



Dr. Giora (Georg) Josephthal, Nuremberg

(9.8.1912 in Nuremberg - 22.8.1962 in Lucerne; buried in Kibbutz Gal-Ed)



(photo: private)

Family background

Giora (originally Georg) Josephthal came from a liberal Jewish family which had lived in Central Franconia since, at least, the 17th century.

His grandfather was the lawyer Gustav Josephthal (1831 Ansbach - 1914 Nuremberg), chairman of the Nuremberg Jewish Congregation as well as chairman of the Nuremberg Bar Association.

His father Paul (1869 Nuremberg - 1943 Tel Aviv) was managing director of the *Metallwarenfabrik vorm. Max Dannhorn A.G.* (Metal Goods Factory, formerly Max Dannhorn Joint-Stock Company), Nuremberg, and occupied important positions in employer organisations. His personal interests were, nevertheless, directed towards social questions rather than the commercial sphere. In the First World War he had been severely wounded in France and several times decorated. His last rank was Major. His wife was Emma, née Schnebel (1875 Nuremberg - 1943 Tel Aviv). Giora was the youngest of their four sons.

Education

Giora Josephthal had a humanistic education at the *Altes Gymnasium* (Old Grammar School, today *Melanchthon-Gymnasium*), Nuremberg, where he matriculated in 1930. Although he was inclined towards medicine, he chose to study law with the intention of joining the family law firm, and frequented the universities of Heidelberg, Berlin and Munich. After the Nazis came to power he continued his studies and obtained his doctorate at Basle.

While studying law he found time to follow his close personal interests by attending extracurricular courses in sociology and economic history.

Social worker

Already as a student in Berlin and Munich, he had spent much time working voluntarily for the local Jewish communities and come to know the problems of their poorer sections. Previously he had only known his own middle class milieu.

When he had finished his studies he was asked by Bavaria's Jewish communities to give Jewish youths a new sense of direction. Most of them had been expelled by the Nazis from German schools and were without employment or purpose. He set up workshops and farmsteads whose final, though not publicly admitted, aim was the preparation of these young people for life in Palestine. At the beginning of 1936 he was appointed General Secretary of the He-Halutz (*Pioneers*) in Berlin so that his sphere of activity had been extended to cover the whole of Germany.

He also succeeded in establishing such professional training camps in other European countries and in persuading their governments to admit young German Jews.

Zionist

Already as a teenager at grammar school in the late 1920s he had become aware of the growing anti-Semitism around him and begun to doubt whether Jews had a future in Germany. He turned towards Zionism which was to become his life's work.

The Jews in Palestine which was then governed by Britain under a League of Nations mandate had, in contravention of British orders, set up their own self-defence organisation (*Haganah*) which was secretly buying arms in Europe.

Giora Josephthal discretely collected funds from Zionists in Germany in order to finance these purchases. One of the buyers was arrested by the Nazis who had in his possession a photograph showing him in the company of Giora Josephthal who was, thereupon, repeatedly arrested and interrogated without, however, revealing anything. That was around 1937.

Having been issued with a passport by a well-disposed county official in *Oberpfalz* (Upper Palatine) where he had established one of his training farms, Giora immediately emigrated to Palestine, together with his young wife Senta. They arrived in September 1938.

Only a few weeks later Germany's Jews were subjected to the pogrom of the 9th of November which became known as the *Kristallnacht*. Giora Josephthal joined a mission which was sent from Palestine to Western Europe in order to persuade the governments there to open their frontiers to young German Jews, even if only temporarily, with Palestine as possibly their final destination. He also organised an escape route from Rotterdam and Antwerp to Palestine, disregarding the immigration restrictions of the British authorities.

The ships were barely adequate for the high seas. The papers for the passengers were prepared by Giora Josephthal. In the spring of 1939 the French police arrested him in Paris in posses-

sion of a hundred passports, but released him upon the intercession of friends. Shortly afterwards, the outbreak of the Second World War made further sea traffic impossible, thus closing this route of escape.

A new beginning in Palestine

In October 1938, shortly after their arrival in the then British mandate of Palestine, Giora and Senta Josephthal joined a Kibbutz. Their home was a chicken hut which they shared with seven others. Giora formed the intention of becoming a baker. One year later the Second World War broke out and prevented the export of citrus fruit, thus depriving the Kibbutz of its sole source of income. Its members then earned their livelihood by building camps for the British army.

From January 1943 to September 1945 Giora Josephthal served as a volunteer in that army in Palestine and Egypt. He was promoted to Sergeant but soon demoted for failing to obey an order which, in his opinion, went against the interests of the Jews in Palestine.

The Kibbutz Gal-Ed

Giora and Senta had, for a long time, been planning to found a new Kibbutz with a predominantly German-Jewish membership. In March 1945 this plan became fact with the establishment of the Kibbutz Gal-Ed in a bleak, treeless expanse. This was followed by years of picking up stones and digging up rocks until the soil began to bloom. Eventually, it bore trees, grain, fruit and cattle and included a veterinary laboratory and a small factory of plastic products.

