

Episode 26 - Lawrence of Arabia and Aaronsohn of Palestine

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 26, where we'll be discussing the accomplishments of the Romanian Jew Aaron Aaronsohn.

By-the-way, you just listened to "Canaan" (12 Spies), a song written and composed by the Israeli singer-songwriter and pianist Shlomi Shaban. A link to the full video is provided in the Notes.

As you may recall from one of our previous episodes, In late 1900s, the idea of agricultural colonization in Palestine spread quickly among the Romanian Jews and in 1875 a society called Jashub Eretz Israel (The Colonization of Eretz Israel) was founded in Moinesti. Similar societies were created in other Romanian cities and a turning point was reached with the Focsani conference of two days, 30 December 1881 and 1 January 1882. 56 delegates representing 32 localities took part in the conference held in the town's Jewish school. At the Focsani conference it was decided to encourage and coordinate all efforts towards organized emigration and successful colonization in Palestine. The conference had a great impact on the European Jews and many historians consider the Focsani conference the first Zionist congress, years before Theodore Herzl first Zionist congress in Basel in 1897.

One immediate result of the Focsani conference was the departure of the ship Thetis from Galatz in August, 1882, bearing 228 Jews from Bacau and Moinesti, the First Aliyah, who will be creating the first farming colonies, Zikhron Ya'akov and Roch Pina.

Among these 228 Jews were Aaron Aaronsohn, 6 years old, born in Bacău in 1876, and his parents, who were among the founders of Zikhron Ya'akov, near Haifa, one of the pioneer Jewish agricultural settlements of the First Aliyah. At Zikhron Ya'akov Aaron got two sisters, Sarah and Rivka, and a brother, Alexander. His father, Ephraim Fischel Aaronsohn became one of the YiShuv leading farmers.

The languages Aaron spoke at home were Yiddish and Hebrew, but he also learned English, Arabic, Turkish, French, German, Romanian and some Italian.

At the age of thirteen he was brought to Baron Edmond de Rothschild's attention and, four years later, he was sent to agricultural school in France for two successful years before returning home to become an agronomist in Metullah, a new settlement at the northernmost point of the country. Later, he left Metullah to establish an organization for agricultural technology. Together with a member of the German Templer community, he launched a business for importing and selling agricultural machines such as reapers, harrows and combine harvesters using modern marketing methods. Another company he established sold gasoline-operated pumps, a centrifuge for separating cream and making butter, and fertilizers. He also imported different varieties of seeds and vines.

He started mapping Palestine botanically and, in the process, became a leading expert on the subject. On his 1906 field trip to Mount Hermon, while trekking around the Upper Galilee in the area of Rashaya in what is now Lebanon, he discovered *Triticum dicoccoides*, wild emmer, whom he considered to be the "mother of wheat", a remarkable find for agronomists and historians of human civilization. Geneticists have proven that wild emmer is indeed, an ancestor of most domesticated wheat strands cultivated on a large scale today with the exception of

einkorn, a different ancient species, which is currently just a relict crop.

This discovery made Aaronsohn world-famous. He impressed many American Jews he met during his trip to United States, in particular the influential Henrietta Szold, Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall. Dr David Fairchild of the Department of Agriculture once wrote that 'when a short, light complexioned Jew walked into his office he soon discovered he was in the presence of an extraordinary man'. Aaronsohn's contacts in America enabled him to obtain funds to establish an experimental station in Palestine, which was set up in 1910 at Athlit a few miles south of Haifa at the foot of Mount Carmel. The station, the first in the Middle East, originally employed Arab laborers, Aaronsohn having been in favor of Jewish settlements using both Arab and Jewish labor. But this was a controversial view and he later changed his mind and opted for complete separation between Jews and Arabs.

Soon after the out-break of the first world war the country was menaced by a ravaging locust infestation such as had not visited Palestine for forty years. In 1915, March through October, the locusts stripped the country of almost all vegetation. Djemal Pasha, one of the three Pashas that ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I, drafted Aaronsohn as the one man who might avert the threatened calamity. Aaronsohn worked out a scientific campaign. He put thousands of Arab soldiers to work digging trenches into which the hatching locusts were driven and destroyed. The inhabitants of the progressive Jewish villages, men, women and children, worked until they dropped from exhaustion. The fight to rout the vast army of locusts was hopeless because of lack of petroleum and galvanized iron. Yet Aaronsohn succeeded in staving off the devouring scourge for two full months, proving himself a skilled organizer and exhibiting again a marked knowledge of entomological science.

Aaronsohn and the team fighting the locust invasion was given permission to move around the area known as Southern Syria, including modern day Israel, and to make detailed maps of the areas they surveyed. Aaronsohn also collected strategic information about Ottoman camps and troop deployment.

