



Memoirs of a Grandmother - Pauline Wengeroff

Pauline Wengeroff was born in Bobrusky, White Russia, in 1833 and died in Minsk, in 1916. In her life all the major currents affecting Russian Jews were played out: from rabbinic orthodoxy to Hasidim, to *haskala*, to general education, Europeanization and complete secularization, until, finally, the great tragedy of her life - the apostasy of her children. Her own life faithfully reflected the centrifugal forces of modernity that whirled around her. That life she described in detail in her memoirs, from which an extract follows. These currents of political and religious liberalism and that pursuit of education and career on the part of middle- and upper- class Jews in this period brought about the collapse, among them, of the traditional Jewish society into which she had been born and the disintegration of the values that the society had cherished:

Born at the beginning of 1830's in Bobrusky and brought up by strictly observant parents, I was in a position to see the transformation which European education wrought on Jewish family life. I can see how easy it was for our parents to educate us and how hard it was for us, the second generation, to bring up our children. Though we became acquainted with German and Polish literature, we eagerly studied Pentateuch and Prophets, for they gave us pride in our religion and its traditions and bound us to our people. Biblical poetry stamped itself on the untouched childish mind and provided for the days to come chastity and purity, buoyancy and inspiration. But how hard for us was the great transition period in the sixties and seventies. We had achieved a degree of European education, but we knew of the wide gaps in our knowledge. We did our utmost so that our children would not lack what we had missed. But we overlooked the wisdom of observing moderation. So we have only ourselves to blame for the abyss between us and our children. We must now obey our children and submit completely to their will, just as once obedience to our parents was inviolable. As once with our parents, so now with our children, we must hold our tongues, and it is harder now than then. When our parents talked, we listened respectfully, as now we listen, in pride and joy, as our children talk about themselves and their ideals. Our submissiveness and admiration make them tyrannize us. This is the reverse side of the coin, the negative impact of European culture on the Jews of Russia. No group but the Jews so swiftly and irrevocably abandoned everything for West European culture, discarded its religion, and divested itself of its historical past and its traditions.

My parents were God-fearing, deeply pious, and respectable people. This was the prevalent type among the Jews then, whose aim in life was above all the love of God and of family. Most of the day was spent in the study of Talmud, and only appointed hours were set aside for business. Nevertheless, my father's business affairs often involved hundreds of thousands of rubles. Like my grandfather, my father was a contractor, an occupation which in the first half of the nineteenth century played a great economic role, enabling the Russian government to erect fortifications, build roads and canals, and thus supply the army.

A marriage was arranged between me and Hanan Wengeroff, and at eighteen, I became the bride of a man I loved deeply but knew not at all. Konotop, where my husband's



parents lived, was to be my new home. A small town of ten thousand inhabitants, it yet looked like a village. The inhabitants were mostly Christians; the few Jews were grain merchants and tavern keepers. My father-in-law, the richest man in town, held the government's wine and liquor concession. I remember the way the house was furnished - the large rooms, expensive furniture, beautiful silver, carriages and horse, servants, frequent guests. Most Konotop Jews, including the Wengeroffs were Hasidim. A daughter of mitnagdim, I saw and heard much that was new. I read a lot in Konotop, especially Russian. First I read the German books I had brought from home - Schiller, Zschokke, Kotzebue, Bulwer. Then I started on the Russian books which stood on the shelves of the Wengeroff library. I read Moskauer Nachrichten and taught my husband, eager to learn, German. But his chief study was Talmud. Every Monday and Thursday he spent the night with his rabbi, hunched over great tomes. Since our betrothal, my husband experienced mystical religious moods and devoted himself to the sacred mysteries of the Kabbala. Then, this fervent young man yearned to make a pilgrimage to Lubavich, the seat of the head of the Lithuanian Hasidim. The rabbi would surely have the complete answers to all disturbing questions and enigmas. Yet barely two years before, my husband had advocated modern ideas, which led to conflicts with his parents.

One morning, which was busy at household tasks, my husband came into the kitchen and told me, elatedly, excitedly, that his father had permitted him and his elder brother to go to Lubavich in the company of their rabbi. What happened there I do not know, for my husband never spoke of this tragic experience. All I know that this young man, hopeful and inspired, made a pilgrimage to the rabbi, hoping he would unveil the great mystery, but returned sober. He continued his religious observances and studied with the rabbi, but the magic and ecstasy had gone. Thereafter, little by little, he began to neglect his religious observances. Then he decided to cut his beard. We had our first quarrel. I begged him not to yield to vanity and let his beard grow. He would not hear of it. He reminded me that he was the man of the house and demanded my obedience and submission.

Four years later we left Konotop and the patriarchal way of life we had led. My husband had obtained the liquor concession in Lubny, where we were to start our own independent life. No, without having to worry about his parents, my husband organized his life as he desired. Daily prayers in prayer shawl and phylacteries ceased, though he continued to study the Talmud. He used to discuss it at length with the town rabbi, who was our frequent guest, but this interest was just scholarly.

In 1859, my husband's father, grandfather, and another partner obtained the leasehold on liquor for the province of Kovno. My husband was put at the head of the office. We liquidated our business in Lubny, packed our possessions, and moved. But before I go on about myself, I want to say something about 1855, which marked a new era in Russia, especially for Jews. It was the year Alexander, the Second, ascended the throne. He liberated sixty million peasants from bondage and the Jews from their chains. He opened the gates of his main cities into which swarms of Jewish youth thronged to quench their thirst for European education in the universities. In this brilliant period of intellectual flowering, the Jews took part in the ferment in the whole country, the rise of the fine arts,



the development of the sciences. The effects of the reforms in the forties were apparent now: a succession of Jewish professors, doctors, engineers, writers, musicians, and sculptors had won recognition abroad and brought fame to their country. This made it possible also for the Jews to attain an unexpected influence in commerce and industry. Never before or after did the Jews in St. Petersburg live in such wealth and distinction as then, when a good part of the financial affairs of the capital cities were in their hands. Jewish banking houses were founded. Corporations headed by Jews were organized. The stock exchange and the banks grew to immense proportions.

My wise mother once said: "Two things I know for certain. I and my generation will surely live and die as Jews. Our grandchildren will surely live and die not as Jews. But what our children will be I cannot foresee." The first two parts of this prophecy came true. The third is now coming true, for our generation is some kind of hybrid. Other peoples and other nations have drawn from modern, alien currents and ideals only what is congenial to their own character and thus have preserved their own individuality and uniqueness. But the course that befell the Jews was that they could not acquire the new, the alien, without renouncing the old and repudiating their unique individuality, and their most precious possessions. How chaotically these modern ideals whirled through minds of young Russian Jews! Traditional daily ideals disappeared, but new ones did not arise in their stead. These young Jewish men had no sense of moderation no did they want it. In this transitional period, the woman, the mother, was cruelly brushed aside, for clinging to tradition; she wanted to impart to her children the ethics of Judaism, the traditions of its faith, the sanctity of the Sabbath and the Holy Days, Hebrew, Bible study. She wanted to transmit this great treasure along with the enlightenment, with the new currents of West European culture. But the husbands had the same answer to all pleas: "The children need no religion." In their inexperience, they wanted to take the dangerous leap from the lowest level of education to the highest, without any intermediate step. They demanded not only assent from their wives, but also submission. They preached freedom, equality, fraternity in public, but at home they were despots.

Kovno was a pretty, provincial town when we settled there. Near the Prussian border, it was natural that a German style of life influenced the whole town. Though the Jewish tradition remained intact in the small Lithuanian towns, in Kovno the enlightenment was in full swing. In progressive Jewish homes, mostly among wealthy families whose fathers and sons were engaged in commerce with Germany and who frequently traveled across the boarder, the deviation from Jewish tradition was great. About the only thing that remained unchanged was the kosher kitchen. The Sabbath was no longer kept holy, nor did it disturb the passion for business. The wife, clinging tenaciously to the traditions, used to light the Sabbath candles, but her enlightened husband lit his cigarette. He invited his friends for cards. The Kiddush cup filled with wine stood on the table, but no one touched it; it had become a symbol. Only the peppered stuffed fish remained. Apostasy did not go far as to banish that from the Friday evening meal. Instead of Sabbath songs, there were jokes and anecdotes.

