of the truce. We left in a Jeep at 9:00 at night after it got dark because we didn't really trust the Arabs. We didn't want to risk it in the daytime. From Jerusalem to Tel Aviv is a matter of about 30 miles. We left Jerusalem at 9:00 at night and we got into Tel Aviv at 8:00 the next morning. It took us practically 12 hours to do 30 miles. Anyway, we got there. When I actually started my job I was Director General of the Foreign Ministry. Before that I had been cut off.

What the truce meant for us was a very welcome breathing space because we had been very hard pressed by these people. We had really very little in the way of defensive material. After May 14th we had the Egyptian army and the Syrian army and the Jordanian army and the Iraqi army and even the Lebanese although the Lebanese didn't have very much. They had all invaded our territory. They had all come in and we were very hard pressed. So this was a breathing space. We used this breathing space, and they did too, to try to redeploy and get additional weapons and that

kind of thing so that if and when the fighting resumed we would be in a better position than we were the first time.

JK: When the fighting did resume . . .

Eytan: They made the mistake of resuming the fighting. Then they only lasted 10 or 12 days. They lost a lot of ground during that time and they were much worse off than if they hadn't re-started the fighting. We made the most of those 10 or 12 days, less than two weeks. Then there was another truce.

JK: Then the truce in July took place. Even after the truce there was still periodic fighting that would break out.

Eytan: It was inevitable. I don't remember the details now but, each side was naturally anxious to better its position as much as they could.

JK: The UN had appointed a mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte. How effective was he and was he considered neutral?

Eytan: When Bernadotte first arrived, this was a thing I have a very clear memory of, he was received very favorably. I still remember I was standing on the roof of the Jewish Agency's building, a pretty big building on a hill and you could get a good view from the roof, I was standing there with a man called Dov Yosef, who was the military governor of Jerusalem at the time. We saw this white UN plane coming in from the south bringing Bernadotte. It landed on a little airfield just north of Jerusalem. An

hour or so later Bernadotte actually came to the office. I still remember the feeling when this white plane carrying Bernadotte as the UN mediator arrived. The feelings were very positive. I don't know whether people thought he would solve all the problems or anything like that but, it was a relief.

As time went on and talks and negotiations with him continued the thing became stickier and stickier. My own feeling was, and still is, that he was a reasonably well intentioned person. By reasonably well intentioned I don't mean that he was on our side but, that he thought that people shouldn't be fighting and killing each other. I don't think he had any notion of the complexity of the problem. I'm not sure that he was really a very intelligent man but, he was a neutral, a Swede. He was a member of the Royal family. There were things about him that we didn't like particularly. He had negotiated in 1945 with the Nazis and with Himmler. That was sort of his specialty, to negotiate and to mediate. That had been just three years before. I always had the feeling that here we were sitting with a man who three years before had been talking to Himmler. It gave me a spooky feeling. I don't think that our people had terrific trust or confidence in him. On the other hand, the assumption was that he was doing his best, such as it was. He did some very foolish things. The

most foolish was that he didn't seem to realize, for example, the extreme complexity of the whole question of Jerusalem, how sensitive a subject it was. And he proposed that the whole of Jerusalem be put under the rule of King Abdulla of Jordan. The idea of putting the whole of Jerusalem in the hands of an Arab king was bound to set us against him. I don't think that anyone would have forgiven him for that. I don't think he meant it in any wicked way. It was just the complexity of the whole thing and the background that was beyond him.

JK: What kind of power did he as a mediator have? Was he just supposed to go back and forth between the two sides or if he made a proposal was it felt that it would be implemented?

Eytan: No, he couldn't give orders. A good mediator puts things in such a way and makes an offer that you can't refuse. He puts things in such a way that he persuades you. In order to persuade people you have to be more or less reasonable. To say the whole of Jerusalem should come under an Arab king was a foolish thing to bring up because he should have known that the 100% result would be complete rejection by us.

JK: Was there some fear that his recommendations would be put into effect? I'm only asking because he was assassinated shortly after that.

Eytan: I don't think so, not by anyone who actually had dealings

with him. I took part in all kinds of meetings with him. They were all practically held on the terrace of the small Foreign Ministry building that we had in Tel Aviv at that time. I don't remember the details of them. There must have been minutes kept of those discussions. They exist in the archives.

