

## ABSTRACT

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OTTOMAN JEWS ENCOUNTER MODERNITY  
THE CASE OF LEA MITRANI AND JOSEPH NIEGO  
(1863-1923)

Amalia Skarlatou, MA History, 2010

Directed By: Professor Bernard D. Cooperman, Department of  
History

The thesis aims to be a collective biography of Joseph Niego and Lea Mitrani, two Ottoman Jews, whose lives would span a sixty-year period of profound changes for Ottoman Jewry.

Born in Edirne, Joseph and Lea were educated in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Subsequently, they were sent to Paris in order to be trained as teachers and be sent back to help “regenerate” “Oriental” Jews through a Western-style education. After their marriage, Joseph was appointed director of the agricultural school “Mikveh Israel,” established by the Alliance in the outskirts of Jaffa, where the family would spend twelve years.

Their time in an agricultural school and contact with Zionism and the Jewish pioneers in late nineteenth-century Palestine would define their lives as a married couple and as Jews in the vortex of modernization and nationalisms. While Joseph would thrive professionally, Lea would gradually lose control of her life.

EVANESCENT HAPPINESS: OTTOMAN JEWS ENCOUNTER MODERNITY  
THE CASE OF LEA MITRANI AND JOSEPH NIEGO (1863-1923)

By

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Amalia Skarlatou Levi  
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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## *Section 1 In Search of Home: The Lives of Joseph Niego and Lea Mitrani*

This thesis aims to be a collective biography of Joseph Niego and Lea Mitrani, two Ottoman Jews, whose lives would span a sixty-year period of profound changes for Ottoman Jewry.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Edirne, Joseph and Lea were educated in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Subsequently, they were sent to Paris in order to be trained as teachers and be sent back to help “regenerate” “Oriental” Jews through a Western-style education. After their marriage, Joseph was appointed director of the agricultural school “Mikveh Israel,” established by the Alliance in the outskirts of Jaffa, where the family would spend twelve years.

Their time in an agricultural school and contact with Zionism and the Jewish pioneers in late nineteenth-century Palestine would define their lives as a married couple and as Jews in the vortex of modernization and nascent nationalisms. While Joseph would thrive professionally, Lea would gradually lose control of her life. At the end of twelve years, this appointment would cripple their life together and alter them as individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to copyright constraints, the thesis does not include the rich visual material from individuals, archives and libraries in Israel, Turkey and France that I have collected during the process of doing research. It will hopefully be included in a future version of this work.

Lea was already pregnant with her first child when they arrived in “Mikveh Israel” in the early summer of 1891. Strolling along the path across the synagogue leading to a clearing in the garden, she could not have failed to notice the stones marking the graves of two children, Jacques, four years old, and Jeanne, six years old. These were children of the outgoing director, Samuel Hirsch and they had died of diphtheria only seven days apart at the end of August of 1887. Perhaps on an evening just after sunset, when the heat would be less suffocating for women dressed and corseted in the latest European fashion, Lea accompanied Mme Hirsch on a farewell visit to the graves. Samuel Hirsch’s appointment as director of Mikveh Israel was over and soon they were to return to Europe, first to Trieste by sea, then on a train to Switzerland. They longed to join their only surviving child, whom they had left with his grandfather in Geneva after their two elder ones died.

It was Lea’s first time in Palestine, but Joseph, her husband of only one month, had served nearly five years as assistant director of the agricultural school. Both she and Joseph were from Edirne and both were educated in Paris—theirs was a good match.

They had arrived in the Ottoman province of Jerusalem—*Kudüs Mutasarrıflığı* as the Ottomans called it—some days before. The sea passage had been good. It was late in the spring, and the ship that had left Constantinople had arrived with no incident in the port of Alexandria. From there they had to proceed to Port Said, in order to board another boat to Jaffa. It was only one night’s sail from Port Said to the picturesque city with its densely built houses and labyrinth-like, winding streets. This was the gateway to the Holy Land for Christian pilgrims in

search of an imaginary Orient and for Jews “ascending” to an ideal, palpable homeland.<sup>2</sup>

Long before they were able to see the shore in the early morning hours, Lea and Joseph would have stood together on the deck, taking in the inebriating fragrance of the orange, lemon, pomegranate, olive and banana trees from the groves of Jaffa.<sup>3</sup> This land was so different than Edirne, their hometown, with its dry steppe climate, cold and often snowy in winter, nested at the confluence of the river Meriç and its two tributaries Tunca and Varda.<sup>4</sup> Jaffa’s wild flora reminded Joseph of Istanbul, but then the Ottoman capital’s vegetation, Mediterranean in essence, was lush due to the abundant rainfall and a humid climate, not tropical in its force.

They had married in the end of April in Edirne. Joseph had taken some time off his duties to travel to Edirne and had rushed the wedding<sup>5</sup> in order to be back in Mikveh Israel on time to take over officially from Samuel Hirsch. In fact with the Passover holiday fast approaching, they had to marry as soon as possible, since *Halakhah* forbade weddings during *Pesach*, during the counting of Omer, or the festival of Shavuot.<sup>6</sup> Because waiting until after mid-June for Shavuot to be over was

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<sup>2</sup> The term « to ascend » in Hebrew is used to denote the act of immigrating to Eretz Israel.

<sup>3</sup> Émile Deschamps, *En Palestine: dans les districts de Saïda et de Jaffa; huit jours à Jérusalem* (Paris, Maisonneuve, 1903), 97. « ...Jaffa présente un aspect plus oriental et plus imposant, vue de son côté nord, couvert de jardins d'orangers, de citronniers, de grenadiers, de limoniers, d'oliviers, de bananiers...toute une végétation d'une abondance et d'un force tropicales. À l'époque de la floraison de sorangers, en avril, c'est une immense poussée de parfums délicieux qui s'exhale de leur verdure jusqu'a cinq ou six milles en mer, d'ou l'on peut *sentir* l'approche de la ville. Dans l'humidité des nuits sereines, l'odeur est d'une telle force, qu'elle est enivrante. »

<sup>4</sup> Samuel van Valkenburg and Ellsworth Huntington, *Europe* (New York, J. Wiley & Sons, inc.; London, Chapman & Hall, limited, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> Lea Mitrani, letter to AIU, March 6, 1891, CAHJP HM3/109 (AIU Turquie X E 183).

<sup>6</sup> Pesach (Passover) starts on the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan. Shavuot takes place in the sixth day of the month of Sivan. The counting of the Omer means the counting the forty-nine days between the two festivals.



not an option with Joseph's new appointment, the wedding took place on Wednesday, April 22, 1891, the day before the first *Seder*.

Educated in Paris, both Lea and Joseph would most probably have opted to don European clothes for the ceremony instead of the traditional ones—the velvet *bindalli* dress with the ornate, gold-couch embroidery for the bride and the festive, fur-lined *entari* for the groom.<sup>7</sup> It must have been Joseph's maternal uncle, Grand Rabbi of Edirne Raphael Behmoiras, that recited the *nisu'in* blessings over the young couple sitting under the *talamó*, the booth-like structure covered with ceremonial textiles that was erected for the wedding.<sup>8</sup>

The Chief Rabbi was like a father to Joseph. He had taken him under his protection when the boy's father died, possibly during the cholera epidemic of 1865, when Joseph was only two years old.<sup>9</sup> Raphael had hoped Joseph would choose to follow in the steps of the famous Behmoiras rabbinical family of Edirne, and had personally been involved in his education.<sup>10</sup> Joseph started out studying Torah in the

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<sup>7</sup> See the following two images, depicting weddings. Henry J. Van-Lennep, "Jewish Marriage" (Lithograph, 1862) and showcase with bride and groom (last quarter of nineteenth century) (Jewish Museum of Turkey). Literally, *bindalli* means "thousand branches." The word alludes to the intricate pattern of flowers and stems that decorate the fabric. The *entari* was a caftan open in the front, skimming the waist, and with slits in the sides. The festive ones were usually trimmed with fur. Only a few years divide the two weddings, but the evolution from traditional to European dress is apparent.

<sup>8</sup> The word *talamó* is derived from the Greek word *θάλαμος*, which means "chamber," thus describing the booth-like structure of the *talamó*. While the *talamó* in the Jewish Museum is a wooden, permanent structure, affixed on the *Ekhal* (the *Aron HaKodesh* in a Sephardic synagogue), such structures were usually made of poles over which ornate ceremonial fabrics were arranged to form the booth, as we see in the lithograph Henry J. Van-Lennep. The *talamó* with the showcase with bride and groom, comes from the old synagogue in Tekirdağ, a city near Edirne (last quarter of nineteenth century) (Jewish Museum of Turkey).

<sup>9</sup> Orhan Koloğlu, "Osmanlı Basınında 1865 Kolera Salgını İstanbul Sağlık Konferansı ve Mirza Malkom Han," *Osmanlı bilimi araştırmaları* 6, no. 2 (2005); J. N. Hays, *Epidemics and pandemics: their impacts on human history* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, c2005), 267-269. During the years between 1863-1875 the world experienced a cholera pandemic that began in the Indian subcontinent, and came to the Red Sea with the ocean traffic. Trade as well as muslim pilgrims brought the disease to Mecca, and from there it spread to the Ottoman Empire, and its provinces in Syria and Palestine, and North Africa. After that it moved to Europe and even arrived to New York.

<sup>10</sup> See more detailed information about the Behmoiras family in Chapter 2.

*meldar*,<sup>11</sup> but later on continued his studies in the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) school for boys in Edirne. In 1876, at the age of 13, he left for Istanbul, due to the Russo-Turkish war, and studied at an AIU school.

At the suggestion of his teachers, Joseph, 15 years old, was sent to the École Normale Israélite Orientale in Paris, which he finished in 1882.<sup>12</sup> He must have impressed his teachers and the Alliance administration with his love for learning and with his leadership skills. They must have considered him a good match for their work in Palestine, particularly since it was obvious to the Central Committee that agricultural development would not be possible without scientific methods. Niego was sent to Montpellier, where he was educated as an engineer agronomist. He was destined for a post in Mikveh Israel, and still a student in Montpellier he was already corresponding on agricultural matters with the school's director, Samuel Hirsch.

Joseph was already in Montpellier, when Lea Mitrani arrived in Paris in 1884. She was a graduate of the AIU school for girls in Edirne, and had left her parents, David and Amada, to continue her studies at the École Bischoffsheim.<sup>13</sup> While visiting Paris on a break from his studies in Montpellier, Niego might have been introduced to the young newcomer from Edirne by fellow students from the Ottoman Empire. How bright and promising everything must have looked to these boys and girls, "Orientals" thrown into Belle Époque Paris, charged with absorbing its lights and spreading their reflection back to their homelands.

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<sup>11</sup> *Meldar* was the equivalent of the Ashkenazi *heder*. The *meldar* offered an environment where the children learned how to read and recite Jewish prayers.

<sup>12</sup> The École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO) in Paris was established specifically to provide education for students from the Ottoman Empire, the Levant, and North Africa. These students were expected to return to the "Orient" and become teachers and directors at the Alliance network of schools. For more information, see Chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> Because the École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO) did not accept girls before 1922, girls studied at the École Bischoffsheim.

We do not know though if the two met in Paris or if their marriage was arranged through a matchmaker when Lea went back to Edirne, or at the suggestion of the AIU. We have no known correspondence between them until a letter of Lea to the Alliance, in February 1891, mentioning Joseph as her fiancé.

In the meantime, after finishing the *École Bischoffsheim* in 1887, Lea was sent as a teacher to the AIU school for girls in Tetuan in Morocco. Joseph had earned his diploma of agronomist in 1886 and had already left for Mikveh Israel. In 1890, Lea was transferred to the girls' school in Edirne, and if they had not already met before, the two Alliance graduates would have many opportunities to meet and socialize in their hometown, whenever Joseph was back to visit family or on vacation.

Marriage was a turning point, its consequences of enormous magnitude for their lives. Had they known, would they have proceeded with their decision? Would they have done something differently?

Once appointed director of the agricultural school of Mikveh Israel, Joseph's full potential as a favorite of the Alliance administration was revealed. He embraced his work with all his heart and might.

I have never worked with more passion, with more heart and soul than I did at Mikveh Israel. I devoted my whole being to that regenerative work in Palestine that I consider as a sacred calling...I was not, though, the only one to be inspired by this spirit. All of us at Mikveh Israel, students, professors, personnel and director, we worked for the best...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Niégo, Joseph. *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*. *Bulletin publié à l'occasion du soixantedixième anniversaire du Frère Grand Président J. Niégo, sous les auspices du District XI de la Béné-Bérith, avec une préface de J. Shaki* (Istanbul: L. Babok & Fils, 1933), 14.

For him, this was more than a profession; it was a calling, and an outlet for his extraordinary energy and passionate need to lead. He was everywhere at once, tirelessly forging past natural adversities, family problems, or outside opposition. He was respected and feared, admired and loathed.<sup>15</sup> He was powerful and fearless. For twelve years, while in Palestine, he never mentioned his personal problems to anyone, save to his surrogate “family,” the President and the Central Committee of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.

In the meantime, Lea’s life was spiraling out of control. She was the only woman in an establishment with male students and an all-male teaching body. If there were local female workers on the farm, doing the laundry or in the kitchen, she would not have been able to socialize with them; language and class presented insurmountable obstacles. Her efforts to create a bourgeois haven out of their home were constantly challenged and negated by the dust of the rural surroundings, by the lack of sociable company, and the constant health issues the family experienced.

Despite her elite Alliance education, she was marginalized and trivialized in an unfamiliar place. Her husband, so dedicated to his calling, truly cared about her but did not have time to do anything to change matters. Her situation was even more precarious as six pregnancies and births in 1891, 1893, 1894, 1896, 1899, and 1902, intercepted by the death of two of the children, left little time or possibility to recuperate physically and psychologically. Joseph’s reports permit us to follow her gradual disintegration that started after the death of her third child in 1896. She would

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<sup>15</sup> The voluminous correspondence between Joseph and practically all important personalities in Palestine during those years, his reports, and those of other administrators presents us with a multifaceted portrait of Joseph. The assertive and powerful way with which he dealt with every day problems with authorities, with the colonies, or the Arab population had won him many friends but also enemies.

never recuperate fully after that. The family left Palestine first for Paris, and then for Istanbul in 1903.

While his family life was crumbling around him, Joseph's public persona thrived, and his dominant role in Jewish communal affairs continued until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Never once in his public life, lectures, or writings do we see any mention of the problems he faced in his private life, confiding them only in written reports to the Alliance. Through his reports, we can follow rudimentarily the last twenty years of Lea's life, spent mostly in sanatoria in Europe. Lea died in Paris in 1923, but Joseph continued living in Istanbul, where he died in 1945.

### *Section 2 In Search of Truth: A Synthesis of Sorts*

Reconstructing Joseph and Lea's married life through archival material and the existing literature is inevitably an arduous and unbalanced endeavor. On the one hand, there is Joseph and his bigger-than-life personality, with an abundant, quasi-autobiographical outpouring of correspondence, reports and writings to the Alliance and other personalities of the era, but with an almost secretive, indomitable pride that made this charismatic speaker inarticulate when dealing with his personal life. On the other side, there is Lea, whose "voice" we only hear during the odd four years that she was producing written documents as an AIU teacher. After that we see her mirrored only in Joseph's texts, and she is defined by her role as wife and mother.

Undoubtedly, their story is not different than the fate of other contemporary couples. The writing of history is solidly based on primary sources, and it is mostly written documents that are considered worthy to be kept in archives. Until recent decades archival practices in the West have favored political, diplomatic and military history, traditionally the abode of men. Thus it is their voice that is heard through the archives, and on which historical scholarship is usually constructed. Women's lives and experiences have been either ignored, or understood through the male lens.

Joseph and Lea's story is unique because their personal failure challenges traditional scholarship and conventions about Sephardic Jews. Trying to decipher their story through the prevalent paradigm of Westernization and modernization in the Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire explains neither Joseph's subsequent actions, nor Lea's melt-down. It is their twelve years as a couple in Palestine that define his intentions and motivations, and his sweeping communal presence in the heterogeneous panorama that Istanbul presents during the first two decades of the twentieth century. And it is these twelve years that seal their fate as a husband and wife, and as a family.

If Westernization and modernization are not the pivotal forces in Joseph and Lea's story, then we need to turn our attention in another direction—to the wave of nascent nationalisms and the ways that these two individuals, Ottoman Jews living at that particular time and place, confronted, understood, and internalized the nationalizing process. As a couple, Joseph and Lea embody the difficult, often bumpy road that Balkan Jews traversed at the turn of the twentieth century in order to negotiate and fit into the architecture of modern nation-states.

Living in Palestine at the height of the First Aliyah (1881-1903), they found themselves in close contact with the land and the people, and in an environment where Zionism was not only or predominantly cultural, as was the case with the Ottoman Jews, but pragmatic and palpable. Back in Istanbul, where they returned after 1904, and up to the eve of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the city was bustling with an increased diplomatic and political activity, and was ripe with a variety of opposing views in the matter of national feelings among the Jews. Theirs was a unique experience, when compared to their coreligionists in the Jewish community in Istanbul.

Joseph Niego is usually represented as the superlative communal figure, as he himself wanted to be seen. But the scholarship is incomplete and fragmented. It does not take into consideration his family life or sojourn in Mikveh Israel. Historians have understood each period of his life as independent from the others, and thus have not deciphered the motivations behind many of his actions. Zionist historians dealing with his “Palestinian” period and weighing his role in Israel’s state building process do not consider his Ottoman, Sephardic background nor have they consistently followed what came after. Those who study him in the context of Ottoman Jewry largely ignore his particular position in the history of Zionism and how Mikveh Israel had shaped him.

As for Lea, it is her husband’s professional life, and the conditions around her that define her as an individual Sephardic woman. It is not difficult to see why Lea lost her equilibrium in Mikveh Israel: Unable to perform her profession in the all-male environment of the agricultural school, she is trivialized, confused, relegated to

the side. While Joseph is busy with “important” matters, she tries to find serenity and a home, but where is “home”? Having been uprooted very early from her hometown in the name of modernity, where does she fit in and how does the idea of return, of *nostos*, play out?

In the same way, it is crucial to understand how gender shaped the way Joseph and Lea understood and processed life. Because Joseph’s writings are readily available and give us the “big picture,” we might assume that his male point of view and life experience are dominant. But although Lea remains “silent,” the physicality and finality of her reaction to the world around her encompass and affect her and her family’s life. Through Joseph’s letters and reports, we can unearth minute details and information that partly enable us to understand how Lea grappled with modernity and tradition, Westernization and embourgeoisement, and her emotional journey through a traumatic reality. It is a pity that we have no memoir by Lea, only her very early writings.

There is no solid biographical treatment of Joseph Niego or Lea Mitrani. Our understanding of Joseph’s work has been based on his scientific reports on places he visited in Palestine and the rest of the Middle East, or on his lectures and writings, collected in a volume to honor his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>16</sup> For Lea, our information comes mainly from references in Joseph’s correspondence. While these provide us with a generic sketch of the factual conditions of their life, they are not enough to cover their

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph’s many lectures were collected in a tome honoring his fifty-year work in Jewish communal affairs. Joseph Niego, *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences. Bulletin publié à l’occasion du soixantedixième anniversaire du Frère Grand Président J. Niégo, sous les auspices du District XI de la Béné-Bérith, avec une préface de J. Shaki* (Istanbul: L. Babok & Fils, 1933).

When writing his *Histoire des juifs de Turquie* Abraham Galanté (1873-1961), renowned Turkish Jewish historian and politician, made extensive use of the reports that Niego prepared as a JCA inspector on various Jewish communities.



intellectual and personal background. It would be especially interesting to see how their life together disintegrated under the pressure of the conflicting dynamics in the relationship, brought forth by the particularities of the Jewish settlement in Palestine during the end of the nineteenth century, and the role of women in this process.

This is not, however, a thesis on the history of the First Aliyah, nor on the ideological background of Zionism, or the position of women in it. Other works have dealt with these issues in much greater depth and detail.<sup>17</sup> Rather against the effervescent background of Palestine, I will examine how historians of Ottoman Jewry during the transitional period from Empire to Republic have understood issues such as modernization, Zionism, and gender. In writing a collective biography of Joseph and Lea Niego, tracing the unforeseen twists of their lives, I will argue that they crossed conventional lines by trying to navigate the dangerous realm of nationalisms and centrifugal tendencies in the Balkans—not less treacherous than the swamps surrounding Mikveh Israel.

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding literature on Zionism, and particularly the role of women during the First Aliyah, I have examined primarily literature in English and French, and available English translations of Hebrew books or journal articles.

For information on Jewish women in the Yishuv and the First Aliyah see Margalit Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner: Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005); Mark A. Raider and Miriam B. Raider-Roth (eds.), *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002); Margalit Shilo, “The Transformation of the Role of Women in the First Aliyah, 1882-1903,” *Jewish Social Studies* 2, 2 (Winter 1996): 64-86; Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo and Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds.), *Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008); Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

For information on Zionism, see Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism: on the morality of the Jewish state* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion: dreams, designs, and realities in a century of Jewish settlement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1998).

## Chapter 2: Edirne

### Section 1 A Balkan “Alma Mater”: Edirne and its Jewish community

Contemporary accounts of Alliance teachers, who resided in the city and taught in the schools, noted the “vitality with which the memories of the history of the Jewish past are conserved” among Jews in the city and exemplified Edirne as a unique place that “has produced the majority of the good teachers in the Alliance” and where “the average share of intelligence is much greater...than among other Jewish groups in the East.”<sup>18</sup>

The big fire of 1905 that ravaged the Jewish quarter of Edirne and its thirteen synagogues sealed the community’s rupture with its past. In the wake of the fire, Jewish notables, victorious in their half-century struggle to dominate community politics—and ensure its modernization— decided to build a new synagogue on the ashes of the old ones. The grandiose new building, inaugurated in 1907, crystallized a moment of euphoria in time, when the community was demographically and financially at the height of its power, just before the onslaught of the Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913.

Before the fire, there were thirteen synagogues located in close proximity in the Jewish quarter of the city. Their names, poetic relics of expulsions and migrations

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<sup>18</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 142-144.

that had brought Jews to the area, bespoke of places that people had left behind:<sup>19</sup> Aragon, Majorca (Major), Catalan, Seville, Toledo,<sup>20</sup> Portugal;<sup>21</sup> Italy, Sicily, Pulia;<sup>22</sup> Buda;<sup>23</sup> Cefalonia;<sup>24</sup> “Alaman;”<sup>25</sup> “Gerush.”<sup>26</sup>

The new synagogue’s architecture was modeled after European synagogues, thus translating in mortar the community’s aspirations. The architect though, probably complying with the community’s desire, avoided incorporating into his design Moorish elements that were all the rage in synagogue architecture of the era.<sup>27</sup>

An eclectic building, the Edirne synagogue combined various contemporary architectural elements: While its façade was built in an austere neoclassical way that resembled the monumental architecture of buildings built by other Ottoman minorities in the Balkans,<sup>28</sup> the cupolas of the twin towers of the synagogue are definitely European in style, resembling the cupola of the Great Synagogue in Rome and the cupolas of the Grande Synagogue of Brussels. Its imposing interior was modeled after the Tempelgasse synagogue in Leopoldstadt, Vienna, and the Dohány

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<sup>19</sup> R. Bali, “Edirne Yahudileri,” 2.

[http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/edirne\\_yahudileri.pdf](http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/edirne_yahudileri.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Synagogues belonging to the “Spanish” Jewish community.

<sup>21</sup> Synagogues belonging to the “Portuguese” Jewish community.

<sup>22</sup> Synagogues belonging to the “Italian” Jewish community.

<sup>23</sup> Synagogue belonging to the “Hungarian” Jewish community.

<sup>24</sup> Synagogue belonging to the “Greek” Jewish community.

<sup>25</sup> Synagogue belonging to the Ashkenazi community.

<sup>26</sup> “Expulsion.”

<sup>27</sup> Used for indoors and outdoors decoration in architecture, the Moorish style was adopted by European Jews eager to showcase their difference from the Christian majority. For Jews, who through emancipation had started feeling secure and optimistic in their European towns, looking different or exotic was a harmless way to indicate pride in a (constructed) Eastern identity through a style that was not used in church architecture. Sephardic communities in Europe (i.e. the Sephardic synagogue in Vienna), they would use Moorish style to allude to their particularism and their heritage that they considered more distinguished than that of Ashkenazi Jews. Through its Moorish-style synagogue, the Viennese Turkish Jewish congregation made a conscious effort to be seen as unrelated to Hassidic Jews from Galicia and to poor *shtetl* émigrés flocking to Vienna, when the Sephardic synagogue was being built. For more information, see Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 81-85.

<sup>28</sup> See for example the exterior of the Chalki Theological school at the island of Chalki, Istanbul, and the façade of the church at the Cunda Adası in Ayvalık, Asia Minor.

Street synagogue in Budapest, while the *Ekhal*<sup>29</sup> was reminiscent of the Rue Victoire synagogue in Paris. The new synagogue was truly magnificent, and no other synagogue in the Balkans resembled it in size or opulence.

When trying to understand the building's eclectic character, we might compare it to the eclectic synagogues that were built towards the turn of the century (1890-1900) in Europe, and for which “perhaps the designers hoped that by combining stylistic features from many countries and all ages they could produce something Jewish—international, appearing in all periods of European and Middle Eastern history, and not conventionally Christian. In their eclecticism and joyous abundance, the synagogues...may have satisfied Christians who wanted Jews kept at arm's length as well as Jews who did not want to imitate church architecture.”<sup>30</sup>

The break with the past, implicit in the building's underlying rhetoric, was not only stylistic, but also conceptual: while before each of the thirteen synagogues served its own, small constituency—their dimensions reflecting their numerical parochialism—the new synagogue had pews for nine hundred men and three hundred women. It was the biggest synagogue in the Balkans and third in size in Europe. This change in dimensions probably reflected a change in decorum and in the nature of the service.

In 1907, the construction was finished and the “Great Synagogue”—as it was named—was dedicated. It was only five years before the Balkan wars and seven to the First World War, events that ushered the Jewish community into an era of instability and decline. From the approximately 17,000 Jews in the beginning of the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ekhal* is the term that is traditionally used to describe the *Aron HaKodesh* in Sephardic synagogues.

<sup>30</sup> Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning*, 89.

century, there will be 13,000 at the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, and about 2,000 left in the wake of the Second World War (and only 3 by 1998).<sup>31</sup>

In 1934, the pogroms known as “Thracian Events” (*Trakya olayları*) were only the culmination of a series of events since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. As was the case with other minorities during the 1930s, Jews were also being harassed through legislative restrictions, loss of governmental jobs, boycotts against Jewish businesses, a slandering press, and unfavorable public opinion. One of the central points against Jews was their use of Ladino, and their subsequent adoption of French instead of Turkish.<sup>32</sup>

The events that started out with verbal intimidation and continued with physical attacks were carried out by the mob and instigated by ultranationalist journalists and government agents. Events took place in Edirne, but also other Thracian cities, such as Çanakkale, Tekirdağ and Kırklareli. Houses were stoned and shops were destroyed, and verbal or other attacks against Jews were carried out. Feeling betrayed by the State’s delay in putting order and awarding justice, Jews started fleeing those cities by the thousands. The events fitted the policy of Ankara to diminish non-Muslim presence or influence in frontier areas.<sup>33</sup> Although the Thracian events must not be seen as part of an orchestrated, State-sponsored anti-Semitism, they were an expression of the xenophobia characterizing the two first decades of the Republic, and eventually signaled the community’s downfall.

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<sup>31</sup> Rifat Bali, “Edirne Yahudileri,”

[http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/edirne\\_yahudileri.pdf](http://www.rifatbali.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/edirne_yahudileri.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> For an extensive account of the events, see R. Bali, *Trakya Olayları* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> For more on the subject, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries* (University of California Press, 2000), 162-163.

For centuries though, Edirne had been a destination point for Jews fleeing expulsion and persecution in their homelands. Although we know of individual Jews visiting the city already since before the destruction of the Second Temple, we can only be sure of a Jewish settlement in the city from the beginning of the Byzantine era (fifth century C.E.). Sephardic Jews overthrew the supremacy of the “Gregos”—a term that fifteenth-century Sephardic exiles used to differentiate themselves from the autochthon Greek-speaking Jews—after their arrival to the city in late fourteenth century, and then in larger numbers after 1492.<sup>34</sup> The city had an important Karaite community,<sup>35</sup> and subsequent immigration of Central and Eastern European Jews created a sizeable Ashkenazi population: Hungarian Jews (1376), French Jews (1394), Bavarian, Bohemian and Silesian Jews (after 1454) and others escaping persecution in their lands opted to immigrate to the Ottoman city.

Edirne was known as a mystic and spiritual city, where Sephardi exiles and rabbis continued producing religious, philosophical, and literary work. One of these personalities was Joseph Caro (1488-1575), who started writing his masterpiece, *Beit Yosef*, in Edirne, having arrived there after 1497 from the Iberian Peninsula. Caro eventually settled in Safed, becoming a leader in the rabbinical schools of the city.

The city as a whole experienced an elevated intellectual and cultural activity during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The concentration of large numbers of exiles in Edirne, the stimulating confrontation with the local Romaniote culture, the circulation of ideas made possible by publishing, and the presence of libraries and relative prosperity of an economic élite that supported scholarly and

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<sup>34</sup> In 1492, after the *Reconquista*, Jews residing in the Iberian Peninsula were expelled by decree.

<sup>35</sup> Karaite Judaism believes in the preeminence of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), and rejects Rabbinical Judaism and the Talmud.

cultural activity all contributed to the explosion of creativity and innovation during this period.<sup>36</sup>

Learned men such as Mordecai Comtino (15<sup>th</sup> century), Rabbi Joseph Caro (16<sup>th</sup> century), the Ibn Verga family and Rabbi Avtalyon b. Mordecai Modena (16<sup>th</sup> century); the printers Solomon and Joseph Jabez, who printed Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* (sixteenth century); learned rabbis such as Rabbi Isaac Zarfati, Rabbi Isaac Molkho. The city was also an important center of Jewish music, its cantors being famous and sought after in far away congregations in Bulgaria and Romania. The mystical choral society of Maftirim that sung religious hymns influenced by the Muslim Dervish brotherhoods was founded in Edirne in the seventeenth century.

In fact, through its prosperity, and intellectual appeal, the Jewish community of Adrianople came to be regarded as

the alma mater of all the communities in Thrace, in Bulgaria, in short of all communities that had sprouted from the coasts of Marmara sea to the faraway Danube. Only one city could equal it in prestige—Salonica, which was influential in the Orient, Thessaly and Greece.<sup>37</sup>

‘*Αδριανούπολις*, as was her Greek name, (*Engl.* Adrianople, *Fr.* Andrinople, *Tr.* Edirne) was named after the Roman emperor Hadrian, when it was built in 125 C.E. An important center during Byzantine times, the city had been captured by the Ottomans in 1361. It became a major Ottoman commercial, military, and economic center in the Eastern Balkans, especially as a major staging area for Ottoman

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<sup>36</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry : A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 49-50.