A few years later we moved to St. Petersburg. I was going toward a future which would, in transforming the past, surpass all my expectations. The society we became part of



consisted of distinguished and cultivated people, most of whom lived a carefree existence in wealth and luxury. The St. Petersburg Jewish community had a magnificent synagogue and even two rabbis - one modern and seminary trained, the other Orthodox. But the Jewish community had abandoned many Jewish customs and traditions. The more fashionable even celebrated Christmas. Only Yom Kippur and Passover were observed, but in an up-to-date way. Some Jews drove to the synagogue in their carriages and ate in the intervals between the Yom Kippur service. It remained a festival of remembrance, joyful because it recalled not the Exodus from Egypt, but one's own childhood in the *shtetl*. The *seder* was observed, in a highly abbreviated form. Even baptized Jews kept the *seder*. Though they did not themselves make the holiday feast, they welcomed invitations from their not yet baptized friends. These were the customs of the upper stratum of Jewish Petersburg. To live in this milieu and remain impervious to it required a strong character and religious fidelity which my husband lacked. Yet here in Petersburg, I often witnessed the strong feeling of solidarity among these Jews who had given up traditional Judaism. Jews in trouble with the authorities anywhere in Russia used to turn to the Petersburg Jewish community for help. Petersburg Jews spared neither money nor time. They appealed to the highest authorities on behalf of the oppressed Jews. Their concern was natural and understandable. The Jewish solidarity became proverbial all over the world. Even the baptized Jews were not immune to it.

In our family, the struggle to keep the Jewish tradition went on in much the same way as in so many other families. First my husband requested, and then demanded, that his wishes be fulfilled. It was not enough for him to have complete freedom over all matters outside our home: I had to "reform" my home and myself. It began with small things, intimate things, dear to me. As soon as we settled in Petersburg I had to discard the *peruke* which pious Jewish women wore. It was here in Petersburg, after a violent struggle, that I ceased to keep a kosher kitchen. Little by little, I had to drive each cherished custom from our home. "Drive" is not the right word, for I accompanied each to the door with tears and sobs. I loved my husband intensely and as faithfully as in the first days of our marriage, yet I could not submit without resistance. I wanted to preserve this cherished tradition for myself and my children, and I fought a battle of life and death.

In Petersburg, a thousand different experiences always seemed to converge on the only problem of Judaism. What a time of heartbreak when my son attended the gymnasium! Simon was a fourth grade student. The students were taken to the chapel for religious services. All but Simon knelt before the icons. When the teacher ordered him to kneel, he refused: "I am a Jew. My religion forbids me to kneel to an image." After the service, the enraged teacher told Simon he was expelled. I went to the school superintendent, imploring and weeping. I wanted to tell him my son had not willfully been disobedient; he wanted only to remain loyal to his own upbringing and religion. I could not speak; my throat was tight and the tears flowed. I foresaw that my son's whole life would be destroyed. The school superintendent reflected. The boy was dismissed from this gymnasium, but he would arrange to have Simon admitted to another. I was relieved and also proud. Simon was the flesh of my flesh. But ought I to expect that my children, growing up under alien influences, would follow the ways of their mother? They understood, in their way, what was happening and often took their father's side. I felt



alone and abandoned by my husband and society. I submitted. But no one suspected the tragedy I experienced that day. Only a few yellowed pages, to which thirty-eight years ago, in an hour of despair, I confided my unhappiness, are the silent witness of my suffering. These words which I wrote first April 15, 1871 I have set down for they seem to express the woe and despair which so many wives and mothers suffered in that transitional era in Jewish life.

It was a piece of good luck for us when my husband was offered the position of vice-director of Commerce Bank in Minsk. We did not ponder long, but packed our things and moved. That was at the end of 1871 and the end of financial worries. In a short time, my husband became director of the bank and once again we led a comfortable and prosperous life. The third generation came, fearing neither God nor the devil. They paid highest homage to their own will, raised altars to it, and shamelessly offered the most sacred sacrifices to it. This was the generation that grew up without tradition, without the memories of Judaism. The laments of the Ninth of Ab were foreign to them; foreign, too, the thrice-daily-repeated longing for Zion in the prayers; alien the cycle of the Jewish festivals, in which a solemn one was succeeded by a gay one. This generation were atheists. In time, the fathers who had reared their children in a manner of modern enlightened Europeans came to see their fateful mistake. Though they themselves had cast off Judaism and its traditions, they still remained Jews in their hearts, good Jews in a national sense, proud of their past. But their children no longer had memories of a Jewish past. One partial remedy would have been the study of religion in the government schools. Able teachers might easily have interested their pupils in the Jewish past, introduced them to ancient Hebrew poetry, guided them through Jewish history, and so awakened their pride in belonging to a people whose culture and history were ancient, meaningful, and impressive. These young Jews might, then, perhaps not have felt the humiliation at every reminder of their Jewish origin, nor would they have turned from their own people in rage, putting their abilities in the service of others.

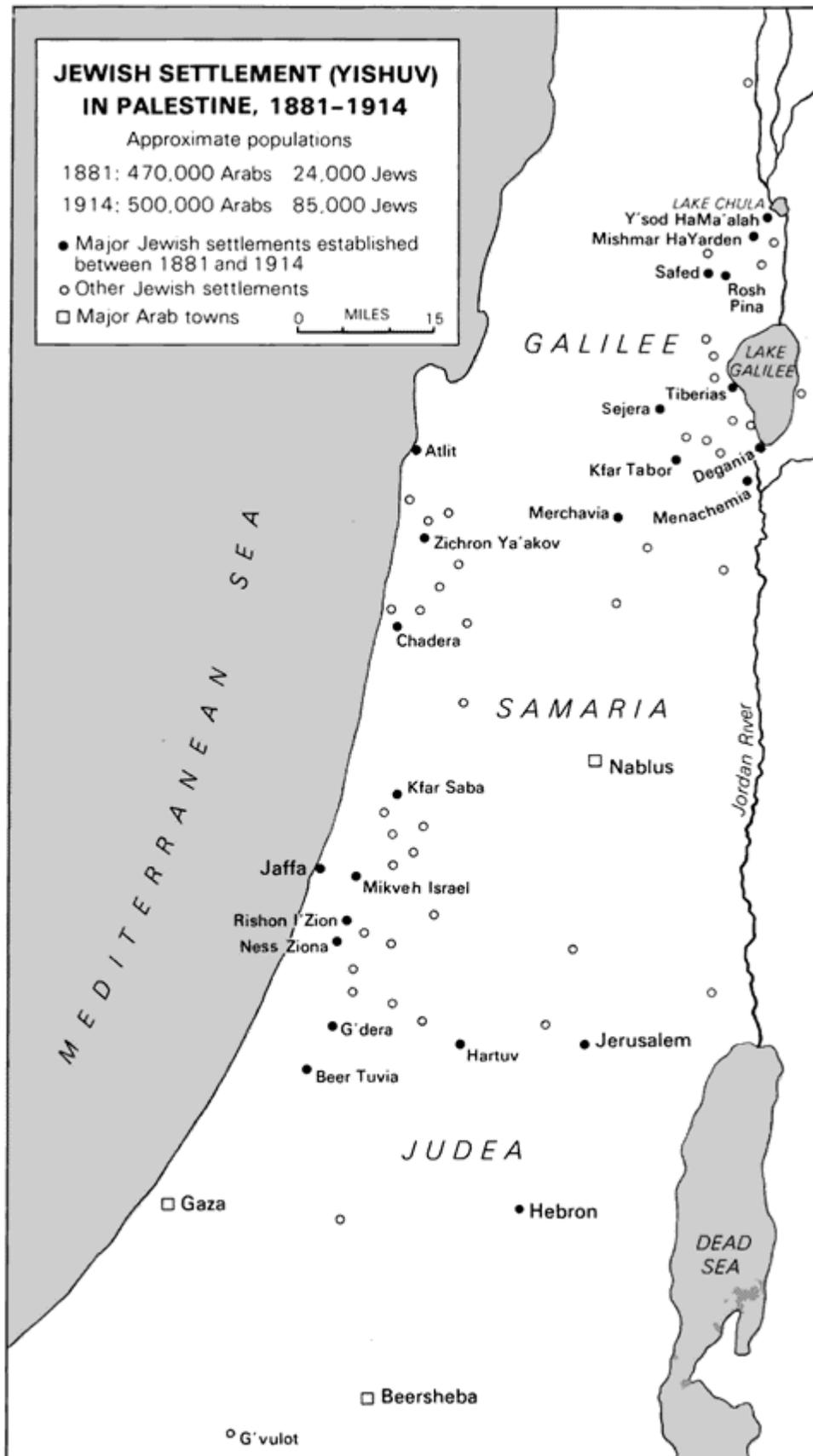
In the sixties the government had begun its policy of Russifying the Jews. After the Polish uprising of 1863, Russian was made compulsory in the Jewish schools in Poland and Lithuania. Then, the subject matter began to be regulated. Gradually, Jewish studies were shortened to make more time for general curriculum. But the government's policy articulated the unspoken wish among the young generation, and especially their Jewish teachers, that general education be given priority. No wonder, then, that in the cold, dark, and stormy eighties and nineties, our children in their frail boats, tossed on the raging waves of life, wanted to bring their little boats to safety. A safe harbor to them was baptism. So this terrible word comes like a plague. The word has rarely crossed my lips for it was too close, piercing a mother's bleeding heart. After the terrible events, I never spoke of them, and confided only to my diary, damp with tears, and preserved them deep, deep in my memory - until today. In those transitional seventies, all sorts of high-flown words became current: nihilism, materialism, assimilation, anti-semitism, and decadence. "Nihilism" made its appearance in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Our young people responded enthusiastically to the book and its hero, with whom they identified. Conflict between parents and their children became more embittered and the young people became more alienated from their parents, often ashamed of them. They viewed