I remember Bernadotte very well. He was a fine looking man, very tall, quite impressive but, I must say not terribly intelligent though.

JK: The next thing I would like to talk to you about is your involvement in the Armistice agreements in the Isle of Rhodes in 1949. In our earlier discussions we have been building up to that. The mediator, Count Bernadotte, was assassinated in Jerusalem in September of 1948. After that Ralph Bunche was named acting mediator. Did things change after that? How did Ralph Bunche operate in that role?

Eytan: Ralph Bunche had been Bernadotte's number two man, assistant, or right hand man, so he was already involved. I think two things helped when Bunche took over. One was that Bunche was well known to us. Bunche had been the assistant secretary-general of the UN Special Committee on Palestine back in the spring of 1947. The secretary-general of the committee was a Chinese man named Mr. Hoo. Bunche was his number two man. I had known Bunche since April of 1947. So, by the fall of 1948 we had known

Bunche for over a year. Not only had we known Bunche for about a year but he had known the situation out in Palestine himself. He was much more familiar than Bernadotte had been. Bunche in those respects and also in terms of intelligence was a great improvement on Bernadotte. I think that the second element probably was that the assassination of Bernadotte came as such a shock that it automatically insured cooperation with his successor whoever his successor might have been. As it happened it was Bunche whom we knew. Although it is not nice to say this, in fact, it was a big improvement.

**JK:** Then later on that fall the General Assembly asked that an armistice agreement be established.

**Eytan:** The Security Council in a resolution of November 16, 1948, called for an armistice. There again the Arabs didn't want it. We immediately said, "Okay, we'd be very happy to negotiate armistice agreements with all these countries," four of them. And the Arabs said, "no." So, it took another couple of months or so of further military failure on their part. As you said the fighting went on sporadically. By December, 1948, and the very first days of January, 1949, we had driven the Egyptians back to their side of the border. Incidentally, it is worth adding, that people always think that when Jerusalem was besieged, it was besieged by the forces of Jordan. In fact, it was besieged by the forces of both

Jordan and Egypt. The Egyptians got right into Jerusalem, right into the city boundary. They had come a long way. They had come right through the southern part of the country.

By the end of December, 1948, and the first days of January, 1949, we had driven the Egyptians back into their own territory. In fact, we were pursuing them into the Sinai. Then the Egyptians decided to call it a day. They had had enough. And that is when they responded to the Security Council's call for the armistice negotiations. In fact, five days later we started. At that point they were ready.

JK: As you said earlier you then became head of the Israeli delegation.

Eytan: Yes, That's right. Ralph Bunche presided. He was the mediator. He represented the United Nations. He had a full staff. He had a political staff and a military staff, not an enormous number of people but quite enough. I don't know how big the United Nations' party was but, I think it was not less than the Israeli or Egyptian delegations.

JK: Who were some of the important actors? Yourself and Bunche and who else?

Eytan: Let me first of all tell you a curious thing. I was the head of our delegation. I was a civilian and the Director General, the permanent head, of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. The head of the Egyptian delegation was a military man called Seif ed-Din. He may have only been a colonel at that time. Later he was a general. He was the head of the Egyptian delegation. From that all kinds of people over the years have drawn the following conclusion. Both the delegations were composed of civilian, that is political, representatives and military, half and half. But, because our delegation was headed by a civilian people said, and I think that we ourselves for a long time said, that we saw the armistice agreement as a political agreement and that our delegation was composed of civilians, Foreign Ministry officials, plus military advisors. Whereas the Egyptians saw the armistice as military agreements. Their delegation was headed by a military man and was therefore military with political advisors.

