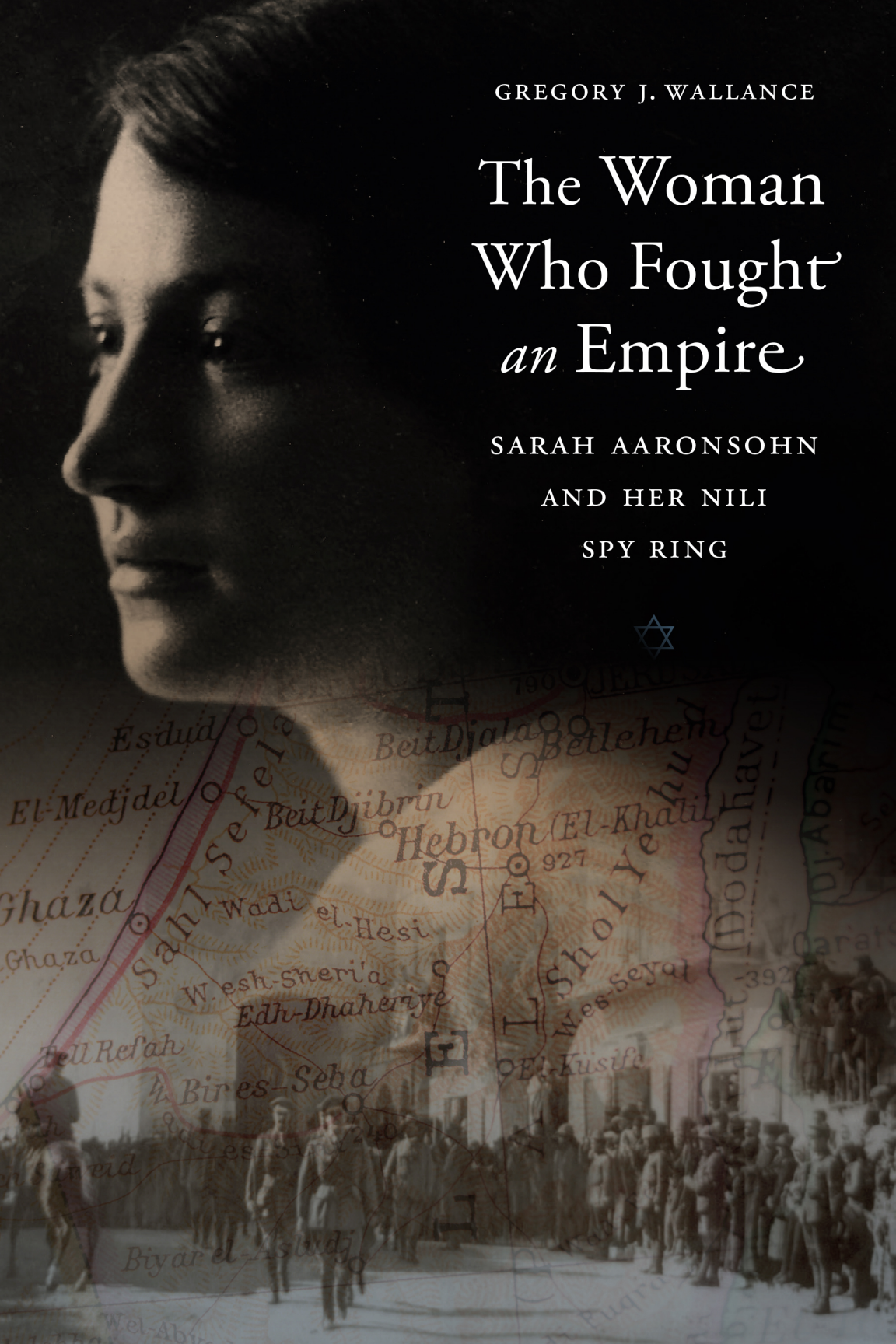
GREGORY J. WALLANCE
The Woman Who Fought an Empire
SARAH AARONSOHN AND HER NILI SPY RING
Esdud
El-Medjdel
Beit Djibrin
Hebron
(El-Khalil)
Ghaza
Wadi el-Hesi
Sholi Yehud
Wes-seyal
Edh-Dhaheriye
Tell Refah
Bir es-Seba
El-Kusifa
Biyar el-Asludj

The Woman Who Fought an Empire

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Sarah Aaronsohn and Her Nili Spy Ring

GREGORY J. WALLANCE

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Set in Adobe Garamond Pro by Mikala R Kolander.