<sup>37</sup> A. Navon, “Preface” in Albert Confino, *Scènes de la vie juive en Orient* (Algeria, 1942).

offensives into the Balkans and beyond.<sup>38</sup> Its importance is underscored by the fact that in the early 1900s Austria, Britain, France, Russia, and Bulgaria all maintained consulates in the city, and there were also foreign schools, hospitals and various religious institutions under their protection.<sup>39</sup>

Edirne's aura was tied to the fact that, from 1365 until the conquest of Istanbul in 1453, it was the capital city of the Ottoman Empire. During this period, it was probably the largest and most important Ottoman Jewish center. Even after Istanbul's conquest, Edirne remained the preferred residence for many of the Sultans, as for example for Sultan Mehmed IV "the Hunter," who preferred hunting game outside his palace in the outskirts of the town over the politics of the capital. It was at his palace in Edirne, in 1666, that Sabbetai Zvi, the false Messiah, was brought for interrogation by the Sultan's closest advisers, while Mehmet IV himself secretly observed the proceedings from behind his grilled window.<sup>40</sup>

Many cite as reasons for the widespread messianic fervor that Sabbetai Zvi had aroused among his coreligionists the slow decline in the economic fortunes of the Sephardim, the uncertainty and chaos that reigned in the Ottoman Empire, and the persisting misery of exile.<sup>41</sup> These are also connected to the "crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." Zvi's conversion to Islam, when offered the choice between that and death, brought about a wave of conversions, both by Jews and

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<sup>38</sup> D. Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>39</sup> Avigdor Levy, "The Siege of Edirne (1912-1913) as Seen by a Jewish Eyewitness: Social, Political, and Cultural Perspectives," in *Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History, Fifteenth through the Twentieth Century*, ed. Avigdor Levy (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 156.

<sup>40</sup> Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 262-263, 280. For more on Zvi, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi; the Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 59.



Christians, during the Sultan's reign that contemporary European observers were at a loss to explain. So numerous were they that a new "Law of the New Muslim" was compiled in 1676 to regulate the conversion process<sup>42</sup>.

The legacy of Zvi's conversion was enduring. While many converted sincerely, others renounced Zvi and repented, while others continued living as Sabbateans (*Dönme*), outwardly Muslims, but secretly continuing Jewish/messianic beliefs and practices. In fact "it has increasingly come to light that some of the leading rabbinical figures of the Ottoman Empire continued to be secret Sabbateans long after the movement appeared to have run its course." These include Samuel Primo, the rabbi of Edirne until 1708. Sabbateanism, essentially a symptom of intellectual and social crisis among Ottoman Jews, added to the widespread malaise and feelings of demoralization, especially among the rabbinical elite, and the decline in religiosity and religious knowledge among the masses.<sup>43</sup>

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of decline. Other cities in the Empire rose in importance, especially port cities such as Salonica and Izmir, beyond Istanbul, that were better positioned than Edirne to process the growing international trade of the empire and forward supplies and goods to the Balkan and Anatolian hinterlands. By the twentieth century, after the independence movements in the Balkans, and the creation of new states, the Ottoman Empire's territorial holdings

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<sup>42</sup> In the Ottoman context, conversion to Islam was not simply a matter of religion, since it "permitted Jews and Christians to share in the benefits enjoyed by the majority Muslim population of the empire, and relieved them of the political and financial disabilities of their 'tolerated' status." See Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923*, 281.

See also Marc Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Cengiz Şişman, "A Jewish Messiah in the Ottoman Court: Sabbatai Sevi and the Emergence of a Judeo-Islamic Community (1666-1720)" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Aron Rodrigue, "The Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of Ladino Literary Culture," in *Cultures of the Jews*, edited by David Biale, (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 870.

in Europe had receded to the small coastal plain between Edirne and Istanbul—a retreat from the sixteenth century, when the Empire stretched to the gates of Vienna.

By the mid-nineteenth century the Jewish community in Edirne began flourishing anew. New industries that were introduced in the region gave Jews new commercial areas of involvement and liberated them from the stagnation of previous decades. But the nineteenth century is also characterized by the appearance of new nation-states and Jewish communities would have to change and adapt to new masters. The nineteenth century saw also the gradual demise of the Ottoman Levant as an Eastern Sephardi common cultural area (*Kulturbereich*).<sup>44</sup>

The appearance of borders in a previously homogeneous and fluid area affected Edirne's position as a regional center and capital. Situated at the conjunction of the Greek and Bulgarian borders, Edirne would eventually be cut off from the commercial arteries that for centuries had permitted it to play a leading role in the regional economy. Gradually, it would turn into a provincial city of little consequence and its Jewish community, isolated from the other Jewish communities of the Balkan Judeo-Spanish world, would enter a period of decline.

In the meantime, for a short window of fifty years just before the turn of the century—between 1860 and 1910—and before the onslaught of the wars, a vibrant intellectual life in the city and close contact with European Jewish communities not only at the commercial but also at the intellectual level had created an atmosphere of exuberance and a vibrancy that was ripe for novelties, experimentation, and learning. Maskilim such as Barukh Mitrani and Abraham Danon were stellar personalities

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<sup>44</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, xxiii.

active in Adrianople. Thus it was that the Alliance Israélite Universelle found a fertile place for its ideals in the Ottoman Empire. With the establishment of a boys' and girls' school in Edirne, the city became especially important for the organization.

Contemporary accounts of Alliance teachers, who resided in the city and taught in the schools, noted the

vitality with which the memories of the history of the Jewish past are conserved” among Jews in the city and exemplified Edirne as a unique place that “has produced the majority of the good teachers in the Alliance” and where “the average share of intelligence is much greater...than among other Jewish groups in the East.”<sup>45</sup>

Soon everything would be irrevocably changed. The two Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I dealt a decisive blow to a city that due to its geography had become a major battlefield. Thousands of Jews had to flee Edirne following the wars. Constant warfare of the first decades of the twentieth century contributed to the demographic decline of the community through emigration to Palestine and America. After 1923, with the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Edirne Jewish community, as other Jewish communities in the newly established state, went through a laborious—and often traumatic—process of becoming Turkish.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 142-144.

<sup>46</sup> The Jewish community of Turkey, following the Treaty of Lausanne, had renounced its minority rights, as instituted by the treaty. For a detailed analysis of the process of “Turkification” of the Jews in Turkey, see Rifat Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri: Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945)* (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 1999).

Section 2 “Molded and Shaped”<sup>47</sup> by the Alliance Israélite Universelle

The lives of Joseph Niego and Lea Mitrani were inextricably tied to, and influenced by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), first as students in its schools, later as teachers and employees, but mostly as Sephardi Jews living in the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Jewish communal identity in the Ottoman Empire underwent profound transformation in the period from mid-nineteenth century to 1923. Before the 1840s, Ottoman Jews—as was the case with the other non-Muslim religious communities in the Ottoman Empire, such as Christians and Armenians—led a relatively autonomous religious, social, and cultural existence. Jewish life was Judeo-Spanish in character, amalgamated with local elements, the inheritance of Romaniote Jews, and the presence of Karaites and Ashkenazim. It was during the Reform period, defined by the Imperial Edicts of 1839 and 1856, that the idea of modernization as Westernization was cemented into the Ottoman Empire.<sup>48</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, the original spirit of capitulations had changed, and through the coercion of foreign powers, an increasing number of non-Muslim Ottoman subjects were acquiring extra-territorial privileges up to then accorded only to diplomats and merchants of foreign states. Enjoying foreign protection, Ottoman

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Niego, in the *Bullettin Semestriel de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1901, p. 152, cited in *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition : The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, edited by Aron Rodrigue, 97.

<sup>48</sup> The 1839 *Hatt-ı Şerif* of Gülhane was named after the imperial garden where it was proclaimed. The 1856 Edict was the *Hatt-ı Hümayun*.

subjects came increasingly under the sphere of influence of European powers and aspired to “modern life” in Europe.<sup>49</sup> The establishment of foreign, missionary schools in the Empire—eager to compensate for the lack of a state-sponsored Ottoman educational system—exacerbated the rift between an Empire that vainly sought to contain its subjects and the non-Muslims subjects that sought alternatives elsewhere.

Mesmerized by the Western rhetoric equating modernization to Westernization, many Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, the Levant, Middle East, and North Africa understood progress as the adoption and emulation of European ways in language, dress, living, and education. In this atmosphere, the nineteenth century saw Western colonial and imperialistic powers vie for domination of the “Orient.” The destabilization of the area, the so called “Eastern Question,” brought forth by their territorial rapaciousness and disdain for local populations, had already begun in late eighteenth century.

Although scholarship usually sees Ottoman Jews as objects of the *mission civilisatrice* of Western Jews, recent scholarship has shown the need to abandon this finite paradigm and challenge our assumptions. Fatma Müge Göçek argues against the notion of the omnipotence of the West, and considers the agency of the local societies.<sup>50</sup> Mark Levine challenges the “teleological narrative of Europe as the prime mover of modernity and everyone else as responding to it,” and speaks of “a

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<sup>49</sup> Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream : The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 468-477.

<sup>50</sup> Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demis of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 134, 138.

polycentric world with long-standing interconnections and no dominant center.”<sup>51</sup> Commenting on the pivotal role that Westernization and modernization have occupied in the scholarship on modern Ottoman Jewish history, and Ottoman history as a whole, Sarah Abrevaya Stein remarks that scholarship has been focusing on how Ottoman Jewries responded to events that were motivated by or took place in Western Europe and not on the ways they were agents themselves. This approach, though, makes them seem as “agents” of Western Europe and strips them of their place within the indigenous Ottoman social and economic fabric.<sup>52</sup>

Under the light of this new approach, Ottoman Jews resurface not as hapless “Orientals” and objects of Western Jewish philanthropy, but as pragmatic individuals, who aptly realized that an Alliance education, especially the linguistic skills it offered, would render them competitive in the arena of commerce, particularly so with Greeks and Armenians.

Ambitiously set out to “regenerate” “Oriental” Jews, Western Jewry would eventually become part of contemporary European colonialism. Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, the legal status, occupational distribution, cultural habits, and religious outlook of Western European Jews had undergone a fundamental transformation.<sup>53</sup> Emancipation, acculturation, integration were all terms that had taken them by storm. Taking advantage of the intellectual, social, and political climate of the time, they boldly broke out of the margins of society, where they had

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Levine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries Since 1492.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, edited by Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David Sorkin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 341-342.

<sup>53</sup> Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 1.

been relegated up to then. For French Jews that had been granted citizenship and equal rights in 1790-91 and were steeped in Enlightenment and *Haskalah* ideals,<sup>54</sup> the road to integration was understood as being possible only through education. Only through education—they believed—Jews would be able to encounter modernity, and free themselves from the backwards traits that had hindered their progress.

One of the catalysts for the involvement of Western Jews with the “Eastern Jewish Question” was the Damascus Affair of 1840, a ritual murder libel that brought the situation of the “Oriental” Jews to the limelight and pushed their Western brethren to become proactive on their behalf.<sup>55</sup> New developments in transportation and communications, especially in the printing press, made news travel much more speedily than before. Daily bulletins in the press about the state of the Jewish community in Damascus resulted in increased self-awareness, solidarity, and involvement of communities from the Caribbean to Germany and Poland. Western Jews became intent on helping Eastern Sephardim, now spectators in the theatre of European imperialism in the Near East.

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<sup>54</sup> *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment, was a movement that had started in mid-eighteenth century in Germany and gradually spread to the rest of Europe through the nineteenth century. *Haskalah* promoted Jewish emancipation and integration into European society through the adoption of enlightenment ideas, increase in secular studies, the predominance of reason over superstition and prejudice, the productivization of Jews and the transformation of traditional Jewish social patterns through vocational and agricultural occupations.

<sup>55</sup> In 1840, the Damascus libel provides European Jews with the opportunity to showcase the fruits of their newly attained emancipation. Their campaign on behalf of Damascus Jews, with British Jewry taking the lead, resulted in the Ottoman Sultan issuing a decree condemning the incident and was a diplomatic success for Montefiore and Crémieux. This newly found awareness spurred the creation of societies that targeted Jewish involvement in common causes, such as education, through philanthropy and activism. The creation of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris (1860), and of B’nai B’rith in New York (1864) can be tied to this series of events. In the case of the Alliance, its “call to arms” is global in nature, while for B’nai B’rith, a focal point for its founding members was the lack of a collective response by American Jewry during the Damascus libel, when compared to the Jewish response in Britain. For more information, see Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

For French and German Jews, the discourse of “regeneration” was central. As neophytes of their newly emancipated status, AIU founders upheld views typical of bourgeois nineteenth-century European reformers, who through education and social engineering aimed to generate a new kind of citizen, useful to the State, who would in turn produce a wholesale improvement (“regeneration”) of the lower classes. Through this, they became consciously or unconsciously part of Western expansionism and imperialism—economic, territorial, or cultural. In the Middle East, they discovered communities that were “backwards,” “superstitious,” and “uncivilized.” They believed that it was this image that Jews projected, which caused anti-Semitism. If Oriental Jews wanted their position to ameliorate, they would have to “regenerate” and become “civilized,” and in this way, they would be able to fight bigotry and anti-Semitism.<sup>56</sup>

Founded in 1860, the Alliance Israélite Universelle led the way for the “regeneration,” and “moral progress” of “Oriental” communities. Lack of education, ignorance, superstition, and bigotry were all traits of the “Orientals” that needed to be eradicated. The newly founded organization appealed to the “Jews of the world” to come to its help in order to “moralize those who have been corrupted...; enlighten those who have been blinded...; ...defend those who have been calumniated,...; rescue all those who have been persecuted,... .”<sup>57</sup> French and German Jews identified the situation of Sephardic Jews in the mid-nineteenth century with their own situation in

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<sup>56</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 7-10.

<sup>57</sup> “Appel à tous les Israélites,” in AIU, *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 10-11, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition : The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 8-9.



the last decades of the eighteenth century. They felt that since they had been able to “regenerate” and integrate, they had to help other Jews to become modern citizens in their host countries.<sup>58</sup>

But for the Jews of the Balkans, the Levant and the Middle East, modernization was not an endogenous process. Modernization became inextricably tied to the “civilizing mission” (*mission civilisatrice*) of French, and less often German, Jewish organizations, and thus acquired unmistakably Westernizing traits. As already stated, this was not the case only with the Jews of the Empire, but also with other minorities and the Ottoman upper classes.

Established in various cities across the Ottoman Empire and the Levant, AIU schools were instrumental in the aspirations of local élites for modernization. These local élites were composed mostly of Francos,<sup>59</sup> of bankers, financiers, and rich merchants, and also of a few local intellectuals animated by the *Haskalah*. These local elites sought out the support of Western Jews in order to reform Eastern Sephardic communities—while in the process securing their own political superiority in communal affairs.

From the 1850s through 1923, the struggle between community élites and traditionalists in the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire was essentially cultural and educational in nature. During the 1850s and 1860s, the conflict centered on the establishment of new schools. The traditionalist rabbis were not only opposed

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<sup>58</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 74.

<sup>59</sup> *Francos* were small Italian and other West-European groups of Jews, mostly Italian speaking, found in major commercial cities, such as Izmir, Istanbul and Salonica.

ideologically to a secular, European education; they also feared for their livelihood since they earned their livelihood through teaching at the *meldars*. Conservatives also resented the “usurpation” of control over communal affairs by secularists, particularly by the Francos. It was these secularists who had requested from the Alliance to found schools in the large Jewish centers of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>60</sup>

In any case, these schools came to fill the lack of a state-sponsored educational system. Despite the *Tanzimat* reforms, the state was remarkably slow in establishing a robust, centralized educational system that would forge a common identity among the multi-ethnic, polyglot elements of the Empire. Up to then, education had been the prerogative of each community.

The *haskalah* movement found fertile ground in Edirne when Joseph Halevy<sup>61</sup> arrived and spearheaded the establishment of an AIU school in Edirne. A. Navon, director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale, speaking about the school in 1923, described how

on a winter evening, in the year 1855 or 1856, the faithful going for services saw at the entrance of the Portuguese synagogue, a young man dressed like a Bulgarian villager....They decided to guide him to...Rabbi Danon...The foreigner impressed all...He had read everything. The entire Bible, the Talmud, the commentaries...the

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<sup>60</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 72-82.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Halevy was born in 1827 in Edirne. He studied in France, and after teaching in the AIU school in his hometown and in Bucharest was later on sent on various expeditions (one of them being Yemen). He was distinguished for his erudition, knowledge of languages (he spoke Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hungarian, and later Ethiopian, and a series of dead languages such as Assyrian), and adventurous spirit. He was passionate about Hebrew, wrote in Hebrew (among his works was a poem under the title *Tikvati* (“My Hope”), proposed the establishment of a society for the advancement of Hebrew, and translated works of Schiller, Byron and Hugo in Hebrew. He transmitted his passion to his student Eliezer Perlman (who later became Eliezer Ben Yehuda). During his explorations, he discovered the Ethiopian Jews. He died in 1917. For more information on his life, see the chapter “Éthiopie: Joseph Halévy (1827-1917), l’indomptable” in Élisabeth Antébi, *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*.

rabbinical literature...He was speaking the language of the prophets. Everyone was enthusiastic, delirious. And all vied for accepting Rabbi Yossef in their homes, and for taking care of him...<sup>62</sup>

In fact Joseph Halevy was instrumental in subverting the traditionalists of the city, who, having first admired the newcomer, soon understood that they had “warmed a snake in their bosom.” Halevy started by criticizing traditional education and the way the local rabbis exploited the populace. He then started teaching French, and other “cursed studies” and soon he had gathered around him a group of notables, who were longing for reform. According to A. Navon, the rift that arose in the community was between on one side the wealthy and the traditionalists that backed up the Hahamim, and on the other side the Frankos and the maskilim, who included many young and audacious members from the commercial class that supported the renaissance and regeneration of the community in order to be competitive in the new order of things.

In 1865, Halevy and other notables of the community sent a letter to Paris, requesting the Alliance to open a school in their city. The organization agreed to open a boys’ school in the city and sent Rabbi Felix Bloch, graduate of the Rabbinical Seminary in Paris, as its first director. Describing the effect that Bloch’s top hat had when he would go to the synagogue, A. Navon says:

That top hat, it was the whole of Europe that entered [in the synagogue] with him...It is the symbol of science...It indicates your status as a learned man...It is not an ordinary head covering: it is a “diploma hat.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> A. Navon, “La foundation de l’ École de l’Alliance à Andrinople,” *Paix et Droit*, April 1, 1923, 13-14.

<sup>63</sup> A. Navon, “La foundation de l’ École de l’Alliance à Andrinople,” *Paix et Droit*, April 1, 1923, 15.

Till that time, boys in Edirne had frequented *meldars (Talmudei-Torah)*<sup>64</sup> against which the AIU was vehemently outspoken and critical. AIU teachers regarded such traditional schools with disdain, and as a source of superstition and ignorance, and as unfit to prepare students for modern life. Education in these schools consisted of one or two years learning the Hebrew alphabet, and to read.

A report on Jewish schooling in the city of Edirne in 1874 reveals that Talmud Torah schools still reigned during that period.<sup>65</sup> While the AIU boys' school had 120 students and the girls' school had 100, the Talmud-Tora had 700 students studying under 16 rabbis. The report does not fail to attack the education that the children received in the Talmud Torah as well as the hygienic conditions of the school. According to the report, only 4 students were learning the Talmud, and 8 were able to read Rashi, while the rest struggled with the more elementary Torah. Biblical history and Hebrew grammar were completely ignored, and there was little discipline. As for the physical conditions at the school, the rooms were narrow and the children were generally pale and suffered from fever. The report also mentions two other Talmud Torah schools with a total of 350 students. One is directed by Mr. Benbassan and the other by the Mitranis, father and son.<sup>66</sup>

There were also some 200 children not attending school at all; these would just roam the streets, peddling, playing, or just “vagabonding.” Although there was a vocational school in Edirne, established by the Ottoman government, and open to all

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<sup>64</sup> Religious schools. They were called *meldars* in Judeo-Spanish.

<sup>65</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, July 1, 1874, 48-50.

<sup>66</sup> This refers to Barukh Mitrani, an important personality of the era in Edirne.

minorities too, Jewish parents did not send their children to it out of concern over kosher food.

AIU teacher M. Fresco, visited three *meldars* in Istanbul and reported that he had been “unable to remain more than a few minutes in that oppressive atmosphere.” “One’s heart sinks,” he wrote, “and one is filled with pity and disgust” when entering such a place. He describes the place as “a small room of between eight and ten square meters,” where on a “dirty and greasy floor, there are seated from thirty to forty unclean children.” He found ridiculous the way the Biblical text was translated in “an archaic, immutable Judeo-Spanish” and was “chanted in singsong... whined, not to be understood.”<sup>67</sup>

For girls even such opportunities were lacking. Some girls of preschool age frequented “nurseries” established by *maestras* (women schoolteachers). While some would teach the girls to read and write in Ladino, the *maestras* were usually there just to supervise the children, who sat all day at her home with nothing to do. Other girls were educated by their mothers. Many girls of disadvantaged families also frequented missionary schools that gave subventions to the parents, but these schools were often controversial since they were accused of proselytizing.<sup>68</sup> Girls of rich families were

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<sup>67</sup> As cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle*, 116-117.

<sup>68</sup> Esther Benbassa, “L’éducation féminine en Orient: l’école de filles de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle à Galata, Istanbul (1879-1912),” [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hes\\_0752-5702\\_1991\\_num\\_10\\_4\\_1582](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hes_0752-5702_1991_num_10_4_1582). In this article (page 533), Esther Benbassa gives a concise portrait of boys and girls’ schooling in nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. She cites statistical data showing that by mid-nineteenth century the number of Muslim girls attending school was higher in comparison to that of Jewish girls. But by the end of the nineteenth century this has changed, and the ratio of boys and girls both in the State schools as well as minority schools was one girl to three boys. In foreign primary schools, the ratio was nearly equivalent.

home-schooled by a religious teacher or educated in foreign (mostly missionary) schools.

The AIU schools' intensive use of the French language and glorification of Western culture meant a "Gallicization" of education. This system facilitated the creation of a French speaking, West-oriented *bourgeoisie* and upper class that effectively sidestepped rabbinical authorities and came to exert control of the communal affairs. This newly "Gallicized" bourgeoisie superimposed French culture on local Sephardim. Eventually, although the Alliance was not founded to serve French foreign policy, the zeal of its teachers to westernize and Gallicize came to promote, intentionally or not, French interests abroad.<sup>69</sup>

These were the circumstances under which "Oriental" Jews came into contact with the "militantly westernizing teaching corps"<sup>70</sup> of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. AIU established its first school in Tetuan, Morocco, in 1862, and in the Ottoman Empire, in Baghdad, then an Ottoman province, in 1864. The first school for boys in the Empire's European lands was established in Volos, today in Greece, in 1865, and in Edirne in 1867. In 1913, the system encompassed 183 institutions attended by 43,700 pupils. The Alliance was particularly active in the Ottoman Empire, since the authorities did not pose major difficulties to the society's schools. This was not only due to the fact that the Empire was weakened by the constant

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<sup>69</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition : The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle*, 5. For the AIU, see also idem, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1990).

demand for concessions by the European powers, but also to the fact that there was no alternative of a general Ottoman educational system that the Empire could juxtapose.

Although initially conservatives were suspicious towards the AIU schools, eventually they understood what the Francos and the *maskilim* had already understood: That if they were to be regarded well, to fight blood libels, and to withstand Greek and Armenian competition in the field of commerce and business, they needed to acquire new skills through education.<sup>71</sup> Community notables were also eager to rectify the Jewish community and eradicate the streets from the poor, the destitute, and the beggars.

Contemporary accounts describe the disadvantaged position of Jews in comparison to other minorities. In a 1875 report about the advantages of opening a AIU school, Nissim Behar says the following, when describing the Jewish quarter of Balat:

The Jews of Balat, especially those of the lower class, have a seedy appearance...They are quick-tempered, loud, selfish...They have many natural gifts, but their vices dull or deaden their intelligence...They have more superstition than religion...The Jewish people are the least well considered here and the most despised; the Jews are the dregs of society....A people may be persecuted unjustly, but when they are looked upon with general disdain, it must be that to some extent they are deserving of it. ...In order to uplift the new generation, we must spread instruction and honest labor throughout the capital; we must open a school for boys, a school for girls...The Armenians and Greeks understood this a long time ago...Thus they can be found working in all the offices and practicing every profession...<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 83-85.

<sup>72</sup> As cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle*, 137-139.

In time, traditionalists came to understand—just as the modernists were preaching—that poverty, backwardness, and ignorance prevented Jews from being competitive in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman socioeconomic environment, and gradually came to accept the need for a new approach to education. The schools of the Alliance were also particularly popular among parents, who saw that through education their children were better suited to succeed professionally and helped them advance in the social structure. The schools were also frequently visited by the foreign consuls established in the city, who were very interested to learn about the program of studies and provided the children with gifts.<sup>73</sup>

The most revolutionary aspect, though, of the establishment of AIU schools in the Ottoman Empire, and one with far reaching effects, was that for the first time girls were able to attend schools. In the press of the time, women were hailed as the ones who would “Westernize” their families, especially among the younger generations.

AIU-sponsored female education became a catalyst of changes for traditional communities. For the Alliance, the regeneration of “Oriental” Jews was contingent upon the regeneration of women. AIU believed that beyond secular and religious subjects, an education that provided high moral standards and civilized (i.e. Western) manners was valuable, because it prepared the students for their role as wives and mothers.

The program of studies was different for boys and girls. Although they were taught the same subjects, girls devoted fewer hours to their studies, while they had to spend one or two hours a day on needlework or sewing, qualities that were

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<sup>73</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, July 3, 1871, 131.



traditionally sought after in a woman in Eastern and Western societies, and that the Alliance promoted as an appropriate female occupation.

As for vocational education, different apprenticeships were being offered to girls and boys. Girls had fewer options when choosing, and they were mainly directed to occupations that would eventually help them to find employment acceptable for women, such as millinery, dressmaking, lace making, or laundry, while boys were trained to become cobblers, mechanics, blacksmiths, watchmakers, painters, woodcarvers etc.

Eventually, the Alliance education was a product of its time. Although the Alliance had aimed to free women from the yoke of traditional society, the bourgeois system of values, implicit in the normal and vocational education its schools provided, perpetuated the role of the woman as wife and mother, and as identity shapers. Still, female education in Eastern Jewish communities was a revolutionary step that permitted women to come into contact with contemporary advances. At the same time, it firmly put women in the midst of nationalisms, and helped create a proto-national identity.

The results of AIU schooling in the Ottoman Empire were multi-faceted. Through the Alliance schools Jewish communities were imbued in French language and culture, and taught new trades. The associations of its alumni became in time politicized groups that were able to exert influence and pressure in community politics. In the years leading up to World War I, it was some of the alumni of the Alliance who would enthusiastically support Zionism in the Ottoman Empire.

Just before the start of the First World War, upper middle-class Jewish students started looking to other options, such as secular schools, missionary schools, and the newly established (1915) B'nai B'rith Jewish Lyceum.<sup>74</sup> Despite that, mass education continued taking place in Alliance schools until the 1920s and 1930s. In an age of rising nationalisms, AIU had wanted to supply “Oriental” Jews with an educational infrastructure that in essence was a prerogative of the nation-state. It would be these states that, once having secured control over their citizens, would bring along the demise of the Alliance.<sup>75</sup>

Analyzing the impact of the Alliance education on local communities, E. Benbassa and A. Rodrigue say:

Cultural Westernization in the Judeo-Spanish heartland overdetermined a process of change that separated the Jewish communities from the culture that the rulers slowly imposed on their subjects. The polyglot Judeo-Spanish communities were singularly ill-prepared to meet the new nation-state that was to become the norm in the Balkans by the twentieth century. ...The half-century Alliance dominance in most Judeo-Spanish communities considerably complicated the response of the Eastern Sephardim to the irruption of the nation-state, which carved up irrevocably the old Judeo-Spanish center that had remained a single unit during four centuries of Ottoman rule.<sup>76</sup>

### *Section 3 “Assiduity and Perseverance”: Joseph and Lea’s Early Schooling*

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<sup>74</sup> The school was established with the initiative of Joseph Niego. For more information on his activities during the “Istanbul” Chapter.

<sup>75</sup> Esther Benbassa, “L’éducation féminine en Orient: l’école de filles de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle à Galata, Istanbul (1879-1912),” 530, [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hes\\_0752-5702\\_1991\\_num\\_10\\_4\\_1582](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hes_0752-5702_1991_num_10_4_1582).

<sup>76</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 89.

Both Lea Mitrani and Joseph Niego were born in Edirne and studied at its Alliance Israélite Universelle schools.

Joseph was born in 1863 and was left an orphan at two years of age, when his father died, possibly during the cholera epidemic of 1865.<sup>77</sup> His father's name was Ezra, and although we do not know his background, we can assume he had progressive ideas, since we find his name in the membership records of the Alliance Israélite Universelle some months before his death.<sup>78</sup> His mother belonged to the prominent Edirne rabbinical family of Behmoiras. She may have been named Perla.<sup>79</sup>

After his father's death, Joseph came under the protection of his maternal uncle, Grand Rabbi Raphael Behmoiras. The Behmoiras family could be traced back to Rabbi Menahem Ben Isaac Ashkenazi, who was born in Temesvár (Timișoara), in present day Romania, in 1666 and moved to Edirne with his parents.<sup>80</sup> Family lore says that Menahem's father, Rabbi Isaac Ashkenazi, and his family came to Edirne on their way to the Holy Land in order to meet Sabbetai Zvi and that two-year-old Menahem, sick with the plague, was miraculously healed by Zvi.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Orhan Koloğlu, "Osmanlı Basınında 1865 Kolera Salgını İstanbul Sağlık Konferansı ve Mirza Malkom Han," *Osmanlı Bilimi Araştırmaları* 6, no. 2 (2005); J. N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 267-269. The years 1863-1875 a cholera pandemic began in the Indian subcontinent, and came to the Red Sea with the ocean traffic. Muslim pilgrims brought it to Mecca, and from there it spread to the Ottoman Empire and its provinces in Syria and Palestine, and to North Africa.

<sup>78</sup> "Adhésions Nouvelles," *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, January 2, 1865, 240, <http://www.jpress.org.il/view-english.asp>.

<sup>79</sup> According to the Sephardic naming conventions, Joseph and Lea's first female child would have been named after her paternal grandmother. The child was named Marguerite, a Gallicized version of Perla (meaning "Pearl"). Another possibility though is that the name of the child bore only a phonetic resemblance to that of her grandmother, in which case the grandmother's name might have been "Mazalto."

<sup>80</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), s.v. "Bekemoharar."

<sup>81</sup> See <http://behmoiras.net/Yahoo/www.behmoiras.com/History2.html> and <http://behmoiras.net/Yahoo/www.behmoiras.com/esname.html>.

Rabbi Menahem Ben Isaac Ashkenazi came to be a learned rabbi, secretary to the famous Rabbi Abraham Sarfati. When Sarfati wanted to appoint his son-in-law, Abraham Gheron, as his successor, six out of thirteen congregations disapproved, and went on to appoint Menahem b. Isaac as head of the *Beit Din*. Officiating in a city with Sephardic majority, Rabbi Menahem sought to disassociate himself from his Ashkenazi past, and adopted the acronym Bekemoharar as his family name.<sup>82</sup> He was extremely influential and headed a large yeshivah, and thus in effect, till the end of nineteenth century, Edirne had two officiating grand rabbis, coming from two rabbinical dynasties, the other one being Gueron (or Gheron). Each of the descendants of Rabbi Menahem ben Isaac Ashkenazi, or Bekemoharar, was an influential personality in his own right, and each left behind a plethora of responsa, commentaries, and other publications.