All this is not true. It is not true for a very simple reason. It was purely by chance that I became the head of our delegation. In fact, I didn't become the head of the delegation until the morning on which we left for Rhodes. I had been involved with the preparations for the negotiations but, I wasn't going to go to Rhodes. I was Director of the Foreign Ministry and was building up the whole Foreign Ministry and I couldn't get away from my desk. My job was at home. The head of the delegation could quite easily have been a man called

Yigael Yadin, who afterwards became a famous archaeologist, and at that time was head of operations of the Israeli army. If he had been the head of the delegation our delegation would have been headed by a military man and the Egyptian delegation would have been headed by a military man. Everybody would have seen the negotiations as being on strictly military matters which is quite naturally the nature of an armistice. An armistice on its practical side deals mainly with military matters, like territory and defense lines and the exchange of prisoners. Had certain things been different Yigael Yadin could have been the head of the delegation. Then it would have been two military delegations. By chance this is how it worked out. The fact that the head of one delegation was a military man and the other was not had no significance whatever despite all the significance that people tried to read into it both then and later. Among the people principally involved those that I remember are the head of the Egyptian delegation, Seif ed-Din. Their chief political man was Abdul Moneim Mustafa, who was their central non-military figure on the delegation. Later on he became the Egyptian minister to Switzerland and then he died soon after. Then there was the king's brother-in-law, Colonel Sherein. This was when King Farouk was still reigning in Egypt. The King wanted his own man on

the delegation so he didn't have to rely on his government for a report. He had his own brother-in-law. He is still alive in Cairo and I have often thought if ever I were in Cairo I'd look him up. Then there was a man called Mahmoud Riad who I think later became Foreign Minister or possibly Prime Minister of Egypt. At the moment I don't remember the rest. Shabtai Rosenne probably remembers them all. They had a good and fine quality delegation.

On our side I had Shabtai Rosenne with me. He was our legal advisor. Then I had four military men. One was General Yadin whom I've mentioned who was Chief of Operations of the Israeli Defense Forces. Another was a much more junior officer called Yehoshafat Harkabi who later became a professor at Hebrew University and has written a great deal about Arab-Israeli relations. Another was Yitzhak Rabin who became Prime Minister of Israel. At that time he was a junior officer and very young. And the other was called Arie Simon who became an educator. On the civilian side we had Elias Sasson who had been for years the Jewish Agency's senior advisor on Arab affairs and later on in the Foreign Service became Ambassador to Italy, Switzerland, Turkey, and so on. We had a good delegation as well. On the UN side there was Bunche and his main military man, William Riley. He was a General in the US Marines. There was a

Frenchman called Henri Vigier who later presided over the negotiations between us and the Syrians and the Lebanese on behalf of Bunche. That was very useful because he was a Frenchman and the negotiations with the Syrians and Lebanese were conducted in French.

That was about it unless you are interested in one curious person because he belonged to neither side nor to the UN. All this was taking place on Greek soil in Rhodes and the Greek Foreign Ministry was curious as to what was going on and they also wanted to be helpful. So, they sent a young man with a wonderful name called Themistocles Chrysthantopoulos whom I remember very well because of certain things connected with the Greek language. At one time I was a Greek scholar. I remain friends to this day with Themistocles Chrysthantopoulos. He became a member of the Greek delegation to the UN later. Then he became the Ambassador to Canada and China. He's retired now and, in fact, I had a letter from him yesterday. That goes back to those days in Rhodes. Those were the main people there.

**JK:** The fighting had taken place with several Arab nations. Why were the negotiations set up separately with each nation involved?

**Eytan:** Now you are bringing up a big question. I could talk about that for another three hours. This was part of

Bunche's wisdom. Egypt was the first nation to respond and that was under military pressure. We had driven them back. We had invaded their country. Our troops were on their territory. That was not the case with any of the others. They were the leading Arab country and they were the first to respond. Within two or three days of our meeting with the Egyptians at Rhodes, roughly around January 15th, 1949, Ralph Bunche told us that he had had a request from Lebanon and a request from Jordan to join in the negotiations. So, Egypt having set the example they also wanted to join in and negotiate armistice agreements. He hadn't asked us or consulted us. He was simply informing us that he had said to them, "no, we are now busy with Egypt. When we are finished with Egypt we will be delighted to start with Lebanon and delighted to start with Jordan." Not to get the things mixed up, he was 100% right.