In memory of my father, Don Wallance

Englishmen often talk about "playing the game," but even during the war few Britishers played it to a finer finish than this Jewish girl.

CAPT. L. B. WELDON of British Naval Intelligence,
"Hard Lying": Eastern Mediterranean, 1914–1919

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

I have adopted the usage of Middle East historians such as Eugene Rogan and Scott Anderson and frequently use "Ottoman" and "Turkish" interchangeably and Western spellings for cities, such as Beirut or Damascus. Even in English works, Jewish, Arab, and Turkish names can be spelled a variety of ways. For example, Sarah's settlement in Palestine has been spelled Zikron Ya'aqov, Zichron Ya'akov, Zichron Yaakov, and Zichron Yaacov. In general, I have attempted to use the version most commonly found in English-language works on the Middle East in World War I, but even then there is sometimes a close split, as with the case for Sarah's settlement. My somewhat arbitrary choice is Zichron Ya'akov. In some instances, where a letter's or memoir's usage conflicts with contemporary usage, such as Istanbul, I have used the city's name in the letter or memoir—in this instance, Constantinople.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Aaronsohn Family
Ephraim (father)
Malka (mother)
Aaron
Zvi
Samuel
Alexander
Sarah
Rivka

The Feinberg Family
Israel (father)
Fanya (mother)
Avshalom
Tzila
Shoshana

British Intelligence Officers in Egypt (1915 Rank)
Maj. Wyndham Deedes
Capt. Stewart Newcombe
Lt. Leonard Woolley
2nd Lt. Thomas E. Lawrence

Other British Figures
Gen. Sir Archibald Murray
Gen. Sir Edmund Allenby
Prime Minister David Lloyd George
First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill
Sir Mark Sykes

The Rulers of the Ottoman Empire
Djemal Pasha
Enver Pasha
Talaat Pasha

The Nili Spies (Partial List)
Eitan Belkind
Naaman Belkind
Liebl Bernstein
Menashe Brunstein
Tova Gelberg
Yitzhak Halperin
Yosef Lishansky
Dr. Moshe Neumann
Nissan Rotman
Liova Schneersohn
Reuven Schwartz

American Figures
Henry Morgenthau, U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire

The Woman Who Fought an Empire

Introduction

World War I, one of the greatest disasters in human history, transformed the role of women in espionage. In prior conflicts, women spies had generally been amateurs who operated informally and on a small scale. By giving rise to the modern, centralized, and well-funded intelligence organization, the war created opportunities for women to spy as part of or even to run major spy networks.

Ironically enough, despite the many courageous women who skillfully spied in that war, the best known today is Mata Hari, the nude dancer and courtesan who had no significant espionage achievements but still found herself in front of a French firing squad in 1917. Mata Hari came to define the image of the female spy in the public imagination as an erotic espionage agent, or as a femme fatale, whose principal talent is seduction. That false and unfair image persists today in popular culture and, having endured for a century, must be discarded.[1]

Sarah Aaronsohn is the curative for the damaging Mata Hari stereotype of women spies. She was the intelligent, beautiful, brave, willful sister of an equally willful, world-famous scientist, and the skilled leader of a mostly male spy ring at a time when women held an inferior status in society. Her cloak-and-dagger exploits played an important role in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the outcome of World War I.

Sarah was born in 1890 in Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire, to Jewish emigrants from Romania. When World War I began in 1914, Sarah was married to a Jewish businessman in Constantinople (now Istanbul), the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Wartime postal restrictions and censorship limited Sarah's ability to get news from her family in the Zichron Ya'akov settlement in Palestine, and she grew increasingly homesick. In late 1915 Sarah decided to return to Zichron for

an extended visit. By a coincidence of timing and geography, Sarah's three-week trip took her through the heart of the genocide the Turks conducted against the Armenians.