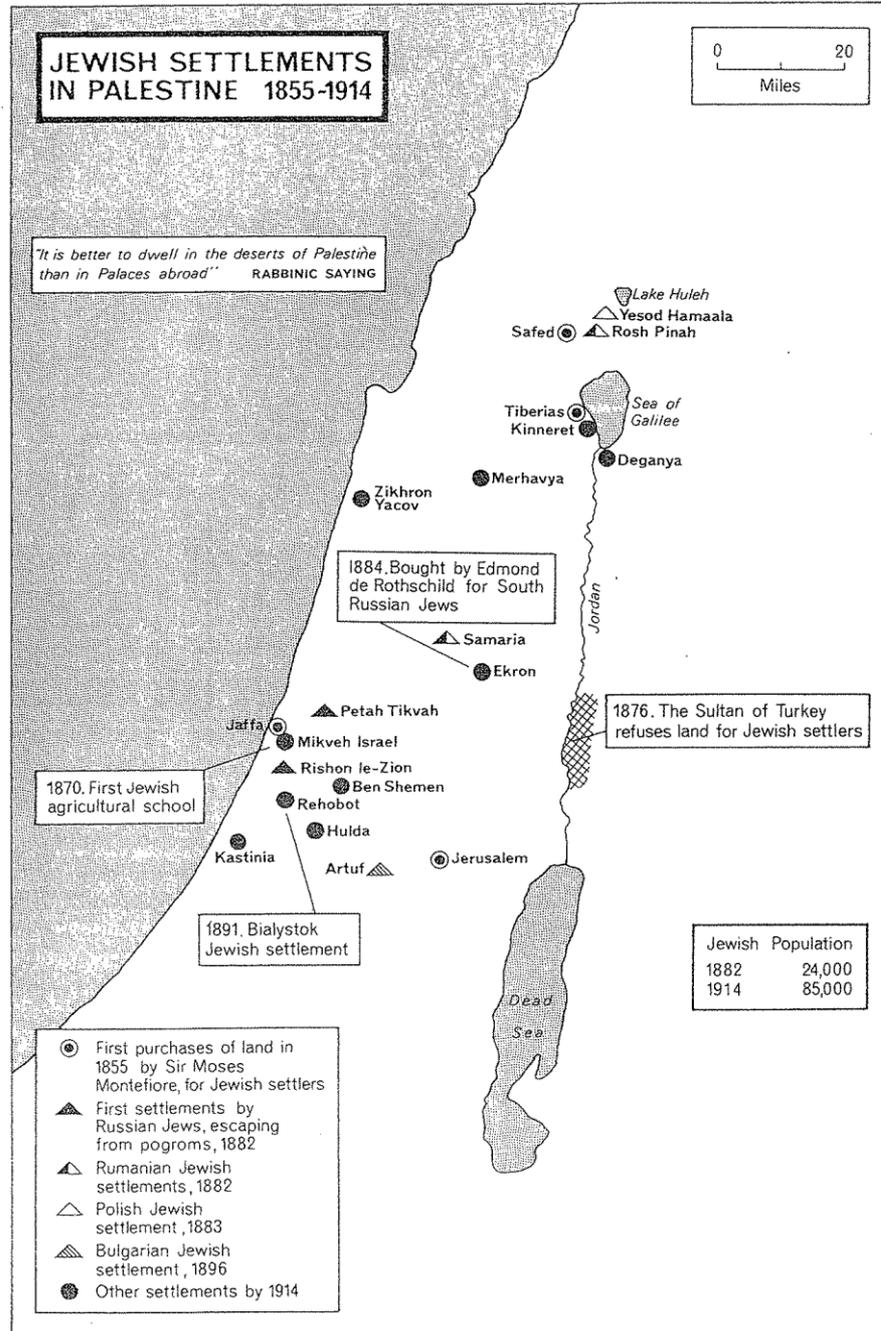


in their parents only a purse which enabled them to satisfy their desires. But there was no respect. After all, one could only respect a person of high culture. If the relations between parents and children in their forties and fifties were tragic-comic, these relations in the eighties and nineties were pure tragedy. Jewish youth abandoned themselves to total assimilation. Then came March 1, 1881, and the sun, which has risen on Jewish life in the fifties, suddenly set. Alexander, the Second, was killed by a bomb on the bank of the Catherine Canal in St. Petersburg. The hand that had freed sixty million serfs was stilled. The lips, which had pronounced the great word of liberation, were forever silenced. The City Council of Minsk sent two delegates to St. Petersburg to place a wreath on his fresh grave. The mayor of Minsk and my husband were chosen. It was the first time in Russian history that Jews had participated in a demonstration of mourning. But different times came. The reptiles that had shunned the light emerged. Anti-semitism erupted; the Jews were forced back into the ghetto. Without ceremony, the gateways to education were closed. The jubilation of the fifties and sixties turned into lamentation. The few rights that Jews had enjoyed were withdrawn. Disabilities began to pile up. Rights of residence for Jews in the cities became ever more restricted. An academic education became more and more difficult for Jews to attain, for only a very small Jewish quota was admitted to the gymnasiums and even fewer were admitted to universities.

Pogrom was a new word, coined in the eighties. The Jews of Kiev, Romny, Konotop, were among the first to experience the savage assault of the local mobs. That was the beginning. In the eighties, with anti-semitism raging all over Russia, a Jew had two choices. He could, in the name of Judaism, renounce everything that has become indispensable to him, or he could choose freedom, with its offers of education and career, through baptism. Hundreds of enlightened Jews chose the latter. The apostates were not converts out of conviction, nor were they like the Marranos of the earlier age. These apostates disbelieved in all religions: they were nihilist. My children went the way of so many others. The first to leave us was Simon. Upon learning this, my husband wrote him: "It is not becoming to abandon the camp of the besieged." Volodya, my favorite child, no longer among the living, followed Simon's example. After completing the gymnasium in Minsk with a brilliant record, he applied to the university at St. Petersburg. He submitted his papers. The admissions clerk rejected them. "These are not your papers, you must have stolen them. You are a Jew, but these papers refer to someone with a Russian name- Vladimir." Several times more he applied to the university, with the same results. Then he took the fateful step, and was immediately accepted.

The baptism of my children was the hardest blow to my life. But the loving heart of a mother can bear a great deal. I forgave them; the blame was on us, the parents. My sorrow gradually lost its personal meaning, but everyone took on the character of a national misfortune. I mourn it not only as a mother, but as a Jewess mourning for the Jewish people that has lost so many of its noblest sons.





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Background on the Manifesto of the Bilu

Bilu are the first letters of a passage in Isaiah, Chapter 2, Verse 5: “House of Jacob, come let us go.” The Biluim, about five hundred young people mainly from the Kharkov region, were part of the wider movement of the “Lovers of Zion” (Hovevei Zion) which had developed in Russia in the early eighteenth-eighties mainly under the impact of the pogroms of 1881. This manifesto was issued by a Bilu group in Constantinople in 1882.¹

The Manifesto of the Bilu

To our brothers and sisters in Exile!

‘If I help not myself, who will help me?’