The questions and issues were not the same. The territorial questions were not the same. Between us and Egypt we had the problem of the Sinai, the Suez Canal, which didn't concern Lebanon or Jordan. So, he had said no. I have written about this. This was the awful mistake that the UN Conciliation Commission made in April, 1949, in Lausanne where I was also the head of our delegation. The same four Arab countries were represented. The Commission instead of treating them as a delegation of Egypt separately, Jordan

separately, Syria and so on, they molded them into a single Arab delegation. The result was that they were all looking over each other's shoulders and each one was terrified of saying or even thinking of any kind of solution or concession for fear of what the others might think. That was doomed to failure from day one. Bunche was a smart fellow and he must have realized that right from the start. As I said he didn't even consult us. He informed us that he had said, "no, we'll wait. We'll finish with Egypt and then there will be time enough for the others."

JK: I understand that Bunche started off the meetings in a way by saying that there was no victor and no vanquished. Mr. Rosenne had explained that to me and that had set a mood that made it easier to talk.

Eytan: I don't recall. It would take too long to discuss everything that went on procedurally at Rhodes but, Bunche knew how to handle everybody and situations. He knew how to handle negotiations. He had an instinctive feel for them.

JK: Did the Israelis and the Egyptians sit in the same room face to face at this time or did Ralph Bunche meet with each delegation separately?

Eytan: All these things. There were not many full formal sessions. The first session was a full formal session with the two delegations meeting under the chairmanship

of the mediator and so was the final session with the final signature of the agreement. There may have been one or two or more like that but, most of our meetings with the Egyptians were informal. The two legal advisors would meet together and the military people would meet together. We met the Egyptians constantly. We played billiards with them. We were in the same hotel. The reason that we were in the same hotel was probably that Bunche also had in mind that if you have all these people under the same roof they are bound to socialize a bit.

This was immediately after the civil war in Greece and in fact the civil war in the north of Greece was still going on. Greece was absolutely destroyed. There was nothing and the food was inedible. It was absolutely appalling for six weeks. But, they suffered from the same food that we did in the same dining room. We weren't actually sitting at the same table but, if you have your meals in the same dining room at the same time with the same people every day for six weeks you're bound to fraternize quite a bit. The billiards I remember. We met them constantly. I remember this Abdul Moneim Mustafa whom I told you about. He was their chief civilian man. He fell sick at one point and was laid up in bed. And I remember very well that Elias Sasson and I came to visit him and we sat by his bedside. We brought him chocolates. The

relationship was good. The negotiations were like that. The formal meetings were really either introductory or sort of concluding. In between there was a lot of informal talk.

JK: Were these agreements considered temporary that would lead up to some permanent agreement?

Eytan: I think that they were quite deliberately -- and I think this was also Bunche's wisdom -- they had no time limit. It was not assumed that they would last indefinitely because there is a clause in each of them saying that one year after the signature of the agreement if either side wanted to propose a revision, they could request the Secretary-General of the United Nations to call a meeting of the two and that each side would be obliged to attend. That implies that it wasn't really thought that it would last more than a year or that there would be a need for it for more than a year. Each of the agreements started with a quotation in accordance with the Security Council Resolution of November 16, 1948, calling upon the sides to conclude an armistice "as a transition from the present truce to permanent peace." Everybody signed that, therefore, the assumption was this was a transition to permanent peace and that there would be a permanent peace. How long would it take? Maybe a year. If for some reason it took longer than a year there was this provision in the agreement that the Secretary-General

could be asked to call a meeting. This was invoked only once, by us in the case of the agreement with Jordan, because the Jordanians had failed to fulfill some of their obligations under the agreement. They refused to attend, so they broke the agreement by not fulfilling their part and by refusing to accept the Secretary-General's invitation.

JK: But the critical issues had been dealt with during the armistice negotiations and so it seemed to work. For many years that was the only thing that there was.

Eytan: Under each of the agreements a joint armistice commission was set up consisting of a delegate of the UN and each of the two parties. They were called Mixed Armistice Commissions or MACs. They met regularly. Every time either side had a complaint they would meet. That was on-going all the time.

JK: There were other Arabs besides those four nations that were a part of the fighting. How was that handled in the negotiations?

Eytan: All kinds of Arabs sent token forces, but they didn't count. The only ones that did count were the Iraqis. The Iraqis sent a powerful force but the Iraqis absolutely refused to negotiate an armistice. They said that the Jordanians could negotiate for them and that they would be bound by what the Jordanians agreed to. It didn't quite work out that way because the Iraqis were so

happy to be there that they caused a lot of trouble for the Jordanians afterwards. They had really come in specifically on Jordan's side. Their troops were occupying certain sectors within the overall Jordanian scheme of things.