The nightmarish journey convinced the deeply shaken Sarah that unless the British defeated the Ottoman Empire, and a homeland for Jews was created in Palestine under British rule, the same fate would befall the Jews of Palestine. Little more than a year later and at age twenty-seven, Sarah became the leader of a pro-British spy network code-named Nili in the Ottoman Empire. The spy ring had originally been formed by her brother Aaron, a world-famous agronomist, and Avshalom Feinberg, a fearless young man from another settlement. But it was under Sarah's leadership that Nili provided the British crucial intelligence in their war against the Ottoman Empire for control of the Middle East. Sarah's loyalty, however, was decidedly not to Britain. "My only concern is with saving my Jewish brothers and sisters," Sarah told a British officer. "Had it not been for them, do you think I would be working for you?"[2]

Operating from behind enemy lines, Sarah recruited spies; conducted her own espionage in places like Jerusalem, Nazareth, and along the Mediterranean coast; managed the unruly Nili men, several of whom were in love with her; and delivered her intelligence reports to a British spy ship that made clandestine visits to Palestine from British-controlled Egypt. A British intelligence officer in Egypt later said that Nili was "the most valuable nucleus of our intelligence service in Palestine during the war."[3]

Sarah's inspiring story has led some of Nili's chroniclers to make Sarah seem as if she had stepped out of a painting of an Old Testament scene, as more of a brave and self-sacrificing saint than a flesh-and-blood woman. One purpose of *The Woman Who Fought an Empire* indeed is to celebrate Sarah's singular bravery and commitment, but another is to show that her dedication occasionally went beyond the pale and that she was not without emotional conflict, fear, self-doubt, dark moods, and her own needs.

Ultimately, Sarah's vision was realized when the British, with the assistance of her espionage, defeated the Ottomans. Palestine came under

British rule in what is called the British Mandate, the springboard to an independent Jewish state. Sarah's story and the events swirling around her are the story of the creation of Israel and the modern Middle East.

For years after World War I, Jews living under the British Mandate scorned Sarah and her spies as irresponsible and reckless. Even after the state of Israel was created in 1948, Israeli governments did not officially recognize the achievements of Sarah and her spies. That ended in 1967 as the result of a dramatic discovery in the desert.

As I learned during my research, there is more to Sarah's story than espionage. Her letters as well as the letters written by family members and fellow spies reveal daring and committed young people tied to one another by enviably deep bonds of devotion and loyalty; indeed, their commitment to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine appears inseparable from their commitment to one another. The dashing Avshalom Feinberg, who was also a poet, conceived the idea of young Palestinian Jews spying for the British. He once wrote to Sarah of those bonds.

"What connects us more than blood and fellowship is our love, is the habit of being together and the suffering we have shared. These are things that will not die."[4]

1

I Will Be Really Happy When I Am Home

In 1882 Ephraim and Malka Aaronsohn, and their young sons—Aaron, age six, and Zvi, age four—sailed from Romania on the steamer *Thetis*. They were among several hundred Jews on the *Thetis* escaping Romania's intensifying pogroms and vice-like restrictions on Jewish economic activity. Many Romanian Jews gambled their futures on America, but the Jews on the *Thetis* took a bigger gamble. Their destination was Palestine, a backwater region of the province of Syria in the Ottoman Empire, which included what is now Israel. Among Palestine's population were 450,000 Arabs and 25,000 mostly ultraorthodox Jews in Jerusalem and a few other towns. These side-locked Jews lived in Palestine, not in the spirit of Zionism but to study ancient Hebrew texts and die on holy soil.

The Jews on the *Thetis*, by contrast, dreamed of a "return" to Zion. The Lovers of Zion society in Romania sponsored the families on the *Thetis* in the belief that Jewish settlements in Palestine would foster in diaspora Jews "holy feelings which the sheer weight of pain, want, and poverty had put to sleep for thousands of years" and lead to a Jewish revival in Palestine. The *Thetis* Jews were in the vanguard that would pave the way.[1]

