

Clement Attlee, Story of Nobility

by Michael Curtis



The evil that men do lives after them, the good is often interred with their bones. So let it be with Clement Attlee, Lord Attlee. On November 19, 2018 a remarkable story, unknown until today, was revealed about him, leader of the Labour Party, 1935-55, member of Winston Churchill's War Cabinet, May 1940-45, deputy PM in 1942, and prime minister 1945-51. The story reveals that in 1939 Attlee, then 56 and leader of the political Opposition, sponsored a German Jewish mother from Würzburg, and her two children who wanted to leave Nazi Germany, and invited one of them, Paul Willer, aged ten, to live in his house in Stanmore, Northwest London, arriving on Easter Sunday and staying for four months.

On November 10, 2018 the Metropolitan Police Service of Greater London, Scotland Yard, opened a criminal investigation into alleged antisemitic hate crimes by members of the British Labour Party, LP. It had received a dossier of more than 80 pages of alleged antisemitic statements, including Holocaust denial, by members of the Party. One, typical, of them said,

“We shall (get) rid of the Jews who are cancer on us all.”

The hostile climate in the present LP towards Jews and Israel has long been evident. Luciana Berger, Jewish M.P. for Liverpool received hundreds of hate messages from members of the LP and Far-Right groups. She stated that antisemitism is very real and alive in the LP. She had in September 2018 to be given special police protection from antisemites at the LP conference. Other LP M.P.s, including the pro-Israeli activist John Mann, Bassetlaw, Yorkshire MP, have been harrassed.

It is saddening to list a few typical egregious statements. Jackie Walker, vice chair of leftist Momentum, claimed Jews were the chief financiers of the slave trade. Alan Bull on Facebook told us that JFK was assassinated by Israeli intelligence. Ken Livingstone knew Adolf Hitler was a Zionist. The problem goes to the top of the party, to the leadership.

Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn has been accused of antisemitism, and revelations of his past activities, speaking of Hamas and Hezbollah as “friends,” and taking part in a commemoration ceremony for Black September murderers of 11 Israeli athletes at the assassination on September 5, 1972 at the Munich Olympic games, suggest this is credible. Corbyn associated with awowed antisemites such as Raed Salah, leader of the Islamic Movement in Israel, and Paul Eisen, Holocaust denier and defender of David Irving, and was tolerant of their utterances.

Corbyn did state he wanted to “drive antisemitism out of the party,” but in the same speech, he mourned the “killing of many unnamed Palestinian protestors in Gaza.” He supported an artist who had painted a mural in London’s East End that depicted Jews playing monopoly on the backs of naked people. Corbyn also, through either ignorance or malice, signed a most unfortunately worded statement of 70 Labour MPs that the LP’s

proposed end to the Israel-Palestinian conflict was a "Final Solution."

The Labour Party, and its leader, was not always like this. Harold Wilson as prime minister fired actor-politician Andrew Faulds in 1973 as Labour spokesperson for the arts because he accused pro-Israeli Labour MPs of dual loyalties. Attlee was non-politically personal. Paul Willer had a Nazi father who left the family in 1933, and a Jewish mother, a doctor, who was troubled by Kristallnacht of November 9, 1939, and decided to escape Germany first to the Netherlands and then to UK. The family could not qualify for Kindertransport because the two children were "half-Aryan" but a solution was found. The arrangement with Attlee was made through Paul's uncle who was living in London, and the local rector of Stanmore, in whose church Attlee was a regular attendant.

In interviews in November 2018, the now 90 year old Willer, who became a sales manager of a textile company in Hertfordshire, spoke affectionately of his treatment by Attlee, in a large house and garden, a menage which involved a maid, a cook, suburban life style, and cold baths every morning. Since Willer spoke no English, conversation was in Latin which Attlee's daughter, Felicia, understood. Willer spoke of Attlee as a gentle person, a gentleman, happy and relaxed, playing games with his family of children. He could not be kinder.

All commentators on Attlee's life and career agree he was a modest man with a quiet unassuming manner. It may have been politically uncharacteristic, but Attlee never mentioned or spoke publicly about the incident, never sought to to make political gain or glorify himself in any way as a result of his benevolence. His action was unusual and estimable in one sense, he was never a Zionist nor particularly friendly or sympathetic to Jewish causes in Britain. It was President Harry Truman in a letter of August 31 ,1945 who pressed Attlee, then PM, to grant 100,000 certificates for displaced

Jews who had known the horrors of concentration camps to immigrate from war torn Europe to Palestine.

But then his life was full of surprises. Attlee came from an upper middle class background, father was a solicitor, and he became a socialist through his experience working in the poor area of East London, where he became mayor of Stepney in 1919 and tackled the problem of slum landlords.

Britain has had its share of charismatic and flamboyant political leaders, above all Winston Churchill, but Clement Attlee was not one of all. In a moving tribute in the House of Lords on January 25, 1965, the day after Churchill's death, Attlee parenthetically indicated differences between the two men. He called Churchill "the greatest Englishman of our time, I think the greatest citizen of the world of our time. No one could ever disregard him, a man of genius, a man of action, a man who could could also speak and write superbly."

Attlee lacked the flamboyant personality of Winston, but he did have an honorable and distinguished career, wounded in World War I at Gallipoli and Mesopotamia, becoming a Major, and then a lawyer and entered public life where he was more prone to work behind the scene and in committees rather than in the public spotlight. In World War II he was deputy minister to Churchill. Attlee had led the Labour party for twenty years. In the first post war parliamentary election in 1945 he led his party to a surprisingly victory, winning 393 seats in House of Commons to Churchill's 213, out of a total of 627. In office, Attlee resembled a largely unknown prime minister, Lord Liverpool, PM, 1812-27, reticent, lacking charisma, a dignified but poor public speaker, but a competent and efficient manager. He presided over a diverse cabinet including strong, confrontational war horses, Ernest Bevin and Aneurin Bevan. His term of office brought many nationalizations, coal, electricity, gas, iron and steel, and he presided over the partition of India, and the end of the Palestinian and Jordanian mandates.

Attlee was as Margaret Thatcher said, all substance and no show. From time to time Churchill made uncomplimentary gibes about political opponent Attlee which he later regretted, but his most cutting remark hit the spot, at least in part. Attlee was, he said "a modest man with much to be modest about." Whatever the differing views of his political career and personality, Clement Attlee can be commended for his generosity toward a ten year old Jewish refugee, and for his modesty in not revealing it.