In 1918, Aaron was one of the experts consulted for the purpose of demarcating the northern boundary of Palestine, focusing on the need for irrigation water. He envisaged a boundary that would assure the inclusion of the sources of the Jordan, Litani and Yarmuk rivers. His approach became the official Zionist baseline presented to the Peace Conference in Paris in February 1919.

The Aaronsohns were all bitter at the way in which Jewish settlers were treated. Conditions in the country for Christians as well as Jews became hard after Germany started to dominate Turkey and much Jewish-owned property was seized. With the outbreak of hostilities in the region, the Aaronsohns saw opportunities for positive action against this Turkish rule. Joined by Avshalom Feinberg, formerly a poet in Paris and by then secretary of the Athlit station, they established an organization called the Gideonites that was committed to fight the Turks. The Gideonites decided to try to work with the British, whom they saw as pro-Zionist. They were opposed to the policies of Yishuv leaders like Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zvi who appeared happy to be part of the Ottoman Empire. The Gideonites were convinced that an Allied victory in the war was essential if the Yishuv was to make progress, and they began to work hard to convince the

Allies that they could be of special assistance in achieving an Allied victory by their ability to provide key information to the British military. The Athlit station eventually became the Gideonites center and Aaron its leader, who became known as jfasooz ('the Spy') by settlers who disagreed with his activities, built up an efficient intelligence network. Gideonites' operation supplied highly detailed information to the British that helped Allenby to victory at Megiddo in September 1918, his entry into Damascus in early October and the capture of Aleppo at the end of the month that forced Turkey to seek peace. The Aaronsohns, however, paid a bitter price with the tragic death of Sarah.

Feinberg, who was murdered by Bedouins in December 1916 while he was attempting to make contact with the British, can be credited with responsibility for the basic idea of the espionage ring. In January 1915 the Turks arrested him and accused him of having made contact with British Navy ships moored off Haifa Bay. He was, however, released for lack of evidence. He then presented Aaron with a plan for providing the British with anti-Turkish intelligence. As a result, Alexander Aaronsohn was sent to try to make contact with the British in Egypt. In disguise and using a false Spanish passport, he managed to board the American cruiser Des Moines and reached Egypt in late 1915, but the British were not interested in his proposals for local Palestinian help and were suspicious that he might be an enemy agent. Feinberg was then dispatched to Cairo to join Alexander. He impressed the officer in charge of intelligence at Port Said, Lieutenant Leonard Woolley, later the eminent archaeologist, and managed to convince the British that an efficient system for passing critical intelligence to them could be established.

At the same time, the British government had begun to be concerned about the situation in the Middle East and, as a result, accepted the Aaronsohns as suitable and reliable agents for British intelligence. The proposed organization was called NILI, an acronym of words from Samuel 15:29 —Netzah Yisra'el Lo Yeshaker, 'the strength of Israel will not lie'— chosen when the British officer with whom contact was established asked for a password. A Bible was opened at the page containing this verse.

In November 1915 the British agreed on an espionage operation centered on Athlit. Feinberg returned to Palestine to help initiate the operation but, despite their acceptance of the plan, it received little attention and support from the British. Alexander Aaronsohn then went to the United States where he became active as a lecturer and propagandist. Rivka joined her brother in the US to appeal for funds. Alexander eventually returned to Cairo in October 1917, became a captain of intelligence and was awarded the DSO. In the Second World War he served in the British Intelligence Service.

NILI regularly gave information to British intelligence via a network extending from Beersheba to Damascus. Once a month, when there was no moon, a naval sloop from Port Said would land near Athlit and Sarah Aaronsohn would pass over intelligence reports. Carrier pigeons were occasionally used.

Twenty-three active NILI members collected and transmitted intelligence data to the British, besides some twelve passive ones. In all, more than a hundred people worked on NILI's behalf, some serving in the Turkish army and some engaged on road construction and on water supplies. The NILI network handed over to Allenby's HQ data that included topographic and visual intelligence about ground and aerial activity, as well as information on the deployment and battle orders of enemy forces. Of even greater value were reports on joint Turkish and

German intentions, their expected reserves and their strengths. Even ciphers relating to links between Damascus, Turkey and Germany were obtained. Some information was extracted from German pilots who were treated medically by a physician who was a Nili spy.

Naaman Belkind, a member of Nili, was captured and provided the Turks with information that led to the settlement at Zichron Ya'akov being surrounded in October 1917. Many Nili members including Sarah were arrested. The Turks tried to get Sarah to disclose the names of her associates. Her father was beaten unconscious and she herself was tortured for four days before she took her own life by shooting herself in the mouth with a pistol, she had previously hidden. Naaman Belkind and Joseph Lishanski were hung in Damascus by the Ottomans. Nili was the most famous spy network operating in the Middle East during the first world war.