The *Thetis* sailed across the Black Sea, through the Bosporus and Dardanelles, into the Mediterranean, and down to the coast of Palestine. The authorities in Palestine initially would not let the *Thetis* dock because the Ottoman government in Constantinople, suspicious that Jews were agents for British imperialists with designs on the Levant, had issued an edict against Jewish immigration. The *Thetis* steamed up and down the Palestinian coast, looking for a hospitable port, while on board the sanitary conditions for the Jews went from merely distasteful

to perilously unhealthy. Port officials in Jaffa finally allowed the Jews to disembark.[2]

The Jaffa port officials had an ulterior motive for letting in the Jews. All of them were confined to Jaffa until they paid baksheesh, which was valued more highly by the local Ottoman bureaucrats with their red tarbushes than any pronouncements from Constantinople. The Ottoman bureaucratic bay for baksheesh was heard throughout the empire from minor bureaucracies in remote provinces to its very heart, the civil administrative offices in Constantinople in the block of government buildings called the Sublime Porte.[3]

The Jews, with the assistance of their local contacts, managed to come up with baksheesh, paid off the authorities, and were released after a week. Some sixty families went to Haifa in northern Palestine, where they stayed in a khan—a caravansary or rest stop—which in this case was a large courtyard with stone walls next to a stone house. They had no desire to remain any longer than necessary in Haifa with its many mosques and a few churches and where Jews lived within the Muslim district.[4]

A contingent of Romanian Jews headed south from Haifa, riding mules or sitting on ox-drawn wagons. They reached a narrow mountain path by nightfall, but the weary oxen declined to pull the wagons further. The men disassembled the wagons. Some hoisted the pieces and their belongings onto their shoulders and began to climb the mountain, while others lashed the liberated oxen up the steep path. Behind them came the women, carrying infants or holding the hands of the young children. The band of Jews and their animals climbed in the dark for several hours in a silence broken by the grunting of the oxen and the high-pitched howls and whines of jackals.[5]

Their destination was a hilltop perch on Mount Carmel near the coast of what is now northern Israel. The name "Mount Carmel" is a misnomer because there is no specific peak but rather a row of hills that once were the outcroppings of an ancient carbonate barrier reef. At the top of one hill, the Jewish settlers found Arab farm workers, or fellahin, living in decrepit mud-and-wattle huts. With their arrival, the desolate place, known as Zammarin to the Arabs, became one of the

first Jewish settlements in the initial modern wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine called the First Aliyah (1882–1903). The new settlers began building huts and clearing fields.[6]

Wealthy Jewish patrons in Romania had purchased the land for the immigrants from Haifa speculators, who plainly got the better end of the deal. The sweeping view of Arab olive groves and the tranquil, blue Mediterranean was splendid, but otherwise Zammarin proved to be an inhospitable home. The Romanian tradesmen, shopkeepers, and peddlers had planned to survive by farming even though few had any agricultural experience. Promised funds did not arrive; it might have seemed to the settlers that rocks flourished better in the fields than their wheat and barley did; and the settlers were beset with malaria, yellow fever, mosquitoes, black flies, snakes, scorpions, and acute homesickness. ("My heart grieves mightily when I remember how we wandered so far away from our family nest," one resident wrote to her sister-in-law in Russia.)[7] The oppressive summer heat and the khamsin—the suffocating, dust-laden desert wind—were especially hard on the settlers.

The sensible ones returned to Romania, and the remaining Jews pawned their Torah scrolls. They survived mainly because of the seemingly divine intervention of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, scion of the French branch of the powerful Rothschild banking family. The baron, who believed that Palestine was the future of the Jewish people and not just their past, gave the settlers desperately needed funds but with the biblical-like condition that "he alone shall be the colony's sole Lord and that all things in its domain be under his rule."[8]

Not having much choice, the settlers agreed to the baron's terms. They even renamed their settlement Zichron Ya'akov (in Jacob's Memory) after the baron's father. Every aspect of their lives was dictated by the baron and his agents, from what crops could be grown to the construction details of their residences. On his inspection visits to Zichron Ya'akov (he sailed to Palestine on his private yacht), the baron scolded a housewife for reading Shakespeare instead of the Bible, questioned the children in the schoolhouse on their grasp of arithmetic, and rebuked a mother for failing to cover a crib with mosquito netting. As he walked to the synagogue, villagers handed the baron petitions "as though he

were Caesar approaching the Forum." Any utterance of the baron's name was invariably followed by the phrase, "May God be merciful on him." When the baron departed after one visit, Bedouin horsemen, who had come to see "the Sultan of the Jews," saluted him by firing their rifles into the air.[9]