Nearly two thousand years have elapsed since, in an evil hour, after a heroic struggle, the glory of our Temple vanished in fire and our kings and chieftains changed their crowns and diadems for the chains of exile. We lost our country where dwelt our beloved sires. Into the Exile we took with us, of all our glories, only a spark of the fire by which our Temple, the abode of our Great One, was engirdled, and this little spark kept us alive while the towers of our enemies crumbled into dust, and this spark leapt into celestial flame and shed light on the heroes of our race and inspired them to endure the horrors of the dance of death and the tortures of the *autos-da-fé*. And this spark is again kindling and will shine for us, a true pillar of fire going before us on the road to Zion, while behind us is a pillar of cloud, the pillar of oppression threatening to destroy us. Sleepest thou, O our nation? What hast thou been doing until 1882? Sleeping, and dreaming the false dream of Assimilation. Now, thank God, thou art awakened from thy slothful slumber. The Pogroms have awakened thee from thy charmed sleep. Thine eyes are open to recognise the cloudy delusive hopes. Canst thou listen silently to the taunts and mockeries of thine enemies?...Where is thy ancient pride, thine olden spirit? Remember that thou wast a nation possessing a wise religion, a law, a constitution, a celestial Temple whose wall² is still a silent witness to the glories of the past; that thy sons dwelt in palaces and towers, and thy cities flourished in the splendor of civilisation, while these enemies of thine dwelt like beasts in the muddy marshes of their dark woods. While thy children were clad in purple and fine linen, they wore the rough skins of the wolf and the bear. Art thou not ashamed?

Hopeless is your state in the West; the star of your future is gleaming in the East. Deeply conscious of all this, and inspired by the true teaching of our great master, Hillel, ‘If I help not myself, who will help me?’ we propose to form the following society for national ends.

¹ Laqueur, Walter and Rubin, Barry, *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict* (New York, Penguin Books, 1985), 3-4

² The Wailing Wall



1. The Society will be named “BILU” according to the motto ‘House of Jacob, come, let us go’. It will be divided into local branches according to the numbers of its members.
2. The seat of the Committee shall be Jerusalem.
3. Donations and contributions shall be unfixed and unlimited.

We want:

1. A home in our country. It was given us by the mercy of God; it is ours as registered in the archives of history.
2. To beg it of the Sultan himself, and if it be impossible to obtain this, to beg that we may at least possess it as a state within a larger state; the internal administration to be ours, to have our civil and political rights, and to act with the Turkish Empire only in foreign affairs, so as to help our brother Ishmael in the time of his need.

We hope that the interests of our glorious nation will rouse the national spirit in rich and powerful men, and that everyone, rich or poor, will give his best labours to the holy cause.

Greetings dear brothers and sisters!

HEAR, O ISRAEL! The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and our land Zion is our one hope.

God be with us! The PIONEERS OF BILU.

From Mark Twain’s The Innocents Abroad³

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent. The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee sleep in the midst of a vast stretch of hill and plain wherein the eye rests upon no pleasant tint, no striking object, no soft picture dreaming in a purple haze or mottled with the shadows of the clouds. Every outline is harsh, every feature is distinct, there is no perspective—distance works no enchantment here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land.

Small shreds and patches of it must be very beautiful in the full flush of spring, however, and all the more beautiful by contrast with the far-reaching desolation that surrounds them on every side. I would like much to see the fringes of the Jordan in spring-time, and Shechem, Esdraelon, Ajalon and the borders of Galilee—but even then these spots would seem mere toy gardens set at wide intervals in the waste of a limitless desolation.

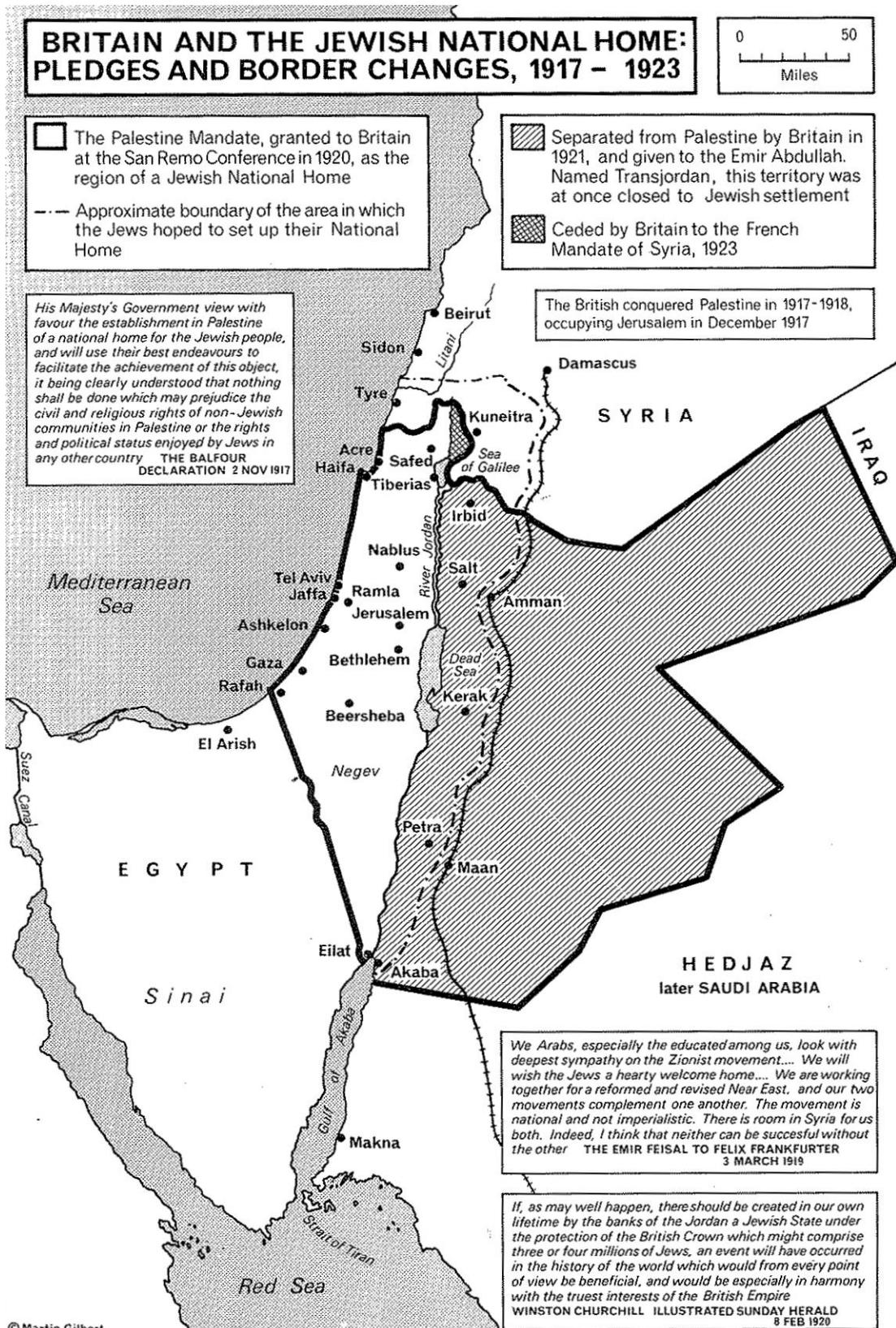
³From <http://www.gutenberg.org/files>



Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Where Sodom and Gomorrah reared their domes and towers, that solemn sea now floods the plain, in whose bitter waters no living thing exists—over whose waveless surface the blistering air hangs motionless and dead—about whose borders nothing grows but weeds, and scattering tufts of cane, and that treacherous fruit that promises refreshment to parching lips, but turns to ashes at the touch. Nazareth is forlorn; about that ford of Jordan where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing, one finds only a squalid camp of fantastic Bedouins of the desert; Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, to-day, even as Joshua's miracle left it more than three thousand years ago; Bethlehem and Bethany, in their poverty and their humiliation, have nothing about them now to remind one that they once knew the high honor of the Saviour's presence; the hallowed spot where the shepherds watched their flocks by night, and where the angels sang Peace on earth, good will to men, is untenanted by any living creature, and unblessed by any feature that is pleasant to the eye. Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens; the wonderful temple which was the pride and the glory of Israel, is gone, and the Ottoman crescent is lifted above the spot where, on that most memorable day in the annals of the world, they reared the Holy Cross. The noted Sea of Galilee, where Roman fleets once rode at anchor and the disciples of the Saviour sailed in their ships, was long ago deserted by the devotees of war and commerce, and its borders are a silent wilderness; Capernaum is a shapeless ruin; Magdala is the home of beggared Arabs; Bethsaida and Chorazin have vanished from the earth, and the "desert places" round about them where thousands of men once listened to the Saviour's voice and ate the miraculous bread, sleep in the hush of a solitude that is inhabited only by birds of prey and skulking foxes.

Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?

Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition—it is dream-land.



