

French Jewry and Agricultural Settlement in Palestine before WWI

I would like to open this lecture with an attempt to define its topic in a precise manner. What I am going to speak about is French Jewish involvement in Palestine during the Ottoman period: involvement that originated with the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle beginning in the late 1860s, was continued by Edmond de Rothschild from 1882 on, and then by the Jewish Colonization Association from 1896. The purpose of this lecture is to show that there is a clear continuity among these three phases of French Jewish involvement in Palestine and that they should not be regarded as separate phenomena. It should be pointed out at this stage that although the AIU and the JCA were international organizations, their involvement in Palestine was, almost exclusively, initiated and supported by the French members of their governing bodies. It is for this reason that I consider it possible to regard the work of these organizations in Palestine as originating with French Jewry.

The question of Palestine Jewry occupied the Central Committee of the AIU from its very inception in 1860. The leaders of French Jewry considered improving the miserable lot of their Palestinian co-religionists as their moral duty. Palestinian Jewry was regarded as a relic of the glorious Jewish past and, as such, worthy of preservation and of the support of well-to-do West-European Jewry. Furthermore, it was considered as shameful that Christian visitors to Palestine should see the misery of its Jewish community, a phenomenon that could easily encourage antisemitism. The way to improve the condition of Palestine Jewry was also considered to be obvious: it was only by becoming productive, by moving from total dependence on charity from Jews overseas, to a life of labor and self-support, that the Jews of Palestine could extricate themselves from their plight. Here was, again, one of the points that gave French Jewish leaders a sense of guilt: the easy money coming from them, as well as from other Jewish communities, was to be blamed, to a large extent, for the misery in Palestine. It was the fear of losing this source of income, unsatisfying as it was for an average Jew in Palestine, that made people unwilling to try any productive way of earning their living. To break this vicious circle one must create suitable opportunities and encourage the Jewish population to follow the path of productiveness.

These were the thoughts prevailing in Paris in the early and mid-1860s, but no practical solutions were proposed. This changed in 1868 when Charles Netter, one of the founders of the AIU and a member of its Central Committee suggested that he could visit Palestine and inquire into the condition of Palestinian Jewry while on his business trip to Persia. His offer accepted, Netter spent two weeks in Palestine and upon his return to Paris submitted his report to the Central Committee. According to Netter the plight of Palestinian Jewry could only be improved by productiveness and this was possible only in agriculture, as industry and commerce were almost nonexistent in Palestine. There was little new in this approach. It was characteristic of many "Lovers of Zion" since at least the 1830s but then came Netter's unique contribution. It was pointless, as Montefiore had done in his orchard near Jaffa, to try to settle adults on the land and expect them to become farmers. Farmers must be trained and prepared from early youth and to this end it was imperative to establish an agricultural school in Palestine. Even at this early stage, Netter regarded the school as much more than just an educational institution. He saw it as the first stage of a prolonged project of Jewish agricultural settlement: successful graduates of the school would be helped by the AIU to obtain land and settle on it and thus a first generation of skilled Jewish farmers in Palestine would be established. These farmers would then employ Jewish workers on their land and teach their children how to till the land, and thus little by little, a class of Jewish

farmers would develop in Palestine. In other words, what Netter envisaged was a very slow, organic process of the creation of Jewish farmers, as contrasted with the previously unsuccessful attempts to turn grown-up men into farmers.

During this process there would be no room for philanthropy: the school itself would generate income by selling agricultural products and its graduates would be given land and equipment not as a gift but as a loan to be paid back with interest. This, of course, needs no explanation, for we saw that it was philanthropy that was blamed for the unfortunate situation of Palestinian Jewry in the first place. And the final goal, in Netter's eyes, was much more than establishing a class of Jewish farmers: in his report of 1868 he spoke about preparing a haven for future refugees from Russia. A few years later he was much more explicit. When charges were raised against him that the name he gave the school - Mikveh Israel - was unsuitable, he responded by explaining that the word Mikveh means hope. And the specific hope is that the establishment of the school would one day result in a "reunion in the land of our ancestors".