The modern-day Moses and his flock realized their dream. By 1914 the primitive hamlet had become a prosperous village of nearly a thousand inhabitants and almost a hundred buildings, including a hospital and a bank; it had running water; and it offered horse-drawn coach service to Haifa and Jaffa. The baron recruited the eminent physician Dr. Hillel Yaffe to run a clinic for treating malaria patients. Zichron even boasted vineyards and a winery with huge underground wine cellars, although the wine could not be sold in the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire and had to be exported. Eucalyptus trees imported from Australia provided shade where no trees had ever grown, and the dusty trails had been replaced by passable dirt roads bordered with thorny acacia that, in season, were laced with sweet-smelling yellow blossoms. One American visitor in that period, however, viewing Zichron through the prism of American prosperity, thought it had the look of a squat Russian village.[10]

Even so the settlers could be justly pleased with what they had accomplished, but any candid assessment of Zichron's progress had to acknowledge the baron's indispensable bounty and the economic advantage of an endless source of low-cost labor from the Arab village farther down the slopes of Mount Carmel. As Zichron grew, fewer and fewer Jews worked in the settlement's fields, which more resembled those of plantations whose workers were Arabs.

The baron's other settlements took root as well, such as Petah Tikva, Rishon LeZion, Rosh Pinah, Hadera, and others; they were all part of an archipelago of tiny Jewish islands gamely struggling in the Ottoman Empire. By 1914 the Jewish population of Palestine was approximately eighty thousand people, including a new Jewish settlement next to the port of Jaffa called Tel Aviv. The Jews of Zichron and the other settlements, collectively referred to as the *yishuv*, went about their lives as Ottoman subjects.

Aaron and Zvi Aaronsohn had been born in Romania. The rest of the Aaronsohn children were born in Palestine. Two more boys, Samuel and Alexander, were followed by the first girl, Sarah, in 1890. The last Aaronsohn child, Rivka, was born two years later.

The family's affectionate name for Sarah was Sarati, "my Sarah." Much of Sarah's youth was devoted to household chores, from washing the stone floors, to scrubbing the wooden dining table with sand and water, to endless sewing and mending of the family's clothes, such as her brother Zvi's shirts for his pending wedding. In *Mandrakes from the Holy Land*, novelist Aharon Megged imagines Sarah as a teenager, helping to prepare and serve a family dinner while wearing "a festive white dress and a large bow tie on her breast, her light hair gathered on her nape by a black ribbon."[11]

Sarah was educated at the village school, where she learned French, Hebrew, and Arabic, plus some history, religion, and agronomy. Paris was then the world center of literature, science, art, music, and fashion, and French culture radiated like bright sunlight even into remote Palestine. The franc was common currency in the Jewish settlements, even though the official currency of the Ottoman Empire was the lira, and Zichron Ya'akov, much to the pride of its inhabitants, became known as "Little Paris." The curriculum at Sarah's school was modeled on the programs of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded by a French statesman in 1860 to, among other purposes, promote the education of Jews in the Middle East. But formal schooling for girls ended at age twelve, and thereafter Sarah was self-taught, reading books in several languages. Sarah, who lacked any trace of the Romanian shtetls, saw herself not as a child of struggling settlers in a malarial backwater town but as a pioneering Jew and audacious redeemer of a long-lost dream. While Yiddish was the primary language of the Aaronsohn home, the family talked enthusiastically of the reintroduction of Hebrew as a spoken, everyday language in Palestine.[12]

When the first modern Hebrew dictionary appeared, Sarah and Rivka, then ages fourteen and twelve, wrote its author, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, to express their gratitude for the "first five books of your great dictionary, and to tell you that we cannot wait for you to publish the next ones." In their letter, the sisters pointed out that currently Hebrew is lim-

ited to "very general terms" and that "we do not have a name for each flower and plant, for each bird, for all the little insects that buzz in our ears when we walk in the fields." The sisters blamed the schools of the pioneer Jewish settlements, where children were not "educated to look and observe." If children were encouraged to collect plants, insects, and stones and to bring them to school, "then a name would be found for each one of these." Once they too had failed to pay attention to the objects around them, but their big brother Aaron had changed that. "Our brother never returns home from his journeys without bringing many plants, stones, pieces of metal, etc. He looks after them as though they were pearls, writes down on a little note the origin of each object and gives it a strange name. We can almost say that he hugs and kisses them. He really loves spending time with them. Little by little we are being infected with his 'craziness.'"