Raphael's grandfather Joseph Raphael Ben Mordechai had been appointed head of all the congregations in Edirne and its environs by Sultan Abdülmejid in 1839. Raphael succeeded his father Moses Rahamim after the latter's death in Istanbul in 1878, where he had fled during the Russo-Turkish War. Long after the Jewish communities in independent Bulgaria, after the country's establishment in 1878, severed their ties with the rabbinate in Edirne, Raphael would still sign official

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<sup>82</sup> The name that the family would use by late nineteenth century, "Behmoiras," is the standardized, Gallicized and Sephardic version of the acronym Bekemoharar (BKMOHRR=Ben Kevod Morenu Ha-Rav Rabbi). Rabbi Menahem Ben Isaac Ashkenazi (1666-1733) was the first in line to use this acronym, instead of his family name (Ashkenazi). From then on, each of his descendants would append the initial letter of his father's name to this sequence. This is why in the AIU membership lists we find Rabbi Raphael's last name as Behmoiram (since his father was Moses) (see AIU membership lists, in the "Adhésions Nouvelles," *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, July 1, 1878, <http://www.jpress.org.il/view-english.asp>).

papers as “Grand Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Philippopoli residing in Adrianople.”<sup>83</sup>

Rabbi Raphael Behmoiras was personally involved with Joseph’s education and had wanted him to become a rabbi. Most possibly Joseph started out his studies under his uncle,<sup>84</sup> but although the young boy impressed Rabbi Raphael with his rendering of a Haftara on the occasion of the death of his father, the young man did not choose to follow in his steps. In the *meldar*, Joseph would have acquired a basic religious instruction, some ability to read and write Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew, and some elements of arithmetic. For some years, he frequented the AIU boy’s school in the city. In 1876-77, with the Russo-Turkish war, he moved to Istanbul and continued his studies for two years at the AIU school in Galata. The school’s director was Mr. Dalem, while Joseph’s Hebrew teacher, Rabbi Menahem Farhi gave him a sound understanding of the language. After the end of the war, he returned to Edirne, and continued his studies at the AIU school, eventually being selected for the ENIO in Paris.<sup>85</sup>

Lea’s full name was Lea Pauline Mitrani. Pauline might be the Gallicized version of the traditional name “Bouliissa.”<sup>86</sup> Of her family we know only the names

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<sup>83</sup> “Grand Rabbin de la Communauté Israélite de Philippopoli demeurant à Andrinople.” See the birth certificate of Lea Niego. Philippopoli is the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv. The Encyclopedia Judaica also mentions that Grand Rabbi Raphael was “a member of the Bulgarian Parliament.”

<sup>84</sup> In Edirne, each rabbinical “dynasty” (the Gherons and the Bekemoharars) had their own yeshivah and Beit Din.

<sup>85</sup> J. Shaki, “Préface,” in *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> The name Bouliissa is most probably a title, denoting an elder sibling, and possibly originating from the word “Bula,” which is a corrupt form of the Turkish word “abla” (meaning “elder sister”). Originally, it is assumed that it was used by the Greeks and Romaniote Jews together with another first name, and in time it came to stand alone. For a discussion about the origins of the name, and Minna

of her father, David, and mother, Amada.<sup>87</sup> Mitrani, as a last name, was well known in the city, originally indicating Jews, who came from the city of Trani in Italy.<sup>88</sup> A David Mitrani appears in the 1878 membership list of new adhesions of the AIU,<sup>89</sup> approximately the year that Lea had started her education in the AIU school for girls. We can assume that the family was progressive in its views; not only did the Mitranis send their daughter to the school, but they subsequently permitted her to go to Paris to further her education.<sup>90</sup>

Established in 1870, the school for girls in Edirne was the first such school that the AIU operated in the Ottoman Empire. Lea studied in the school for four and a half years, much longer than the average three years curriculum.<sup>91</sup> Lea Mitrani's family was wealthy enough to have been able to afford their daughter's education.<sup>92</sup>

We can try to imagine Lea's experience as a female student in 1870s Edirne by reading the reports sent to the AIU Central Committee by the school's *directrice*, Rachel Behar. Originating from Jerusalem, Rachel Behar, together with her sister

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Rozen's comments see <http://www.sephardicstudies.org/boulissa.html>. Mathilde Tagger suggests that in Judeo-Spanish, under the influence of Slavic areas (such as Serbia and Bulgaria—possibly under the influence of the Yiddish word for housewife, “Balabuste”), the name meant “bride” or “wife,” and conveyed the parents' wish that their daughter find soon a good husband.

<sup>87</sup> Their names are stated in Lea's birth certificate.

<sup>88</sup> The city of Trani is located in the south of Italy, in the Apulia region. Located on the Adriatic sea, the city was a seaport throughout its history. In the twelfth century, it boasted the largest Jewish community in southern Italy, birthplace of the great medieval rabbi Isaiah ben Mali di Trani (c. 1180-1250). Subject to persecutions, many Jews started fleeing the city in the beginning of the sixteenth century, and when the region came under Spanish control, they were expelled en masse in 1534. The exiles went to cities such as Salonica and Edirne.

Due to this fact, we can assume that Lea's family frequented the synagogue of the “Pulya” congregation.

<sup>89</sup> “David Mitrani, ben A.” (“Adhésions Nouvelles,” *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, July 1, 1878, <http://www.jpress.org.il/view-english.asp>).

<sup>90</sup> For more information, see “Paris” chapter.

<sup>91</sup> E. Benbassa and A. Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 86.

<sup>92</sup> The 1883 list of graduating students of the school for girls states names of students, who had to leave the school because their families were unable to pay.

Fortunée, had arrived in Paris in 1872. They were the first Sephardi women to be trained by the Alliance as teachers at the *École Bischoffsheim*.<sup>93</sup> She had a long and influential career as a teacher in AIU, like her brother Nissim Behar.<sup>94</sup> She was appointed in Adrianople in 1882, and later on, she would be appointed head of the school for girls in Tetuan, Morocco, where Lea would be sent after finishing her education in Paris.

In her annual report from Edirne in 1883, Rachel Behar hints that the school was a reason for intra-communal strife between traditionalists and modernists. She emphasizes that the school “acquires with each passing day the appreciation of even the most fanatic, quite a big step forward in that this group does not try any more to harm the schools.”<sup>95</sup>

The report details the life of the students and their education and we can reconstruct Lea’s life as a student. There were 223 students, divided into four classes for older pupils, and two classes for smaller children. The classes were enumerated according to the students’ progress, with “first” denoting the most advanced students, and “fourth” the lowest one. Of the two classes for smaller children, one was for students who were just starting and those who had just left the “asile” (the nursery) (a

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<sup>93</sup> The *École Bischoffsheim* was a normal and vocational school for girls. Female students from the Ottoman Empire and the Levant that were sent by AIU to be trained as teachers in Paris were accepted in this school, since the *École Normal Israélite Orientale*, established by AIU to train male teachers, did not accommodate girls until 1922. For more detailed information on the school, see chapter about Paris.

<sup>94</sup> Born in Jerusalem, Nissim Behar has been called the founder of modern Hebrew education. After being taught the Hebrew language by Eliezer BenYehuda, he became a teacher of modern Hebrew at the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Jerusalem and was the school's director from 1882 to 1887. In 1901, Behar moved to New York City, where he directed the National Liberal Immigration League from 1906 to 1924. During his years in New York, he continued to develop his method for teaching Hebrew, which became known as Ivrit be Ivrit.

<sup>95</sup> R. Behar to AIU Central Committee, 1883 Annual Report, October 14, 1884, CAHJP, HM2/5905A.

division of complete beginners with no previous knowledge of French) after having learned some. The other was frequented by girls and boys of 3, 4, 5 years of age. At 7 years of age, the boys continued to the boys' school.

While on school premises, the students used French as the language of instruction and conversation. They were permitted to speak Greek with their sewing mistress, because "this language is of great importance in Adrianople."<sup>96</sup> Knowledge of foreign languages was deemed crucial in order to deal with Greek and Armenian competition in commerce. This was of course what constituted the advantage of the Alliance schools: since French was widely used in commerce in the Levant, acquiring French was of paramount importance and utility. This is why other minority children (Greek and Armenian) were frequenting the AIU schools. Furthermore, since the circulars of the AIU Central Committee stated that "the criterion for study of additional languages must above all be that of utility,"<sup>97</sup> Greek was also used so that Jewish students could communicate with the large Greek-speaking population in Edirne and other nearby areas.

Regarding courses and method of teaching, in her report Behar stated that they were trying to make the instruction as appealing as possible so that students would like it. She explained that when the children came to the school with no knowledge of French, they were placed in the "asile," directed by Mme Démitriades. In the *asile* a great part of their time was dedicated to language exercises. The teacher narrated stories from the bible, using pictures that were entertaining for the students and

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<sup>96</sup> R. Behar to AIU Central Committee, 1883 Annual Report, October 14, 1884, CAHJP, HM2/5905A.

<sup>97</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 29.



instructive without being tiring. The older children would start writing exercises. When the children would start at the fourth grade, beyond writing, they would also learn calligraphy; they would copy from the book, and learn the numbers. They would also learn by heart stories that the teacher translated for them in Spanish and that they had to narrate to their parents. For the third class, being a bit more advanced, they would do math and geography and some dictation. As for the first two classes, the instruction became much more complex. The students were given books about grammar, religious history, world history, some elements of astronomy and science.

Behar also discussed the school program that the Central Committee in Paris had put into effect during the school year 1883-1884.<sup>98</sup> Able to judge the local circumstance, she stated that although she had tried to apply the program as directed by the Alliance, it has been impossible to do so, because the new program was demanding and not easy to adapt to students with no previous knowledge of French. She believed that the students had first to learn to speak the language, and then be given the material of the program and that the program would be successful only if they advanced slowly with many repetitions. She also suggested that she could modify, and submit to the committee's approval, the program so that teachers would find it easier to follow. Even though they hadn't followed the program during the school year 1883-1884, they had good results in reading, geography and history.

Behar continued her yearly report by describing the subjects taught in Jewish history, Ancient, Roman, Ottoman history, and natural history, grammar, geography,

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<sup>98</sup> "Instructions pour les professeurs," Archives of the AIU, France XI.E.1, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 25.

mathematics and by praising the effort, zeal and devotion of the personnel of the school, consisting of two assistant teachers, two mistresses for sewing, and one rabbi.

The Alliance stressed play as a way to exercise the children's minds through exercising their body. Behar described how the building was big, spacious and hygienic. In the summer, the children would take their break in a large courtyard, but it was necessary to create a confined space, where they could play in the winter. But due to budget constraints, they had to forego in favor of more urgent matters.

The school had also had positive moral influence in general "on the Jewish population of the city and on the former students" in particular. Rachel Behar noted:

The schools of the Alliance are well viewed here, not only by our coreligionists, but also by all the other communities, so we also have Greek and Armenian pupils. The establishment of the AIU schools has had a fortunate influence on the Israelite population of the city that is not despised as before: the fanaticism and the prejudices tend to disappear with each passing day...The young girls that have studied at the school profit from the instruction and the education that they have received: some do well thanks to their knowledge; others earn their living in an honorable way; one student directs with success a small school that I supervise from time to time...; two others direct the schools at Kırkkilise and Samacoff.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, R. Behar attached to her report the list of students leaving the school. Next to each student's name, she would write the duration of her studies, and the reason for her leaving. While some students graduated, others had to leave the school because of family circumstances—their families were unable to pay the school's tuition, or they had to start working, some of them as maids—and others because of illness. Among her classmates, Lea was the only one that was sent to Paris to

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<sup>99</sup> R. Behar to AIU Central Committee, 1883 Annual Report, October 14, 1884, CAHJP, HM2/5905A.

continue her studies at the *École Bischoffsheim*. In order to be chosen to go to Paris, the student had to have excellent grades and performance at the exams, the recommendation of her teacher, and a healthy constitution. Being the only girl in Edirne in 1883 to be sent to Paris, Lea must have presented all the above qualities.

Behar must have decided to recommend Lea after having studied her performance and abilities over a period of time, certainly long before the final May exams in French composition, math, translation from and into Hebrew, and dictation. The AIU wanted the *directrice* to judge not only Lea's present level of abilities, but also her future potential, and intellect, and especially her "strength of character,...perseverance, ...assiduity,...sense of responsibility, and...punctuality." An important factor would also be to examine the family's manners and morals. Additionally, Lea's physical condition played a paramount role in this process. The AIU Instructions stated the following:

The student must have a sturdy constitution and be in good health, of average build, neither too tall nor too short, with no physical defects and no illnesses. Pronunciation should be clear, elocution should be fluent; the slightest vision or hearing defect is immediate and final cause for rejection...In the course of this observation, hereditary tendencies must be given careful consideration, and the director must check whether the student's family is subject to instances of abnormal development, physical illness, tuberculosis, mental illness, epilepsy, and so forth.<sup>100</sup>

After passing her exams, Lea would follow in 1883 the same path that had taken Joseph to Paris some years before.

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<sup>100</sup> AIU, *Instructions générales pour les professeurs* (Paris, 1903), 75-78 in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 38-39.

## Chapter 3: Paris

### Section 1 “Instruments of Regeneration”: Becoming an Alliance Teacher

Joseph and Lea were fifteen years old when they arrived in Paris. Being selected to study in France was for these adolescents a “rite of passage”<sup>101</sup> that would change forever their worldview. Eventually, their education and experience in the City of Light and the sentiments of gratitude that filled their heart, resulted in the emergence of a bifurcated identity.

Life in Paris must have been an exciting, albeit intimidating experience for Lea and Joseph, at least in the beginning. They must have been exhausted by the lengthy trip that had taken nearly two weeks, scared by all the novelty around them, intimidated by the other French students, and challenged by the intense curriculum. For the duration of their stay in Paris, they could not expect to visit back home, or hear from their families regularly.

Lea and Joseph were nurtured by the AIU ideals during their most malleable years. Their love for France and belief in its quasi-mythical glory would constitute a form of “religion” for them. Upon their graduation, they had become AIU’s zealous “missionaries,”<sup>102</sup> eager to bring French culture and civilization to the Jewish communities of the Levant, the Middle East, and North Africa. They would be part of the Alliance teaching corps that through the unified instruction in the AIU schools

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<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Antébi, “Albert Antébi (1873-1919) ou la Religion de la France” (Mémoire de l’EPHE, Section des Sciences Religieuses, 1996), 3, <http://www.antebiel.com/universite/memoirepdf/religionFrance1.pdf>.

<sup>102</sup> The term was used by Sylvain Lévi. Cited in A. Navon, “L’ École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

helped promote the “spiritual unity” of Jews in the Mediterranean basin, providing common “moral features” to communities from Tetouan to Adrianople.<sup>103</sup>

On July 3, 1932, the Alliance Israélite Universelle celebrated the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* in the gardens of the boys’ school at No 59, Rue d’Auteuil, across the gates of the *Bois de Boulogne*. The celebration started out with the students giving a theatrical performance, a gymnastics presentation and an exhibition of their drawings, and finished with a recital of songs, and a presentation of a *Scene from Morocco*, during which the students, boys and girls, recreated a scene of Jewish life in that country.

After the student choir sang the “Hymn to the Alliance,” Sylvain Lévi, president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, came to the podium and analyzed AIU’s role in offering “Oriental Jews, long in lethargy due to the Muslim milieu they lived in,” the possibility of regeneration through education, especially through Jewish education. AIU believed that this would enable them to become worthy citizens and to declare, in the same way as Jews in their “beloved France,” their loyalty to the cities that had adopted them, without having to renounce their Jewish heritage. He emphatically pointed out that the Alliance was successful in this direction because it drew “the instruments of the regeneration from the environment itself that the Alliance wanted to regenerate.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Abraham-Albert Navon, “L’ École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

<sup>104</sup> “L’Alliance n’est pas une oeuvre d’instruction; elle est une oeuvre d’éducation, et d’éducation Israélite... Ses créateurs visaient à accomplir par l’éducation “une oeuvre de régénération” dans les communautés de l’Orient qui s’étaient depuis longtemps assoupies parmi la somnolence du monde musulman... Le français et l’hébreu, [étaient] étroitement associés pour rendre au monde juif de l’Orient sa dignité compromise... le jour où chaque israélite pourra dire partout, comme nous aimons à le proclamer ici, dans notre chère France: je suis citoyen, dévoué corps et âme à la cité qui m’adopte, sans avoir rien à renier de l’idéal que m’a légué Israël. *Civis sum Judaeus*...”

Initially, young educators or rabbis were sent as instructors or directors to the AIU schools. These were recruited particularly in Alsace, from Jewish schools in other parts of France, or from the Rabbinical Seminary in Paris. Although many of these instructors, such as Félix Bloch, Samuel Hirsch, Maurice Marx and Jules Dalem, would have illustrious and long careers serving the AIU in its schools in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, others would not live up to the expectations of AIU, or prove able to adapt to the environment and the communities that they were sent to. Furthermore, the sheer number of AIU schools meant a shortage of teachers. French-born female teachers, moreover, were reluctant to leave France and teach in far-away cities.

In order to address this shortage, the AIU central committee began already in 1864 to discuss, and in 1867 decided, to choose the best students in the AIU schools, and to train them as teachers for the Alliance schools by bringing them to Paris for further studies.<sup>105</sup> AIU believed that, after having completed their training in Paris, the new teachers would be successful in their mission because they were well adapted to the climate and the language of the countries they would teach in, and familiar with the customs and needs of the local population.<sup>106</sup>

One can discern an “implicit hierarchy” and elitism in the teacher corps of the Alliance.<sup>107</sup> It was students specifically from AIU schools in the European lands of

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Il est un principe...qui a contribué à la server...: celui de puiser dans le milieu même qu'il s'agissait de relever les instruments de cette régénération.” Sylvain Lévi, as cited in “L' École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

<sup>105</sup> For more detailed information on the process of selecting the students to be sent to Paris, see Chapter 2, subdivision on Adrianople.

<sup>106</sup> Speech of AIU vice president, Eugène Sée, at the inauguration of the *École Normale Israélite Orientale de Jeunes Filles* (ENIO for girls). “Inauguration de l' École Normale Israélite Orientale de Jeunes Filles,” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1922.

<sup>107</sup> Élizabéth Antébi, *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 15-16.

the Ottoman Empire that for the most part were sent to study in Paris to become teachers. It was the Judeo-Spanish culture area of the Balkans, i.e., what is today Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria, that provided almost 60 percent of the teaching body, and 70 percent in the case of women teachers. This phenomenon can be attributed to two main factors: On one hand, the Balkan lands of the Ottoman Empire, already open to European ideas, had more easily accepted the work of AIU, and had more AIU schools than other communities, such as the interior of Iraq and Morocco. On the other hand, Balkan Jewry was Judeo-Spanish speaking, and being familiar with the structure of a Romance language, were more apt to learn and manipulate French, which was of course an absolute prerequisite for acceptance into the ENIO.<sup>108</sup>

Eventually, these teachers would form one of the first “autochthonous Westernized intellectual elites” among the Jews in Muslim lands and many, upon retiring, would become notables, journalists, heads of communities, or politicians. By having lived four years in Paris and by being part of a Western, prestigious organization, the teacher became a player in communal affairs.<sup>109</sup> A teaching career in the Alliance was a solid and quick method, especially for male teachers, to transcend implicit hierarchies in the local communities and join the class of notables. Most of them had not come from the commercial and financial elites, whose children usually would follow their fathers into business, but from families occupied in petty commerce, crafts, services, or manual labor.

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<sup>108</sup> E. Benbassa and A. Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 49-51.

<sup>109</sup> E. Benbassa and A. Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 48-49, 85.

The first four students<sup>110</sup> for the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* arrived in Paris in 1867. After other temporary addresses,<sup>111</sup> in 1876, as the school's resources increased, it moved to No 4 bis, Rue des Rosiers, occupying until 1890 part of a building that housed the Vocational School. In the fall of 1890, the school moved to its building at No 59, Rue d'Auteuil. The building, located at the gates of the *Bois de Boulogne*, had been the country home of Claude Adrien Helvétius, a French philosopher and intellectual, whose *salon* had seen numerous illustrious personalities of the eighteenth century, such as Voltaire, Diderot, D'Alembert, Franklin, and the young Bonaparte.

The students were taught the same subjects as French students in normal schools. These were French language, physics, history, geography, Spanish, accounting, drawing, choir and gymnastics.<sup>112</sup> Upon finishing their studies, the "Oriental" students also took part in the same exams as French students in order to obtain their certificate. Besides these lessons, which formed the nucleus of the curriculum they would eventually be teaching, they also took religious instruction and studied Hebrew language and Jewish history, through which the AIU aimed to forge in each student "a Jewish heart, a Jewish soul," which they were expected to inculcate in their own future students. The AIU Central Committee sincerely believed that French and Hebrew could be used to restore the "compromised dignity of Oriental

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<sup>110</sup> David Cazès from Tetuan, Salomon Bénoliel and Abr. Bendelac from Tangiers, Nissim Béhar from Jerusalem (although recruited as a student in Istanbul).

<sup>111</sup> In the beginning, the ENIO was housed alongside the students of the Jewish vocational school at No. 9, Rue des Singes (later renamed Rue des Guillemites). The students would take their courses in different locations, some of them in the evening. In 1868, the school moved to a new location at No. 46, Rue des Marais, and had already 3 instructors and in 1871 the school moved again to the address No 57, Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, to the *Séminaire Israélite*, the Jewish Seminary.

<sup>112</sup> For a detailed program of studies for the ENIO during 1886-1887, see Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 35-36.



Jews.”<sup>113</sup> The students obtained a diploma of Hebrew, and the Chief Rabbi of France presided over the examination committee.

In 65 years, from 1867 to 1932, more than 1,800 boys and girls graduated from the preparatory schools, and were sent as teachers and directors to the extensive network of schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. During the celebrations for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school in 1932, its director, Abraham Navon, spoke of the difficulties that these young teachers had had to overcome and described their “heroic” travel to cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, or Mosul, at the “end of the world”. For lack of trains, he explained teachers needed 40 days on the back of a mule to reach their destination after leaving the port of Alexandria, and this through foreign lands infested with outlaws and bandit groups in constant war with each other.<sup>114</sup>

In their new posts, the newly minted teachers, with no one to turn to for advice, were forced to face a completely new environment and adapt to a new life without giving in or “assimilating to their surroundings.” Especially during the first decades of AIU’s work, their role went beyond teaching: The directors of the AIU schools played an important role in the communities where they were placed. On many occasions, they intervened with the local authorities or with foreign governments, and played a conciliatory role in the communal affairs. This was not an easy task: Finding themselves amidst intra-communal conflicts, and often having to fight for the existence of their school, they were often seen with suspicion, and were victims of prejudices, or slanders.

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<sup>113</sup> A. H. Navon, *Les 70 ans de l'École Normale Israélite Orientale* (Paris: Durlachter, 1935), 111, as cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 36.

<sup>114</sup> A. Navon, “L'École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

Their points of reference and support were the encouragements that they received from the Alliance, and the spirit of sacrifice that had been instilled in them at the ENIO...the school that had formed their soul and had prepared them for their mission.<sup>115</sup>

If establishing schools with modern curricula for boys was tolerated as a necessary evil in many Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, establishing schools for girls was even more complicated. It was the most enlightened communities that were first to open schools for girls, and in the case of many, this would come a decade or more after schools for boys. The first school for girls opened in Tetuan in 1868. It was not before 1875 that there were girls' schools in centers like Tangiers, Salonica and Edirne. Izmir had one in 1879, Tunis in 1882, and Baghdad only in 1895.

In order to recruit female teachers for the girls' schools, the Alliance decided to use the same model that had proven successful for recruiting male teachers. Since it was extremely difficult to find French female teaching staff, AIU decided to send the best students of its girls' schools in the "Orient" to Paris. An adolescent girl, no matter how eager to further her education, would not be able to take this decision alone. She would have to consult with her family, primarily with her father or brother, according to the rigid conventions that affected the status of women in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>116</sup> We can assume that it was probably families in already fairly modernized communities that were more apt to accept the idea of their daughters acquiring a profession, and to agree to send them abroad for this purpose.

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<sup>115</sup> A. Navon, "L' École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932)," *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

<sup>116</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, 49.

Over 70 percent of female students recruited for further education came from the Balkans, another indication that Jews in these countries were in the forefront of modernization, at the turn of the twentieth century.

The decision to recruit female teachers in this way directly affected gender dynamics in the local community. The traditional representation of the Sephardic woman as leading a bourgeois existence, relegated to the domestic sphere and not having to work, was true mostly for the upper classes, who could afford such a type of life. Women of other classes would often work as seamstresses, sales girls or as helpers in their father's or husband's business, but this was done largely in the context of family economies. Through their profession, the AIU female teachers were able to live outside the expected framework, independent of family and community.

In 1872, the first female students—Rachel and Fortunée Béhar<sup>117</sup>—arrived in Paris and were placed at the *Institut Bischoffsheim*, since the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* could not accommodate female students at the time. The *École Bischoffsheim* had been established in 1870 with the contributions of Mr. Louis and Mme Amélie Bischoffsheim.<sup>118</sup> The school's first director was Joseph Bloch, previously director at Jewish communal school at the city of Colmar in Alsace. The Bloch family had come to Paris from Alsace after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. In a way that might be seen as amateur today, all the family was actively involved

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<sup>117</sup> Rachel and Fortunée Béhar were sisters of Nissim Béhar, who had been accepted as one of the first male students of the ENIO in 1867.

<sup>118</sup> Louis Bischoffsheim (1800-1873), banker and philanthropist, was born in Mayence, Germany. After finding employment in a banking house, he eventually established his own bank in Amsterdam at the age of twenty. His business grew rapidly with branches in many European cities, and in 1850 he settled with his family in Paris so that his son could pursue his studies there. He was involved in many important ventures of his time, and, among others, he financed projects such as the Franco-Egyptian Bank, the Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Midi, and the Crédit Foncier Colonial.

with the school, especially his daughter, Miss Florentine Bloch.<sup>119</sup> Afterwards, she directed the school together with her brother Maurice Bloch, who became director of the school in 1883.<sup>120</sup> During the first years, there were only twelve students at a time, a number that was not enough to cover the demand for female teachers. Thus, AIU decided to place part of the students at other private establishments, five students each at the schools of Mme Isaac at Auteuil and of Mme Weil-Kahn at Neuilly.<sup>121</sup>

An ENIO school specifically for girls, the *École Normale Israélite Orientale de Jeunes Filles*, was finally established in 1922 in Versailles. From 1872 until 1926, 232 “oriental” girls would study in the school and return to the Middle East to teach, having obtained their *brevets élémentaire* or *supérieur*.<sup>122</sup> The program of studies was the same as the school for boys: the young girls would be taught physical and natural sciences, ancient history and ancient literature, geography, gymnastics, arithmetic, French, and English, as well as Hebrew, the Bible, and Jewish History.<sup>123</sup> In addition girls were instructed in “female skills.”<sup>124</sup>

As was the case for boys at the ENIO, female students were subjected to a particularly rigorous program of studies. The “Oriental” students were expected to advance to the same written and oral exams with two years less preparation than their

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<sup>119</sup> Obituary for Mlle Florentine Bloch, *Paix et Droit*, March 1, 1937.

<sup>120</sup> Maurice Bloch was born at Colmar in Alsace in 1853. His father, Joseph Bloch, was the director of the Jewish communal school there. After the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, the family came to Paris, where Joseph Bloch became director of the *École Bischoffsheim*, and Maurice continued his studies. In 1883, he succeeded his father as director of the school. Beyond his career as an educator, he wrote extensively on Jewish subjects, and was a laureate of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques.

<sup>121</sup> All three schools, i.e. the *Institut Bischoffsheim*, Mme Isaac’s and Mme Weil-Kahn’s, were boarding schools in Paris.

<sup>122</sup> “Le 60e anniversaire de l’*École Bischoffsheim*,” *Paix et Droit*, May 1, 1932, and “Inauguration de l’*École Normale Israélite Orientale de Jeunes Filles*,” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1922.

<sup>123</sup> Frances Malino, “The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1930,” in Judith R. Baskin (ed.), *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 251.

<sup>124</sup> “...enseignement des travaux féminins...” Abraham-Albert Navon, “L’*École Normale Israélite Orientale* (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

Parisian classmates. At times, their instructors would point this out to the central committee. Maurice Bloch, director of the *École Bischoffsheim* would ask emphatically:

Is it diplomas you wish or pedagogues?...As a result of this hasty and feverish work, these sixteen year olds are experiencing a fatigue and emotions which they will later resent. We are creating neurasthenics in place of healthy women—and certificate holders in lieu of pedagogues.<sup>125</sup>

This view contradicts the official rhetoric of the Alliance that emphasized the warmth and homey atmosphere that it provided the students with. Accounts about the intensity of the studies, student rebellions or conflicts among students paint a different picture of the experiences of these adolescents.<sup>126</sup>

### *Section 2 At the École Normale Israélite Orientale: Joseph Niego*

In the summer of 1878, Joseph, and other students sent from the AIU schools in Edirne or Istanbul to the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* in Paris had boarded the steamer of the Austrian Lloyd's company from Constantinople to Trieste.<sup>127</sup> After more than nine days at sea, they were happy to alight in the buzzing Adriatic city, the only port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the Mediterranean. From there the Austrian Southern Railway, the *Österreichische Südbahn*, would take them to Vienna's *Westbahnhof*, from where they would board the train to Paris.

It was late afternoon when a member of the Central Committee in an *Omnibus de Famille* came to meet them at the *Gare de l'Est* station in the heart of Paris. The omnibus had twelve seats, just enough for the students and their luggage.

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<sup>125</sup> Frances Malino, "The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1930," 252.

<sup>126</sup> See more in the subdivisions for Joseph and Lea's education in Paris.

<sup>127</sup> There was not yet a direct railway connecting Constantinople to Vienna. The first direct Orient Express train would begin its itinerary in 1889.

Exhausted by the trip, the young men were nevertheless left breathless by the sumptuous *hôtels*, those grandiose mansions lining the Boulevard de Strasbourg, as the carriage slowly proceeded south towards the river Seine. Just before turning left at the Rue de Rivoli, they saw the workers busily restoring the city hall, the *Hôtel de Ville*, badly burned during the events of 1871.<sup>128</sup>

The city that Joseph and the other students arrived in was a city that bore the wounds of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune. It was the large train stations such as the one that they had just left and the broad boulevards that their omnibus was passing, built in the framework of the rebuilding of the city by Baron de Haussmann, that had permitted the French army to act swiftly and crush the Commune in the spring of 1871. In fact, two students sent from Edirne to the ENIO, Rodrigue and Barishac, had died in Paris in 1870.<sup>129</sup>

Soon they found themselves at the Rue des Rosiers, a narrow, meandering street that cut the Jewish Quarter in the Marais district from West to East.<sup>130</sup> Marais had been left out of the grandiose rebuilding of Paris by Baron de Haussmann and had lost its luster. The nobility and the bourgeoisie had abandoned it for more upscale

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<sup>128</sup> The *Paris Commune* in 1871 was a series of events that were the direct outcome of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. The city council, known as the *Paris Commune*, effectively governed the city of Paris for the two-month period during April and May of 1871. The Commune included working class, socialist, and politically extremist elements, and as such has been seen as a model proletarian society by personalities such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Mao. During the last week of May, the French army crushed the Commune, by arresting and executing most of the people involved (different accounts speak of 10 to 30 or even 50 thousand people).

<sup>129</sup> J. Shaki, "Préface," in *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 5.