Martin Gilbert, *Jewish History Atlas* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) p 86



Background on Memoirs of a Grandmother⁴

Pauline Wengeroff was born in Bobrusky, White Russia, in 1833 and died in Minsk, in 1916. In her life all the major currents affecting Russian Jews were played out: from rabbinic orthodoxy to Hasidim, to *haskala*, to general education, Europeanization and complete secularization, until, finally, the great tragedy of her life - the apostasy of her children. Her own life faithfully reflected the centrifugal forces of modernity that whirled around her. That life she described in detail in her memoirs, from which an extract follows. These currents of political and religious liberalism and that pursuit of education and career on the part of middle- and upper- class Jews in this period brought about the collapse, among them, of the traditional Jewish society into which she had been born and the disintegration of the values that the society had cherished:

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Born at the beginning of 1830's in Bobrusky and brought up by strictly observant parents, I was in a position to see the transformation which European education wrought on Jewish family life. I can see how easy it was for our parents to educate us and how hard it was for us, the second generation, to bring up our children. Though we became acquainted with German and Polish literature, we eagerly studied Pentateuch and Prophets, for they gave us pride in our religion and its traditions and bound us to our people. Biblical poetry stamped itself on the untouched childish mind and provided for the days to come chastity and purity, buoyancy and inspiration. But how hard for us was the great transition period in the sixties and seventies. We had achieved a degree of European education, but we knew of the wide gaps in our knowledge. We did our utmost so that our children would not lack what we had missed. But we overlooked the wisdom of observing moderation. So we have only ourselves to blame for the abyss between us and our children. We must now obey our children and submit completely to their will, just as once obedience to our parents was inviolable. As once with our parents, so now with our children, we must hold our tongues, and it is harder now than then. When our parents talked, we listened respectfully, as now we listen, in pride and joy, as our children talk about themselves and their ideals. Our submissiveness and admiration make them tyrannize us. This is the reverse side of the coin, the negative impact of European culture on the Jews of Russia. No group but the Jews so swiftly and irrevocably abandoned everything for West European culture, discarded its religion, and divested itself of its historical past and its traditions.

My parents were God-fearing, deeply pious, and respectable people. This was the prevalent type among the Jews then, whose aim in life was above all the love of God and of family. Most of the day was spent in the study of Talmud, and only appointed hours were set aside for business. Nevertheless, my father's business affairs often involved hundreds of thousands of rubles. Like my grandfather, my father was a contractor, an occupation which in the first half of the nineteenth

⁴ Wengeroff, Wendy. "Memoirs of a Grandmother." *The Golden Tradition*. Ed. Lucy S. Dawidowicz. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972. 160-168.



century played a great economic role, enabling the Russian government to erect fortifications, build roads and canals, and thus supply the army.

A marriage was arranged between me and Hanan Wengeroff, and at eighteen, I became the bride of a man I loved deeply but knew not at all. Konotop, where my husband's parents lived, was to be my new home. A small town of ten thousand inhabitants, it yet looked like a village. The inhabitants were mostly Christians; the few Jews were grain merchants and tavern keepers. My father-in-law, the richest man in town, held the government's wine and liquor concession. I remember the way the house was furnished - the large rooms, expensive furniture, beautiful silver, carriages and horse, servants, frequent guests. Most Konotop Jews, including the Wengeroffs were Hasidim. A daughter of mitnagdim, I saw and heard much that was new. I read a lot in Konotop, especially Russian. First I read the German books I had brought from home - Schiller, Zschokke, Kotzebue, Bulwer. Then I started on the Russian books which stood on the shelves of the Wengeroff library. I read Moskauer Nachrichten and taught my husband, eager to learn, German. But his chief study was Talmud. Every Monday and Thursday he spent the night with his rabbi, hunched over great tomes. Since our betrothal, my husband experienced mystical religious moods and devoted himself to the sacred mysteries of the Kabbala. Then, this fervent young man yearned to make a pilgrimage to Lubavich, the seat of the head of the Lithuanian Hasidim. The rabbi would surely have the complete answers to all disturbing questions and enigmas. Yet barely two years before, my husband had advocated modern ideas, which led to conflicts with his parents.

One morning, which was busy at household tasks, my husband came into the kitchen and told me, elatedly, excitedly, that his father had permitted him and his elder brother to go to Lubavich in the company of their rabbi. What happened there I do not know, for my husband never spoke of this tragic experience. All I know that this young man, hopeful and inspired, made a pilgrimage to the rabbi, hoping he would unveil the great mystery, but returned sober. He continued his religious observances and studied with the rabbi, but the magic and ecstasy had gone. Thereafter, little by little, he began to neglect his religious observances. Then he decided to cut his beard. We had our first quarrel. I begged him not to yield to vanity and let his beard grow. He would not hear of it. He reminded me that he was the man of the house and demanded my obedience and submission.

Four years later we left Konotop and the patriarchal way of life we had led. My husband had obtained the liquor concession in Lubny, where we were to start our own independent life. No, without having to worry about his parents, my husband organized his life as he desired. Daily prayers in prayer shawl and phylacteries ceased, though he continued to study the Talmud. He used to discuss it at length with the town rabbi, who was our frequent guest, but this interest was just scholarly.

In 1859, my husband's father, grandfather, and another partner obtained the leasehold on liquor for the province of Kovno. My husband was put at the head of the office. We liquidated our business in Lubny, packed our possessions, and moved. But before I go on about myself, I want to say something about 1855,



which marked a new era in Russia, especially for Jews. It was the year Alexander, the Second, ascended the throne. He liberated sixty million peasants from bondage and the Jews from their chains. He opened the gates of his main cities into which swarms of Jewish youth thronged to quench their thirst for European education in the universities. In this brilliant period of intellectual flowering, the Jews took part in the ferment in the whole country, the rise of the fine arts, the development of the sciences. The effects of the reforms in the forties were apparent now: a succession of Jewish professors, doctors, engineers, writers, musicians, and sculptors had won recognition abroad and brought fame to their country. This made it possible also for the Jews to attain an unexpected influence in commerce and industry. Never before or after did the Jews in St. Petersburg live in such wealth and distinction as then, when a good part of the financial affairs of the capital cities were in their hands. Jewish banking houses were founded. Corporations headed by Jews were organized. The stock exchange and the banks grew to immense proportions.

My wise mother once said: "Two things I know for certain. I and my generation will surely live and die as Jews. Our grandchildren will surely live and die not as Jews. But what our children will be I cannot foresee." The first two parts of this prophecy came true. The third is now coming true, for our generation is some kind of hybrid. Other peoples and other nations have drawn from modern, alien currents and ideals only what is congenial to their own character and thus have preserved their own individuality and uniqueness. But the course that befell the Jews was that they could not acquire the new, the alien, without renouncing the old and repudiating their unique individuality, and their most precious possessions. How chaotically these modern ideals whirled through minds of young Russian Jews! Traditional daily ideals disappeared, but new ones did not arise in their stead. These young Jewish men had no sense of moderation no did they want it. In this transitional period, the woman, the mother, was cruelly brushed aside, for clinging to tradition; she wanted to impart to her children the ethics of Judaism, the traditions of its faith, the sanctity of the Sabbath and the Holy Days, Hebrew, Bible study. She wanted to transmit this great treasure along with the enlightenment, with the new currents of West European culture. But the husbands had the same answer to all pleas: "The children need no religion." In their inexperience, they wanted to take the dangerous leap from the lowest level of education to the highest, without any intermediate step. They demanded not only assent from their wives, but also submission. They preached freedom, equality, fraternity in public, but at home they were despots.

Kovno was a pretty, provincial town when we settled there. Near the Prussian border, it was natural that a German style of life influenced the whole town. Though the Jewish tradition remained intact in the small Lithuanian towns, in Kovno the enlightenment was in full swing. In progressive Jewish homes, mostly among wealthy families whose fathers and sons were engaged in commerce with Germany and who frequently traveled across the boarder, the deviation from Jewish tradition was great. About the only thing that remained unchanged was the kosher kitchen. The Sabbath was no longer kept holy, nor did it disturb the passion for business. The wife, clinging tenaciously to the traditions, used to light the Sabbath candles, but her enlightened husband lit his cigarette. He invited his



friends for cards. The Kiddush cup filled with wine stood on the table, but no one touched it; it had become a symbol. Only the peppered stuffed fish remained. Apostasy did not go far as to banish that from the Friday evening meal. Instead of Sabbath songs, there were jokes and anecdotes.