The sisters expressed their gratitude to Ben-Yehuda "for making our love for the language even stronger." Then, politely, almost apologetically, the sisters inquired, "Might we also dare draw your attention to some doubts and questions?" Sarah and Rivka proceeded to identify certain definitions they didn't understand or, implicitly, didn't agree with. Helpfully, they provided a list of questions for the great author to answer. Ben-Yehuda was so impressed that he published the sisters' letter in his newspaper, *Hashkafa*.[13]

Sarah matured into a striking young woman. Her blue eyes, oval face, erect posture, and full, sensuous figure would have found approval in the Belle Époque of Paris but not so in straightlaced Zichron Ya'akov. The slightly upward tilt of Sarah's head signaled her independent-mindedness, which was not an attitude Jewish women in the settlements typically displayed. The Jewish pioneer spirit in Palestine was not so bold as to grant women political and social equality with men. In 1886 when young women in the settlement of Petah Tikva demanded the right to vote at settlement meetings, even their own mothers opposed them.

Characters in the novels of Nehamah Pukhachewsky, a woman who came to Palestine in 1889 from Russia, reflect the bitterness of pioneer women at their inferior status. The character Zipporah Dori, a farmer's wife, attended a settlement assembly convened to address a vital issue.

But "they would not allow me to speak. Their reason was that I was only a guest at the meeting and not an official participant. Grievously offended, I wondered . . . cannot a poor wretched soul like me contribute anything?" She answered her own question: "A woman has no rights whatsoever. . . . A woman's place is in the kitchen, behind the stove and not among the chosen delegates of the people!"[14]

Jewish gender role expectations were lost on Sarah. She reportedly was among the first women in Palestine to decline to wear corsets, was an excellent shot and horsewoman, hunted with men from the village, and argued about politics and the future of Palestine with her brothers. Sarah often rode her fast mare into the countryside by herself, taking only a pistol for protection. "My mare was so swift, it was like flying," Sarah recalled years later for a visitor to the Aaronsohn home, with evident delight at the memory. "With my feet in the [stirrups] I'd stand erect and throw away my wide straw hat and then catch it sailing through the air." Sarah sewed her own dresses, which many Zichron women secretly admired, but she also occasionally wore men's agricultural clothes without concern for what anyone might think. Young men tended to fall in love with her.[15]

For all her independent-mindedness, Sarah's identity was knitted into that of her family. In small towns there is often a family that stands apart, perhaps because the children are striking in appearance, a member has a claim to distinction, the clan acts like royalty, or the family has a grand house. In the case of the Aaronsohn family, it may have been all of the above. The Aaronsohn children were unusually good-looking. At a young age Sarah's older brother Aaron gained worldwide recognition as an agronomist and became an influential figure in the Ottoman Empire. Sarah's mother, Malka—an otherwise practical, no-nonsense woman—raised her children to think of themselves as royalty. Malka's own mother had insisted that the family had descended from King David.[16]

By the early 1900s Ephraim and Malka had freed themselves from dependence on the baron and had become independent farmers. The family lived in Zichron's equivalent of a château, a rose-colored stucco house with a tile roof on an avenue lined with tall cypresses. The well-

furnished interior included a living room with comfortable sofas and armchairs and a Persian rug; a dining room with a table covered by an embroidered tablecloth and a tall dark wood cabinet filled with crystal wine glasses, decanters, and such; and a snug kitchen with a large pantry containing porcelain plates and serving dishes decorated with bright red and purple flowers or elegant gold trim.