Lets' look now at two figures who were pivotal against the Turks in the Great War, one famous, and one generally unknown today. While very different individuals with very different goals, Thomas Edward Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia, " the Oxford-trained Arabic-speaking archaeologist

who became a self-taught guerrilla warfare innovator, and Aaron Aaronsohn, who immigrated to Palestine at age six, a self-educated agronomist and geologist who developed and financed an espionage network, both men shared in the strong desire of ending the Ottoman dominance of Palestine and Arabia. While the activities of T. E. Lawrence are well documented, those of Aaron Aaronsohn are virtually unknown outside of Israel.

As I said, Aaron came to the conclusion that the only hope for the Jews was a British victory. In October 1916, Aaron, in cooperation with MI5, arranged to be secretly transported to London, where he convinced the British of his knowledge of the local terrain and the logistics of the Turkish forces. He wanted to cooperate with them in the gathering of intelligence. A few months later, at the Savoy Hotel in Cairo, Aaronsohn met T. E. Lawrence. Aaron, with an ego certainly equal to Lawrence's, noted in his diary his impression that the young lieutenant was "very well informed on the Palestine question - but rather conceited."

For the next three years Lawrence and Aaronsohn were to cooperate and conflict with each other, one to advocate and lead the future of the Arabs, the other to lay the foundations for the Jewish State. Of course, both of them were in conflict with the plans of the Great powers which they supposedly served. Each of these strong-willed men had different views as to the future of Palestine. Even though he acknowledged the positive aspects of Jewish settlement in the area, Lawrence seemed to echo the general anti-Semitism of the British officer corps, warning against the extent of the Zionist goals advocated by Aaronsohn. Aaronsohn thought that Lawrence had experienced too much success at an early age, and that "he was infatuated with himself."

The conflict between Lawrence and Aaronsohn continued at the Paris Peace Conference. The sophisticated and charming Lawrence was impressive in presenting the need for the Arabs to control the region, while Aaronsohn, with his powerful American friends, such as Felix Frankfurter, Henry Morgenthau, and Justice Louis Brandeis, vainly struggled to define and organize the Zionist position. Paradoxically, there was a moment in which Feisal, with Lawrence's assistance, agreed that the Arab and Zionist movements "complete one another." How different history could have been had that understanding been made a reality.

In 1917, Chaim Weizmann sent Aaronsohn on a political campaign to the USA. While there, Aaronsohn learned that the Ottoman authorities had intercepted a Nili carrier pigeon, which led to the arrest and torture of his sister Sarah and other members of the underground.

After the war, Weizmann called on Aaronsohn to work on the Versailles Peace Conference. On 15 May 1919, under unclear circumstances, Aaronsohn was killed in an airplane crash over the English Channel while on his way to France. Aaronsohn died a bachelor and had no children. His research on Palestine and Transjordan flora, as well as part of his exploration diaries, were published posthumously.

After Aaronsohn's death, the director of British Military Intelligence confirmed that Allenby's victory would not have been possible without the information supplied by the Aaronsohn group. After his death, Allenby paid tribute to him. 'The death of Aaron Aaronsohn', he wrote, 'deprived me of a valued friend and of a staff officer impossible to replace. He was mainly responsible for the formation of my field Intelligence organization behind Turkish lines. . . His death is a loss to the British Empire and to Zionism but the work he has done can never die.' The British brigadier Walter Gribbon, who worked closely with him, said that Aaron was responsible for saving 30,000 British lives: 'The Jews must remember that no man has done more than Aaron to make the conquest of Palestine by the British possible.' To Ormsby-Gore the Aaronsohns 'were. . . the most valuable nucleus of our intelligence service in Palestine during the War.... Nothing we can do for them... will ever repay the work they have done and what they have suffered for us.'

Aaron Aaronsohn was clearly a man of unusual qualities, described on his death as a 'very practical dreamer of dreams' and one who had been a 'very pillar of support' for the Jewish cause. To Judge Brandeis, he was 'one of the most interesting, brilliant and remarkable men' he had ever met. He was said to be a picturesque figure and was clearly a man with charisma, highly respected by key British government figures. He was also a difficult man, which led him to make enemies in Zionist circles. His premature death at the age of forty-three partly explains the lack of recognition, and begs the question of what influence he would have had on subsequent Jewish and Zionist history had he not perished so young.

Anecdotally, it may be worth mentioning that Aaron Aaronsohn was the first car-owner in Palestine and one of the first to own a bicycle, which he brought back from France.

This concludes our episode on Aaron Aaronsohn.
Until next podcast episode, be well.