A few years later we moved to St. Petersburg. I was going toward a future which would, in transforming the past, surpass all my expectations. The society we became part of consisted of distinguished and cultivated people, most of whom lived a carefree existence in wealth and luxury. The St. Petersburg Jewish community had a magnificent synagogue and even two rabbis - one modern and seminary trained, the other Orthodox. But the Jewish community had abandoned many Jewish customs and traditions. The more fashionable even celebrated Christmas. Only Yom Kippur and Passover were observed, but in an up-to-date way. Some Jews drove to the synagogue in their carriages and ate in the intervals between the Yom Kippur service. It remained a festival of remembrance, joyful because it recalled not the Exodus from Egypt, but one's own childhood in the *shtetl*. The *seder* was observed, in a highly abbreviated form. Even baptized Jews kept the *seder*. Though they did not themselves make the holiday feast, they welcomed invitations from their not yet baptized friends. These were the customs of the upper stratum of Jewish Petersburg. To live in this milieu and remain impervious to it required a strong character and religious fidelity which my husband lacked. Yet here in Petersburg, I often witnessed the strong feeling of solidarity among these Jews who had given up traditional Judaism. Jews in trouble with the authorities anywhere in Russia used to turn to the Petersburg Jewish community for help. Petersburg Jews spared neither money nor time. They appealed to the highest authorities on behalf of the oppressed Jews. Their concern was natural and understandable. The Jewish solidarity became proverbial all over the world. Even the baptized Jews were not immune to it.

In our family, the struggle to keep the Jewish tradition went on in much the same way as in so many other families. First my husband requested, and then demanded, that his wishes be fulfilled. It was not enough for him to have complete freedom over all matters outside our home: I had to "reform" my home and myself. It began with small things, intimate things, dear to me. As soon as we settled in Petersburg I had to discard the *peruke* which pious Jewish women wore. It was here in Petersburg, after a violent struggle, that I ceased to keep a kosher kitchen. Little by little, I had to drive each cherished custom from our home. "Drive" is not the right word, for I accompanied each to the door with tears and sobs. I loved my husband intensely and as faithfully as in the first days of our marriage, yet I could not submit without resistance. I wanted to preserve this cherished tradition for myself and my children, and I fought a battle of life and death.

In Petersburg, a thousand different experiences always seemed to converge on the only problem of Judaism. What a time of heartbreak when my son attended the gymnasium! Simon was a fourth grade student. The students were taken to the chapel for religious services. All but Simon knelt before the icons. When the teacher ordered him to kneel, he refused: "I am a Jew. My religion forbids me to kneel to an image." After the service, the enraged teacher told Simon he was expelled. I went to the school superintendent, imploring and weeping. I wanted to



tell him my son had not willfully been disobedient; he wanted only to remain loyal to his own upbringing and religion. I could not speak; my throat was tight and the tears flowed. I foresaw that my son's whole life would be destroyed. The school superintendent reflected. The boy was dismissed from this gymnasium, but he would arrange to have Simon admitted to another. I was relieved and also proud. Simon was the flesh of my flesh. But ought I to expect that my children, growing up under alien influences, would follow the ways of their mother? They understood, in their way, what was happening and often took their father's side. I felt alone and abandoned by my husband and society. I submitted. But no one suspected the tragedy I experienced that day. Only a few yellowed pages, to which thirty-eight years ago, in an hour of despair, I confided my unhappiness, are the silent witness of my suffering. These words which I wrote first April 15, 1871 I have set down for they seem to express the woe and despair which so many wives and mothers suffered in that transitional era in Jewish life.

It was a piece of good luck for us when my husband was offered the position of vice-director of Commerce Bank in Minsk. We did not ponder long, but packed our things and moved. That was at the end of 1871 and the end of financial worries. In a short time, my husband became director of the bank and once again we led a comfortable and prosperous life. The third generation came, fearing neither God nor the devil. They paid highest homage to their own will, raised altars to it, and shamelessly offered the most sacred sacrifices to it. This was the generation that grew up without tradition, without the memories of Judaism. The laments of the Ninth of Ab were foreign to them; foreign, too, the thrice-daily-repeated longing for Zion in the prayers; alien the cycle of the Jewish festivals, in which a solemn one was succeeded by a gay one. This generation were atheists. In time, the fathers who had reared their children in a manner of modern enlightened Europeans came to see their fateful mistake. Though they themselves had cast off Judaism and its traditions, they still remained Jews in their hearts, good Jews in a national sense, proud of their past. But their children no longer had memories of a Jewish past. One partial remedy would have been the study of religion in the government schools. Able teachers might easily have interested their pupils in the Jewish past, introduced them to ancient Hebrew poetry, guided them through Jewish history, and so awakened their pride in belonging to a people whose culture and history were ancient, meaningful, and impressive. These young Jews might, then, perhaps not have felt the humiliation at every reminder of their Jewish origin, nor would they have turned from their own people in rage, putting their abilities in the service of others.

In the sixties the government had begun its policy of Russifying the Jews. After the Polish uprising of 1863, Russian was made compulsory in the Jewish schools in Poland and Lithuania. Then, the subject matter began to be regulated. Gradually, Jewish studies were shortened to make more time for general curriculum. But the government's policy articulated the unspoken wish among the young generation, and especially their Jewish teachers, that general education be given priority. No wonder, then, that in the cold, dark, and stormy eighties and nineties, our children in their frail boats, tossed on the raging waves of life, wanted to bring their little boats to safety. A safe harbor to them was baptism. So this terrible word comes like a plague. The word has rarely crossed my lips for it was too close, piercing a



mother's bleeding heart. After the terrible events, I never spoke of them, and confided only to my diary, damp with tears, and preserved them deep, deep in my memory - until today. In those transitional seventies, all sorts of high-flown words became current: nihilism, materialism, assimilation, anti-semitism, and decadence. "Nihilism" made its appearance in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Our young people responded enthusiastically to the book and its hero, with whom they identified. Conflict between parents and their children became more embittered and the young people became more alienated from their parents, often ashamed of them. They viewed in their parents only a purse which enabled them to satisfy their desires. But there was no respect. After all, one could only respect a person of high culture. If the relations between parents and children in their forties and fifties were tragic-comic, these relations in the eighties and nineties were pure tragedy. Jewish youth abandoned themselves to total assimilation. Then came March 1, 1881, and the sun, which has risen on Jewish life in the fifties, suddenly set. Alexander, the Second, was killed by a bomb on the bank of the Catherine Canal in St. Petersburg. The hand that had freed sixty million serfs was stilled. The lips, which had pronounced the great word of liberation, were forever silenced. The City Council of Minsk sent two delegates to St. Petersburg to place a wreath on his fresh grave. The mayor of Minsk and my husband were chosen. It was the first time in Russian history that Jews had participated in a demonstration of mourning.

But different times came. The reptiles that had shunned the light emerged. Anti-semitism erupted; the Jews were forced back into the ghetto. Without ceremony, the gateways to education were closed. The jubilation of the fifties and sixties turned into lamentation. The few rights that Jews had enjoyed were withdrawn. Disabilities began to pile up. Rights of residence for Jews in the cities became ever more restricted. An academic education became more and more difficult for Jews to attain, for only a very small Jewish quota was admitted to the gymnasiums and even fewer were admitted to universities.

Pogrom was a new word, coined in the eighties. The Jews of Kiev, Romny, Konotop, were among the first to experience the savage assault of the local mobs. That was the beginning. In the eighties, with anti-semitism raging all over Russia, a Jew had two choices. He could, in the name of Judaism, renounce everything that has become indispensable to him, or he could choose freedom, with its offers of education and career, through baptism. Hundreds of enlightened Jews chose the latter. The apostates were not converts out of conviction, nor were they like the Marranos of the earlier age. These apostates disbelieved in all religions: they were nihilist. My children went the way of so many others. The first to leave us was Simon. Upon learning this, my husband wrote him: "It is not becoming to abandon the camp of the besieged." Volodya, my favorite child, no longer among the living, followed Simon's example. After completing the gymnasium in Minsk with a brilliant record, he applied to the university at St. Petersburg. He submitted his papers. The admissions clerk rejected them. "These are not your papers, you must have stolen them. You are a Jew, but these papers refer to someone with a Russian name- Vladamir." Several times more he applied to the university, with the same results. Then he took the fateful step, and was immediately accepted.

The baptism of my children was the hardest blow to my life. But the loving heart of a mother can bear a great deal. I forgave them; the blame was on us, the parents.



My sorrow gradually lost its personal meaning, but everyone took on the character of a national misfortune. I mourn it not only as a mother, but as a Jewess mourning for the Jewish people that has lost so many of its noblest sons.