Netter's ideas concerning the desirable agricultural products to be grown in Mikveh Israel are worthy of closer study. Netter considered that it would be pointless to compete with the local Arab farmers. Their labor would always be much cheaper than that of the Jews and consequently products from Jewish farms would be more expensive and hard to market. This ruled out grande culture and citrus growing. Jewish agriculture should therefore concentrate on "sophisticated" agricultural products like artichokes and asparagus for which there would be a good market throughout the Middle East. Netter, who spent much of his life traveling on business, must have been served these vegetables quite often on ships, for he believed the shipping agencies operating in the Middle East to be a possible market for Mikveh Israel products.

However, by 1882, when because of Netter's death and external developments which will be described shortly the direct involvement of the AIU in agricultural settlement in Palestine came to an end, not much of Netter's original goals had been achieved in Mikveh Israel. The main obstacle was that Palestinian Jews, for reasons we have already mentioned, were reluctant to send their children to an agricultural school. With the image of a very hard working but poorly rewarded Palestinian Arab fellah in their minds, Palestinian Jews considered agriculture as a totally unbecoming profession for their children. Those who were ready to send their sons to Mikveh wanted them to learn useful crafts like smithery or carpentry and not agriculture, so Netter had to compromise to get at least some students to enroll in his school. Other pupils came from poor Jewish families from other Middle Eastern countries, their parents attracted more by the free board and clothing at Mikveh than by its curriculum. Their schooling completed, these children returned to their countries of origin thus leaving Netter's dream of creating Jewish farmers in Palestine unfulfilled. Another drawback that should be mentioned was the lack of funds. The intention had been that money for Mikveh Israel would be donated by the AIU members. But this had never become a really popular campaign. The lists of donors which were duly published in the AIU Bulletin clearly indicate, that it was only thanks to a handful of wealthy donors, including Netter himself, that funds were available at all to run the school.

In 1881-1882 anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia led to a wave of immigration to Palestine. Adult single men and families came to Palestine not merely to reside there but to live a productive life, preferably by cultivating the land. For the first time an ethos of agriculture as a reaction to life in the Diaspora and as the best way to promote Jewish nationalism became a conviction of the would-be settlers themselves and not only of their leaders in the

Diaspora. The new immigrants, organized in the very loose framework of the Hibbath Tsion (Love of Zion) movement, came with some savings to buy land and establish agricultural colonies. Nothing could have been more harmful to Netter's plan for the slow organic development of Jewish farmers in Palestine than this immigration of Russian Jews in considerable numbers. It is against this background that one should consider his famous letter to the London Jewish Chronicle in March 1882 in which he tried to discourage Russian Jews from coming to Palestine. Netter was severely criticized by people from the Lovers of Zion circles who accused him of betraying their cause. They did not understand that, unlike them, he had much to lose by the 1882 wave of immigration. Here we have the beginning of a conflict between the French approach to agricultural development in Palestine and the East European one. The Lovers of Zion from Eastern Europe had no time to spare. They could not wait for generations to pass. They had to have an immediate solution. Netter, their former champion, became, to quote Peretz Smolenskin in his journal Hashahar, a sinner, whose sin "shall be remembered for ever and ever".

But another development might have comforted Netter in the late summer of 1882. Edmond de Rothschild, a son of the famous family of bankers, decided to extend his help to those Russian Jews that were already in Palestine. Rothschild chose Netter as his adviser and together they contemplated a scheme for training some of the most able immigrants in Mikveh Israel and then helping them to establish a colony. For Netter this was a long cry from his original plans but still much better than any other possible option for Russian Jews who had already moved to Palestine. Unfortunately his untimely death in 1882 put an end to this scheme. But in the meantime another one was proposed to Rothschild: settling in Palestine Russian Jews with experience in agriculture. These were not difficult to find as the Russian government, since the 1830s, had encouraged Jews to settle on the land. A special envoy was indeed sent to Eastern Europe who brought back with him to Palestine a group of Jewish farmers from the small village of Pavlovo in Bielorussia who were settled, at Rothschild's expense, in Ekron (Mazkeret Batya). Although soon afterwards Rothschild became involved in settling Jews without previous training, this was, to quote his own words, something "completely different" and was most probably caused by pressure upon him from different quarters in Palestine. The basic idea, no doubt originating with Netter, was to settle Jews with some training and experience only. Rothschild's final goals were, like Netter's, far-reaching: "The aim is to create models of future settlements around which further groups of immigrants could subsequently settle". Almost echoing Netter's words about building a haven in Palestine for future immigrants from Russia, Rothschild, according to one of his assistants, was in constant fear of future outbreaks of anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia and considered it "of great importance to establish some footholds in Palestine".