Aaron Aaronsohn was the dominant figure in that family. In 1893 agents of Baron de Rothschild, in the manner of talent scouts, spotted Aaron's promise and sent the brilliant but often combative fifteen-year-old—"how are you ever going to do anything if you quarrel with everybody?" his father once asked him—to France to study agronomy. Two years later Aaron returned to Palestine as a trained young scientist known for hard work (he rarely slept more than four or five hours a night, rising before dawn to read scientific periodicals or do research). For a time Aaron worked as an agricultural instructor at Metula, one of the baron's settlements, and later went into business as an importer of agricultural equipment.[17]

But throughout Aaron pursued botanical research on horseback and on foot, carrying with him an 1870s-era map of Palestine, a compass, a magnifying glass, and a .577/.450 Martini-Henry rifle. He became known as the Jew who gathered "wild grasses of no value." In 1906 on one of his explorations, Aaron discovered in the crevice of a rock on Mount Hermon patches of hardy wild wheat that had been thought extinct since ancient times. It was a long-sought, untainted strain that might rejuvenate existing wheat stocks, weakened by centuries of crossbreeding, to produce greater resistance to rust and drought. In a largely agrarian world, Aaron's discovery earned him an international reputation at age thirty, although ultimately the wild wheat did not dramatically improve existing stocks.[18]

In 1909 David Fairchild, a research botanist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, invited Aaron to the United States to confer with American researchers on whether his discovery could improve wheat cultivation in the dry soils of the western plains. During his visit, Aaron asked Fairchild to introduce him "to some of the wealthy Jews in this country." Aaron met with, among others, Oscar Straus, the first Jewish

cabinet member, whose brothers co-owned Macy's department store; Julian Mack, a well-connected judge in Illinois who became a close friend; Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck & Company; Rabbi Judah L. Magnes of Temple Emanu-El in New York City; bankers Jacob Schiff and Paul M. Warburg; and Henrietta Szold, who later founded Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America.

Blue-eyed like Sarah, physically robust (reportedly, he could lift a horse off the ground and flip it on its side), deeply tanned, and filled with an inexhaustible warehouse of information to the point that he outtalked even the voluble Theodore Roosevelt during a subsequent trip to the United States, Aaron was a sensation among these American Jews. Legal scholar Felix Frankfurter, later a Supreme Court justice, once said of Aaron Aaronsohn, "I do not need the fingers of my two hands to include him among the most memorable persona I have encountered in my life." Frankfurter even began writing a biography of Aaron.[19]

Aaron explained to these distinguished Jews how agrarian technology could be used in Palestine to support a much larger Jewish population. His contention was not merely botanical but *political*, because it refuted the claims of both Jewish and non-Jewish anti-Zionists that Palestine was too arid to support a significant Jewish population. Impressed with Aaron's blend of science and Zionism, the American Jews donated $20,000 for Aaron to build an agricultural research station on a bluff overlooking the Mediterranean near Atlit, a tiny settlement about twelve miles north of Zichron. The research station's board of trustees was a roster of prominent American Jewry.[20]

The entrance road to the station could be accessed from the coastal road that ran between Haifa and Jaffa. A sign in English and Hebrew announced that the visitor was approaching the "Jewish Agricultural Experiment Station." The visitor turned off the coastal road and traveled down a road lined with stately Washingtonia palm trees planted by Aaron. The main building, about a mile from the Mediterranean, was a two-story cinder block structure with a laboratory and a research library; adjacent were storage buildings and an American midwestern-style windmill. Aaron's sisters, Sarah and Rivka, and their friends worked

at the research station. Aaron succeeded in producing more wheat, barley, and oats per acre than many flourishing farms in Palestine did even though he had deliberately chosen an arid site.[21]

Agronomy would appear an unlikely basis for espionage. But Aaron's passion for disciplined observation, one that he passed on to Sarah and the other workers, would prove an invaluable asset for intelligence gathering, and the Atlit research station would turn out to be a suitable headquarters for a spy ring, whose recruits would include many of the young Jews who had worked there for Aaron. But that lay in the future.