<sup>130</sup> The Marais is a district in the 4<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris. Rue des Rosiers, passing through the heart of Marais, already existed in the thirteenth century. The district's destiny was closely related to the policies of the French kings towards the Jews, especially the expulsion of Jews by Charles VI in 1394. Jews reappeared in the area after the French Revolution in 1789. Until the late eighteenth century, Marais had been an upscale quarter for the nobility and the bourgeoisie. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than 80% of Paris' Jewish population lived in Marais, especially around the Rue des Rosiers. During the last decades of the twentieth century, Marais has undergone an extensive regeneration and it has become a popular destination in the Paris landscape.

neighborhoods and Marais had gradually become the abode of the poor, the destitute, and immigrants.

As the carriage passed an array of little stores with Hebrew inscriptions, butcher shops, bakeries, tailors' shops, kosher small eateries, and groceries, they looked keenly at the French Jews going about their businesses in the street.<sup>131</sup> Soon they arrived to the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*, located at No 4 *bis*, occupying part of the building of the Vocational School.<sup>132</sup>

The building was an eighteenth-century *hôtel*, classical and austere in its proportions. The ENIO was a modest, but comfortable establishment, with study halls, a dormitory and an assembly hall. The students were shown their beds in the dormitory, left their luggage and then were brought to meet the director and the teachers of the school. Being on the road for so many days, they were then sent to the public baths, the "Hammam sauna Saint-Paul, » housed nextdoors at No 4, Rue des Rosiers.

The first days before classes were a whirlwind of activity. The students were taken to the tailor's for their uniforms. They were also introduced to the Chief Rabbi

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<sup>131</sup> The demographics in Marais were greatly altered with the influx of approximately 20,000 Central and Eastern European Jewish refugees, fleeing persecutions in Romania, Austria-Hungary, and Russia after 1881. It was then that the Jewish quarter acquired its definitively Ashkenazi overtones.

<sup>132</sup> The Vocational School was established in 1852 and its aim was to provide the children of poor Jewish families vocational training. It was established by three Jewish students (Manuel Leven, doctor; Narcisse Leven, lawyer; and Eugène Manuel, student at the *École normale supérieure*) as a "society for the support of Jewish apprentices and workers of Paris." The plaque in the entrance of the school states that the founders of the school, "worried for the miserable state of stagnation of many Jewish children that were occupied with peddling or other degrading professions, decided to give them general and technical education and turn them into qualified workers." (« *Préoccupés de l'état misérable où végétaient de nombreux enfants israélites voués à la brocante ou à d'autres métiers dégradants, ils résolurent de leur donner une instruction générale et technique et d'en faire des ouvriers qualifiés* »). The students were doing their apprenticeship during the day, and general instruction in the evenings.

of France, Lazare Isidor,<sup>133</sup> in his office at 17, Rue Saint-Georges. They were then taken to meet Narcisse Leven,<sup>134</sup> AIU general secretary, at the organization's offices in 53, Rue de Tréville. They might have even been introduced to the AIU president, Adolphe Crémieux,<sup>135</sup> at some festive occasion.

We might also assume that they would have to chance to meet with or hear a talk by Charles Netter, who had left Mikveh Israel in 1873 due to his deteriorating health, but continued to be active in the AIU, and raise funds and support for the agricultural school until his death in 1882. In fact, Charles Netter was personally involved with the school. S. Loupo, one of the first students at ENIO, recalled how Netter had intervened during a students' "revolt" in the end of 1876. The ENIO had been transferred from the Jewish Seminary to the building at the Rue des Rosiers but still lacked a director and the students felt that many things had changed for the worse (food, discipline, allowance). Many were insubordinate, inciting the others into revolt. S. Loupo describes how at the vocational school "we looked like exiles and

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<sup>133</sup> Lazare Isidor (1813-1888), born in Lorraine and a graduate of the Rabbinical school of Metz, became Chief Rabbi of Paris in 1847, and Chief Rabbi of France in 1867, and held this post until his death. He was instrumental in promoting greater integration of the Jewish community and had the Bible translated into French.

<sup>134</sup> Narcisse Leven (1833-1915) was born in Germany but was raised in France. Very early in his life he worked under the guidance of Lamartine and Hugo, collecting charity for the poor. Later on he became a lawyer and secretary to Adolphe Crémieux, and in 1863 will be among the founding members of the AIU. He will be general secretary of the organization from 1863-1883, then vice president from 1883-1898, and finally its president from 1898-1915. He would also become president of the ICA, the Jewish Colonization Association. He wrote a monumental, two-volume history of the AIU: *Cinquante ans d'histoire; L'Alliance Israélite Universelle (1860-1910)* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1911).

<sup>135</sup> Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880) was born in Nîmes and became a lawyer. A charismatic speaker, soon his fame reached Paris, where he established his practice, and became acquainted with many important personalities of the time. Crémieux actively participated in public life in France, and also abroad, and he played an important role during the Damascus Affair in 1840. He was a member of the Central Consistory of the Jews of France (the administrative body of French Jews), and in 1848, he became minister of Justice. Supporting initially, but then becoming disillusioned with Louis Napoleon, he was arrested and imprisoned in 1851, after which he remained private. In 1860, together with other friends, he founded the Alliance Israélite Universelle. In 1870, he became active again, and resumed his position as minister. Crémieux was instrumental in defending the rights of Jews both inside France, as well as in places abroad.



were miserable. There were grumbles and complaints about the food. One day, we refused to try certain dishes. The next day, we received a visit by Mr. Netter, who sharply admonished us.”<sup>136</sup>

Once lessons started, their days were filled with classes and homework. Students at the ENIO and the *Institut Bischoffsheim* had only four years until the examinations for the *brevet de capacité pour l'enseignement primaire*, the diploma that every teacher in a French public school had to possess.<sup>137</sup> The “oriental” students went through the same examination system as French students. Besides the courses that they had in common with French schools, such as French, physics, geography, history, accounting, drawing, choir and gymnastics, Joseph and his friends would take religious instruction, study Hebrew and Jewish history. Joseph Halevy, the great *savant* was their Hebrew teacher. Religious life was observed in the school, and holidays were celebrated. Each Saturday, after the services, the Grand Rabbi Z. Kahn would receive the students, and interest in their studies.

As for entertainment, the students were brought once per month to a play at the *Théâtre Français*. Every Saturday, they would attend services at the synagogue of the Rue Victoire. During their two free afternoons, on Saturday, after the end of *Shabbat*, and Sunday, they would go visit nearby attractions, such as the Louvre, or would go fishing at the banks of Seine. Sometimes they would spend the afternoon sitting at a café, reading the newspapers, drinking coffee, and playing at cards or

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<sup>136</sup> Recollections of Samuel Loupo in A. H. Navon, *Les 70 ans de l' École Normale Israélite Orientale*, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (1860-1939)*, 46.

<sup>137</sup> Some of the students had such a desire to study and learn that they were not content acquiring only the *brevet élémentaire*, that was obligatory for all, but would also study by themselves, without a teacher, and prepare for the examinations of the *brevet supérieur*.

billiards.<sup>138</sup> Fourth-year students had permission to stay out until midnight once per month, and it would be safe to think that the students might delve into other Parisian entertainment that would not be as innocent.

The school aimed to foster a nurturing, and family-like environment for young people who had come from faraway places and would not see their families for many years, due to difficulties in transportation. Students were expected to know their obligations and the director and teachers did not promote punishment or sanctions for discipline. Everyone knew that, for grave mistakes, there was only one punishment: going back home. But this was a rare measure, and was mostly due to “a physical ailment, for intellectual shortcoming, or for poor choices.”<sup>139</sup>

After the end of his studies at the ENIO, Mr. Marx, director of the school, and Mr. Baumfeld, professor of mathematics, suggested Joseph’s name to the president of the Alliance, Salomon Goldschmidt<sup>140</sup> who, impressed by the boy, decided to subsidize his studies in the National Agricultural School in Montpellier. Goldschmidt was passionate about Mikveh Israel, and was interested in contributing for training a special agronomist as the director of the school. His leadership qualities would already be obvious, and beloved by his friends, he was designated as their representative in front of the school’s directors. He excelled in his lessons, even though he preferred literature and poetry, while now his studies were scientific. After

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<sup>138</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Paris and Environs with Routes from London to Paris and from Paris to the Rhine and Switzerland: Handbook for Travelers* (Leipzig: K. Baedeker, 1884), 17.

<sup>139</sup> A. Navon, “L’ École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

<sup>140</sup> S. H. Goldschmidt was president of the Alliance from 1881 to 1898. He was German, while all other Alliance presidents were French.

receiving his diploma of engineer-agronomist, Joseph left Montpellier and went to Jaffa in May 1886.<sup>141</sup>

Studying at the *École Normale Israélite Orientale* fostered close friendships among students, who had to rely on each other during their Parisian years. These strong ties would remain once the students had become teachers and spread out to the AIU schools in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In their posts, they would often seek support from each other, offer help when family issues arose, advice when needed. They had become more of a family than their “real” families. Joseph had made many friends at ENIO who would later on play an important role in his professional life, and whose names we recognize in his letters and reports: Moïse Fresco, David Haym, A. Navon, Abraham Ribbi, Joseph Sabah, Gabriel Arie, Isaac Benchimol, and others.

### *Section 3 At the École Bischoffsheim: Lea Mitrani*

In 1883, fifteen-year-old Lea Mitrani, would follow the same path from Edirne to Paris as had Joseph Niego five years before. Among thirty-six students graduating from the AIU school for girls in Edirne that year, she was the only one who was sent to Paris.

On the train to Paris, Lea would remember fondly the friends that she was leaving back home. Some of them had graduated, but others had left their studies for a variety of reasons: some had to because their parents were unable to pay, some had

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<sup>141</sup> J. Shaki, “Préface,” in *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 7-8.

moved to other cities, and others were obliged to start working. Sara Cevahir had been obliged to leave school and become a maid; others, like Bohora Ovadia, always feeling weak and sickly, were not permitted to continue their studies for fear they would endanger the health of the other students; and yet others would die, as Sara Capon, who had died at twelve years of age.<sup>142</sup> Lea's family must have been extremely proud when their daughter was selected for Paris.

Dressed in their best clothes, Lea and other Ottoman Jewish girls from the AIU schools had arrived in Paris in the early fall of 1883. Miss Florentine Bloch, had come in an omnibus to welcome the girls and bring them to the school building, situated at No. 13, Boulevard Bourdon.<sup>143</sup> It was raining lightly and as the coach proceeded past *Place de la Bastille*, the girls were looking admiringly at the strolling couples under huge black umbrellas, the gentlemen with their tall hats, and the ladies dressed in the latest Parisian fashion.

They arrived at the school as the lamplighter had started turning on the gas lamps lining the street. The building was overlooking the waters of the *Arsenal*, and a light breeze would pass over the water, playfully stirring the curtains at its tall windows. They were first brought to the third floor, to the dormitories, where they left their luggage. Looking out of the window towards the Seine, they were shown the *Jardin des Plantes* in the distance. They were then called downstairs for dinner. They walked past various workshops on the second floor and then descended to the first floor, where the library, the reception area, the classrooms and the offices were

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<sup>142</sup> Report by R. Behar to the AIU, CAHJP, HM2/5905A.

<sup>143</sup> The life of the female students of the *Institut Bischoffsheim* is not documented as much as the life of boys at the ENIO and we can only partly reconstruct it through available reports. For this subdivision, I have made extensive use of the article by Edouard André, "Les Fondations Bischoffsheim," *Revue Internationale de l'Enseignement* 47 (January-June 1904): 150-154.

located. The basement was reserved for the kitchen and for other services, while the maids and other auxiliary personnel's quarters were on the last floor.<sup>144</sup>

The school offered both vocational and regular training. The girls were split in to three groups, those who wanted to become teachers, those who wanted to work in commerce and administration, and those who wanted to go into female professions (such as seamstresses, milliners etc.). Four years of lessons were necessary to become a teacher, and some of the French girls would pursue a diploma from the Sorbonne, after the *brevet supérieur*. For the AIU students, three and a half to four years were deemed enough for a girl to become teacher, and Lea would be placed in this group.

Lea spent a lot of time in the library. She liked reading and the library had a vast number of books on literature, history, natural history, and the French classics. She and the other "Orientals," imbued in French culture, language and customs, were completely immersed in French civilization, and in this way, she had heard the Blochs say, *Institut Bischoffsheim's* work was essentially "patriotic."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Edouard André, "Les Fondations Bischoffsheim," *Revue Internationale de l'Enseignement* 47 (January-June 1904): 152.

<sup>145</sup> "...Tous les ouvrages les plus remarquables de la littérature française, tous les volumes d'histoire de nature à exposer l'évolution des esprits et des mœurs, à expliquer ce qu'est notre pays, ses conquêtes et son avenir surchargent d'innombrables rayons. Ces volumes forment, paraît-il, la lecture familière des douze jeunes filles venues de l'Orient et que l'Alliance Israélite place à l'Ecole Bischoffsheim, où elles apprennent la langue française, où elles se pénètrent de notre littérature, de notre histoire, de nos idées, de nos mœurs. Après avoir reçu, et brillamment, l'empreinte de notre civilisation, elles retournent dans leur pays d'origine exercer les fonctions d'institutrice, communiquer à leur tour le savoir acquis, répandre les idées françaises, faire aimer cette France qui les a tirées de cet état de sémi-servitude encore si répandu en Orient. Par une disposition obligatoire des fondateurs, ces douze jeunes filles sont choisies parmi les élèves les plus intelligentes des écoles établies en Orient et fondées par l'Alliance Israélite. Leur séjour à l'Ecole Bischoffsheim se complète de promenades à travers Paris, de visites aux monuments, de conférences sur notre histoire, sur nos institutions. Aussi, n'est-il point téméraire d'affirmer que l'école Bischoffsheim, en formant ces futures maîtresses des écoles de l'Alliance, accomplit œuvre patriotique. M. et Mme Maurice Bloch, qui appartiennent eux-mêmes à cette terre d'Alsace toujours regrettée, s'emploient avec une conscience au-dessus de tout éloge, à l'éducation de celles qui sont les ouvrières de l'influence française dans ces contrées du Soleil, où tant de puissances européennes entretiennent des écoles, subventionnent des missions destinées à leur assurer la suprématie sur leurs rivales." Edouard André, "Les Fondations Bischoffsheim," *Revue Internationale de l'Enseignement* 47 (January-June 1904): 153.

From student accounts, we learn that Maurice and Florentine Bloch managed the school with love and provided the students with an affectionate environment that beyond courses provided “order, cleanliness, scrupulous moral standards, hygiene, abundant and well-balanced meals, and enlightened supervision.”<sup>146</sup> During the holidays and each week, the girls attended the grand synagogue at 44, rue de la Victoire. They were also attending lectures on French history and culture. In the weekends, the students were sometimes invited by fellow Parisian students to spend the day with their families. During the summer, the girls remained in Paris and visited the museums or gardens, such as the Gardens of *Luxembourg*. Sometimes, Miss Florentine would accompany them to a café in one of the grand boulevards that was proper for ladies to visit. They would order coffee or tea, and would sit for one or two hours watching the bustling Parisian life unfold before their eyes.<sup>147</sup>

At all outings, the girls were chaperoned, whether they were sightseeing, visiting monuments, or going to the doctor. This was especially important, since the parents relied on Alliance to keep their daughters safe from the “vices” that everyone was convinced were lurking in the City of Light. There were many at the students’ hometowns, eager to gossip that “young girls in Paris are living in filthy districts full of debauchery.”<sup>148</sup>

At times, Lea felt lonely in Paris. She was of course grateful for the opportunity that AIU had given her—not everyone could visit or live in the splendid

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<sup>146</sup> Frances Malino, “The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1930,” 251.

<sup>147</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Paris and Environs with Routes from London to Paris and from Paris to the Rhine and Switzerland: Handbook for Travelers* (Leipzig: K. Baedeker, 1884), 17.

<sup>148</sup> Recollections of Mrs. Weismann in A. H. Navon, *Les 70 ans de l' École Normale Israélite Orientale*, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (1860-1939)*, 42-44.

city. She was aware that by living far away from her family and hometown she had become stronger, independent, and knowledgeable. And she was excited about the prospect of teaching at a school. But it was not easy. Since she left Edirne, she had known that she would not see her parents for at least four years. She missed Edirne, and the smell of her home, and the food of her mother. She would read each letter again and again, trying to decipher things unspoken among the lines that her mother had penned in the thin, neat strokes of the “Rashi” script. Of the twelve “Orientals” at Bischoffsheim she was not the only one to feel so lonely. Some of her friends fell ill, not able to stand life in a foreign land, even if it was the City of Light. They were sent back. Others died. She persevered. Four winters.

At times, she found her Parisian classmates a source of frustration. Especially at the start, they would scrutinize her and the other students from the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Everything that the Orientals said, did, or wore was strange, to say the least. They seldom accepted the newcomers into their tight-knit circle. Often Lea would feel embarrassed by their mean comments. The comments were sometimes spoken in a hushed voice, but still Lea could hear them, while other times they were meant as jokes. Lea and other students would complain to Miss Florentine, who would then intervene on behalf of the “Orientals.”

Lea loved studying and her days were completely filled up with her studies, since all AIU students had only three years to finish the five-year curriculum. Sometimes, she felt overwhelmed by the feverish program of studies, and the sheer amount of things to learn. The exams looming at the end of her studies seemed

insurmountable. Some of her friends had left, not able to pass the exams. When they were over, Lea felt burnt out and exhausted.

She certainly did not feel ready; nothing could make you feel ready to leave the security of your life in Paris, sheltered by the benevolence of the AIU and the kindness of Miss Florentine and Mr. Bloch. She was apprehensive about the future, and worried about where she would be appointed. She had secretly hoped to be appointed somewhere near Edirne. She knew the Central Committee did not appoint the teachers to their towns of origin—the secretary general had explained that it was for their own good: In their towns, they would not be able to establish their authority, since they would not be seen by the locals as AIU teachers to be respected, but as one of their own, the “daughter of...” She had hoped though that she would be appointed in a city not far away from Edirne—maybe Rustchuk, or Philippopolis, or even Izmir—so that she could visit her parents during the holidays.

But now she had her diploma, and she was appointed to the girls’ school in Tetuan, Morocco. It was an early snowy morning when she boarded the train to Marseilles at the Gare de Lyon. Mr. Ribbi, himself a teacher in Morocco, accompanied her on the trip, and helped her lift the trunk with her new clothes, demure and befitting an AIU teacher, into the train.<sup>149</sup> It was February 1887.

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<sup>149</sup> The trunk included all necessary clothing, such as dresses, jackets, skirts, blouses, shoes, stockings, undergarments, a corset, towels and handkerchiefs and would be provided by AIU. Frances Malino, “The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1930,” 251.



#### Section 4 “Orientals” in the City of Light

Coming to Paris, what could be considered as a cultural shock for Joseph and Lea did not stem from the different environment, since both had been immersed in French culture for years at the AIU school in Edirne. But now they were viewed as outsiders, as “Orientals” in need of “regeneration.” The identity issue must have been particularly intriguing for the two adolescents. AIU had aimed for Jews to integrate into the societies they lived in, but in practice, by inoculating them with Western values, it had "cultivated Jewish particularism in spite of itself" and "impeded their integration through a paradox which is of the very essence of this type of modernisation."<sup>150</sup> In effect, their Paris education would be a break with their past that would alienate them from their origins.

The identity issue, without doubt of importance during their years in Paris, became a recurring theme throughout Lea’s and Joseph’s life. The Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire, a series of measures from 1839 to 1876 that had aimed to modernize the Empire, had been late to foster Ottomanism in the Empire’s subjects, the idea of a common Ottoman citizenship with allegiance to the sultan as a point of consensus for the varied and divided ethnic groups in the Empire. Lea and Joseph were uprooted too early out of their milieu to be aware of these intricacies. Their education at the AIU schools had denigrated their traditional upbringing, language, and culture. Having been taught to look towards the West, they were ambivalent about their Ottoman identity, nor “real” Westerners, certainly not French, although this is to what they aspired. In Paris, their Sephardic identity designated them

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<sup>150</sup> Esther Benbassa, "The Process of Modernisation of Eastern Sephardi Communities," 5.

automatically as "Orientals." How much did they identify with this new identity, or how much did they fight against it?<sup>151</sup>

The students of the ENIO found particularly intriguing the fact that they were seen as "Orientals," while back at home, many came from environments that had ardently cultivated a Western identity. Samuel Loupo, a graduate of the ENIO, described how the other students of the seminary would consider the "Oriental" students with "embarrassing curiosity," and expected them to be "like the savages of the Far West." He added that "having come from Rustchuk, a city serving as a link between the West and the Black Sea, with a population in constant communication with Bucharest and Vienna, the term "orientaux" used to refer to us seemed odd to me at first, if not pejorative." Mrs. Weismann, originally from Adrianople, remembered with fondness and affection how Miss Florentine Bloch at the Institut Bischoffsheim would intervene on behalf of the "orientales," victims of the "occidentales," by "pointing out their error to the Parisian girls, who were mischievous and sly, and for whom everything about the "petites orientales"...was shocking."<sup>152</sup>

Abraham Ribbi, teacher at the boys' school in Tetuan, Morocco, describes his identity crisis as follows:

Only we, having passed some time in the capital of France and returned to the places that we saw the light, can measure the huge change that has been accomplished in our ideas and the immense path that we have traveled, especially concerning our taste.

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<sup>151</sup> Although belonging to a much later period, Frances Malino's study about Sephardi adolescents sent to study in Paris on the eve of World War II (Frances Malino, "Adieu a ma maison": Sephardi Adolescent Identities, 1932-1936," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 131-144) is a valuable contribution for understanding the various issues that young boys and girls had to face.

<sup>152</sup> Recollections of Samuel Loupo and of Mrs. Weismann in A. H. Navon, *Les 70 ans de l'École Normale Israélite Orientale*, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (1860-1939)*, 44-47.

That's why...I feel everywhere exiled and I really suffer at times with nostalgia for European things.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Letter from Abraham Ribbi, AIU teacher in Tetouan, Morocco, to the Central Committee, September 10, 1888. Maroc LXXXI E 1044, cited in Élisabeth Antébi, *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 39-40.

## Chapter 4: Tetuan and Edirne

### Section 1 “Strange Phases of Life”:<sup>154</sup> The Jewish Community of Tetuan

With a stellar French education behind her and her *brevet*<sup>155</sup> in hand, Lea arrived in Tetuan in February 1887, eager to set out on the *mission civilisatrice* that the Alliance Israélite Universelle had entrusted to her. A native of Edirne, a city firmly rooted in the European vanguard of the Ottoman Empire, she belonged to the “nobility” of AIU’s Paris-educated “Oriental” teachers, those who would return back to their cities of origin having full-heartedly internalized the Westernizing agenda of their mentors. As such, her reports on the local Jewish community would concentrate on the backwardness of the community, failing to see that Sephardic Jews and Muslims in Tetuan were descendants of people who had been expelled from *Al Andalus* after the Reconquista, just as had her kin in Edirne.

Tetuan was strategically situated close to Europe some miles south of Gibraltar, in an area coveted by France, Spain and Portugal. The city is nestled upon the slope of a fertile valley from where the river Martil flows down to meet the Mediterranean at Tetuan’s harbor, Martil. On its west and south, its horizon is defined by the impenetrable Rif mountains, gateway to the tribal regions of Anjera.

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<sup>154</sup> “Tetuan’s Moors and Jews: Strange Phases of Life in this Morocco Town. The Two Quarters—In Private Homes—Trades and Shops—The Moor’s Instinct for Art,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1888, [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=940CE3DB173AE033A25751C1A9649C94699FD7CF](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=940CE3DB173AE033A25751C1A9649C94699FD7CF).

<sup>155</sup> The *brevet de capacité pour l’enseignement primaire* was the diploma that every teacher in a French public school was required to possess in order to be able to teach.

Already established as a trading post by the Phoenicians on lands inhabited by Berbers during the first millennium BCE, Tetuan was active during Roman times, and subsequently passed into Vandal and Byzantine influence. The Arabs conquered the region in 642 CE, establishing their linguistic and cultural supremacy. In the fifteenth century it became home to Moors and Jews expelled from Spain, who brought with them their heritage from Granada. Since the sixteenth century, Morocco has been under the rule of the Sharifian dynasty. In modern times, as other parts of North Africa, Morocco, and Tetuan in particular, became entangled in the colonial quest of European powers, primarily France and Spain, and later of Germany and Great Britain.

The Jewish community of Morocco lived as *dhimmis* under Islam, a “protected people,” just like Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The sultan of Morocco guaranteed their lives, religious observance and properties, and in return Jews had to pay the tax poll—this practice continuing well into the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>156</sup>

In Tetuan, large parts of the Jewish population were Sephardic Jews descendants of those who had arrived in the north of Morocco after the expulsion in Iberia, and spoke Judeo-Spanish.<sup>157</sup> Jews, who had come earlier, had developed an idiom of their own, called Judeo-Arabic that consisted of Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic. Sephardic Jews there were certainly more open to European influences, knowledgeable in European languages, and involved in commerce.

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<sup>156</sup> Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>157</sup> The Judeo-Spanish spoken in Morocco, also called *Haketia* and “Western Ladino,” differs than the Ladino spoken by the Balkan communities in that it borrows Arabic words. It was mostly spoken in Tétouan, Tangiers, and Ceuta.

Many Sephardic Jews were merchants who had flourished with the support and backing of the Sultan, and controlled most of the country's imports and exports. They imported sugar, coffee, tea, metals and tobacco, and exported wheat, hides, cereals and wool. Others had trade firms and represented European businesses; they often acquired European protected status, thus escaping Moroccan jurisdiction. The vast majority of Jews, however, were artisans, peddlers, or small merchants. In fact, Jews in Tetuan monopolized coppersmithing and copper-engraving, tin production, gold-smithing (as was the case in virtually every other place in Morocco), and the manufacture of glass products, and they dominated tailoring and winemaking.<sup>158</sup>

Jews in Tetuan lived in the *mellah*, the Jewish quarter, the doors of which closed at sunset. The life of the Jewish community was harsh, as Jews had to don distinctive clothing and were subjected to humiliations and persecution by the local population, with the authorities remaining mostly indifferent. Being the only non-Muslim minority, highly urban among a primarily rural, village or even tribal and nomadic population, the Jews were quite visible indeed.<sup>159</sup>

In the realm of schooling, from four to thirteen years of age, Jewish boys would traditionally attend the *heder*, where they would learn Hebrew, and would study the prayers, the Torah, and some prophets and commentaries. At thirteen years of age, they had to leave school in order to earn their living, except for the sons of rich families, who would go on to the *yeshivah*, studying the Talmud. Girls received no formal education.

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<sup>158</sup> Michael Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco, 1862-1962* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 127.

<sup>159</sup> Lucette Valensi, "Multicultural Visions: The Cultural Tapestry of the Jews of North Africa" in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, edited by David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 890.

It was the report by scholar Joseph Halevy, professor of the prestigious *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, exposing their plight that propelled the newly founded AIU to establish its first school for boys in Tetuan in 1862 and a school for girls in 1865. Soon, Morocco had become of strategic importance for France in general and the AIU in particular. In fact, French consuls became actively involved in assisting the Central Committee of AIU in Paris to conduct its work in Moroccan cities, promoting the establishment of new schools and backing existing ones that they saw as agents of modernization for Jews or Europeans, who would opt to send their children to the AIU schools in order to receive French education.

The 1870s were a difficult period for the AIU schools. Caught in the intra-communal strife and tired by the war of the rabbis against secular education, the AIU teachers left in 1876, leaving behind some local teachers, who were desperately trying to teach three hundred fifty students, who did not understand French.<sup>160</sup> In 1880, AIU would send Abraham Ribbi<sup>161</sup> as director to the boys' school in Tetuan, at exactly the same time that the Alliance was trying to solicit the Sultan of Morocco at the conference of Madrid regarding the status of the Jews.<sup>162</sup>

In fact, the Central Committee of the AIU had dispatched Charles Netter and Emmanuel Veneziani, two of its most influential members, to Madrid to lobby on behalf of the Jews, and to discuss the many injustices they were subjected to, such as being obliged to wear different clothes than the rest of the population; being barred

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<sup>160</sup> Élizabéth Antébi, *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 41.

<sup>161</sup> Abraham Ribbi was born in Izmir in 1861, and died in Oran, Algeria, in 1928. He taught in Tetuan from 1880 until 1889, then Tangiers, from 1889 to 1910. In 1910, he was sent to Oran, where he got sick, and subsequently was made redundant by the AIU. He finished his days in poverty in Oran in 1928.

<sup>162</sup> With the conference of Madrid in 1880 the Great Powers guaranteed the independence of Morocco.

from leaving their quarters whenever they wanted, for example at night; being subjected to humiliations by the local authorities and living in constant fear of their lives.<sup>163</sup>

A central theme at the Madrid conference in 1880 was the protections granted by European states to Moroccan citizens, Jews among them. In fact, Jews represented a disproportionate number among those enjoying foreign protection, especially since in the latter half of the nineteenth century the absolute majority of merchants who had anything to do with Europe were able to acquire protection by England, France, or other foreign power. This was of course a way for them to avoid the *dhimmi* status: Indeed whereas the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire brought about the abolition of the status quo, equality for all, and new civil courts, the Moroccan sultan continued preserving the existing framework of Islamic law. This is why, as imperialism started undermining the legitimacy of the Moroccan regime, the “Sultan’s Jews” sought other forms of civic status and polity. This of course had direct impact on the perception of the rights of the Sultan as a sovereign.<sup>164</sup> The Sultan argued that the *protégé* system was a challenge to his sovereignty, while AIU and other countries—the United States among them—believed it would be unwise to alter it, as the Sultan wanted. During the conference, Netter and Veneziani lobbied for “protected” Jews, but also for the Jewish masses, who had no consular protection.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco, 1862-1962*, 51.

<sup>164</sup> Daniel J. Schroeter, *The Sultan’s Jew: Morocco and the Sephardi World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 153.

<sup>165</sup> Michael Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco, 1862-1962*, 48.



The reestablishment of AIU schools in Morocco was an important milestone for the Jewish communities. Abraham Ribbi, the new director, focusing on the regenerative work of the Alliance, stressing how Moroccan Jews “had fallen at the level of the vulgar Islamism of the masses, of the Catholicism of Lourdes, a real paganism under the aegis of the God of Sinai and of the Decalogue,” and how there was a need to convert these Jews to “the real Judaism.”<sup>166</sup>

Secular education affected the place of women and the status of family. AIU firmly believed in the importance of young women as future wives and mothers, who would instill modern ideas into their families. According to AIU, for Moroccan Jewry progress became possible through the young girl because “sequestered as she was in the mellah...having no contact with the outside world...she was able to conserve intact her school instruction, meditate at leisure the words of her dear teacher from France, whose manners and behavior she tried to imitate,” while young men, after leaving the school were easily lured by their surroundings, and even though they were witnesses to the injustices and the misery of the masses, they came to see these plights as natural necessities.<sup>167</sup>

As was the case in every place they operated, AIU schools in Morocco would eventually create an elite class of Jews, who used French in their everyday and professional lives. Many of them would take part in Zionist enterprises later on, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century. The graduates of the Alliance schools would also form associations active in the cultural life of their cities (among

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<sup>166</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “Abraham Ribbi (1826-1928): L’ Apôtre du Maroc,” in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 47.