Background on the Manifesto of the Bilu⁵

Bilu are the first letters of a passage in Isaiah, Chapter 2, Verse 5: “House of Jacob, come let us go.” The Biluim, about five hundred young people mainly from the Kharkov region, were part of the wider movement of the “Lovers of Zion” (Hovevei Zion) which had developed in Russia in the early eighteenth-eighties mainly under the impact of the pogroms of 1881. This manifesto was issued by a Bilu group in Constantinople in 1882.

The Manifesto of the Bilu

To our brothers and sisters in Exile!

‘If I help not myself, who will help me?’

Nearly two thousand years have elapsed since, in an evil hour, after a heroic struggle, the glory of our Temple vanished in fire and our kings and chieftains changed their crowns and diadems for the chains of exile. We lost our country where dwelt our beloved sires. Into the Exile we took with us, of all our glories, only a spark of the fire by which our Temple, the abode of our Great One, was engirdled, and this little spark kept us alive while the towers of our enemies crumbled into dust, and this spark leapt into celestial flame and shed light on the heroes of our race and inspired them to endure the horrors of the dance of death and the tortures of the *autos-da-fé*. And this spark is again kindling and will shine for us, a true pillar of fire going before us on the road to Zion, while behind us is a pillar of cloud, the pillar of oppression threatening to destroy us. Sleepest thou, O our nation? What hast thou been doing until 1882? Sleeping, and dreaming the false dream of Assimilation. Now, thank God, thou art awakened from thy slothful slumber. The Pogroms have awakened thee from thy charmed sleep. Thine eyes are open to recognise the cloudy delusive hopes. Canst thou listen silently to the taunts and mockeries of thine enemies?...Where is thy ancient pride, thine olden spirit? Remember that thou wast a nation possessing a wise religion, a law, a constitution, a celestial Temple whose wall⁶ is still a silent witness to the glories of the past; that thy sons dwelt in palaces and towers, and thy cities flourished in the splendor of civilisation, while these enemies of thine dwelt like beasts in the muddy marshes of their dark woods. While thy children were clad in purple and fine linen, they wore the rough skins of the wolf and the bear. Art thou not ashamed?

Hopeless is your state in the West; the star of your future is gleaming in the East. Deeply conscious of all this, and inspired by the true teaching of our great master, Hillel, ‘If I help not myself, who will help me?’ we propose to form the following society for national ends.

⁵ Laqueur, Walter and Rubin, Barry. Ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. 3-4.

⁶ The Wailing Wall



4. The Society will be named “BILU” according to the motto ‘House of Jacob, come, let us go’. It will be divided into local branches according to the numbers of its members.
5. The seat of the Committee shall be Jerusalem.
6. Donations and contributions shall be unfixed and unlimited.

We want:

3. A home in our country. It was given us by the mercy of God; it is ours as registered in the archives of history.
4. To beg it of the Sultan himself, and if it be impossible to obtain this, to beg that we may at least possess it as a state within a larger state; the internal administration to be ours, to have our civil and political rights, and to act with the Turkish Empire only in foreign affairs, so as to help our brother Ishmael in the time of his need.

We hope that the interests of our glorious nation will rouse the national spirit in rich and powerful men, and that everyone, rich or poor, will give his best labours to the holy cause.

Greetings dear brothers and sisters!

HEAR, O ISRAEL! The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and our land Zion is our one hope.

God be with us! The PIONEERS OF BILU.

From Mark Twain’s The Innocents Abroad⁷

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent. The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee sleep in the midst of a vast stretch of hill and plain wherein the eye rests upon no pleasant tint, no striking object, no soft picture dreaming in a purple haze or mottled with the shadows of the clouds. Every outline is harsh, every feature is distinct, there is no perspective—distance works no enchantment here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land.

Small shreds and patches of it must be very beautiful in the full flush of spring, however, and all the more beautiful by contrast with the far-reaching desolation that surrounds them on every side. I would like much to see the fringes of the Jordan in spring-time, and Shechem, Esdraelon, Ajalon and the borders of Galilee—but even then these spots would seem mere toy gardens set at wide intervals in the waste of a limitless desolation.