Aaron Aaronsohn's success enabled him to build his own home next to his parents' house, creating a graceful compound for the intellectual and landed aristocrats of the Aaronsohn family. The interior motif of Aaron's home was heavy dark wood paneling, furniture inlaid with mother of pearl, and books—shelves and shelves of books. The grand feature of Aaron's home was a rotunda-shaped library filled with scientific works in German, French, and English. In the bedroom was a double-poster bed with a bas relief of wild wheat carved into the footboard. The bathroom had its own boiler, which provided hot water through a thin pipe to a showerhead above the bathtub; a wardrobe cabinet with glass doors; and a wooden scale that allowed the heavyset Aaron to keep track of his weight.[22]

In early 1912 Sarah's mother, Malka, died. One account suggests that some form of euthanasia may have been involved and speculates that such a drastic measure might have been necessary because Malka suffered from depression after her father was tortured to death during a Romanian pogrom. Essentially, though, the circumstances of Malka's death, and its impact on her husband and children, are a mystery.[23]

Later that year Aaron provided funds for the twenty-two-year-old Sarah to travel to Europe and arranged for her to stay with his European friends. Sarah apparently had never been to a foreign country. After visiting Paris, she went to Hamburg, Germany, arriving on October 18. Like many young travelers, she fretted about spending and eating too much but seemed especially concerned about not hearing any news from her

brother, whom Sarah had expected would send her letters in care of her hosts and in advance of her arrival.

Sarah wrote Aaron the day after she arrived in Hamburg.

> My dear Aaron,
> As you can see, I am already here in Hamburg. I arrived yesterday morning. Mrs. Suskin came to pick me up at the railway station. The beautiful Hamburg welcomed me with a great weeping, darkness and pouring rain in the streets. I was hoping to find a letter from you here, but there wasn't one.
>
> It's been more than two weeks since you've written to me. Why? I suppose that you are very busy these days. You must have been at the trustees' yearly meeting. Let me know what was decided and if the Americans were happy with you.
>
> . . . My dear, I spent so much money in Paris, which is awful. I don't really know where it all went. At least I saw a lot; I bought what I needed, but not more than that.[24]

From Hamburg Sarah went to Berlin, arriving on November 7. Sarah wrote Aaron, wryly comparing Berlin to Zichron and again expressing concern over her spending.

> It's already my third day here. On the first day I was greeted by beautiful snow, though it wasn't cold. They say it wasn't much snow this time and indeed, after a few hours, it melted and the streets were full of sludge and mud like our own streets. I haven't had a chance to see anything since it has been raining and gray all the time. I have only gone shopping with Ms. Berman and spent only a little money for food and the most necessary domestic supplies. There are so many beautiful and useful things here if only there was enough money! My dear, I have already taken 800 marks from the Suskins. It's awful how much money my journey is costing.

Sarah appeared not to have been impressed by European worldliness and culture—or with the bourgeois Jews she had met in Berlin.

To tell you the truth, I will be really happy when I am home. Here I am at a Jewish pension with Ms. Berman and her family, there are many Russians, everywhere Russians, wherever you move, you find them. Ms. Berman's sisters are modern girls and, of course, look askance at people like us. They study in the [music] conservatoire, play music, are very much concerned with their appearances, but I find them rather ignorant. I am, of course, ignorant, too and yet, even to my surprise, my aspirations are different than those of other people. When I am surrounded by people who are inferior to me, I cannot stand it. I like to be among people who are superior, so that I can draw from their knowledge and hear interesting things.

Sarah offered an especially acerbic opinion of the Jewish women she had encountered during her recent stay in Hamburg.

My dear, I have to confess that the people I met in Hamburg were not exactly to my liking either, particularly the women, who are not very cultured and usually have a sweet tooth and thus are fat like cows.

She complained again about not receiving any letters from Aaron—or his assistant at the agricultural research station, Avshalom Feinberg—and about the fact that, while her health was fine, she was putting on weight.

It has been several weeks and I haven't heard any news from you, or your secretary; indeed, he can write to me, or is he already such a *groisser macher* [big shot]? Still, you should let us know in some way, about yourself. Rivka also writes that she does not have any news from you.

. . . I don't have any other news. I am healthy but it seems that I have gained too much weight. I am not happy about this. I will try to lose some weight at home.[25]

Sarah returned in late 1912 to Zichron, where she and her sister, Rivka, could dress up in the afternoons after they had finished their chores and