On one major point Rothschild differed from Netter's ideas - in what concerned the crops to be grown in the colonies. Without any knowledge of the Middle Eastern scene and generally unwilling to hear a word of advice from experts, Rothschild tried to introduce into Palestine the only crop with which he was familiar: wine grapes. Thus the colonies were completely dependent on foreign markets in which they could hardly compete because of lack of experience and the high costs of transporting wine from Palestine to Europe. If it hadn't been for Rothschild's subsidies, the settlers wouldn't have been able to survive from the economic point of view.

In 1891 another wealthy banker, Baron Moritz de Hirsch, became involved in Russian-Jewish affairs. Appalled by new measures against Russian Jewry, Hirsch decided to establish a new organization to assist them. Called the Jewish Colonization Association or

JCA, its aim was to facilitate the immigration of Russian Jews, not to Palestine, but to Argentina. The reasons for this were quite pragmatic: Hirsch considered Palestine to be too close to Russia to act as a possible haven for Russian Jews. Furthermore he didn't want to compete with Rothschild, whose work in Palestine was, by 1891, known to all. But very soon after Hirsch's death in April 1896, a new council of the JCA was elected in which some very well known French Jews set the tone. All of them were in some way connected to the AIU during Netter's days. It was thanks to Narcisse Leven and other French members of the council that, despite strong opposition by its German and British members, it was decided to involve the JCA in Palestine as well.

The ideas that were implemented in Palestine by the JCA in 1896-1899, however, were not new. They were formulated in the early 1890s by one of Netter's successors at Mikveh Israel, Joseph Niego. Moved by severe unemployment which plagued most of the new immigrants from Russia who arrived in Palestine at this time, Niego tried to find a way to help them in their misery without using Rothschild's methods, which by that time were becoming more and more philanthropic. The outcome of Niego's deliberations was an idea to establish a worker's farm where some of the new immigrants could be employed for a period of time. The best of them would from time to time be settled near-by on land bought specially for this purpose. The land and the most essential equipment would be issued to the settlers as a long term loan to be returned with interest. During the period of their employment at the farm, the would-be settlers would receive some basic training in agricultural work and the best of them would be selected by the farm's management. The farm would operate as similar private establishments of this kind, namely it would be expected to generate income.

Originally Niego thought that the farm should be established and maintained by the AIU, but in 1896, after he was nominated as JCA adviser in Palestine, he broached his idea with that organization. His plan approved in Paris, Niego was asked to purchase a suitable plot to establish the farm. What Niego did was a complete innovation as far as the history of Jewish settlement in Palestine is concerned. Instead of buying land in the coastal region of the country, as had been, almost exclusively, done till then, Niego acquired a large tract of land in Lower Galilee not far from Tiberias. This was more than a question of geography: unlike the coastal region, the soil in the Lower Galilee was suitable for sowing seed crops and thus it was possible to raise wheat and barley there. For Niego and the other JCA leaders this was a matter of the utmost importance. They considered growing grapes for wine, as practiced in the Rothschild colonies, as being inconsistent with their views on real agriculture. Real agriculture, of the type that would change the very character of the new settlers, could only be grande culture, which provided work all year round and thus kept settlers from becoming spoiled by periods of idleness. Furthermore, unlike wine grapes, wheat and barley could sustain a farmer's family and make him independent of market trends.