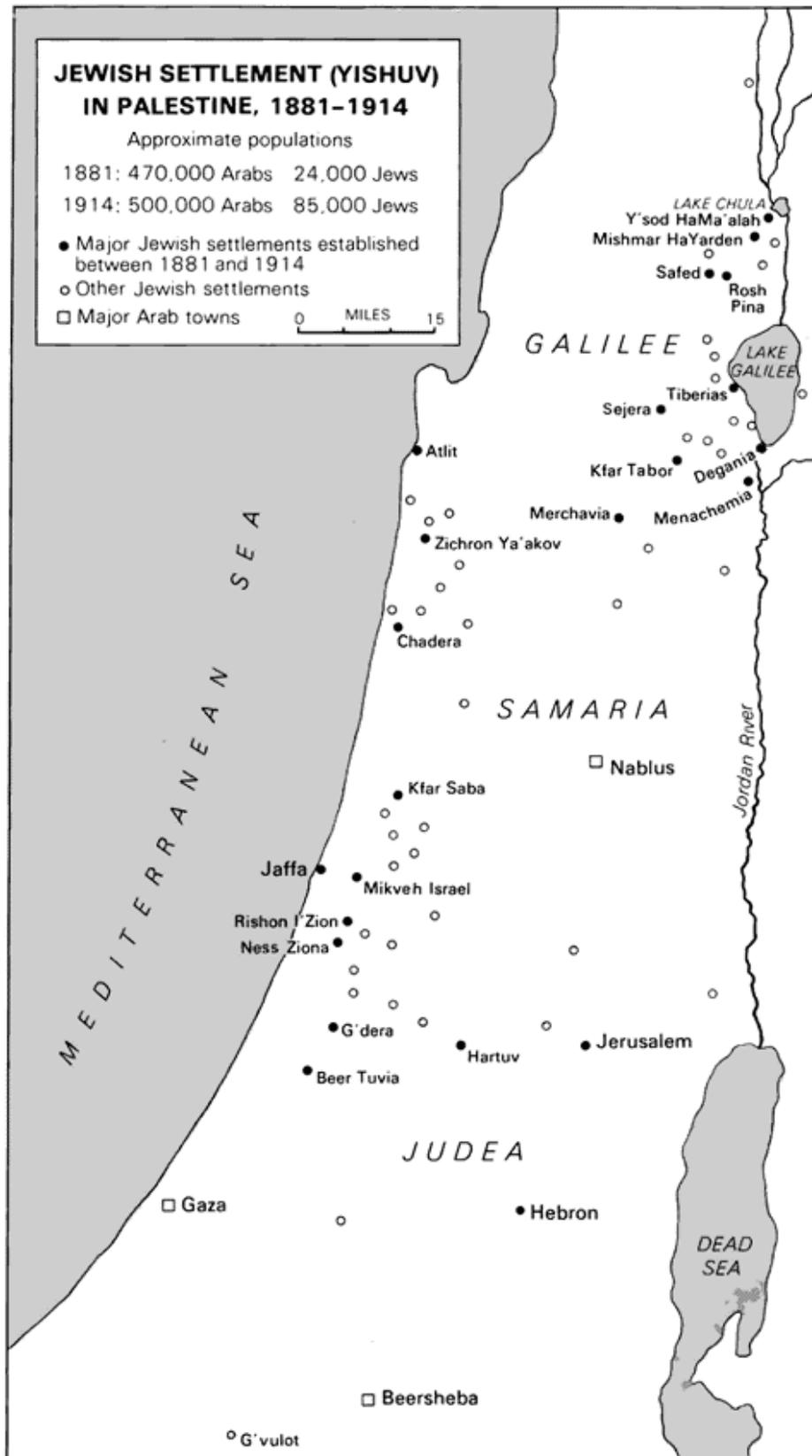
⁷From <http://www.gutenberg.org/files>



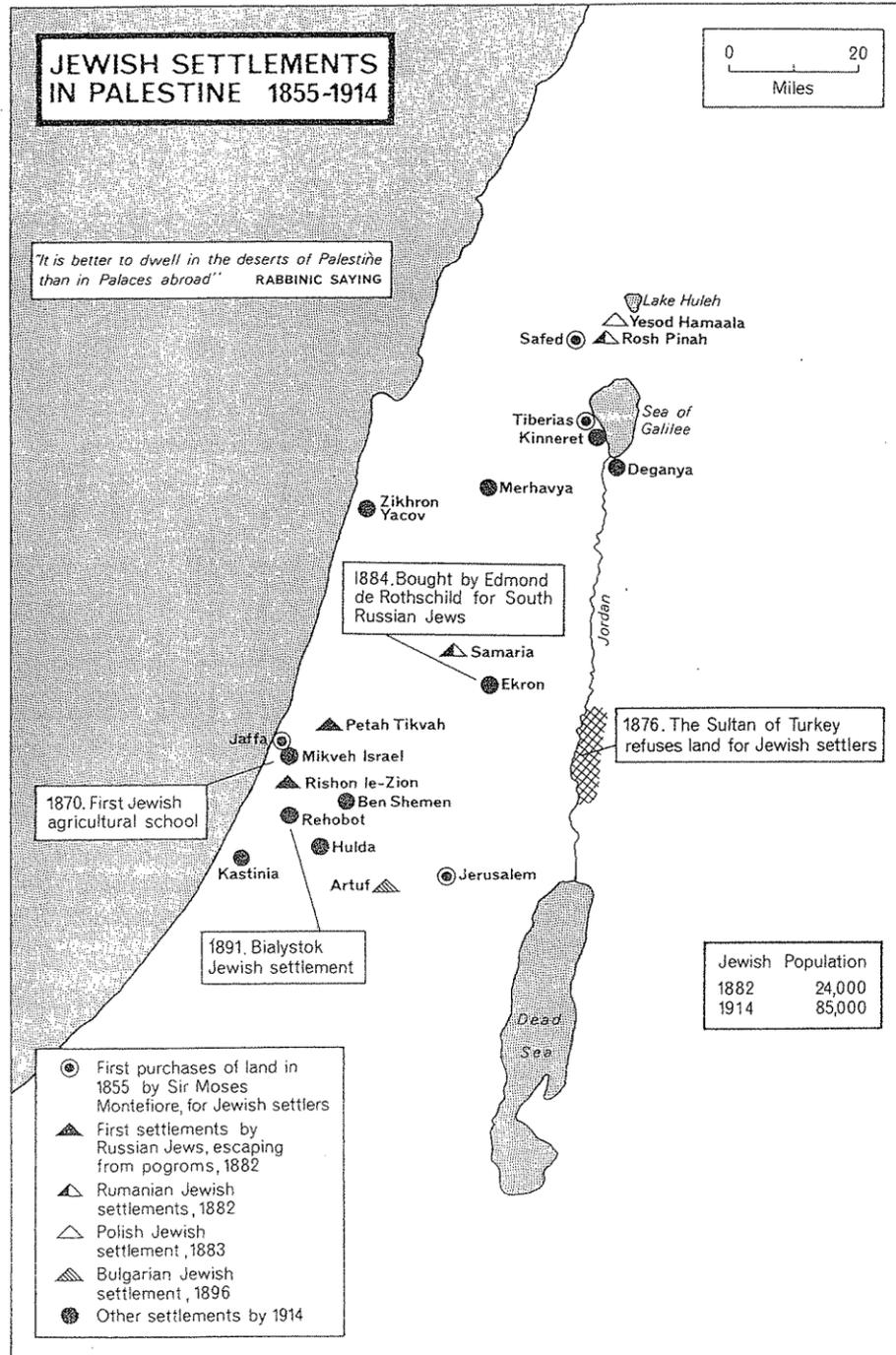
Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Where Sodom and Gomorrah reared their domes and towers, that solemn sea now floods the plain, in whose bitter waters no living thing exists—over whose waveless surface the blistering air hangs motionless and dead—about whose borders nothing grows but weeds, and scattering tufts of cane, and that treacherous fruit that promises refreshment to parching lips, but turns to ashes at the touch. Nazareth is forlorn; about that ford of Jordan where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing, one finds only a squalid camp of fantastic Bedouins of the desert; Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, to-day, even as Joshua's miracle left it more than three thousand years ago; Bethlehem and Bethany, in their poverty and their humiliation, have nothing about them now to remind one that they once knew the high honor of the Saviour's presence; the hallowed spot where the shepherds watched their flocks by night, and where the angels sang Peace on earth, good will to men, is untenanted by any living creature, and unblessed by any feature that is pleasant to the eye. Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens; the wonderful temple which was the pride and the glory of Israel, is gone, and the Ottoman crescent is lifted above the spot where, on that most memorable day in the annals of the world, they reared the Holy Cross. The noted Sea of Galilee, where Roman fleets once rode at anchor and the disciples of the Saviour sailed in their ships, was long ago deserted by the devotees of war and commerce, and its borders are a silent wilderness; Capernaum is a shapeless ruin; Magdala is the home of beggared Arabs; Bethsaida and Chorazin have vanished from the earth, and the "desert places" round about them where thousands of men once listened to the Saviour's voice and ate the miraculous bread, sleep in the hush of a solitude that is inhabited only by birds of prey and skulking foxes.

Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?

Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition—it is dream-land.

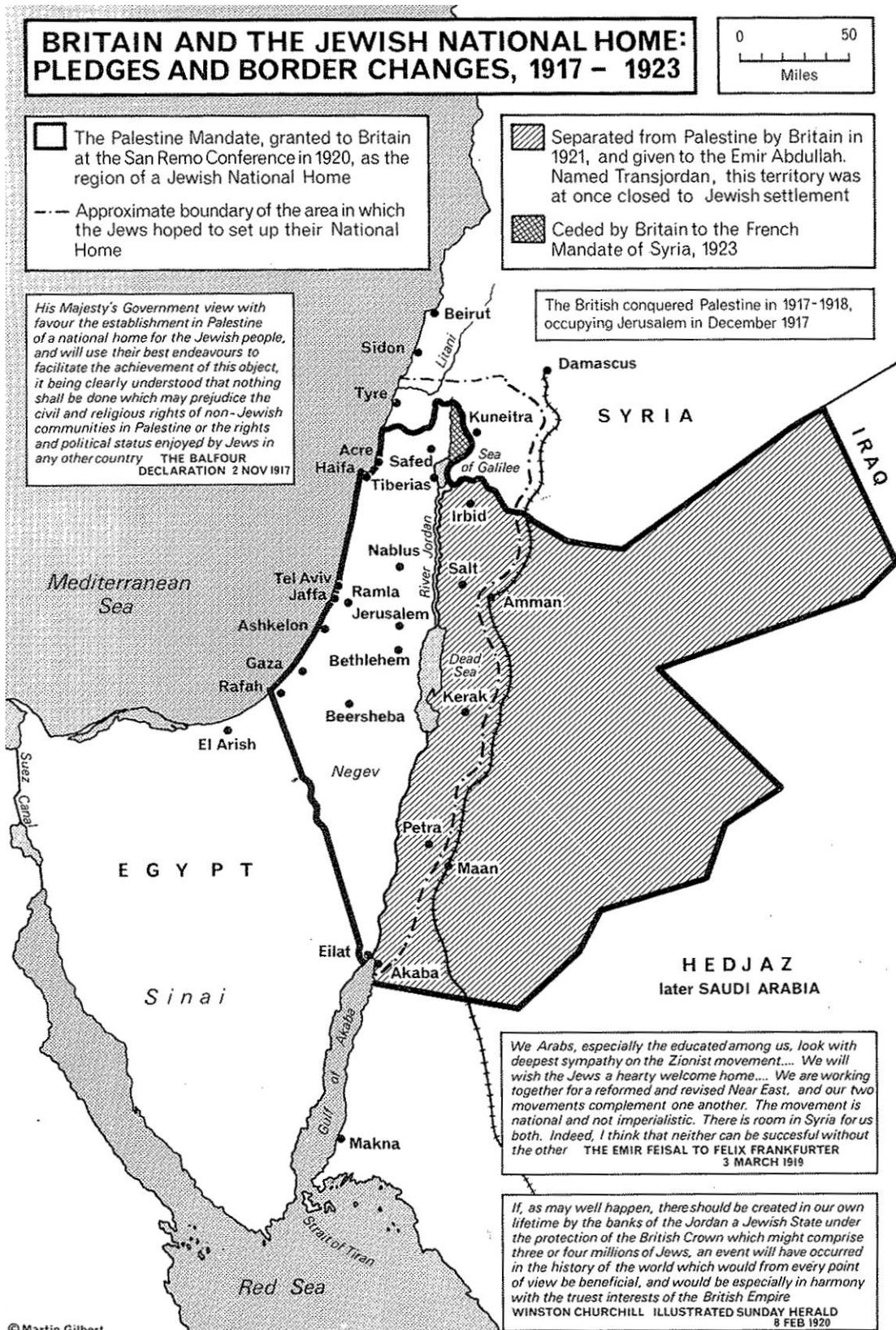


From Jewish Virtual Library



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Martin Gilbert, Jewish History Atlas (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) p 83



Martin Gilbert, *Jewish History Atlas* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) p 86