The Iraqis for political reasons refused to negotiate an armistice. They should have, because they had been very actively engaged in the fighting. It is very hard for people to realize what happened in those days. Even while the British were still running the country supposedly, there were already Arab guerrilla forces operating against us in spite of the British. I remember very well that the officer in command of the Arab guerrilla force in Jaffa from which they attacked Tel Aviv was an Iraqi army officer. That was even before May, 1948. The Iraqis were very active.

JK: You mentioned that much of the agreements were of a military nature. Do you recall what parts were non-military?

Eytan: Yes, first, all the basic clauses like the one I mentioned, the Preamble, laid the basis of the background for the transition from the present truce to a permanent peace. There were two or three paragraphs of that kind of a political nature. Then there were all kinds of theoretical arrangements, for example, in the agreement with Jordan which in some ways was the most difficult

because it touched on Jerusalem. There were theoretical, not practical, arrangements made. The practical were supposed to be left to a committee. The practical issues were to provide for access of Jewish worshipers to the Wailing Wall which is now called the Western Wall. Also, it provided access to Mount Scopus where the Hebrew University had been which had been cut off but remained in a sort of enclave within the territory held by Jordan. The railway line from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem which passed just close to Jordanian territory was also an example of the practical arrangements that were made. There were others as well which I don't recall at the moment which were military in a sense that if the Jordanians chose to refuse us access to the Western Wall, how would they refuse us? By military means, by putting soldiers there. The idea was not a military idea. People didn't go to the Wailing Wall for military purposes. There were other provisos of that kind.

JK: How was the issue of law and order handled within the demilitarized zones and the governing or sovereignty of those zones handled?

Eytan: There was a demilitarized zone at a place called El Auja that was established between Israel and Egypt. There were demilitarized zones, or no-mans-lands, between Israel and Jordan in Jerusalem. There was a demilitarized zone under the agreement with Syria. In

the no-mans-lands because it was neither theirs nor ours it was not necessary to make any arrangements. In the demilitarized zone between Israel and Egypt I think that is where the United Nations planned to establish the Mixed Armistice Commission just because it was a neutral zone. In the agreement with Syria the civilian authority was going to be Israel because that demilitarized zone was almost wholly on the Israeli side of the border. There was a little piece on the Syrian side and I suppose the civilian authority there would have been Syria.

JK: Israel provided the police force?

Eytan: If there was one.

JK: During the armistice discussions was there talk about bringing in United Nations troops as was later done? Did they think that step wasn't necessary?

Eytan: I don't quite know what the answer to that question is. There were United Nations troops in the area at the time because the place which had been the High Commissioner's residence in Jerusalem, which was called Government House and had originally been handed over to the Red Cross, was transferred at some stage from the Red Cross to the United Nations. That was where the UNTSO, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, had its headquarters. Those people were in the country and in the area all along. They must have been appointed under some earlier provision. The chairman of each of the four Mixed

Armistice Commissions was a United Nations officer who was part of this UNTSO set up. I think the UNTSO nominally still exists because in Jerusalem I sometimes see cars with a UNTSO license plate.

JK: Their function at that time was as observers. Is that correct?

Eytan: Their function was always as observers. They don't take on the fighting.

JK: In summary I wanted to ask you if you have any thoughts on some of the lessons either good or bad that could be learned from the handling of the Palestine question during this period.

Eytan: I'm not sure that any lessons can be learned because the difference between then and now is simply this. All this was almost immediately after the establishment of the United Nations. The United Nations was set up in San Francisco in 1945. The UN was asked by the British to handle this whole Palestine question early in 1947. In other words maybe 16 months later. It was the very first thing that the UN was asked to handle. At that time everybody's intentions with regard to the UN were still pure or relatively pure. The prestige of the UN was really at its height. I remember hearing it said that to do such and such a thing meant defying the United Nations which people really didn't want to do. It was something that was politically rather counter productive. Today

nobody minds defying the United Nations. The United Nations at that time carried a lot more weight and moral authority than it has since and certainly than it has now.