<sup>167</sup> Y. D. Semach, “L’enseignement israélite au Maroc et les écoles de l’Alliance Israélite,” *Paix et Droit*, November 1, 1931.

others establishing popular libraries, maintaining lecture halls, organizing public lectures and theatrical plays, or awarding prizes). Looking upon France as their spiritual homeland, they would unwittingly become supporters of its colonial endeavors. When French troops arrived in backward regions of the country in order to—as was the official colonial rhetoric—bring peace to this country of anarchy, to transform commercial methods, and scientifically organize the exploitation of natural resources,” they found in all the *mellahs* Jews who “welcomed them like saviors....in the most pure French.”<sup>168</sup>

*Section 2 Killer Modernity: Lea Mitrani at the Alliance Schools in Tetuan and Edirne*

Lea arrived in Marseilles on a train—third class seat—from Paris on February 9, 1887. Accompanied by Mr. Ribbi, director of the AIU School for boys in Tetuan, she boarded a ship and departed for Tangiers on February 10 in a second-class berth. The crossing was rough, and the ship’s arrival was delayed. From Tangiers, they continued to Tetuan by way of Ceuta, because “that road was shorter and less tiring than that going from Tangiers to Tetuan.”<sup>169</sup> With a well-guarded caravan, they left behind them the high promontory of Ceuta, and the rock of Gibraltar on the European side, and made their way to the gulf of Tetuan.

On their way, they encountered a variety of people that Lea found fascinating and exotic. They saw

Moors with white caftans and turbans on their shaved heads,...negroes carrying wood and burdened with little clothing; Moorish boys driving donkeys laden from

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<sup>168</sup> Y. D. Semach, “L’enseignement israélite au Maroc et les écoles de l’Alliance Israélite,” *Paix et Droit*, November 1, 1931.

<sup>169</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, February 24, 1887. The distance from Tangier to Tétouan is about 40 miles, while the distance from Tangier to Tétouan over Ceuta is about 60 miles.

their ears to their heels with brush or straw or a panier basket of vegetables; men and women of the Riff tribe living nearby, ugly in feature and temper.<sup>170</sup>

Passing the Muslim and Jewish cemeteries at the outskirts of the city, they finally came upon the double wall surrounding Tetuan on February 23, 1887.<sup>171</sup>

Tetuan was a city of 20,000 inhabitants living in whitewashed houses with flat roofs, much used in the evening or the summer. The travelers proceeded to the southern part of the city, to the Jewish Quarter, that was walled off from the rest of the city. Only one gate permitted people to go out for business into the Moorish marketplace, with its large square, where the country people would unload their produce, slaves would be lined up for selling, and workshops and shops were to be found. The streets, narrow passageways sometimes passing under the second story of a house, seemed to Lea like a labyrinth with no apparent beginning or end. She found the atmosphere stuffy, and the houses so densely packed that when she tried to look to the sky, she thought she was looking through a chimney.<sup>172</sup>

Finally they arrived at the modest house where the *directrice* of the school, Mademoiselle Rachel Behar, was living. Lea was so happy to see her old teacher from the girls' school in Edirne, now appointed in Tetuan, who welcomed her warmly. The young girl would be staying with her, and AIU was paying part of her rent—they had also paid her travel expenses.

The first report that we have, written by Lea Mitrani regarding education in the school is dated March, 1888, apparently by AIU's suggestion. In her report, Lea

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<sup>170</sup> "Tetuan's Moors and Jews: Strange Phases of Life in this Morocco Town. The Two Quarters—In Private Homes—Trades and Shops—The Moor's Instinct for Art," *New York Times*, February 12, 1888.

<sup>171</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, February 24, 1887, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>172</sup> Abraham Ribbi to the Central Committee, February 10, 1886. Maroc LXXXI E 1044 cited in Élizabéth Antébi, "Abraham Ribbi (1826-1928): L' Apôtre du Maroc," in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 42.

mentioned that she was teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade with 24 students, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, with 30 students. She described how students mostly enjoyed natural history and geography and especially being able to write letters, since “most of them have somebody from their family outside of Tetuan and...the mothers are happy that their daughters can become their little secretaries.” She also added that parallel to the lessons, she always seized the opportunity to give the students notions of “politeness, savoir-vivre, order, and propriety.”<sup>173</sup>

In another report, she explained how she taught history, geography and orthography using amusing stories and anecdotes in which the students seemed to be very interested. She also mentioned that she liked to let students participate actively in the lesson, since it would be very boring for them to hear her talk for one hour. Finally she described how the students were particularly interested in learning the facts when she taught geography and European history (using as an example a discussion with a student on Henry Plantagenet, Marie de’ Medici and Richelieu) and how they loved to listen to descriptions of the “great cities” such as London, and Paris, cities that are “much livelier in comparison to the city they live in.”<sup>174</sup>

But Jacques Bigart,<sup>175</sup> secretary general of the AIU was not satisfied with this method. In his reply, although he appreciated that Lea Mitrani had herself concluded

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<sup>173</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, March 11, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>174</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, April 12, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>175</sup> Jacques Bigart (1855-1934) was born in Alsace and after finishing the Rabbinical Seminary in Paris he was hired as assistant secretary to Isidore Loeb, then secretary general of the Alliance. From 1892 until his death at his office, he was secretary general of the Alliance, corresponding meticulously with all teachers in the organizations schools. Bigart was a controversial personality, totally dedicated to the mission of AIU, feared by some, critical to others, admired and loved by others. Conservative, he opposed novelties, but lived in a world that was rapidly changing. As was expected by an Alliance leading personality, he vehemently opposed Zionism, and was critical of teachers, who expressed sympathy for it. He was accused of being devoid of emotions, but this was mostly a result of his total obedience to the AIU regulations. Throughout his service in the Alliance, he came to know and care

that history becomes interesting when taught orally, he suggested that she should not try to teach history insisting on details, names or events of secondary importance.<sup>176</sup> “We see no harm if the children do not know who Henri Plantagenet, or Marie de’ Medici are, since we have to do with children that our history interests only mildly; one must leave aside all unimportant events of this history and...concentrate on facts that have influenced general history decisively, such as the crusades, the despotism of Louis XIV, the revolutions in England and in France. Still in these events one has to search more the causes and consequences than the details.”<sup>177</sup>

Responding, Lea Mitrani assured the Central Committee that she would take their suggestions into consideration when teaching of history and continued by analyzing how she taught sciences and composition. She described the intense interest of the students in science by describing how as “their intellect awakes, they can barely stay at their place, and some students instinctively approach the lectern...Biology and botany have captivated them, but what has mostly excited their imagination is the study of physics and chemistry...” Finally she added that many of the students are enthusiastic about writing compositions, because they can see that shortly they will be able to correspond with relatives abroad.<sup>178</sup>

The tone in a letter sent also on May 20, 1888, is different. Loneliness and a sense of deep longing for her family pervade her sentences. Her language mirrored

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for each teacher individually through their letters and reports, and knew that they were the backbone of AIU’s mission.

<sup>176</sup> It would be standard practice for Bigart to chastise the teachers when they wanted to teach facts of history to the students. Bigart insisted that students were not interested in facts and that the teacher should give them the principles and causes of events, in short should “indoctrinate” them in a way. His reaction was the same to Claire Benchimol some years later in Tetuan. See more details in Frances Malino, “The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1940,” 265.

<sup>177</sup> AIU to Lea Mitrani, April 24, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>178</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, May 20, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

the sentiments of other young AIU teachers, especially women, who after a lengthy and demanding education in Paris were entrusted with responsibilities far beyond what their academic training had prepared them for. These were women uprooted from their homes at a young age, intensely educated in a patronizing environment, and sent out to pioneer Western ideals and modernity in a world that would eventually devour all their existence:

Mr. President,

I would like to request the favor of granting me a leave for the upcoming vacations. After leaving the École Bischoffsheim, I did not go to see my family; in the end of the school year, it will be five and a half years since I left them. My parents have written to me many times prompting me to ask you for a leave, but I was not able to do so, except at this moment, one and a half year that I already reside in Tetuan. I think that you will find my desire legitimate. My parents can support my absence no longer and as for me, I feel the need to be with them for some time.<sup>179</sup>

The answer to her request was negative. The Committee explained that although it perfectly understood Lea's desire to see her parents, they suggested that she be patient for some time more and that they would be more disposed to grant such a demand the following year.<sup>180</sup> In her reply, Lea would beg them to grant her the leave that she "absolutely" needs.<sup>181</sup>

The nostalgia for home was a consistent pattern in the correspondence of AIU teachers. Although these young teachers were hand-selected among the most promising AIU students, had undergone extensive medical assessments regarding their health, stamina, and psychology, and had received an elite education, their

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<sup>179</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, May 20, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>180</sup> AIU to Lea Mitrani, June 13, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>181</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, June 22, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

independence and resourcefulness were not enough to help them with the reality check that was their first appointment. Having to adapt to a foreign and sometimes hostile environment with no support proved challenging for many. Not only were they teaching for the first time; they were desperately trying to establish some kind of a verisimilitude of “home” when there was no one from home who could help.

Like Lea, other female teachers too would express feelings of despair or hopelessness in their correspondence with the Central Committee. Rosalie Chéni, teacher in the city of Yambol in Bulgaria, would ask the AIU to permit her to visit her parents that she had not seen for eleven years since she started working as a teacher at the AIU schools.<sup>182</sup> Lucie Ovadia from Salonica sent as a teacher to Alexandria in Egypt would echo Lea’s feelings by writing:

We disembark in a city of the Orient or of Africa which is unknown to us...It is necessary to install oneself, look for a room, a pension; neither mother, nor older sister guides us...We are isolated and miserable, with no relations and no friends...Interrogate my colleagues, ask them if exhausted by the first weeks of teaching, not yet broken into a profession which taxes the brain no less than the lungs, they have not cried secretly in the evening, alone in their room furnished with the four traditional pieces of furniture (two chairs, one bed, a table, a lamp) bequeathed by the *institutrice* whom they have just replaced.<sup>183</sup>

Shortly, Lea would learn that she was appointed to the girls’ school in Tangiers as a replacement to Mme and Mr. Benzaquen, who would be coming to Tetuan. Among her correspondence with AIU, which becomes erratic after October 1888, we find a telegram from her to the Alliance stating the following: “Greatly

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<sup>182</sup> Elizabeth Antébi, “Rosalie Chéni ou la “mère courage,” in id., *Les missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 134.

<sup>183</sup> Frances Malino, “The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872-1940,” 255.

regret. Impossible to go to Tangiers. Letter follows. Mitrani.”<sup>184</sup> We can only imagine her receiving her appointment to Tangiers, and dashing off to the post office to send out a telegram. In a letter dated October 12, 1888, she desperately tries to reverse the appointment:

Mr. President,

I have the honor to acknowledge receipt of your letter of October 5<sup>th</sup>, where you announce my nomination to the post at Tangiers.

It is with the deepest pain that I have learned this news, because I consider myself at Tetuan as happy as in my homeland. With Miss Behar I feel as a veritable sister, I am attached to the people, to the children, I have got used to the customs of the land. It would be very painful to go and establish new acquaintances, new habits, and all that for a very limited time period. I have to remind you of your promise that you would let me go to my family the next year, because I can no longer support being far away from my parents; it is nearly six years since I left them. I have conformed without grievance to your orders, because I was residing in this good city. Now that I see that you want to take away this favor, I feel mortified, because I am sure that I will not be happy in Tangiers...

I know that you care for the welfare of your teachers, and since I am happy in Tetuan, I beg you to let me here for the little time that remains for me in Morocco.<sup>185</sup>

In his reply, Bigart would chastise Lea for sending the telegram, since the Committee anyway “does not take any decision based on a telegram.” Although he mentioned that her considerations were understandable, he explained that “circumstances can arise when the teachers must learn to put their service to the Alliance over their own (interest)” Furthermore, he assured Lea that Tangiers had

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<sup>184</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU, October 14, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>185</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, October 12, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.



“nothing unpleasant” and that “the *directrice*, Mme Isaac, is very sweet and pleasant.”<sup>186</sup>

In a letter of June 1889, Lea was still writing from Tetuan, which meant that she had not been asked to report to Tangiers. Lea was asking again for permission to go to see her parents, and if the Alliance would be able to contribute to the travel expenses.<sup>187</sup> While the Central Committee did authorize her trip, they stated that it was impossible to pay for her travel expenses.<sup>188</sup> Lea wrote back expressing her gratitude for the permission to go and visit her parents and at the same time expressing her indignation for not receiving any subvention with the travel expenses, as AIU had promised her the previous year, and stating that she also should “enjoy the same privileges as the other teachers of the Alliance, who return for the first time to their homes.” She continued her letter by saying:

I have not been able to save anything in Tetuan, because life here is not as cheap as people think. I would not like to borrow money from here, and I think it would be shameful to ask my family (for money) after being in your service for two and a half years...It is impossible for me to prolong any longer my stay in Morocco, because the climate is not healthy for me at all. Mademoiselle Behar has informed you that I suffer very much in my throat, and that I have lost my voice altogether. For some time now I go to class only to be present....I beg you, Mr. President, to agree to pay my travel expenses and to grant me leave for three months, so that I can tend to my throat. After getting well, I will ask you to give me a post in Turkey.<sup>189</sup>

The Alliance did not agree to contribute to her expenses, and in her next letter, dated August 9, 1889, Lea stated that she had to write immediately to her parents so

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<sup>186</sup> AIU to Lea Mitrani, October 23, 1888, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>187</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, June 9, 1889, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>188</sup> AIU to Lea Mitrani, June 23, 1889, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>189</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, July 4, 1889, CAHJP 3/20.

that they would send her money.<sup>190</sup> In the same letter she asked the AIU to provide her with two letters of recommendation, in order to obtain the necessary reductions in the tickets of the two companies that she would be using for her travel, namely the Compagnie Transatlantique at Tangiers, and the Messageries in Marseilles.

During this time, a parallel correspondence was taking place between Rachel Behar, the school's director, and Jacques Bigart. We understand that she had also been having health problems, and that she had asked for a vacation in order to visit her parents, possibly planning to make the long trip to the eastern Mediterranean together with Lea. In a letter, she mentioned how deeply afflicted both she and Lea were by AIU's decision not to grant them permission, vividly describing Lea's pain when she learned that she would not be able to see her relatives and her country anytime soon. She also described how Lea's parents were waiting impatiently to see their daughter, especially her mother, who lived "just for hugging and kissing her beloved daughter. She counts the months and the days that separate her from Lea."<sup>191</sup> From another letter dated July 30, 1888, we learn that Rachel Behar had decided to leave her position in Tetuan, but that she would wait for her replacement.<sup>192</sup>

In another letter that Rachel wrote to Bigart, she explained why Lea was so desperate not to go to Tangiers, and through this letter we can learn a little bit about Lea's parents:

The parents of Mlle Mitrani had agreed to let her come to Morocco only because she would be staying with me, her first teacher, and she herself decided to come here for the same reason. And she has not repented it: she is happy with me, loved by her students, esteemed and well thought of by all the community. This is why she is so

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<sup>190</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU President, August 9, 1889, CAHJP 3/20.

<sup>191</sup> Rachel Behar to AIU President, June 22, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

<sup>192</sup> Rachel Behar to AIU President, July 30, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

attached to her post. You are not unaware that it is very difficult to win the affection of the population, of the students, to understand the character of people, to discipline the students when one does not know them, etc. ...Isn't it painful for her that she is already so far away from her family having not seen them for nearly 6 years to be separated from me and abandon such a good community in order to go to another city where she will have to confront again difficulties? We both find ourselves in the bitterest state of sorrow since your last letter. But we do still hope that you might revoke this decision.<sup>193</sup>

Jacques Bigart's reply was implacable:

We cannot always take into consideration the taste or the whim of the teachers when deciding on transfers and they must do their obligation and sometimes sacrifice their preferences for the necessities of their profession....You mention about the parents of Mlle Mitrani that they decided to send her to Morocco because she would be under your direction. Had the parents of Mlle Mitrani opposed their daughter going to Tetuan, we would have [illegible] of Mlle Mitrani. She has accepted to be in our service for ten years "in the positions that we indicate." If she does not want to obey us, she should submit her resignation and reimburse us for her education. ...Mlle Mitrani will go to Tangiers in the beginning of 1889.<sup>194</sup>

In her reply, Rachel Behar mentioned that she was very sorry that Mr. Bigart had misunderstood her mentioning Mlle Mitrani's parents, and that the point of her letter had been to ask that Mlle Mitrani remains in Tetuan till her vacation next summer. She also informed him that Mr. and Mme Benzaquen and also the new *institutrice*, Mlle Ponté, had arrived in Tetuan, and that Mlle Mitrani was waiting for his instructions.<sup>195</sup>

In a surprising way that annulled his previous letter and demonstrated that he was not as ruthless as people thought, Bigart replied that "since Mlle Mitrani has

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<sup>193</sup> Rachel Behar to AIU President, October 13, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

<sup>194</sup> Jacques Bigart to Rachel Behar, October 23, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

<sup>195</sup> Rachel Behar to AIU President, November 3, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

insisted so much to remain in Tetuan and on the other hand Mlle Ponté desires to go to Tangiers, we have decided, temporarily, to assign Mlle Ponté to Tangiers.”<sup>196</sup>

Lea left Tetuan in late August 1889 and arrived in Edirne in October 3, 1889, after a trip that “lasted more than a month.” Although we know that Lea had asked for a vacation near her parents, she was informed by Mlle Abramovitz, *directrice* of the girls’ school, that she was appointed as a teaching assistant to the school replacing Mlle Sasson. “I am infinitely grateful to the Central Committee for having given me this post, but I would like to request a vacation of three months in order to recuperate completely.” Apparently she had started out her trip already sick, and the changing of climate and season in Edirne aggravated this situation. Attaching a doctor’s diagnosis to her letter, she concluded that if she was to neglect her illness, “I will suffer from my throat for all my life.”<sup>197</sup> The Central Committee agreed to give her two months of vacation.

Lea started working again on January 1, 1890. Her first report comparing her students in Edirne with those in Tetuan contains observations about the community that are quite interesting especially when compared to other, contemporary accounts. Writing her account on the city and the students, Lea has the intensity of the neophyte. She is not “the daughter of David Mitrani,” but the Alliance teacher, dedicated to the organization, passionate about her work, fierce in her devotion. In light of her long absence from the city and her initiation into the “religion” of France, Edirne now seemed to her provincial, devoid of intellect or talent. Or it might be that she was no more the child that had left the city seven years ago. She probably had

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<sup>196</sup> Jacques Bigart to Rachel Behar, November 12, 1888, CAHJP HM3/8.

<sup>197</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU, October 21, 1889, CAHJP HM3/109.

come to realize that the idealized image of her childhood, the image that she had carried in her memory for so many years simply did not exist.

Whatever the reason, Lea's account describes how her students in Edirne lack the vivacity, energy, desire and diligence of the students in Tetuan: "The proximity of the Ocean, the contacts with Spain, the immigration of one hundred young people per year to America and to Algeria, the abandonment of the mellah... have contributed [to the fact] that the Jews of North Africa (I speak of the Jews of Castilian origin) are superior to those in many cities in Turkey." In fact, girls in Tetuan have another reason to study their homework and classes, and that is because young men who return from Caracas or Buenos Aires "choose young women who have excelled in the school." Lea also mentioned that the bad "Judeo-Spanish jargon" affected the children's efficiency when studying, since the language is interspersed with a lot of Turkish words, which were difficult to pronounce or to remember. "I have found that instead of translating into Judeo-Spanish, it is better to explain in French using the most elementary terms."<sup>198</sup> Jacques Bigart was impressed with the account that he found particularly useful for the Alliance, and suggested that Lea continue writing them such accounts in subsequent letters, providing more information on everyday life.<sup>199</sup>

In the following report, Lea mentioned that both Edirne and Tetuan are quite similar from point of view of customs, and continued by stating that the poor in Edirne are much inferior to those in Tetuan, because they marry young and cannot support a wife. Steeped in the nineteenth-century notions of "cleanliness" and

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<sup>198</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU, March 6, 1890, HM 03/109.

<sup>199</sup> Jacques Bigart to Lea Mitrani, March 20, 1890, HM 03/109.

“respectability” and of the need to cleanse the streets of this misery, she assured the Alliance that “it is not that there are not charitable organizations in the city..., just that we have not found yet the way to cure Edirne from this plague.” Comparing Edirne and Morocco, she described how the poor in Morocco are “the liveliest, the most intelligent and the most active of the population, while in Edirne they are the laziest and hapless.”<sup>200</sup> In his reply, Jacques Bigart stated his belief that the Alliance education and the vocational work would quickly remedy this situation.<sup>201</sup>

Lea’s accounts are parallel to the accounts of Mlle Sarah Ungar, the *directrice* who replaced Mlle Abramovitz at the girls’ school in Edirne.<sup>202</sup> After speaking about the teachers—among them Lea Mitrani—as being very competent and kind, she described Edirne as a “deplorable ghost of a city,” worse than what Bigart had described to her.<sup>203</sup> Lea’s and Ungar’s accounts, though, contradict a later account by Moshe Franco, an influential AIU teacher.<sup>204</sup> Writing about Edirne’s status and value for the Alliance, he stressed that

all of the teachers who have had positions here agree...that the average share of intelligence is much greater here than among other Jewish groups in the East. To what can this be attributed? I cannot say; I am simply stating the fact. In addition, this

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<sup>200</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU, May 4, 1890, CAHJP HM 3/109.

<sup>201</sup> Jacques Bigart to Lea Mitrani, May 14, 1890, CAHJP HM 3/109.

<sup>202</sup> Sarah Ungar (1849-1911) had a long and illustrious career in AIU, and served the girls’ school of Edirne for twenty years, from 1890 until her resignation in 1909. Sarah Ungar, contrary to the usual practice of the Alliance, was born in Bonn and was German. During her years in Adrianople she saw wars, epidemics and natural disasters, but persisted and rendered great services to the AIU girls’ school. For more information see Élizabéth Antébi, “Sarah Ungar: Une femme d’exception à Andrinople,” in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 149-162.

<sup>203</sup> “Comme vous avez eu raison! Quelle vilaine ville que ce vieux spectre d’Andrinople, pire encore que je me l’imaginai.” Élizabéth Antébi, “Sarah Ungar: Une femme d’exception à Andrinople,” in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 152.

<sup>204</sup> Born in Istanbul in 1864, Moshe Franco studied at the École Normale Orientale Israélite in Paris, and became teacher and principal in AIU schools in the “Orient.” An avid historian of the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire, he wrote, among others, the books “Histoire des Israélites de l’Empire Ottoman” (Paris, 1897); “Les Sciences Mystiques chez les Juifs d’Orient” (Paris, 1900) and articles such as “La Communauté Israélite de Safed” (in the “Revue des Ecoles de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle”).

city has produced the majority of the good teachers in the Alliance, in particular those responsible for the teaching of agricultural methods in the institutions of this organization.<sup>205</sup>

In June 1890, Mlle Abramovitz, the *directrice*, left the school and Lea together with Mlle Cohen, another *institutrice*, were directing the school, in her absence. In her report dated July 5, 1890, Lea wrote with enthusiasm about the students, and their progress and described how interested they were in lessons such as physics, botanical science and chemistry that permitted them to participate hands-on during the lesson. In the same report, Lea described how because of the heat, the children were suffering from fevers, headaches and sore throats, symptoms that she had also suffered for one week.<sup>206</sup>

Lea's last letter as a teacher dates March 6, 1891, when she announced to the Central Committee that she was submitting her resignation since "according to the decision of my fiancé, Mr. Joseph Niego, my marriage will take place the first days of April."<sup>207</sup> This is the first time that we see their names together. We do not know if the two had met briefly in France, since Joseph was about to finish his studies at Montpellier when Lea was arriving in Paris. They might have had the opportunity to meet through mutual friends. Or they might have been introduced during one of Joseph's visits to his uncle, Rabbi Rafael Behmoiras, in Edirne from his post as assistant director at agricultural school of Mikveh Israel.

In fact, the marriage took place on April 22, 1891. It seems that Joseph had taken some time off his duties to travel to Edirne and had rushed the wedding in order

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<sup>205</sup> Moshe Franco to AIU, January 30, 1897, cited in Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition*, 142.

<sup>206</sup> Lea Mitrani to AIU, July 5, 1890, CAHJP HM3/109.

<sup>207</sup> Lea Mitrani, letter to AIU, March 6, 1891, CAHJP HM3/109.

to be back to Mikveh Israel in time to take over officially as director of Mikveh Israel from Samuel Hirsch, who was leaving his post. They probably had to marry as soon as possible, because Passover was fast approaching. *Halakhah* forbade weddings during *Pesach*, during the counting of Omer, or the festival of Shavuot and the wedding could not wait until after mid-June for Shavuot to be over. They got married Wednesday, April 22, 1891, the day before the first *Seder*.<sup>208</sup>

In the last document we have written from her, Lea expressed her gratitude to the Alliance, and her feelings of gratefulness and devotion. In the same letter, she explained how happy she was because “even after my marriage, I can be of use to the Alliance by being involved in the work of my future husband, in a farm and an establishment where a housewife can always find things to do.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> For more information on their wedding, see Chapter 1.

<sup>209</sup> Lea Mitrani, letter to AIU, March 6, 1891, CAHJP HM3/109.



## Chapter 5: Palestine

Joseph's and Lea's life as a couple was inextricably linked to and irrevocably altered by Joseph's employment as director of the agricultural school "Mikveh Israel," established at the outskirts of Jaffa by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Their twelve-year stay there would affect them each in a way proportionate to the persona that they adopted in order to function in the environment of the establishment. The twelve-year period from 1891 to 1903 is an important milestone for the development of the school, for Joseph's professional growth, and for Lea's ultimate collapse.

The subsequent representation of Mikveh in Zionist, nation-building terms reflects the conflicting duality of the agricultural school between the goals and aspirations of the Alliance and the Zionist version of the story. Their personal catastrophe is also a reflection of this conflict that will take its toll on them.

In an age of science and discovery, Joseph was rightfully the first scientist graduate of the Alliance education, whom the organization entrusted with the social engineering of a new agricultural class of morally elevated Jews through its agricultural school. This was not a nation-building project, but a French philanthropic endeavor, aiming, through the inculcation of Western values and education, to turn "degenerate" Oriental Jews into modern individuals, worthy of their homeland.

For twelve years, Joseph would dominate the establishment and would be esteemed throughout the New Yishuv. And for twelve years, Lea—who during her teaching years in Tetuan had yearned to return to her parents—would live in relative isolation far away from her home as Joseph's responsibilities, the consecutive births

of their children, and the transportation and communication technologies of time complicated her integration into a verisimilitude of normality.

In retrospect, could the outcomes have been foreseen? In what ways was Lea's experience different from that of other Jewish immigrant women of the time? And did Joseph pay for his stellar career in Palestine with the dissolution of his family life?

### Section 1 Ottoman Palestine

In 1891 Joseph and Lea left Edirne for Ottoman Palestine. The region was an effervescent construct of multiple realities that projected differently on its various ethnic and religious communities. Travelogues, reports, and photographs during the last quarter of the nineteenth century paint stereotyped views of the Holy Land, views in which its inhabitants become part of the landscape, and are there as props of a glorious, long forgotten, past.<sup>210</sup> Certain themes recur: places mentioned in the Bible, interiors of holy places, or persons in costume—everything that can convey the idea of a biblical land frozen in time and of a stagnant and decaying world different from the contemporary European way of life.

European travelers presented the Holy Land as a stagnant, ruined and decaying place in need of European political and moral redemption and degeneration. They showed that Turkish rule was the reason that so many bad things had befallen the otherwise blessed and fertile land. “The native population are quite as well aware

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<sup>210</sup> Catherine Nicault (ed.), *Jérusalem 1850-1948, Des Ottomans aux Anglais: entre coexistence spirituelle et déchirure politique* (Paris: Autrement, 1999). 160.

of these facts...they lay the blame of their misery on the shoulders of their rulers, and are only too anxious to pass into other hands.”<sup>211</sup>

The Great Powers, each vying to become its ruler, were drawn to the Holy Land not for its resources or economic importance, but for its religious and cultural significance, and later on for its strategic position.<sup>212</sup> This was a land to be discovered and scientifically explained—both its natural resources, as well as its inhabitants. European travelers, missionaries, journalists, diplomats, scientists, artists, political or military figures, through diaries, travelogues, tales, reports, articles, maps, drawings, paintings and books, discovered “the Orient” in Palestine: a place where colonial aspirations were projected, European prejudices found a fertile soil, and alterity was easy to construct.

This was the “Holy Land,” where the biblical “noble Hebrew” had once roamed. Now the Land lay desolate, a “virgin territory” to be had—and Christianize. In fact, it was the religious fervor of living in the same place that Jesus had lived that helped European pilgrims overcome the harsh climate, lack of transportation and other difficulties that the land presented.<sup>213</sup>

Many nineteenth-century Jews of Europe saw Palestine as an intellectual construct rather than a physical space, since they deemed it physically and psychologically challenging for Westerners. When Niego described and justified Jewish settlement in Palestine as a useful element for the Ottoman Empire, his

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<sup>211</sup> Claude Reignier Conder, *Tent Work in Palestine: A Record of Discovery and Adventure* (London: A. P. Watt and Sons, 1895), 373.

<sup>212</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, “The Formation of Palestinian Collective Identities: the Ottoman and Mandatory Periods,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36, 2 (April 2000): 60.

<sup>213</sup> Nancy L. Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women, 1800-1948* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 54.

argument resembled early Zionist rhetoric, which tried to convince both Jews and Gentiles alike about Zionism's rationality by focusing on the area's usefulness to the Ottoman Empire and not its prospects as a Jewish homeland.<sup>214</sup>

Contemporary Ottoman language and documents refer to Palestine as "*Arz-i Filistin*." Palestine, following the 1864 Provinces Act, was not a single administrative unit, but geographically defined into the *Mutasarrıflık* of Jerusalem to the south (including Jaffa, Gazza, Hebron and Beersheba), and the *Sancaks* of Nablus and Acre in the north (including the cities of Acre, Hayfa, Tiberias, Sefad) administratively tied to the *villayet* of Beirut. Until 1888, these *Sancaks* were part of the *Vilâyet* of *Şam* ('Syria'), but afterwards were incorporated into the new *Vilâyet* of Beirut.<sup>215</sup> During the nineteenth century, the all-defining Mediterranean along its coast was a natural frontier opening to the West, permitting growing commercial, financial and political European presence.

But against the negative descriptions of European travelers, during this period, the region was undergoing major development with new roads being built between Jaffa and Jerusalem as of 1869, and between Hebron and Nablus to Jerusalem in 1881. Horse-drawn carriages (*diligences*) were the common form of public transportation. The railroads were also developed, and rendered transportation speedier and therefore safer. When the railroad from Jaffa to Jerusalem was finished

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<sup>214</sup> Ivan D. Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, "Orientalism and the Jews: An Introduction" in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan D. Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press; Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), xxxvi.