The farm was opened in 1900 in Sejera (today Ilania), a small village to the west of Tiberias. Although the JCA leadership expressed great hopes at the time of its establishment, by 1912, when the farm was sold, these hopes were hardly fulfilled. It seems that the main problem that plagued the farm was the JCA's expectancy of income which was regarded as proof that their approach was indeed a non-philanthropic one. When after 12 years of operation the farm did not generate income but, on the contrary, demanded additional financial means to support its very existence, the JCA heads in Paris were no longer willing to continue with the experiment. Another factor that should be mentioned is, of course, the fact that in 1900, when the farm was established, another very important

development influencing the JCA occurred: Rothschild transferred his Palestinian colonies to the JCA. Burdened with this new task, the JCA heads were less ready than before to continue with their experiment in Sejera.

I would like now to draw some conclusions from my lecture. It seems to me, first of all, that we can speak about much continuity among the three phases of French Jewish involvement in Palestine. This continuity is mainly expressed in the following aspects: Firstly, at least on the conceptual level, French Jewish involvement in Palestine - contrary to what is very often claimed by Zionist historiography - was hardly philanthropic. As we have seen, much thought had been invested by Netter, Rothschild and Niego to find ways to develop Jewish settlement in Palestine in a business-like manner, without turning to philanthropy. Netter and Niego clearly indicated that they rejected the philanthropic involvement of their predecessors (Montefiore in the case of Netter and Rothschild, in his second phase, as concerns Niego). Philanthropy was regarded, as mentioned above, as being the main reason for the miserable condition of Palestinian Jewry and thus the cure must, naturally, come from some other quarters. Netter, by the way, rejected philanthropy not only in relation to AIU activities in Palestine, but in general; when various Jewish communities requested that the AIU open schools in their cities, Netter's reaction was that this should be done only where there were Jews who were prepared to take upon themselves a considerable part of the expenses involved. Secondly, another common aspect in the French Jewish involvement was the idea that it is impossible to settle people on the land without previous training. Netter, who was the first to formulate this approach, at first held a more far-reaching opinion and thought that only those who were trained during their childhood had some chances of success. In 1882 he was ready to compromise and accept some adult Russian Jews for training in Mikveh Israel. Niego's concept of a workers' farm clearly flows from the same approach: first a period of training and then and only then settlement on the land. The period of training also had an additional important role: to enable the heads of the project to select the most suitable candidates for settlement.

These two points are, of course, closely connected: the initial phase of training was essential to avoid the philanthropic approach. It was Niego who formulated this aspect most candidly. He pointed out that in the Rothschild colonies land is distributed among the colonists from the very beginning without any selection or training of the candidates. As it is almost impossible to send away unsuccessful settlers who generally have large families and no other prospects of making a living, one has to heavily subsidize them. In this way a philanthropic regime, so characteristic of the Rothschild administration, comes into being. By training and selection of the would-be settlers, it is possible, according to Niego, to avoid this problem.

Thirdly, the ultimate goals of the French Jewish involvement in Palestine seem to disclose a high degree of continuity. It is evident that they are not restricted to solving the problems of the Jewish population in Palestine, be it the Old Yishuv in the Netter's days or the new immigrants from Eastern Europe in the later period. They are much more far-reaching and much closer to the ideas expressed by the Lovers of Zion and the Zionists than one would usually expect. The ultimate goals are based on an assumption that, because of rising antisemitism, the Jews of Russia would have to leave their country of origin in numbers that would increase with time. To absorb them in Palestine one has to prepare an agricultural infrastructure. Thus the immediate goal, making farmers out of Palestinian Jews, has another long-term objective: establishing footholds where future waves of immigrants will find employment and protection.

But on a more pragmatic level there were also points of difference in the French Jewish involvement. The main one was, of course, the question of which crops should be raised by Jewish farmers in Palestine. As we saw, the ideas changed from "sophisticated" vegetables in Netter's days, to grapevines in the Rothschild colonies and, finally, to grande culture in Sejera. It seems that it should not be difficult to see a clear line of development in these ideas. It moved from mostly foreign kinds of crops intended for marketing to indigenous ones that should, first of all, address the farmer's own needs. It moved from farming that retained much of the urban ways of life, like selling one's products to buy what one needs, to farming that was intended to support the farmer and make him independent of the market trends.

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