This Kibbutz became the Josephthals' home. Giora, on his return from military service, could only briefly take part in its work. After one month he was called away to take up a new task.

With the Jewish Agency

By the autumn of 1945 it had become clear that the British authorities in Palestine had made no preparations to receive the broken remnants of European Jewry. Giora Josephthal was therefore asked by the Jewish Agency (the administration of the World Zionist Organisation, with headquarters in Jerusalem) to open an absorption department which was to be responsible for the reception and settlement of the newcomers. He threw himself into this task and provided the immigrants with doctors, nurses, teachers, nursery schools, tents, blankets and milk.

He circumvented the immigration restrictions imposed by the British administration until they ceased to apply when the State of Israel was founded in 1948. When the ensuing Arab-Israel war led to the mass expulsion of Jews from North African countries, it fell to Giora Josephthal to receive and integrate them in Israel.

His method was not to let the newcomers spend their time idly in tents or tin shacks but to make sure that they earned their living productively in agriculture or new development towns.

In 1952 the Jewish Agency appointed him Treasurer while leaving him responsible for the management of the Absorption Department which he continued to regard as his main task. One of his first steps as Treasurer was the dismissal of 350 employees and their replacement with agricultural instructors.

Funds for Israel

The reception of immigrants from Europe and North Africa was costly. What was particularly lacking was money to build houses to replace the tent camps.

In 1950 Giora Josephthal made the first of several successful visits to the United States in order to persuade American Jews to support Israel financially.

In 1952 Israel sent a mission to The Hague in order to negotiate with delegates of the German Federal Republic about compensation for the cost of rehabilitating those survivors of the Nazi regime who had finally come to Israel. Josephthal was made joint leader of this mission. He accepted the task with a heavy heart but brought it to a successful conclusion.

Politician and Minister

In August 1956 Israel's social democratic Mapai party which had just experienced a considerable loss of the popular vote, chose him as its General Secretary with the specific task of overhauling the ponderous party machine. Although the post went against his nature and caused him great stress he fulfilled it out of a sense of duty until, in May 1959, he suffered a severe heart attack which required six months of rest.

In December 1959 he was elected to the Knesset and almost immediately appointed Minister of Labour in Ben-Gurion's cabinet. He could now, again, devote himself to tasks which were close to his heart though this time with a Minister's authority. He furthered the professional training of immigrants and young people, house-building, the development of new towns and social insurance and drafted a law in favour of handicapped employees.

This fulfilling period lasted little more than a year until Ben-Gurion's resignation in the early part of 1961. Upon Ben-Gurion's re-election later that year, Giora Josephthal was appointed Minister of Housing and Development. To his great disappointment, however, this new post did not include responsibility for social policy which had given him so much satisfaction in his previous job as Minister of Labour.

His death

The exertions of the election campaign and the stress of party politics which he found so distasteful led to two further heart attacks. His concerned elder brother invited him to his villa in Lucerne for a period of convalescence which he spent working on new plans for his Ministry. He died on the 22nd of August 1962, two weeks after his fiftieth birthday. His wife Senta was with him. The coffin was flown to Jerusalem where it was placed in the courtyard of the Jewish Agency for members of the public to take their leave. It was then taken to his Kibbutz Gal-Ed where he was buried.

His personality

Giora Josephthal combined idealism and practical good sense in a rare manner.

His big, heavy frame contrasted with the speed of his mind which enabled him to find the right word and reach the right decision in all the difficult and dangerous situations in which he found himself, again and again. He was without prejudice and always ready to challenge outmoded methods and ways of thinking and their representatives. He had great powers of decision and set himself high standards, even at the expense of his health. His lifestyle was plain and modest.

From his mother he had inherited an intuitive understanding of people and their problems. He also had an unusually good memory for faces.

With his optimism, his warm and open manner and melodious speaking voice he was the bright centre of any company.

His name lives on. Many streets and institutions in Israel are named after him, such as the Josephthal Hospital in Eilat and the Yad Giora School in Herzliya. The annual Josephthal Price is awarded to firms which are judged to take the best care of the health and safety of their workers.

Senta Josephthal

Giora was survived by his wife Senta (née Punfud, Fürth 5.12.1912 - Kibbutz Gal-Ed 26.7.2007) whom he had married when they both were 24 years old. As a co-founder of the Kibbutz Gal-Ed, leading member of the Histadrut (Israel's federation of trade unions) and member of the Knesset she had played an important part in Israel's early years.

She contributed a biographical sketch to the book *The Responsible Attitude. The Life and Opinions of Giora Josephthal*, edited by Ben Halpern and Shalom Wurm, New York 1966. The writer of the present biography has used this sketch as a source.



Senta and Giora Josephthal in 1961
(photo: private)

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