<sup>215</sup> Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Practice as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881-1908," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, 1 (January 1975): 33. See also Baruch Kimmerling, "The formation of Palestinian collective identities: the Ottoman and mandatory periods," 74, note 23.

in 1892, the trip would take only four hours, compared to twelve by diligence and a whole day by mule.<sup>216</sup>

Politically, the second half of the nineteenth century was shaped by the *Tanzimat* reforms that were adopted to counteract European penetration and under pressure from the Great Powers. The Reforms grew out of the need to address growing social and political unrest generated by taxation, disparities between religious communities, need for universal conscription, increasing European intervention, and eagerness of the Ottomans to solidify control over their provinces.<sup>217</sup> Through the Reforms, the Ottoman government and elite tried to inculcate pride in and promote loyalty to the Empire. But this proved an endless, ultimately vain task. Grafting the logic of the Western European nation-state onto the “multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, and multilingual” Ottoman Empire, did not have the desired effects.<sup>218</sup>

The Tanzimat reforms disturbed the latent order of the inherently stratified Ottoman society that had been in place for centuries and established mechanisms for coexistence lost their effectiveness.<sup>219</sup> Some parts of the Muslim population of the Empire, having lost its privileged position, was hostile to the reforms, which they perceived as a concession to the West and as undermining the traditional social structure. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, were disappointed when the state was unable to readily put “equality” into practice. For Jews, the abolishment of the millet

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<sup>216</sup> Jacob M. Landau, *Abdul-Hamid's Palestine* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1979), 11.

<sup>217</sup> Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922*, 64-68; Samir Khalaf, “Communal Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Lebanon,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman empire: the functioning of a plural society*, ed. B. Braude and B. Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), 122.

<sup>218</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries Since 1492,” 335.

<sup>219</sup> Fatma Müge Göçek, “The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Emergence of Greek, Armenian, Turkish, and Arab Nationalisms,” in *Social Constructions of Nationalism in the Middle East*, ed. Fatma Müge Göçek (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 26.

system, at least on paper, by the 1856 decree did not have the effect that emancipation had for their coreligionists in Western European countries and did not facilitate their integration into Ottoman society. As Aron Rodrigue and other historians have argued, Jews—previously a ‘millet’ vested with special privileges and rights—now became a disenfranchised and disassociated ‘minority’.<sup>220</sup> Tensions escalated, and in many provinces conflicts arose, with Muslims attacking their Christian or Jewish neighbors.<sup>221</sup>

The Ottoman leadership, for their part, had internalized the Orientalist discourse of Europe and now set out to civilize the “backward” Arabs of the Empire. In fact the Ottomans pursued a *mission civilisatrice* parallel to that of Western philanthropic or religious societies, since many sons of families from the Arab provinces of the Empire would enroll in Ottoman schools that would use modern methods to inculcate the Arabs—still in a state of “nomadism and savagery”—with the blessings of civilization.<sup>222</sup> Having lost nearly all their Balkan possessions, the rulers were also eager to instill Ottomanism into the souls of their Arab subjects, now a majority of the Empire’s population. Ottomanism was a convenient ideology for urban elites and notables and for powerful families that had accumulated extensive lands with the 1858 law.<sup>223</sup> For the peasantry and the lower classes, however, identity

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<sup>220</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries Since 1492,” 335.

<sup>221</sup> We have such outbursts in Aleppo (1850), Mosul (1854), Nablus (1856), Jedda (1858), Damascus (1860), Egypt (1882) and Baghdad (1889). The reasons for these outbursts remain debated and each side (Ottoman officials, European observers, Muslim Arab elites or historians of the era) gives simplified explanations that only present part of the story. See more in Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>222</sup> Mark Levine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948*, 10.

<sup>223</sup> The Ottoman program of land registration (1858 Law) had aimed to encourage settlement of scarcely populated areas but essentially resulted in the amassment of large estates in the hands of local

was primarily tied to clan and regions, with Islam being the common denominator between the social strata.<sup>224</sup>

If the Reforms had aimed to solidify the grasp of the central government over its subjects, the Ottoman bankruptcy of 1870 had the opposite effect. The management of the Empire's finances by foreign powers (mainly Britain and France) furthered European penetration and financial exploitation, and complicated the way that the Ottomans were able to repay their loans in the face of European rapaciousness. European companies lobbied for, and acquired, concessions for profitable enterprises, such as the development of the Turkish railway system.<sup>225</sup> In the same way, European and local non-Muslim merchants who had managed to acquire European protection or nationality, enjoyed a growing economic advantage, something that led to growing disparities between the different religious communities in the region.<sup>226</sup> Increased European involvement brought change also in the patterns of local economy in Palestine. Europeans—including Jewish settlers—began to arrive. New quarters were established in the cities in Palestine and older ones were expanded. European patterns of import-dependent consumption were developed while agricultural and technical innovations were introduced—although with little benefits

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magnates. Registering and parceling the land introduced the notion of private titles and land accumulation in the area, and favored the appearance of wealthy, politically powerful families that embraced Ottomanism, being the primary beneficiaries of the new sociopolitical order. See Baruch Kimmerling, "The formation of Palestinian collective identities: the Ottoman and mandatory periods," 55. Parallel to the Ottomanism of the central state, Christian and Arab elites, educated in classical Arabic in Protestant missionary schools would gradually develop pride in their Arab past and articulate an "Arabism" that in the beginning aimed to supersede inter-communal conflicts, but would eventually introduce political implications to the cultural awakening of the region. See Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*, 173.

<sup>224</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, "The formation of Palestinian collective identities: the Ottoman and mandatory periods," 71.

<sup>225</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (London & New York: Methuen, 1981), 192.

<sup>226</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*, 99.

to the Arab inhabitants of Palestine who owned little land, and mostly worked large estates held by the government or prominent landowners.<sup>227</sup>

Jewish immigrants meant changes in the labor market. Beyond traditional occupations, new services and occupations arose or established ones change in nature. The influx of tourists and pilgrims during the nineteenth century created a demand for interpreters, and spurred the emergence of antique dealers; the old style 'attar' (spice seller) became an *eczacı*, a seller of European medicines; doctors were highly sought after, and lawyers and photographers were two new popular occupations.<sup>228</sup> Hotels became very profitable operations. More dubious types—especially after the beginning of the twentieth century—would engage in the White Slavery; prostitution in Jaffa increased considerably, prompting a response from Jewish organizations of the time, such as B'nai B'rith and the Society for the Protection of Women (established specifically in order to fight this phenomenon).<sup>229</sup>

The economy of Old Yishuv was limited. Aside from the *halukah*, most occupations suffered from intense competition and low profit margins. Contemporary reports describe the occupations of Old Yishuv Jewish inhabitants:

In Jerusalem Jews have much of the money-changing and money-lending in their hands, and also a considerable proportion of the shops. The cleverest at handicrafts are the Ashkenazim, who do most of the furniture-making, olive woodworking, bookbinding, printing, plumbing, watch and clock-making, etc. The Sephardim and the Gourgees<sup>230</sup> are most successful as drapers, fancy trimming sellers, etc. All

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<sup>227</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*, 267.

<sup>228</sup> Haim Gerber, "Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Palestine: The Role of Foreign Trade," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18, 3 (July 1982): 255.

<sup>229</sup> Gur Alroey, "Journey to Early-Twentieth-Century Palestine as a Jewish Immigrant Experience," *Jewish Social Studies* 9, 2 (2003): 55, 59.

<sup>230</sup> "Gourgees" are people from the country of Georgia.



classes—not only those but also the Mughrabin<sup>231</sup> and Yeminites—flourish as tailors, cobblers, and rough tinkers. ...Many of the Sephardim are carriage drivers. Others...are porters carrying heavy loads on their backs for great distances....Many Jews are druggists, makers of surgical instruments, electrical machinists...besides of course professional men such as doctors, dentists, teachers, etc.<sup>232</sup>

Detailed economic or demographic data for Palestine are scarce for this period, but the fact is that between 1882 and 1908 the Jewish population in the Holy Land tripled. In Palestine, as other contemporary places in the Middle East, population growth was affected by a variety of interrelated reasons: high mortality rates and low life expectancy, diseases, wars, famines and epidemics. The efforts of the centralizing Ottoman regime to advance security in the Empire in order to promote better tax collection had a beneficiary effect on the population. Due to increased security, efforts to reduce the impact of diseases, and advances in nutrition, but mainly due to inward migration, Palestine witnesses a significant demographical growth: during this period, the population grew from half a million to nearly 750,000.<sup>233</sup>

Many of these were Jewish immigrants, who unlike Christian pilgrims arrived to stay. This pattern was intensified after the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia during 1881-1882 when, disillusioned in their hopes of integration and russification, Russian Jews sought to rediscover national life in Palestine. But the Ottoman government, and particularly the Sultan, was reluctant to allow such a great influx of Jews into Palestine, since this might create a new nationalist front—the loss of the Balkan lands

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<sup>231</sup> Deriving from the word “Maghreb” (“West” in Arabic), it denotes, in the context of this article, Jews coming from North Africa, and more specifically Morocco.

<sup>232</sup> E. W. G. Masterman, “Occupations of the Jews in Palestine,” *The Biblical World*, 22, 2 (August 1903): 92-93.

<sup>233</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*, 25, 264-266, 287.

of the Empire to nationalisms was still too raw. The Sultan himself, as a sovereign and as both a Caliph of Islam and Sultan of the Arabs, saw Palestine as his sacred trust and believed that he was to protect the Faithful from European and Western colonialism.<sup>234</sup>

In order to curb this immigration, the government tried to regulate the number of immigrants and have them become Ottoman subjects, and later on imposed restrictions on the entry of Jews in Palestine starting in 1882, and even restrictions on land purchase by Jews (1892).

The authorities were diligent in enforcing the policies that stemmed from Istanbul. Directives received were publicly announced and also published in various newspapers in the empire.<sup>235</sup> Police officers were prompted to see that the regulations were complied with; that Ottoman Jews living in Palestine were correctly identified, so that foreign residents could be expelled and that land purchase or erecting new buildings were made extremely difficult for Jews, Ottoman or foreign.<sup>236</sup> Contemporary reports describe the difficulties that colonies such as Petah Tiqva, Rishon Le-Ziyyon, Gedera or Eqrone faced with Ottoman authorities. Many resorted to bribery of petty bureaucrats and officials something that was in anyway the norm in that context, instead of appealing directly to the *Mutassarif*. Backed by the funds of Baron Edmond de Rothschild of Paris, the administrators of the early settlements could

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<sup>234</sup> Desmond Stewart, "Herzl's Journeys in Palestine and Egypt," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, 3 (Spring, 1974): 28.

<sup>235</sup> For example, in the newspaper *Havazzelet*, published in Jerusalem, or *La Turquie: organe spécial des intérêts de l'Empire ottoman, paraissant le samedi*; published in Paris (for an example see: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5811914n.r=palestine.f9.langEN.hl>).

<sup>236</sup> Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Practice as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881-1908," 34.

afford to be liberal, while the Ottoman officials, with their miserable salaries, could usually not afford to refuse the bribes offered.<sup>237</sup>

Eventually, the Ottoman restrictions were not successful. They were difficult to put into practice, especially due to the interventionist European activity. European consulates established in Jerusalem and other cities, extended their protection to various individuals, exercised influence over the local populace and played an important role in the immigration and settlement of the Jews.<sup>238</sup> Still Jews forbidden to immigrate to Palestine, could enter it as ‘pilgrims’ under the protection of their consuls, and even buy land under their name, or under the name of already established Ottoman Jews, or Arabs. As a result the Jewish community, numbering 24,000 souls in 1882, reached 50,000 by 1897, distributed over a total of eighteen modern Jewish settlements.<sup>239</sup>

This was the situation in the region when Herzl arrived on the scene. Between 1896 and 1902, Herzl would visit Constantinople five times, but to no avail. The Ottoman government, completely opposed to Jewish immigration to Palestine, would repeat the stereotyped formula that “the immigrants would have to become Ottoman subjects, fulfill all civic duties, including military service; they would be permitted to establish themselves in any part of the Ottoman Empire except Palestine.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Neville J. Mandel, “Ottoman Practice as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881-1908,” 35.

<sup>238</sup> Consulates were established by Great Britain (1838) and France (1848), continuing with Prussia, Greece, Austria, Spain, USA, Russia, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden etc Catherine Nicault (ed.), *Jérusalem 1850-1948, Des Ottomans aux Anglais: entre coexistence spirituelle et déchirure politique*, 50 – 51.

<sup>239</sup> Neville J. Mandel, “Ottoman Practice as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881-1908,” 35-36.

<sup>240</sup> Isaiah Friedman, *Germany, Turkey, and Zionism 1897-1918* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 100.

## Section 2 A Holy Land

In their book *Israel, The Impossible Land*, Jean-Christophe Attias and Esther Benbassa outline how, more than a palpable, territorially defined reality, the land of Israel had become an idea, and a construct. Haunted by the Book, the land was holy for everyone, Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Initially the Promised Land, granted by God to Israel as an everlasting legacy, it was brutally invaded by the Romans in 70 C.E. For Jews in the Diaspora, the study of the Law supplanted the land, at the same time perpetuating its memory, and attenuating the pain for its loss. In the Middle Ages the land of Israel was spiritualized: it became a Land of Dreams, a land of abundance and past glory, but also the land of Messianic redemption. Modernity brought intellectual and cultural movements that would redefine the complexity of the Jews' relationship to the land: emancipated and integrated Jews in Europe detached themselves from the land of Israel and believe in the possibility of prospering in the Diaspora, while others rediscover the land. Nationalist effervescence in Europe gave rise to a national Jewish consciousness and emancipated European Jews rushed to help their coreligionists in the Middle East. Zionism was thus born not as an endogenous process, tied to a physical existence in Palestine, but from the awakening of Jewish consciousness.<sup>241</sup>

Historian Chaim Gans argues that “it was the fact that the Jews had not realized the right to self-determination, in conjunction with the persecution that they suffered and with the failure of their attempts to integrate with the nations among

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<sup>241</sup> Jean-Christophe Attias and Esther Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3, 7, 35-37, 58, 60-64, 73, 113, 123-130, 137-140, 144.

which they lived, that gave rise to Zionism and to the other kinds of Jewish nationalisms at the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>242</sup>

Zionism, as a Jewish nationalism, did not seek to create a homeland in the place where Jews resided, but in their historical homeland and focused on the primacy of the Land of Israel in Jewish history and Jewish identity rather than on the primordial role of the Jews in the history of the Land of Israel.<sup>243</sup> Zion was not chosen for its advantages, political accessibility, and natural resources—as was the case with colonial territories where Europeans settled—but because of the emotion and enthusiasm that it was able to arouse in the Jewish world, and because this was the only way the land of Israel could be recreated.<sup>244</sup>

In fact Zionism is an ethno-cultural nationalism in that Jews are members of a group that shares a common history and culture.<sup>245</sup> The land of Israel was perceived as an empty, desolate land that Jewish immigrants were to redeem through populating and cultivating. The “natives” were simply invisible or deemed too devious to be trusted, and contemporary discourse argues that Western influence was necessary for the regeneration of the place.

At the same time, other Europeans mirrored their colonial views and aspirations on the land and its people, aiming to show the salutary effect that a

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<sup>242</sup> Chaim Gans, *A just Zionism: on the morality of the Jewish state* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>243</sup> Chaim Gans argues that the historical rights argument of Zionism for the Jews’ return to Palestine—again, an argument that is not new to other nationalisms—seems retrospectively justified only under the light of the unimaginable scope and nature of the persecutions that had started in the 1880s, but reached incomprehensible heights in the 1930s and 1940s. Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism*, 26, 33.

<sup>244</sup> Attias and Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land*, 151.

<sup>245</sup> Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism*, 8. An ethnocultural nationalism is opposed to civic nationalism, in which “the citizenry of the state has an interest in sharing one homogeneous national culture...not derived from people’s interest in adhering to their original culture, but rather [originating] because cultural homogeneity facilitates the implementation of universal values such as democracy, distributive justice, and economic growth.” Ibid.

European intervention could have. C. F. Tyrwhitt Drake, reporting for the Palestine Exploration Fund, describes the Fellahin as follows:

As the fellaheen are men who will hold up their right hands and swear by God and the prophet, by my life and by their own, that they love me better than their fathers or their brothers, that they are my slaves, &c., &c., and at the same time will filch with their left hands, it is as well to have some little show of authority.<sup>246</sup>

And he continues, describing the “salutary influence” that the colonists have on the natives”:

With all his evil qualities the fellah is not altogether incapable of adopting improvements, especially if likely to produce piastres. If, then, these colonies be encouraged and extended, one may reasonably hope for some slight improvement of the native population in their immediate neighbourhood.<sup>247</sup>

The climate is also another subject that is discussed, since it is deemed trying for the Europeans, but something that the natives are well equipped to withstand:

The climate of this place is unhealthy and feverish and the water tepid. The far-famed fleas, too, of the Hauran keep up all their prestige, and effectually banish sleep from all but pachydermatous fellahin.<sup>248</sup>

Yet others state their beliefs in a strong European presence:

There must be a radical reform in government, before anything can be done to restore Palestine to its former condition...The happiest future which could befall Palestine seems to me to be its occupation by some strong European power, which might recognize the value of the natural resources...; but until such change occurs, the good land must remain a desolation.<sup>249</sup>

In October 1898, during his visit in Palestine, Herzl reflects these contemporary European views. Herzl has arrived to Palestine for the first time, but he

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<sup>246</sup> Palestine Exploration Fund, *Quarterly Statement* (July, 1872), 77.

<sup>247</sup> Palestine Exploration Fund, *Quarterly Statement* (July, 1872), 81.

<sup>248</sup> Palestine Exploration Fund, *Quarterly Statement* (July, 1872), 185.

<sup>249</sup> Claude Reignier Conder, *Tent Work in Palestine: A Record of Discovery and Adventure* (London: A. P. Watt and Sons, 1895), 372, 374

is not interested in its buildings or inhabitants. He sees only “poverty and misery and heat...Confusion in the streets...an Arab-blighted countryside...thick dust on the roads.”<sup>250</sup> With tears in his eyes, he admires Zionist colonists on horseback, seeing them as “Far West cowboys of the American plains.”<sup>251</sup> As for the native Arabs, he comments how they could be used for the drainage of swamps since they were immune to the fever prevalent in colonies.<sup>252</sup> And despite the suffocating heat, he is keen on being presentable to the Kaiser, and focuses on his—and his companions’—clothes, gloves, neckties, shoes, and hats.<sup>253</sup>

And in his entry of October 31, 1898, he writes:

When I remember thee in days to come, O Jerusalem, it will not be with delight. The musty deposits of two thousand years of inhumanity, intolerance, and foulness lie in your reeking alleys...If Jerusalem is ever ours, and if I were still able to do anything about it, I would begin by cleaning it up.<sup>254</sup>

He yearns to leave behind the dust and the heat, and a place that is foreign to him, and takes the early train from Jerusalem to Jaffa. He hopes to “get out of the port and the country then and there” and to do “anything to avoid remaining here a moment longer.”<sup>255</sup>

Herzl’s orientalist—but also realistic—approach is also apparent in his description of Sultan Abdülhamid when juxtaposed with the Kaiser. While he speaks of the Kaiser’s “Imperial eyes” and of the decorum of his splendid aides “of Prussian

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<sup>250</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Marvin Lowenthal (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1962), 279.

<sup>251</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 281.

<sup>252</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 280.

<sup>253</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 286.

<sup>254</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 283-284.

<sup>255</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 294.

elegance”,<sup>256</sup> he describes Abdülhamid, whom he had been relentlessly courting for the granting of the right to settle Palestine, as a small and ridiculous “Sultan of the declining robber empire,” with his “badly dyed beard... the hooked nose of a Punchinello, the long yellow teeth.”<sup>257</sup>

### Section 3 Return to the Homeland

Jewish immigrants coming to Palestine from Europe, North Africa and North America, from Persia and Buchara, and from the Ottoman Empire during the last quarter of the nineteenth century were a heterogeneous crowd. Some came for pragmatic reasons (escape from persecutions and pogroms), others for ideological reasons, burning with the ardent desire to return to a spiritual homeland. Many elderly immigrants came powered by the eschatological belief in the resurrection of the dead in the Holy Land, while others wanted to fulfill the commandments and bring the Redemption nearer. Some Eastern European Jews came to flee the secular Enlightenment movement of Haskalah, hoping to create a Utopian society of true Judaism in the Holy Land. Among Jewish immigrants, there was a high number of women too, mostly widows, who came alone. Of course there were also personal reasons: to find someone suitable for marriage, to fulfill a vow made on the occasion of sickness or death in the family, or to escape an oppressive home.<sup>258</sup>

For members of the lower classes, the appeal of the *halukah*, the abundant charitable funds sent for the support of the Old Yishuv from other parts of the world,

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<sup>256</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 266-267.

<sup>257</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 351.

<sup>258</sup> Margalit Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner?: Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), xix-xxi.



was especially great, and they would join the ultra-orthodox in this. Religious Jews believed that they would attain religious and spiritual fulfillment through prayer and Torah study, and the *halukah* was seen as a necessity, as a means to support families so that the male population could devote themselves to study and prayer.

Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the 1880s did not only ignore the Arab presence, but consciously distanced themselves from the “old Yishuv,” the Jewish communities already living in the land, supported by philanthropy from the Diaspora. Western European Jews considered the ultra-orthodox Jews of the Old Yishuv embarrassing and degrading. They were mortified that Christian pilgrims and other Europeans visiting the Holy Land would see the lamentable situation of the Jewish community and believed that this could easily give way to anti-Semitic sentiments. The attitude of the Kaiser and his aides during his trip to Palestine in 1898 is revealing, albeit on other (revolutionary) grounds. German Foreign Secretary Von Bülow’s *Memoirs* state that “the Kaiser’s brief interest in Zionism was prompted by the wish to rid Germany of elements he did not particularly like,” meaning Jews who were involved in revolutionary parties, especially in urban centers.<sup>259</sup> This report is also confirmed by Herzl, who, in his Diaries, describes the Kaiser’s ill-humor over the Jews of Jerusalem, and the Empress’ comment that “the journey was most pleasant—the only drawback was that she had to see so many Jews.”<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Desmond Stewart, “Herzl’s Journeys in Palestine and Egypt,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, 3 (Spring, 1974): 28.

<sup>260</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 299-300.

For the *Hovevei Zion* immigrants,<sup>261</sup> Palestinian Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews (*Haredim*), were all seen as the “degenerate,” exotic “Other.” Neither occasional violent attacks by the first, nor fierce opposition by the second, altered the perception or the determination of European Jews to reclaim their ancestral cradle. They deemed the Arab existence on the land as inconsequential, rejected it, and negated the pre-Zionist Jewish communities of the old “Yishuv” (settlement).<sup>262</sup> Western Jews aspired to transplant to Palestine Western European values, and their colonial imagination yearned to liberate the “natives” from their barbarian state. For Herzl, a Jewish state in Palestine would be a “bulwark against Asia, serving as guardians of culture against barbarism” and as “a Europe in the Middle East,” where exilic Jews would regenerate.<sup>263</sup>

They formed the “New Yishuv” and in order to disassociate themselves from the ultra-orthodox, whom they saw as idle bigots, they decided to establish their settlements outside the four holy cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed. Although the members of the new Yishuv were still dependent on foreign aid, they provided labor in exchange of support for their agricultural settlements. Only a few of them, doctors, educators, and *maskilim* hoping to spread their ideas, chose to reside in urban centers.

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<sup>261</sup> The *Hovevei Zion* (and their movement, the *Hibbat Zion*) were Jews disillusioned in the prospects of integration in Eastern European society after the pogroms of 1881. Although the general trend of Jewish immigration of the 1880s was towards the United States, the *Hovevei Zion* societies in Russia and Romania support the idea of the return of Jews to Palestine. They believed in self-emancipation, and propagated a national renaissance in Palestine. In order to redefine their identity, they gave were particularly active in the domain of Hebrew language and literary production. The *Bilu*, a group of Jewish students originating in Russian universities, was one among such groups.

<sup>262</sup> Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “The Zionist Return to the West and Mizrahi Jewish Perspective” in *Orientalism and the Jews*, edited by Ivan D. Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), 169.

<sup>263</sup> Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “The Zionist Return to the West and Mizrahi Jewish Perspective,” 170.

The pioneers were thirsty for the wilderness, for uninhabited places that were far away from the towns of the old Yishuv, places that they could manipulate, cultivate, and build according to their philosophy. Pioneers were guided by an ardent desire to recreate the biblical past by breaking ties with the spiritual center of Jerusalem and the old Yishuv's devotion to the Talmud and its study, something that they saw as another tradition in exile that was incompatible with the image of the modern Jew.<sup>264</sup>

For both political and ideological reasons, Jewish immigrants arriving with the First Aliyah from 1881 onwards enthusiastically set out to farm the land without relying on cheap local labor. They believed that their example would attract new immigrants by the opportunities and the prospects of the land to support and sustain European standards of living. Jewish immigrants used both European methods, as well as those that Arab villagers used. Many of the methods they used were developed and practiced in Europe and thus were not always successful in the very different climate and terrain conditions of Palestine.<sup>265</sup>

It was only after 1882 that systematic Jewish rural settlement began: 1882 saw the establishment of Petach Tikva, Rishon le-Zion, Zichron Ya'acov, and Rosh Pina; in 1883, it was Ness Ziona and Y'sod Hama'ala; in 1884, Gedera. Eventually, these *moshavoth*<sup>266</sup> although planned to be self-sufficient, were not able to achieve economic independence that would permit large-scale colonization, and gave way to

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<sup>264</sup> Attias and Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land*, 166.

<sup>265</sup> Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*, 271.

<sup>266</sup> Plural of *moshava*: Traditional kinds of colonies whose members farmed their land independently.

the *kibbutz* concept.<sup>267</sup> Before the establishment of the World Zionist Organization, though, in 1897, no single authority existed to undertake and coordinate a coherent policy of colonization, except some attempts by regional groups (such as the Hovevei Zion-Lovers of Zion) or individuals, such as Baron Edmund de Rothschild.<sup>268</sup>

Baron Edmond de Rothschild regularly subsidized the colonies from 1887 till 1900. By 1889, however, colonies such as Rishon-le-Zion, Zichron Yaacov, Petah-Tiqva and others, had come under his total bureaucratic control. There were frictions and even several revolts by the settlers.<sup>269</sup> The colonies were transferred to the ICA administration (Jewish Colonization Association)<sup>270</sup> in 1900. In retrospect, it was precisely the Baron's suffocating control that had prevented them from becoming self sufficient and independent.

As a condition of their financial support, philanthropists had stipulated the establishment of training schools, what crops were to be grown and the appointment of administrators, educators and other experts. The Baron wanted Jews to become autonomous, not dependent on another form of *haluka*.<sup>271</sup> The agricultural experts, trained in Europe, felt obliged to follow the whim of their benefactors, but plans

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<sup>267</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion: dreams, designs, and realities in a century of Jewish settlement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>268</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion*, 7.

<sup>269</sup> Anne Ussishkin, "The Jewish Colonisation Association and a Rothschild in Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, 3 (October 1973): 347.

<sup>270</sup> The early efforts of ICA, incorporated in London in 1891, were directed towards South America, and only in 1896 its Administrative Council passed a vote, about providing loans for needy colonies in Palestine, an issue that was deeply divisive for the ICA Council, with the opposition led by its English members. Clause 3a in the *Memorandum of Association of the Jewish Colonization Association*, London, 1891, states that ICA aims 'to assist and promote the emigration of Jews from any parts of Europe or Asia and principally from countries in which they may for the time being be subjected to any special taxes or political or other disabilities, to any other parts of the world and to form and establish colonies in various parts of North and South America and other countries for agricultural, commercial and other purposes', as stated in Anne Ussishkin, "The Jewish Colonisation Association and a Rothschild in Palestine," 354, note 9.

<sup>271</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion*, 19-20.

conceived in Europe did not match the realities in the Yishuv.<sup>272</sup> For example, the Baron's staff were Frenchmen, who had been previously employed in France or in Algeria, and tried to import French and colonial agricultural technology into Palestine.<sup>273</sup>

Many confronted with skepticism the future of Jewish settlements in Palestine:

The scheme has disappointed the hopes of many who were very enthusiastic at the first. Some sites chosen have proved to be very unhealthy, and the attempts made to get rid of malaria by planting enormous quantities of eucalyptus trees have not been successful; many marshy spots will require draining. The whole colonization scheme is yet an experiment and one which will be watched with interest by all who are in sympathy with the Jews.<sup>274</sup>

For the settlers though, the colonies were experiments that went beyond mere agriculture. They were keen on making their experiment work. They rejected the passive way of life of the old Yishuv, which they saw as the continuation of an unproductive way of diasporic life, and introduced the notion of a new kind of Jew, who would live on the land through manual labor and agriculture. Redeeming the land would lead to individual redemption.<sup>275</sup> Agricultural work was seen as a sacred and transformative task: Through agricultural work the holiness of the land was reaffirmed, and a new image for the Jew arose, an image of the decent, modern, and productive pioneer (the *halutz*) in harmony with his land. Zionist settlers aimed to reverse the modern trend, characteristic of Western societies, of abandoning the rural

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<sup>272</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion*, 20-21.

<sup>273</sup> Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>274</sup> E. W. G. Masterman, "Occupations of the Jews in Palestine," *The Biblical World* 22, 2 (August 1903), 97.

<sup>275</sup> Attias and Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land*, 160.

countryside for a modern, urban life; instead they aimed to break with traditional Jewish concentration in cities.<sup>276</sup>

In their desire to immerse themselves in the land, pioneers were influenced by nineteenth-century European Romantic notions of a return to the land, and a naïve view of nature. Although they saw Bedouins and fellahin as inferior, and primitive populations, they admired the way they represented stability and tenacity in the land, and idealized their “Oriental” culture.

Contemporary literary production reflects this trend. In their works, writers exalt the role of nature and the work of the pioneers as a communion with the land and a justification for its settlement.<sup>277</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth century, countless Zionist literary products tried to draw a connection between Jews and Palestine, thus legitimizing and justifying Jewish settlement of the land. British novelist and political Zionist Israel Zangwill’s slogan “a land without a people for a people without a land” while articulating the national imagination, clearly ignored the native element.<sup>278</sup>

Post-Zionist historiography characterizes Palestinian Jewish society and then Israel as a colonial society, comparable to other societies of that kind, and they see Zionism as a typical colonial movement. Adversaries to post-Zionism underline that

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<sup>276</sup> S. Ilan Troen, *Imagining Zion*, 17.

<sup>277</sup> For example, in his stories, writer and educator Zeev Yavetz presents a futuristic vision of a new Jewish society in the old East, whereby Jewish life is an ideal national endeavor cast in pseudo-biblical form. The aura of the Bible elevates the difficulties of the pioneer reality, and reconnects the “children of the Book” to their ancient land, while positive elements of the local Arab culture invigorate the image of the new Hebrew man. Although Yavetz’s stories are simplistic and idyllic formulations, by conflating biblical past, agricultural present, and folklorist motifs, they present an ideal, independent, Jewish national future. Yaron Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 29-31.

<sup>278</sup> Eric Zakim, *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 54.

Jewish immigration after the 1880s, as the expression of the modern Jewish national movement, “was a matter of struggle, similar to those of other ethnic and national groups, to create a political entity in a place they considered to be their historic territory.”<sup>279</sup> The difference was that in order to create a national state Jews had to immigrate to another land and fight for it. In this way they became agents of their destiny—and it was their encounter with the Arabs that reintroduced both people into history.

Did arriving in the land of Israel solve the Jewish quest for a “home?” Disillusioned by the harsh environment and the sacrifices that they had to make in order to build a new life in an inhospitable environment, many of the pioneers felt alienated. The reality did not live up to the enthusiasm and expectations of most of the immigrants, who found a land that was so different from its past glory. Nostalgia for their land of origin was not unknown. Many of the writers of the first waves of immigration describe their feelings of uprootedness in their writings—in stark contrast with the glorious accounts of hero pioneers in a bucolic Holy Land.<sup>280</sup> Many did not fit in the agricultural settlements and preferred life in the cities.