A man like Ralph Bunche as a representative of the United Nations carried the moral weight in a way which is hardly the case today. Therefore, I think that at that time the UN was a better place to handle a problem of this kind than it is at the present time. It all depends on the use which was made and still could be made of the United Nations. Everything that Ralph Bunche achieved and that Ralph Bunche gained in the course of the armistice negotiations was diminished and to some extent totally lost by the UN Conciliation Commission on Palestine at Lausanne and afterwards. Why did it go about it in a silly way? For all kinds of reasons. Ralph Bunche was one single man, an employee or servant of the United Nations. He was responsible to nobody except to the Secretary-General. They then had this foolish idea of setting up this UN Conciliation Commission to be composed of the representatives of three countries: the US, France, and Turkey. It was left to the US, France, and Turkey each to name their own representatives. The representatives were not named by the UN the way in which Bunche was. The UN Conciliation Commission as a commission reported through its

secretary, who reported to the Secretary-General. Each one of the three members, the Turk, the Frenchman, and the American was also reporting to his own government and was getting reactions and instructions from his own government. So, this was a terribly weakened form of UN representation and didn't carry anything like the same prestige that Bunche had done because the thing was handled in a stupid way. It was handled in a way that right from the first moment it was bound to weaken the thing.

Supposing each of the three countries had named an absolutely outstanding man, someone who was intellectually the equivalent of Bunche it could have conceivably been different, not all together but, perhaps. The United States nominated a man called Mark Etheridge who was the editor of the "Louisville Courier Journal". What did he know about it? The French nominated Claude de Boisanger who was a foreign service officer and afterwards became the Director of the Comedie francaise. He was a nice man and a cultured man but not interested in this issue. The Turks nominated a man called Hussein Yalcin who was a journalist and who was 80 years old. I am practically 80 years old myself and I shouldn't say anything against 80 year old people but, he wasn't a very good 80 year old. So, these were the three people: Etheridge, de Boisanger, and Yalcin, operating in

the name of the United Nations. Each had been appointed by his own government. The effect of the United Nations depends on the way in which the thing is handled. I can imagine things like that being handled very well or handled very badly.

The man who last year handled the business of Namibia. He was an American African specialist (Crocker) who joined the State Department at the beginning of the Reagan regime and he devoted eight years single handedly to the Namibia question. He knew what he was doing. He was an expert on the subject. He didn't court publicity. He didn't make public statements. By eight years of negotiation with the Russians and the Americans, the South Africans (who were pretty difficult) and with the Angolans and the Cubans and with the Namibians, etc. in the end he hammered out an agreement which had eluded everybody else. That man was operating in the name of the United States but, if a man like that had been operating like that in the name of the United Nations he would have succeeded. If the operation had been in the hands of a body like the Conciliation Commission on Palestine, it would have failed. So, I don't think there is any definitive answer to your question. It depends.

Also, things are so appallingly politicized today. The United Nations, for these purposes anyway, should not be a political instrument but a diplomatic

instrument.

**JK:** Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

**Eytan:** Thank you.

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UNITED NATIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

I, Walter Eytan (Interviewee) hereby agree to participate in the United Nations Oral History Project, sponsored by the Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies, and consent to the recording by magnetic audio tape of (an) interview(s) with Sean Krasno (Interviewer) on June 20, 1990 (Date) at New York (City), N.Y. (State).

It is my understanding that a typed transcript will be made of such tape(s) and returned to me for any necessary corrections. I hereby agree that if for any reason I have not returned the transcript with my corrections to the Institution for Social and Policy Studies within three months of the time it was sent to me, the Project Staff may edit the transcript and make it available for research and other use as provided here below.

In the understanding that the tape(s) and transcript(s) will be preserved at the United Nations and made available for historical, scholarly and (as deemed appropriate by the United Nations) public information purposes, and that copies will be placed on deposit at Yale University for research and study, I hereby grant, assign, and transfer legal titles and all literary rights in the tape(s) and transcript(s) to the United Nations. However, it is agreed that neither the United Nations nor Yale University will publish or authorize publication of the transcript(s) or any part thereof during my lifetime without my written permission.

Walter Eytan

(Interviewee)

June 20<sup>th</sup> 1990

(Date)

Sean Krasno

(Interviewer)

June 20, 1990

(Date)

(For the Institution of Social and Policy Studies)

(Date)