In fact, in order to circumvent the problem of students finishing their studies at the agricultural schools, and moving on to live in urban centers, Eliahu Krause, Mikveh’s director before World War I, replies to an inquiry regarding the admission of new students, by stating that the school would accept only those who could pledge themselves to engage in farming in Palestine following graduation.<sup>281</sup> J. H. Kahn

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<sup>279</sup> Attias and Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land*, 216, 222.

<sup>280</sup> Attias and Benbassa, *Israel, The Impossible Land*, 200.

<sup>281</sup> Eric Fischer, “The Mikveh Israel School during the War Years, 1914-1918,” *Jewish Social Studies* 4, 3 (July 1942): 269.

writing an account of his trip to Palestine in 1910 comments on the irrelevance of a French-based education to the needs of the new society:

I do not deny that I would be happier to find in Palestine a better comprehension of the instruction, instead of superb and huge cellars that have costed millions to install. If, since the beginning, ....there were schools corresponding to the character of the country, with a homogeneous teacher body, what wonderful results we would have in these past 25 years of colonization. But the professors were sent from Paris or were educated in France...Most of the times, they did not feel intimately patriotic love, and thus were incapable to instill it in their students. They carried French ways, French inclinations, French instruction methods and they used French to teach the different subjects. The same was valid for the English or German schools. There too education was given in English or German. Note that Arabic, the language of the country was not taught at all and the Hebrew, imperfectly....I would readily suggest to the Administration of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and that of the Jewish Colonization Association, to suppress the study of French in their schools, at least in those of the colonies, and to replace it with that of the Hebrew and the Arabic. Our future farmers do not need French.<sup>282</sup>

This was exactly the point where Zionism differed from Western European Jews' standard approach to Palestine. While Zionism promoted the idea of a national homeland based on the cultural particularism of Jews, emancipated Western European Jews aimed to integrate and assimilate in their countries of residence. Moved by an "inchoate Palestinophilia," they lacked cultural or political aspirations. They believed that the solution to the Jewish "social problem" that had come forth from centuries of moneylending and petty commerce, and the moral improvement of the masses were possible through education and occupational transformation. Thus they channeled their funds and efforts into systematic "regenerative" and

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<sup>282</sup> J. H. Kahn, *"Erets Israël", le pays juif*, 116-117.



developmental work among Palestinian and, in general, Oriental Jews.<sup>283</sup> This was the approach of the Alliance for the solution of the “Jewish problem” and Mikveh Israel was seen as the epitome of its philanthropic work.

Section 4 Mikveh Israel: “The Jewel of the New Palestine”<sup>284</sup>

Subsection 1 The beginnings

Mikveh Israel (“The Hope of Israel”) was established in the outskirts of Jaffa, by the late nineteenth century the most important foreign trade and debarkation point for the Holy Land. 80,000 tourists, pilgrims, Jewish and Arab immigrants would disembark annually during this period. The nineteenth century had been a period of economic, demographic and urban growth for the city that in the previous centuries had witnessed conflicts between local and Ottoman authorities and the Napoleonic invasion in 1799. Economic development brought about social mobility and urban development. Many streets were being repaved, the decaying walls were torn down, and new buildings were being built, especially educational institutions by various European powers and churches. People from every corner of the Empire and from

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<sup>283</sup> Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918*, 15.

<sup>284</sup> The term was used by Sylvain Lévi, AIU President, during his speech on the occasion of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the ENIO (1867-1932). “L’ École Normale Israélite Orientale (1867-1932),” *Paix et Droit*, June 1, 1932.

Europe were drawn to the region's fertile soil, strategic location opening to the Mediterranean, and available land.<sup>285</sup>

This image of growth, though, contradicts the negative portrayal of the city by European travelers and by the Zionist historiography since the end of nineteenth century. Based on their preconceived ideas of the city's biblical and crusader past, but also from contemporary ideas about hygiene and urban development in European cities, Christian pilgrims and Jewish immigrants would dismiss the major redevelopment that was taking place in and around the city during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. An 1892 description of Jaffa in John Murray's guidebook is revealing:

The first view of Jaffa, gained from the deck of the ship, is beautiful and entrancing...orange-groves, palms, and other Oriental trees combine to render the first view of the Holy Land for ever memorable to the European visitor. A disenchantment, however, follows from the very moment of landing. Jaffa is one of the dirtiest and most uncomfortable of all the towns of Palestine. The houses are crowded together...the streets are narrow, crooked, and filthy...filled with groups of wild Arabs and eager traders...Although Jaffa itself is dirty and uninteresting, its outskirts are delightful.<sup>286</sup>

Another visitor notes:

Jaffa, the gate to the Holy Land, the ancient Phoenician colony, the antediluvian city...is known in the entire world for its oranges and the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Jews had named it *Joppé*, "the Beautiful." It would be an exaggeration to call her beautiful today, despite its lush orange groves. As a city, she resembles all the others in Syria...Jaffa has narrow streets, going to all directions, dirty and putrid in the

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<sup>285</sup> Mark Levine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948*, 30-31.

<sup>286</sup> Mark Levine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948*, 57.

indigenous quarters,...with buildings that do not look bad from afar, but that hide whole quarters of dilapidated dwellings...<sup>287</sup>

Descriptions consistently focus on the alterity of the place when compared to the European notion of an orderly, clean city:

The traveler in the East soon learns not to trust to the distant beauty of city and town. We had been through too many Egyptian towns to be surprised at finding Jaffa less fair within than from the ship's deck. Though not worse than most of the towns of Southern Syria, it is far from attractive to the European or American visitor. Narrow, crooked streets, without sidewalks but often with evil odors, rise in steps, with broken stone pavements and not a little filth. Camels, mules and donkeys, noisy men and veiled women...push their way in a jumble through the main street.<sup>288</sup>

It was in this place so strange for Western Europeans that Charles Netter, an Alsatian merchant, arrived, having left behind his comfortable house on the rue de Vendôme in Paris, in order to fulfill his vision for Palestine by creating Mikveh Israel. It was in his house in Paris that ten years earlier, in 1860, he had established together with other French Jews the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Steeped in the French emancipation ideals, Netter envisioned Mikveh Israel as a school where students would learn farming or other bread-winning occupations, combined with general education mainly in French.<sup>289</sup>

This was of course the approach of AIU, which aimed to help Jews better integrate into society by providing them with tools that would enable them to fundamentally alter their economic activities, occupations, and social status. These tools were of course secular education, vocational training and welfare services. This

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<sup>287</sup> Emile Deschamps, *En Palestine: dans les districts de Saïda et de Jaffa; huit jours à Jérusalem*, 95-96.

<sup>288</sup> Rev. John W. Dulles, *The Ride Through Palestine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1881).

<sup>289</sup> Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1998), 50.

approach was also appealing to other Central European activists, such as Zebi Kalischer,<sup>290</sup> who appreciated the work of the Alliance and found it created a synergy with their own work.

Kalischer believed that the colonization of Palestine was the solution for transforming Eastern Jews, as well as Jews living in Palestine, into an agricultural population with its own land. His aim was to collect money from all Jews in order to buy and cultivate land in Palestine. He also proposed the founding of an agricultural school. He traveled to many cities to propagate his ideas and colonization societies were formed in some. It was largely because of his influence that the Alliance Israélite Universelle founded the agricultural school. In fact the Alliance proposed that he become the rabbi of the establishment, but his age was already too old for this.

Netter visited Istanbul in 1869, and in an audience with Sultan Abdülaziz I, suggested to him that a Jewish agricultural establishment “would also benefit all the subjects of the Porte, without distinction of religion.”<sup>291</sup> After securing land from the Sultan, near Jaffa, Netter established Mikveh Israel in 1870 and lived under a tent and in a cave on its premises for the first two years, under harsh natural conditions. In these first years, Netter, as well as AIU President and banker Salomon Goldschmidt spent one hundred thousand and fifty thousand francs respectively in order to start the project.

Although lacking any agricultural experience, Netter physically worked in the fields. But the labor was demanding for this French merchant and its return

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<sup>290</sup> Zebi Hirsch Kalischer (1795-1874) was a German rabbi and had an active life, writing treatises, commentaries, and contributing to various publications. His main idea though was the colonization of Palestine.

<sup>291</sup> Charles Netter to AIU, September 16, 1869, as cited in “L’ Espoir d’Israel, ou la ferme-école de Mikveh-Israel” in *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France* by Élisabeth Antébi, 278.

negligible. Netter decided to render the school financially viable by developing an export oriented cash crop agriculture, instead of farming grains. After 1873 Netter planted luxury crops such as asparagus and strawberries, and tried to develop the cultivation of citrus fruit, perfume flowers and wine, all geared for export.

Netter had to fight a variety of adversaries. He had to fight opposition from the Arab population in the nearby village of Yazur, as well as from the rabbinical establishment in the Old Yishuv, especially Ashkenazi hard-line traditionalists, who opposed Mikveh Israel's philosophy, and did not send their children to the school.<sup>292</sup>

Particularly the Arabs in the neighboring village of Yazur opposed Mikveh vehemently. Writing for the Palestine Exploration Fund in April 1872, C. F. Tyrwhitt Drake discusses this issue with Netter, and cites the following:

Before the land was granted by the Sultan for the purpose of founding an agricultural school, it was cultivated by the villagers of Yazur, and though the land belongs to the Government, the fellaheen, from long usage, have got to look upon it as virtually their own, and resent its occupation by any other person. In this case the men of Yazur... were particularly enraged, as it had for a long time been their custom to plant gardens to the extreme edge of the land they cultivated, and then sell them to the people of Jaffa, in this way disposing of crown land<sup>293</sup> for their own benefit. Thus cut off, by the interpolation of the Jewish colony, from a source of large revenue, they naturally became bitter opponents of the Agricultural School, which at this moment, however employs from 80 to 100 fellaheen, who are chiefly from Yazur... A larger proportion of Yazur men was formerly employed, but they were found so dishonest that it was necessary to discharge them.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society*, 50.

<sup>293</sup> This was a common European misunderstanding of the Ottoman land system. The land was not crown land but *miri*. *Miri* land belonged to the state, but the right to its cultivation belonged to its tenants, who could pass this right to their heirs.

<sup>294</sup> Palestine Exploration Fund, *Quarterly Statement* (July, 1872), 78.

As for the opposition that arose from the Jewish community itself, the matter was not only spiritual or traditional in nature, but also political: the hostility between France and Germany that had been simmering for some time culminated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, which saw the Alsace-Lorraine region in France become part of Germany. Many of AIU's prominent members (such as Bigart, Leven and Netter himself) originating from that region and being fervently French patriots found themselves in an unpleasant situation. It was in this atmosphere of changing loyalties that the Alliance initiated its educational and vocational work in Palestine, and it is in this light of colonial loyalties that we must see the opposition to it by a large part of the Jewish community in Palestine.

Due to his deteriorating health, Netter had to return to Europe in 1873, but as a leading figure of the AIU, he would continue advocacy work for agricultural training in Palestine from his house in Paris. He was opposed, though, to large, unselective settlement of the land, and he discussed this with Baron de Rothschild in Paris, arguing that such large-scale immigration would only increase the pauperized masses, dependent on the *halukah* and susceptible to Christian missionary work. Netter thought that it was agricultural training of qualified people and improved agricultural techniques that “would enable Jews to support a modest European standard of living in Palestine.”<sup>295</sup> In fact, he argued that it was pointless to try to turn adults into farmers, as Montefiore had dreamt. Netter envisioned that only an innate, natural process of agricultural education of young Jews would provide people with the skills to work the land and to become attached to it. Netter died in 1882, while travelling in Palestine and was buried on the premises of Mikveh Israel. But the

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<sup>295</sup> Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society*, 65.

Baron pledged to support the agricultural Jewish immigrants in Palestine and thus began the New Yishuv.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman government was growing increasingly opposed to the flow of Jewish settlers arriving each day from Eastern Europe. Opposition arose also from elements, especially minority elements, within large cities such as Istanbul, who encountered the Jewish immigrants as the latter passed through Istanbul on their way to Palestine, staying there for some time until they arranged paperwork. Opposition can be tied to three reasons:<sup>296</sup>

- 1) To inter-communal strife that would at times take on an anti-Semitic vocabulary;
- 2) To the fact that these destitute newcomers seemed to reverse the efforts of communal leaders and notables in large cities, such Constantinople or Smyrna, to “heal” and purge the public spaces of the Empire from “antisocial” elements (the sick, the beggars, the poor) through concerted philanthropic activity; and
- 3) To people’s—certainly the government’s—fear that a mass migration of Jews to Palestine could potentially become one more nationalistic issue that would endanger the integrity of the Ottoman state.

Commenting on the settlement in the Ottoman Empire of Jews persecuted in Russia, Romania and Poland, in an article of November 20, 1881, *Neologos*—an influential newspaper published in Istanbul in Greek and catering to the Greek Orthodox community—denounced the pogroms, but continued:

(German and Polish Jews) are a community apart from others, jealous and enemy to others, avoiding any productive occupation, seeking to exploit all classes through

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<sup>296</sup> Euthymia L. Kanner, “Philanthropy and its Social Role in the Orthodox Community in Istanbul (1753-1908)” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History and Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Athens, 1999), 287.

monetary gain, in which they succeed through distasteful and...unmentionable means, sucking like leeches the resources of the country, sentencing all productive elements to material servitude, becoming the real master of the country and avoiding the power of the laws... In vain have governments in these countries developed and applied protective legislation in order to rid the populace of the infection...Nothing has been able to overcome their power... Because of this irrefutable evidence, we do not see the reason why Turkey would want to accept in her bosom this class of people... What will happen in Turkey...where the productive element, both Christian as well as Muslim, is extremely poor and destitute and naïve...a real slave to the rich and landowning Jew, who produces nothing....<sup>297</sup>

Samuel Hirsch became director of Mikveh Israel in 1879. Under Hirsch, the establishment continued to grow, amidst controversies and opposition from the Arabs (whose traditional rights to cultivate the land had been usurped), and the ultra-orthodox who threatened to remove from the *halukah* lists the names of parents, whose children were sent to Mikveh Israel. Hirsch shortly found himself in a difficult position. On the one hand Rothschild, who financed him, wanted Hirsch to supervise other settlements such as Petah Tikvah and Rosh Pinah and to take care of the ever more numerous East European settlers, but on the other hand the Alliance pressed

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<sup>297</sup> As cited in “Philanthropy and its Social Role in the Orthodox Community in Istanbul (1753-1908),” 287-288, by Euthymia L. Kanner. «...απετέλουν πάντοτε [ενν. οι γερμανικής και πολωνικής προέλευσης Εβραίοι] ιδίαν κοινωνίαν κεχωρισμένην των άλλων, ζηλότυπον και κεκηρυγμένην αυτών εχθράν, αποφεύγουσαν πάσαν παραγωγικήν τέχνην, επιζητούσαν την εκμετάλλευσιν των τάξεων του λαού δια του χρηματισμού, ον επιτυγχάνει δια βδελυράς και ρυπαράς οικονομίας και δια παντός ακατονομάστου μέσου, εκμυζώσαν δίκην βδελλών τους πόρους της χώρας, καταδικάζουσας εις υλικήν δουλείαν πάντα τα παραγωγικά στοιχεία, αποβαίνουσας αληθή δέσποινας της χώρας και υπεκφεύγουσας την δύναμιν των νόμων... Μάτην επεπνεύθησαν παρά των κυβερνήσεων των χωρών τούτων και ετέθησαν νόμοι προστατευτικοί προς απαλλαγίαν του λαού από της πνιγμονής... Ουδέν ηδυνήθη να κατισχύση της δυνάμεως αυτών... Τούτων αναντιρρήτως αποδεικνυομένων, δεν βλέπομεν τον λόγον δι’ον η Τουρκία ήθελεν αποδεχθή εν τοις κόλποις αυτής τάξιν ανθρώπων, ήτις εγένετο μάστιξ ανθρώπων πλουσιωτέρων... Τι γενήσεται εν Τουρκία... όπου ο παραγωγεύς και ο Χριστιανός και ο Μουσουλμάνος πενέστατος και άπορος και απλοϊκος, έσται... αληθής είλωσ του πλουσίου και γαιοκτήμονος Ιουδαίου, όστις ήκιστα παραγωγικός...».



him to send back any who went onto the *halukah*.<sup>298</sup> But these were the Bilu pioneers who would be trained from 1882 on in Mikveh Israel and, after a few months, set out to found Rishon le-Zion.

Hirsch was also harassed by the Ottoman authorities and the neighboring Arab villages, and endured complaints from the newly arrived immigrants about their wages or about the amount of work to be done. And although the number of students of the agricultural school had increased (from twelve in 1872 to nearly sixty), the Alliance was not satisfied with the results, especially since very few of the students went on to live self-sufficiently from the land. Hirsch felt betrayed, alone and crushed by the sheer load of his obligations. He was, moreover, “profoundly French, assimilated, [and] hostile to millennial or ‘nationalist’ ideas.”<sup>299</sup> Meanwhile, Mme Hirsch was disintegrating. The climate was harsh on her health, and on that of her children; Whenever possible, she and her husband traveled to Europe, to frequent medicinal baths—deemed at the time beneficial for the nervous system—where they could socialize “in a civilized atmosphere” with other directors of Alliance schools, as was customary and expected. After losing her two children to diphtheria in the summer of 1887, by 1891 Mme Hirsch became almost completely bedridden suffering from painful attacks.<sup>300</sup> This is a pattern that we will also see with Lea, once she arrives in Palestine.

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<sup>298</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “L’ Espoir d’Israel, ou la ferme-école de Mikveh-Israel” in *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 284-285.

<sup>299</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “L’ Espoir d’Israel, ou la ferme-école de Mikveh-Israel” in *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 286.

<sup>300</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “L’ Espoir d’Israel, ou la ferme-école de Mikveh-Israel” in *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 286, 289.

## Subsection 2 Arriving in Jaffa

Joseph, fresh out of the Faculty of Montpellier, had joined the agricultural establishment of Mikveh Israel (“Hope of Israel”) already in 1886 as assistant director under Samuel Hirsch.<sup>301</sup> In 1891, as S. Hirsch and his wife left the settlement, Joseph was appointed its director. In a letter to the AIU, he accepted the post as “an honor, but at the same time a heavy responsibility.”<sup>302</sup> The Central Committee of AIU awarded him 500 francs as a present for his marriage and increased his salary to 3,000 francs.<sup>303</sup> He was third in a line of visionary, motivated, and idealistic directors that had propelled Mikveh Israel into a symbol: from a simple agricultural school, into an influential establishment that would later be glorified in the lore of the newly established State of Israel.

Lea and Joseph must have traveled to Palestine, as was usual, first by ship to Alexandria, where they would have to wait for three days until the next ship sailed from Port Said on the Suez Canal for Jaffa. The trip from Port Said to Jaffa would take approximately 14 hours, but disembarking in Jaffa was not an easy thing. Since Jaffa did not have a port where the ships could dock, the ships and boats would have to drop anchor at a distance from the shore. Austrian, Russian and French postal ships and sailing boats from the Greek islands and Syria would make Jaffa’s horizon quite lively.<sup>304</sup> Big vessels powered by teams of ten oarsmen would approach them and carry passengers to the customs house.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Hirsch had been corresponding with Niego on agricultural matters when he was still a student at Montpellier. See files J41/65 at CZA.

<sup>302</sup> Letter of J. Niego to the Central Committee of AIU, June 17, 1891. CZA J41/86.

<sup>303</sup> Bigart to Niego, March 24, 1891. CZA J41/91.

<sup>304</sup> Emile Deschamps, *En Palestine: Dans les districts de Saïda et de Jaffa; huit jours à Jérusalem*, 93-94.

<sup>305</sup> J. H. Kahn, *"Erets Israël", le pays juif*, 5-6.

The short trip would take a quarter of an hour, and it was quite treacherous due to the rocks that jutted out of the sea. These were the “Andromeda rocks” and people believed it was there that Perseus saved chain-bound princess Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, from the sea monster. Contemporary accounts describe the landing at Jaffa:

It is not uncommon thing for boats to be dashed by the waves upon the rocks or to be upset, not a few lives being thus lost. As we neared the narrow rift in the reef our six oarsmen grew more emphatic in their utterances. The water dashed foaming against the rocks right and left, the boat bounded, the spray fell over us, but in we shot, and in a moment were in still water. The narrow basin is so thoroughly protected that in it little movement is felt. To reach the stone quay, and to climb up its side with the help of hands stretched out to us from the shore, took but little time, and we were landed in Joppa, whence Jonah took boat for the ship of Tarshish twenty-five hundred years ago.<sup>306</sup>

The debarkation at Jaffa, as everywhere else in the East, is invariably conducted with the least possible order and the greatest possible noise... Care should be taken that the luggage is placed in the proper boat, and that none of it falls overboard owing to the confusion...The boatmen are never content with their fees, and on the passage they frequently endeavour to alarm their passengers as to the dangers of the landing with a view to extort an additional gratuity.<sup>307</sup>

If the sea was so bad that the ship could not even drop anchor afar, it would have to go to Beirut, and from there the passengers would have to arrive to Jaffa by road. One could try to go again to Jaffa by ship, but “there is the risk that the boat might bypass

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<sup>306</sup> Rev. John W. Dulles, *The Ride Through Palestine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1881).

<sup>307</sup> Karl Baedeker (ed.), Albert Socin, Immanuel Benzinger, *Palestine and Syria: Handbook for Travelers*, 6.

Jaffa and return to Port Said in which case you would have made the entire trip without arriving to the destination.”<sup>308</sup>

This was by no means an easy trip. While other immigrants would only make it once, leaving behind their *shtetl* in the Pale of Settlement, and embarking in Odessa, Trieste, or Istanbul, Joseph and Lea, as other Alliance teachers, would make the trip repeatedly, whenever changing posts, and also in order to visit their families and cities of birth, or visit Paris and other fashionable places in contemporary Europe. Upon arrival at the port, travelers would be assaulted by an array of crooks, thieves, intermediaries, hawkers, hotel agents, and many other dubious characters who would vie for the passengers’ money by exploiting their naiveté and lack of awareness.<sup>309</sup>

The trip was complicated, and as the travelers had to take multiple boats, and at times lodge in a city, waiting for the next one, special booklets and pamphlets were developed meant to “assist the traveler in planning his tour and disposing of his time to the best advantage, and thus to enable him the more thoroughly to enjoy and appreciate the objects of interest he meets with.”<sup>310</sup> These handbooks gave information about various ports and other cities on the way, dangers that one could expect during the trip, costs, and information on how to obtain official papers, or visit the monuments.<sup>311</sup>

After mooring [in Alexandria], the sanitary police visits for inspection, and once the inspection is completed a crowd of porters and commissioners arrive for the luggage.

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<sup>308</sup> J. H. Kahn, *"Erets Israël", le pays juif*, 6.

<sup>309</sup> Gur Alroey, “Journey to Early-Twentieth-Century Palestine as a Jewish Immigrant Experience,” 44.

<sup>310</sup> Karl Baedeker (ed.), Albert Socin, Immanuel Benzinger, *Palestine and Syria: Handbook for Travelers*, iii.

<sup>311</sup> See for example, R. C. Cervati, *Guide horaire général international illustré pour le voyageur en Orient, description de Constantinople et des plus importantes villes de la Turquie, de l’Égypte et de la Grèce avec leurs principaux monuments. Chemins de fer, tramways, navigation*, Constantinople: 1909. Available at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k55584488>.

The passengers then continue to the Custom House and the Passport Office. Passengers who need to continue to Port Said and then to Jaffa can lodge at hotels near the quay, since some times they have to wait two or three days for a ship to sail. Only Egyptian steamers sail to Jaffa directly without stopping at Port Said, while all other European companies stop first at Port Said. In fact the French steamships of the *Messageries Maritimes* are considered the best for the trip to Jaffa and then Beirut. They sail quickest and they are the most comfortably fitted up for the 12 hours trip to Jaffa. This trip is mostly done by night.<sup>312</sup>

Most probably Joseph and Lea arrived in Port Said on a steamship, continuing then for Jaffa.<sup>313</sup> We can safely assume that the young couple did not have to be subjected to the miserable conditions of the third and fourth class that destitute travelers and immigrants had to contend with. These travelers had to endure hunger and thirst since food was not provided, and they were too poor to bring enough on board; they also had to endure the cold, since there was no heating in those classes, and finally not being used to sea trips, they would get seasick and vomit, which made the crowded and dirty cabins even more intolerable.<sup>314</sup> Usually Alliance teachers would travel in second class, but one wonders if for this trip the newlyweds chose to travel in the first class.

### Subsection 3 At Mikveh Israel

Lea was already pregnant with her first child when they arrived in “Mikveh Israel” in the early summer of 1891, just in time to bid farewell to outgoing director,

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<sup>312</sup> Karl Baedeker (ed.), Albert Socin, Immanuel Benzinger, *Palestine and Syria: Handbook for Travelers*, 3-6.

<sup>313</sup> Steamships were used starting in the early nineteenth century, and would replace gradually the sailing vessels.

<sup>314</sup> Gur Alroey, “Journey to Early-Twentieth-Century Palestine as a Jewish Immigrant Experience, 43-44.

Samuel Hirsch, and his wife. Lea might have even accompanied Mme Hirsch on a last visit to the graves of the Hirsch children, Jacques, four years old, and Jeanne, six years old, buried at the edge of the garden, next to Ch. Netter's tomb. The children had died of diphtheria only seven days apart at the end of August of 1887 and these last days at the establishment were particularly hard for the couple. They wanted to leave and longed to join their only surviving child, whom they had left with his grandfather in Geneva.

It was Lea's first time in Palestine, but Joseph, her husband of only one month, had served nearly five years as assistant director of the agricultural school. Both she and Joseph were from Edirne and both were educated in Paris—theirs was a good match.

After becoming director of the establishment, Niego flourished and his innovative approach and ardent devotion to the land brought Mikveh Israel an influential position among the other settlements. During his time, education expanded, new cultures were introduced and new buildings were built on the farm. Far from micromanaging Mikveh Israel, Joseph envisioned the agricultural school as something much larger than its groves and fields, and with prospects much more far-reaching than the Alliance had aimed for or thought possible of when establishing it.<sup>315</sup>

In 1894, the number of the students reached 100, and in 1899 it was up to 205. Joseph made a point of having at Mikveh Israel students from each of the pioneering settlements of the *Hovevei Zion* so that they in turn would introduce modern methods

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<sup>315</sup> We can follow Joseph's work at Mikveh Israel through his reports to the Alliance that were published in the *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* every January. The *Bulletin* can be accessed on-line through the Historical Jewish Press database at <http://www.jpress.org.il>.

of cultivating the land in their settlements. Niego would also accept Biluim although he did not share their nationalist aspirations.<sup>316</sup> Most of the school's graduates found good positions in the agricultural colonies in Palestine or in the homes of wealthy Jews, who had big properties near Cairo or Alexandria.

An elite body of instructors furthered Mikveh Israel's mission.<sup>317</sup> After finishing his studies at the Veterinary Faculty of Alfort in France,<sup>318</sup> Mr. Abramoff came to teach zoology and veterinary medicine, conducted surveys of the stables of animals, and at Rothschild's order surveyed also all the livestock at the Jewish colonies every week. Mr. Bergemann had studied at the Horticultural Faculty of Versailles and at Mikveh Israel taught botanical sciences. Mr. Saporta had studied at the Faculty of Montpellier. He oversaw the vineyards, the cellar and large agriculture, and taught courses on agriculture, culture of vines and oenology. He was also charged with replacing the director during the latter's absence. Mr. Najjar taught drawing, physics, chemistry, and mathematics. Finally, Niego himself taught accounting and sericulture.<sup>319</sup> In this all-male environment, Lea could not of course work; there was no position for a female teacher at Mikveh Israel. Nor could she work at the AIU school in Jaffa, since road conditions and available transportation made traveling each day back and forth impossible.

Students took five years to complete their studies at Mikveh Israel. During the first three years, their days were split in two: during the morning, the students worked

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<sup>316</sup> Baron de Rothschild, hostile to any socialist tendencies, refused to subsidize "subversive" groups such as the Biluim.

<sup>317</sup> Vital Cuinet, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine, géographie administrative, statistique, descriptive et raisonnée* (1896), 595-596.

<sup>318</sup> The Veterinary School of Alfort, situated in the Val de Marne in France, was established in 1765 and is still functioning today.

<sup>319</sup> Silk culture.

in the fields, and in the afternoon they studied in the classroom. In the last two years, students would spend all their day in the fields and only would have one or two hours of classes in the evenings. Each year, the program of studies would have to be submitted by the director to the AIU Central Committee, which would have in turn to accept it.<sup>320</sup>

Theoretical education and practical training were seen as complementing each other in providing the students with a “complete physical and moral education” and “agricultural preparation.” Their aim was the gradual ‘metamorphosis’ of the students. In defining the ideology of the establishment Niego says:

Their [the students’] bodies, their souls, and their minds must be molded and shaped in a manner to conform to the new life we would have them lead. In this struggle we must oppose the inclinations of our students and their parents, the demands of foreign advisors, and the fragility of the body. Their muscles must be developed; their bones, strengthened; we must combat the influence of nerves, which are, alas, too fragile among Jews. They must become hardened to fatigue so that they become adept at agricultural work.<sup>321</sup>

The courses were complemented by a large library that received many newspapers and periodicals from France, England, Germany, Austria-Hungary and America and in 1894 “46 new works by Jewish writers from all over the world.”<sup>322</sup> It is interesting to note that books entering Palestine, especially books in European languages, were subject to inspection and, if allowed, were taxed per kilo.

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<sup>320</sup> Joseph Niego, “Report on the Agricultural School of Jaffa,” *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, January 1, 1900, 159.

<sup>321</sup> J. Niego, *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1901, 152, cited in *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition : The Teachers of the Alliance israélite Universelle, 1860-1939*, edited by Aron Rodrigue, 97.

<sup>322</sup> Vital Cuinet, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine, géographie administrative, statistique, descriptive et raisonnée* (1896), 596.



Of course the language of education and administration in the establishment was French. When years after, in 1914, E. Krause, then director of Mikveh Israel, would suggest that the school should adapt to reality by adopting education in Hebrew instead of French, Jacques Bigart would comment with indignation at the margins of Krause's letter: "Voilà!" ("Here we go!"). The Alliance was not interested in benefiting the Yishuv, but in French education that would forward the "regeneration" of the individual.

During his directorship, Niego expanded existing buildings, and had new ones built. This testifies to the trust that the Alliance has in his capacities. These included the synagogue and the wine cellar, and the expansion of the manager's house in order to accommodate the growing personnel. He also planted a hectare of eucalyptus trees in 1894, in order to stabilize the soil and dry out the swamps that were causing malaria, according to the beliefs of the time. These are the trees that the visitors see when approaching to the school:

Already from far away, one can see the big eucalyptus trees, *Sadjar el Jahud*, (the Jewish trees) as the Arabs call them, because initially they were planted there by the Jews.<sup>323</sup>

Actually the eucalyptus trees are the clearest example of the transplantation of foreign technology and methods to Palestine. Because no one before 1900 was aware of the link between the anopheles mosquito and the transmission of the malaria parasite, the eucalyptus tree was considered as the most important weapon in the fight against the illness. People believed that through its high absorptive quality, and the aromatic quality of its leaves the eucalyptus trees were the optimum solution in

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<sup>323</sup> J. H. Kahn, "*Erets Israël*", *le pays juif*, 8.

draining the swamps, and in purifying the “malarial miasmas” that were found therein. In 1899 a massive operation was undertaken in the colonies to plant eucalyptuses directly in swamps, as had been done in Algeria.<sup>324</sup>

The Alliance supported his work and rewarded his commitment to the advancement of the causes of the school.

Paris, October 8, 1891

Dear Mr. Niego,

...I would like to extend to you my congratulations for your activities as director of the School and to tell you that your zeal, your devotion and your competence are greatly appreciated by all of us. It is not necessary to apologize for forgetting this or that in your letters, we can very well appreciate the difficulties that you have to overcome and we understand that sometimes you can omit something or write something in summary...It is the responsibility of the secretariat to point out these omissions, so that they repeat as little as possible, and since you are just starting out on a career of director...some advices from our part...can never be superfluous. ...When one is at a one or two-day distance, omissions in the letters can be swiftly fixed, but when one is like us, at a one-month distance (going and coming), we need to be sure to avoid obscurities and misunderstandings.”

Niego, considered an expert due to his education and experience, was sent on frequent trips by the AIU and JCA (Jewish Colonization Association) or invited to advise or lead committees. After the death of the Baron de Hirsch in 1896, Narcisse Leven, AIU president, had also become president of the JCA. Although initially JCA promoted Jewish agricultural colonies in Argentina, Leven looked for other options, and corresponded on this matter with Niego. The latter proposed that Mikveh Israel become the focal point of a colonization program. Since 1897 Niego was also appointed agricultural advisor to the JCA in Palestine. Through his reports and

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<sup>324</sup> Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918*, 25.

recommendations between 1897 and 1900, he virtually shaped the JCA settlement policies.<sup>325</sup>

As an example, in 1897, he was sent by the JCA to inspect various properties in the north of Palestine and east of the River Jordan, and reported that land near Tiberias was eminently suitable for colonization. He also mentioned that land purchase in the *Sancak* of Acre was not as difficult as in the *Mutassariflik* of Jerusalem.<sup>326</sup> Later on, after JCA acquires the land, he is sent again to Tiberias in order to survey and start drawing the limits of the newly acquired land.<sup>327</sup> He was also sent to report on Jewish communities in Harran,<sup>328</sup> Beiruth, Asia Minor, Baghdad and other cities in Mesopotamia and in other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Analyzing Niego's success with the JCA, historian Derek Penslar describes his role in the engineering of the Jewish settlement in Palestine as follows:

Niego was the first Jewish technician in Palestine to wield such wide-ranging influence. He won the confidence of the JCA because of both his impeccable credentials (an Alliance education in his native Turkey, followed by studies in Paris and at the viticultural academy in Montpellier) and his peculiar character traits. Niego appealed to the JCA's hierarchical sensibilities by simultaneously swearing fealty to his *patron* and treating Palestinian Jewry with an appropriate mixture of solicitude and scorn.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Niego and the JCA distanced themselves from the failures of the Rothschild experiment, and focused on the development of a system of agricultural workers trained on JCA farms, that would start out by being sharecroppers, then advance to being rent-paying tenant farmers, and finally would be able to buy their property. In the end though, despite the novel approach, the system did not make the tenants in the colonies more independent than they had been under Rothschild. Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918*, 28-31.

<sup>326</sup> Niego to President of JCA, May 31 and June 20, 1897. JCA 279/7, 8. Notes 34 and 35 in Neville J. Mandel, "Ottoman Practice as regards Jewish Settlement in Palestine: 1881-1908," 44.

<sup>327</sup> Report by Farhi to AIU, March 7, 1899, CZA J41/87.

<sup>328</sup> Letter of J. Niego to AIU, April 28, 1897. CZA J41/88.

<sup>329</sup> Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918*, 28.

Other reports and correspondence with personalities of the time are revealing of his respected position as the director of Mikveh Israel.

Meyerson, General Secretary of the *Hovevei Zion*, invited Niego to be the president of a newly established committee, charged to evaluate the foundation of an agricultural colony at Kastina, and wrote in 1895:

We do not ignore that given the multiplicity and importance of your occupations, this will be a heavy sacrifice for you, but your competence in these matters, the confidence that you are accorded so justly by all those who are involved in the work in Palestine are such that we do not see any other person that could actually act with the authority that your decisions would have.<sup>330</sup>

Niego also played an active role in Jewish communal affairs of Jaffa. He acted as community representative for the purchase of a house that would serve as a hospital for the Jewish community there. The house was bought with funds from Baroness Clara Hirsch. It was registered as Niego's *vakif*, or charitable endowment, in the Islamic court,<sup>331</sup> which also appointed an administrative body representative of the community. The house was registered in Niego's name because the Jewish community of Jaffa, a corporate group, was not recognized as a 'Legal Person' under Ottoman law, and thus could not register property as *vakif* in its name, but could only become the beneficiary of such a property registered in the name of a person.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Letter of Meyerson to J. Niego, October 26, 1895, CZA J41/105.

<sup>331</sup> A *vakif* is a pious charitable endowment according to Islamic law. The relevant *sicil* (court record) reference for Joseph Niego is in Vol. 71, p. 126, case 143 in the year 1317 (1899). The issue of establishing *vakif* in a Muslim court was an issue of contention among many rabbis. Some rabbis argued that it violated Jewish law, while others claimed that it was a valid practice on the grounds that the law of the land is binding (*dina de-malchuta dina*). Ron Shaham, "Christian and Jewish "waqf" in Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 54, 3 (1991), 471.

<sup>332</sup> Ron Shaham, "Christian and Jewish "waqf" in Palestine during the Late Ottoman Period," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 54, 3 (1991), 469.

In October 1898, the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, stopped for some moments at the gates of the agricultural establishment, during his visit to Palestine. An arch had been erected in honor of the Kaiser at the entrance of Mikveh Israel, decorated with a variety of foliage, and an exhibition with agricultural machinery, while the students held olive branches in their hands.<sup>333</sup> Herzl and his companions<sup>334</sup> were present for the occasion. In fact, Joseph was very careful in his association with Herzl so that the authorities would not assume that “Mikveh Israel was becoming a Zionist center.”<sup>335</sup> The famous picture of the meeting between Kaiser Wilhelm II and Herzl was taken during this occasion.<sup>336</sup>

Joseph must have been constantly preoccupied with juggling his multiple responsibilities:

- 1) Overseeing the curriculum and running the educational program at Mikveh;
- 2) Overseeing the agricultural program, and physical plant at Mikveh;
- 3) Constructing substantial new buildings at Mikveh, among them the wine cellar and the synagogue;

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<sup>333</sup> Niégo, Joseph. *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 16.

<sup>334</sup> Herzl’s companions during his trip to Palestine were David Wolffsohn, director of the Jewish Colonial Turst; Max Bodenheimer, president of the Zionist Organization with its headquarters in Berlin; and Reuven Schnirer, vice-president of the Zionist General Council.

<sup>335</sup> J. Niégo to AIU, November 6, 1898, CZA J41/88. See Niégo’s complete account about the Emperor’s visit to Mikveh Israel (and Herzl’s own account of the event) in the Appendix. For more information on Joseph Niégo and his stance regarding Zionism, see the Epilogue.

<sup>336</sup> The photograph belongs to the Central Zionist Archives, and you can see it here: <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/UserImages/00000202.jpg>. The story of the photograph is quite interesting: It was taken by D. Wolffsohn, but did not develop properly and only the Emperor and part of Herzl’s leg was visible. Later on more pictures of Herzl (posing alone) were taken and were combined with the original photo to recreate the scene. There is a good description of how the final version of the photograph came to be in Desmond Stewart, “Herzl’s Journeys in Palestine and Egypt,” 23-24.

- 4) Promoting and marketing the products of Mikveh, particularly its wine, corresponding with buyers in such places as Cairo, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Marseilles, Paris and Warsaw;
- 5) Traveling widely among other places, to Aydın in Asia Minor, to Baghdad, to Rodosto in Eastern Thrace, and Beirut, in order to report on the situation of Jewish communities or other agricultural establishments, such as Or-Yehuda in Asia Minor;
- 6) Inspecting as the agronomist of JCA, prospective lands for acquisition, such as Tiberias, Sedjera, or other places in Palestine, to report on the agricultural situation of colonies, or prepare acquired lands for cultivation. He also suggested new crops and promoted others (such as oranges), and developed comprehensive plans to fight endemic problems, such as the swamps that cause malaria;
- 7) Dealing with often hostile local authorities especially as restrictions on Jewish immigration were extended from Russian Jews to all Jews, even those from inside the Ottoman Empire;
- 8) Coping with opposition of local rabbis and the orthodox community, who opposed the Alliance as subversive to their way of life and their educational program;
- 9) Dealing with the -at times- violent opposition of the Arabs in the villages adjacent to Mikveh.

His obligations take up the majority of his time and begin to affect his health. In his correspondence with the Alliance, we see multiple occasions when he becomes sick from exhaustion. As an example, in December of 1898, students working in the fields were attacked by Arabs. Niego imposed new measures, against which the students reacted with discontent. The director complained of feeling fragile and tired,

but could not take a day off to relax, and fell ill for days.<sup>337</sup> On February 1898, he became ill while in Beirut. Nissim Behar, on his way to Rishon LeZion on February 18, together with Eliezer ben Yehouda, wrote him a note wishing him speedy recovery “in order to undertake again your work, so important for our Country and for our coreligionists.”<sup>338</sup> In the same note, Ben Yehouda added: “...I hope that the good God...will give you back your health so necessary for the good of *Hibbat Zion*.” In another letter, learning that while Niego, back in Mikveh Israel, is not yet fully recovered, Ben Yehouda wishes him to get better, because “as I tell you always, you do not have the luxury to be sick.”<sup>339</sup>

Niego’s vision was to make Jewish settlers independent of charity, especially from the charity of Baron de Rothschild. His correspondence with other settlers paints a vivid image of the difficulties they confronted when establishing new schools and colonies, as well as the impact their education in Mikveh Israel had on them. When JCA established an agricultural school at Sejera, after the example of Mikveh Israel, in the lands that it acquired per Niego’s suggestion, Elie Krause, then deputy director of the Or Yehuda colony in Asia Minor, was appointed its director. Krause, a graduate of Mikveh Israel, who had been sent to the *Institut national agronomique* in Paris per Niego’s recommendation and would become Mikveh Israel’s director in 1914 for nearly half a century,<sup>340</sup> writes:

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<sup>337</sup> Letter from Farhi to Central Committee, December 12, 1898. CZA J41/87.

<sup>338</sup> Letter by Nissim Behar and Eliezer ben Yehouda to J. Niego, February 18, 1898, CZA J41/225.

<sup>339</sup> Letter by E. Ben Yehouda to J. Niego, February 1898, CZA J41/225.

<sup>340</sup> After the departure of J. Niego from Mikveh Israel, the agricultural school witnessed a period of stagnation under the uninspired directorship of Samuel Loupo. The appointment of Elie Krause as the director of Mikveh Israel in 1914 by the Baron Edmond de Rothschild is a turning point for the school, and signals the “new direction that the Alliance has taken, for good or for bad, in the direction of collaboration with the Hovevei Zion and the Zionists” (Antébi, “L’ Espoir d’Israel,” 289). After his studies in Paris, Elie Krause is appointed at the head of the agricultural school Or-Yehuda, near

Sejera, November 12, 1901  
Dear Mr. Niego,

I have received your letters of October 17 and 25. Thank you very much for your wishes on the occasion of my appointment to Sejera. I am deeply touched by your sincere wishes. I do not doubt that the advancement of old Mikveh students pleases you a lot; it is mainly the result of your work.<sup>341</sup>

Another of his students, S. Hochberg, appointed head of the school in Tiberias, described the difficult conditions and the opposition he faced as follows:

Tiberias, January 15, 1898

My dear Mr. Niego,

I apologize for being so slow to write. The resistance that I had to mount against the relentless fight from part of the population and from the local authorities has taken all my powers and time.

The opposition to the school, formed by some Sephardic rabbis and by the leaders of the Ashkenazi community, has begun from the first day of my arrival to Tiberias... The opposition began to influence the local authorities against us. They in turn...having such fear of Jewish philanthropic activities grabbed the opportunity... First of all they asked for a permit from the Vilayet of Beirut for the creation of the school, then the Kaymakam sent the police telling me that if I wouldn't leave the town, they would send me away accompanied by the gendarmes, because I disturbed the public order. All this meant that they wanted to be bribed. Initially I did not want to make my hands filthy, but the chief rabbi and some other friends of the school advised me to do it... I had to give in. Soon I saw results: the opposition lowered their head and the inhabitants started coming en masse in order to register their children."<sup>342</sup>

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Smyrna (Izmir), and then, in 1901, at Sejera, near Tiberias. Appointed in 1914 at the head of Mikveh Israel, he signals a new era, where "Orient ceases to have Paris as its capital": He is Russian that has escaped the pogroms, a farmer at heart, passionately tied to the land and the agriculture, while up to then important, leadership posts of AIU establishments were given to Ottoman Sephardim, inexorably drawn to the Parisian ideal (Antébi, "L'Espoir d'Israel," 291).

<sup>341</sup> Letter by E. Krause to J. Niego, November 12, 1901, CZA J41/239.

<sup>342</sup> Letter from S. Hochberg to J. Niego, January 15, 1898, CZA J41/225.



During these years, we can only reconstruct Lea's life through the reports and letters of J. Niego, of AIU inspectors, or friends of the couple. We can only guess her life, because after her resignation as a teacher of AIU in March of 1891,<sup>343</sup> we have no record from her, except for a last letter to AIU in 1923 that it is obviously copied from a letter by Joseph—or dictated by him. In any case, she died shortly after that.

In her letter of March 6, 1891, she had thanked the AIU Central Committee for all the efforts on her behalf and for her education, and continued by saying that “I consider myself very happy, because I will be able even after my marriage to be useful to the Alliance, by participating in the work of my future husband, on a farm...where a housewife can always find work to do.” This seems to be the case, since Isidore Loeb in a letter dated October 1891 tells Joseph that he is thankful for the care that Mme Niego shows for the School.<sup>344</sup>

Reality in Palestine would be different. Just days before the birth of her first child, Lea found herself in an establishment ravaged by malarial fevers:

December 4, 1891

Mr. President,

...For fifteen days, we have been afflicted by the eternal fevers that ravage the colonies and Jaffa. At this point, 15 students are sick, Mr. Avigdor [the assistant director], Mr. Harari, Mr. Gauthier [all teachers of the school],...the three shepherds, the porter, ...two washer-women. Since the death of A. Pereira, I have not yet found a baker to replace him. With insufficient personnel, I have difficulties organizing the services...We are awaiting with impatience the arrival of the rain and the wind that, by washing the atmosphere and moving all the layers of the atmosphere, will put an end to the epidemic.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Letter from Lea Mitrani to AIU, March 6, 1891. CAHJP HM3/109 (AIU Turquie X E 183).

<sup>344</sup> Loeb to Niego, October 8, 1891. CZA J41/91.

<sup>345</sup> Report from Niego to AIU, December 4, 1891, CZA J41/86.

As the years pass, we see through Joseph's letters to the AIU that Lea's health deteriorated. When not afflicted by mental problems, we see Lea as the bourgeois woman of the time: although isolated from the urban life to which she was used, she tried to recreate the illusion of a "civilized," orderly, welcoming environment in the harsh, alien environment of an agricultural farm; she occupied herself with the upbringing of her children; she took part in the minimal social life of the region; she supported Joseph in his work, and when the possibility arise, took her break in Europe—social life was nearly non-existent in Jaffa, at least in the way that Paris-educated Alliance teachers expected. In a letter, dated May 8, 1892, Niego explains the situation as follows:

Mr. President,

...The local committee of Jaffa has instituted a series of lectures, in order to unite the educated population of the city in one space once per month. In a community, where social life does not exist, there is no other way to see each other, to get to know each other..., to create any useful work.<sup>346</sup>

This picture was quite different from the intense social and cultural life that was being developed in the other colonies, where colonists combined their diasporic identities with new artistic expressions. New songs were composed or translated into Hebrew, clubs and lecture halls were built, concerts took place, all of which, though not rivaling the kibbutz culture of the 1920s, help bring nearer the different segments of the population. Again, due to the limitations of transportation, we can assume that such outings would have been rare for Lea, also due to the fact that Joseph wanted to distance himself from the militant colonists.

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<sup>346</sup> Letter by J. Niego to AIU, May 8, 1892. CZA J41/86.

Lea longs desperately for “educated” company, and Herzl’s trip through Palestine had excited her a lot. Herzl writes in his diary:

It should also be mentioned that Mr. Niego, the director of Mikveh Israel, expressly desired me not to pay a second visit there, which, at Mme Niego’s urgent invitation, I had promised to do as a matter of courtesy; the Turkish authorities, he said, might take it amiss. This is all the result of gossip on the part of the Rothschild officials—which I had foreseen after our encounter in Mikveh Israel.<sup>347</sup>

Inspectors of the Alliance are impressed by Mme Niego’s competence as a hostess. Mr. Isaac Levy writes in 1896:

Beirut, February 19, 1896

Dear Mr. Niego,

I would like to thank you in writing for the endless kindness that you, and particularly your dear wife, have bestowed on me during my sojourn in the School... During all the time that I have passed in your home, I never had the feeling of being a stranger for your family. Already from the first days of my arrival, I felt that I was part of your intimate circle, and this is because of the cordial way with which I was received.<sup>348</sup>

S. Hochberg, previously a student at the Mikveh, concludes his report on his work in Tiberias by expressing his nostalgia for Mikveh, and asking Niego:

Please, give my regards to Mme Niego. I will never forget the nice evenings that I have spent in her company. I kiss the beautiful Marguerite, the good David and the energetic Ezra.<sup>349</sup>

Boris Ossovetchky, an administrator from the colony Rishon LeZion, invites Mr. and Mme Niego to a concert in a room that Mr. Antebi has provided at his house in Jerusalem, mentioning that he would play a piece “especially for Mme Niego.”<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 295.

<sup>348</sup> Letter by Isaac Levy to J. Niego, February 19, 1896. CZA J41/106.

<sup>349</sup> Letter by S. Hochberg to J. Niego, January 15, 1898. CZA J41/225.

<sup>350</sup> Letter by B. Ossovetsky to J. Niego, April 7, 1902. CZA J41/245.

Ossovetzky and officials from other colonies are particularly active in the cultural life of the New Yishuv.

M. Benveniste, secretary, and F. Rabinovitz, treasurer of the philanthropic society “Ezrat Nashim” in Jaffa, mention that Madame Niego had called the attention of the late Baroness Hirsch to their organization.<sup>351</sup>

Lea was also interested in educational matters. When in 1897 the issue of girls’ education in Jaffa and of admitting girls into Mikveh Israel was being discussed with the AIU Central Committee, J. Niego writes:

Dear Mr. Bigart,

...Madame Niego and me we think that in fact a sewing workshop in Jaffa would not be of much help... Here in Jaffa nearly everyone is poor, and those who are comfortable do not run after fashion... Many times these workshops have been misused and many unscrupulous instructors have taken advantage of the students, in order to prepare their own trousseaus.<sup>352</sup>

In 1897, during an audience that he and Lea had with Baroness de Hirsch, Niego presented her a detailed project for the creation of an agricultural school for girls annexed to Mikveh Israel, but the death of the Baroness the same year would bring a temporary end to the project.<sup>353</sup> Elaborating on the advantages of establishing an agricultural school for girls, Joseph analyzes the budgetary requirements and concludes his report with the following words:

The Jewish world will greet with enthusiasm the appearance of such an institution. It will be the completion of the agricultural work undertaken in Judaism. If the late Baron de Hirsch was the promoter of the dignity and the regeneration of Jews by agricultural work, maybe it will be a noble continuation of his wishes to

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<sup>351</sup> Letter by Benveniste and Rabinovitz to J. Niego, May 28, 1901. CZA J41/239.

<sup>352</sup> Letter by J. Niego to AIU, January 24, 1897. CZA J41/88.

<sup>353</sup> Niégo, Joseph. *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 18.

affirm this work and to complete it by instilling the love of agriculture in women, and from them into the bosom of the Jewish family itself.<sup>354</sup>

We can reconstruct the difficulties of everyday life at Mikveh Israel through the “administrative books” and the “correspondence registries” that were kept at Mikveh Israel by Niego and his assistant directors.

June 2, 1898

Mr. President,

It seems that the summer will be a difficult one. For three weeks, the heat is suffocating. In the city or the colonies, rare are the houses that do not have someone sick with fever. In Mikveh, (the proportion is less); but we always have 10 to 15 students that suffer from fever or from stomach pain, and we have to summon the doctor beyond his regular visits.<sup>355</sup>

Mikveh will lose many of its students to these malarial fevers.

The worker student Jacobsohn, ill for three weeks, has taken his last breath. He was sick with a recurring fever. The quinine, which he took in the strongest possible dose, only...put him in a state of delirium near death. Doctors Yafe and Stein, who were taking care of him, had to inject him with quinine, but this extreme measure did not produce any result, and after being unconscious for three weeks, Jacobsohn died in the house of Dr. Yaffe, Saturday, June 29. This death has strongly moved the students and professors, because Jacobsohn was a good comrade, and a good student and his sincere and polite manners had won him the esteem of all.<sup>356</sup>

Joseph and Lea’s family life started unraveling in the fall of 1894, after the birth of their third son, Charles. The family was in Edirne for the birth and returned to Mikveh, because of Joseph’s obligations, in “adverse conditions.”<sup>357</sup> In a report to AIU, Niego will describe how they had to leave in a hurry, “although Madame Niego

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<sup>354</sup> Report by J. Niego to AIU, September 21, 1897. CZA J41/88.

<sup>355</sup> Report by assistant director Farhi, June 2, 1898. CZA J41/87.

<sup>356</sup> Report by assistant director Farhi, June 2, 1898. CZA J41/87.

<sup>357</sup> Letter from Mizan to J. Niego, November 9, 1894. CZA J41/95.

had only given birth seventeen days before, with three small children, two in the arms and one at the breast.”<sup>358</sup> In Izmir, where they had to stop, he had to leave her alone at the hotel, because he was commissioned to examine the situation of Russian refugees in Aydın, in an agricultural farm. Having not yet completely recuperated from the labor, and with three children alone in the hotel, Lea faints frequently and “it is Mr. Gabriel Arié<sup>359</sup> who brought help to her during my absence.” After Niego finishes the inspection, they continue by boat to Alexandria but upon their arrival to the port, “we fell upon a terrible tempest, and when we arrived at Jaffa, Madame Niego had lost all her mental equilibrium.”

In a letter of November 2, 1894, Narcisse Leven,<sup>360</sup> AIU’s vice-president and one of its founders, congratulates Niego and his wife on the birth of their son and wishes the child health. Commenting on their son’s being named after the “unforgettable Charles Netter,” Leven wishes that the child does as much good in his

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<sup>358</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle. CAHJP HM3/338 (TURQUIE LXIV E 770.3).

<sup>359</sup> Gabriel Arié (1863 – 1939) was born in Bulgaria and was a teacher, historian, community leader, and businessman in the Ottoman Empire. A student of Alliance, he first studied at the school in Samakov and then in Balat, the Jewish quarter in Istanbul, where he went with his family, fleeing—as thousands of Jews—the upheavals of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877- 78. In Istanbul, he was a student of Nissim Béhar—brother of Rachel Béhar. He studied at the ENIO (École Normale Israélite Orientale) in Paris with fellow students Niego, Loupo, Navon, and others, who were sent to the, and later would become important personalities in the organization. For a full account of his life, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *A Sephardi Life in Southeastern Europe: The Autobiography and Journal of Gabriel Arié, 1863-1939* (Seattle and London, 1998).

<sup>360</sup> Narcisse Leven was born in 1833 at Urdingen, on the Rhine. During the Franco-German war he was general secretary of the Ministry of Justice, but he resigned on the retirement of its minister, Adolphe Crémieux, and subsequently refused all government positions. From 1880 to 1887 he was a member of the Municipal Council of Paris, of which he became vice-president. He was among the founding members of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. From 1863 to 1883, he was its general secretary. In 1883, he became its vice-president, and in 1898, after S. Goldschmidt’s death, its president. For long years he was member of Jewish Consistory of Paris. He was also president of the Jewish Colonization Association. Leven died in 1915. His detailed reports and voluminous correspondence, as well as the eulogies that he delivered at the funerals of his colleagues paint a vivid and detailed picture of the history of AIU.

life as “the man, whose name he carries.”<sup>361</sup> The infant however dies “from enteritis” towards the end of the year.<sup>362</sup>

Already in January of 1895, Joseph is quite distraught and corresponds with Paris about Lea’s illness.<sup>363</sup> He decides, and AIU agrees, that Lea will be better taken care of by her parents, and she is sent again to Adrianople. Niego informs the AIU that Lea’s health is getting better in Adrianople, but the situation is not favorable as April, then May come. His colleagues in Paris consult with physicians there, and tell Joseph that if the troubles are related to the delivery, then this means she will be completely reestablished in some months. But they worry whether these troubles did not stem from Lea’s character or other hereditary factors, pointing to mental problems,<sup>364</sup> although that would be quite surprising given the fact that Lea, as all students sent to Paris, had passed a rigorous medical evaluation, and also her family’s history had been taken into consideration.

Lea’s problems might have been a combination of causes: Beyond the difficulties of everyday life at Mikveh Israel, she had been subjected to a difficult trip only weeks after giving birth; she might have been suffering from postpartum depression that in those times would be possibly characterized as a “female medical disorder”; and finally, the death of Charles must have been traumatic, since she would have probably had to tend to the little boy in the days before he died. In any case, his colleagues assure Joseph that the doctors in Paris agree that the doctors in Constantinople were correct to suggest isolation. They also mention that the doctors

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<sup>361</sup> Letter from N. Leven to J. Niego, November 2, 1894. CZA J41/95.

<sup>362</sup> Mikveh Israel registry, Denis Ojalvo Archive, Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>363</sup> Letter from N. Leven to J. Niego, January 12, 1895. CZA 41/95.

<sup>364</sup> Letters to J. Niego, May 1895. CZA 41/95.

do not suggest a trip to Paris to consult with specialists, unless as a means of entertaining Lea.

All of this is difficult for Joseph. He despairs and considers resigning from his post, in order to join his wife in Adrianople. In a passionate letter though, Bigart says:

You depend neither upon the colonies, nor the schemers in Jaffa, nor the Turkish authorities, but upon the Alliance, and the Central Committee of the Alliance appreciates your devotion [and] has confidence in your scientific knowledge of agronomy... This is a post of honor, and you cannot desert it; we need you, that says it all. It is in the difficult moments and in sensitive circumstances that a strong man resists... I know, you have many reasons to feel pain and all our hearts reach out to you... But do not speak of resignation, of leaving. People like you do not abandon their post and it is only death that can justify this.<sup>365</sup>

After this correspondence and as Lea's sojourn with her parents did not produce results, Joseph decided to have her come back to Mikveh Israel. His colleagues in Paris assure him that he has made the correct decision and that it is next to his side and under his care in the isolation of Mikveh that she will get better sooner.<sup>366</sup> They also suggest that Joseph and Lea should make a "small trip" to Lebanon this coming summer "without the children, because that would be very tiring for her."<sup>367</sup> They also send a contribution of 1,000 francs for the "extraordinary expenses" that Joseph Niego has incurred due to the illness of his wife.<sup>368</sup>

Between 1891 and 1903, the harsh climate and conditions of living, six successive pregnancies and the stress of conducting a respectable bourgeois family life in a completely foreign environment, would take their toll on the young couple.

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<sup>365</sup> Letter from Mizan to J. Niego, May 2, 1895. CZA 41/95.

<sup>366</sup> Letter from Mizan to J. Niego, May 10, 1895. CZA 41/95.

<sup>367</sup> Letter from Mizan to J. Niego, May 10, 1895. CZA 41/95.

<sup>368</sup> Letter from Mizan to J. Niego, September 19, 1895. CZA 41/95.



From this time on, Joseph and Lea's life would never be the same. For over twenty years, until her death in 1923 in Paris,<sup>369</sup> Lea would be “searching for peace of mind and for her health without ever finding them anywhere, going from city to city and from sanatorium to sanatorium.”<sup>370</sup> As for Joseph, he will later lament bitterly “the loss of home, the break up of our family, the evanescence of the conjugal happiness.”<sup>371</sup>

It was under such conditions that Lea brought six children to the world. During her years at the École Bischoffsheim in Paris, the purpose of her education was to produce a woman who would be able to create the ideal bourgeois family and home according to the ideals of the “cult of domesticity” that was ubiquitously promoted by most publications of the time—women's magazines, advice books, religious journals, newspapers and fiction. Conscientious as she was, this was the way of life that she would try to reproduce in an environment that simply did not provide the necessary prerequisites. She was, in a sense, merely a reflection of the Rothschild effort to introduce European agriculture into a totally foreign landscape; she could not maintain propriety and European cultural norms in an alien and alienating environment.

Did she blame herself for her home's deficiencies? Did eating their dinner in the dining room under the wooden ceilings, painted with country motifs and imported at great expense from Paris,<sup>372</sup> help her cope with what lay outside of the building? Before her first child Ezra was born, she had ordered fabrics for the layette, sent all

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<sup>369</sup> Mikveh Israel registry, Denis Ojalvo Archive, Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>370</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle. CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>371</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle. CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>372</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “L'Espoir d'Israel, ou la ferme-école de Mikveh-Israel” in *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 287.

the way from Marseille, so that they would arrive on time for the new baby's *kortadura de faşadura*.<sup>373</sup> This "fist cutting" was traditionally performed by a young girl who had two living parents: The ceremony probably took place in Jaffa, in a friend's house, where the women would meet on a certain day in order to celebrate the occasion. Joseph's mother was present too, since she had come to help Lea in her last months of pregnancy, as well as after the birth too.<sup>374</sup> As was customary, after the *kortadura de faşadura*, the two women would have started sewing the clothes for the baby, starting with the long dress that the baby would wear as soon as it was born. This dress (*kamiza larga, para vida larga*,<sup>375</sup> as the saying goes) would symbolize the family's hopes for a long life. But was ordering the layette for their yet-to-be born first child from France only an expression of a new mother's excitement, or a sign of despair with everything local?<sup>376</sup>

In any other urban AIU school, maintaining propriety and the bourgeois "decorum" would have been possible to a degree. But Mikveh was situated away from everything—not so much geographically, as psychologically. In fact it was its "inhabitants," i.e. the students, the teachers, the workers, its director and his family that had to make it habitable—and moreover, had to make it succeed. This was a matter of honor for AIU, and for Niego himself, and he worked at the expense of his health and family life in order to achieve this.

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<sup>373</sup> The "cutting of the fabric" for the baby-to-be-born would be usually held during the fifth or seventh month of the pregnancy.

<sup>374</sup> Loeb to Niego, October 8, 1891. CZA J41/91. This is the first mention we have for Joseph's mother. See more on her in the chapter about Istanbul, in the section "Return to the Cradle."

<sup>375</sup> "A long dress for a long life."

<sup>376</sup> Invoice from Brunshwig Frères, Toiles et Nappages, in Geneva, to J. Niego, October 23, 1891. "...La facture pour Madame (se monte) à 577.65 francs....Esperons-nous avoir contenté Madame Niego." CZA J41/202.

As much as Lea felt lonely and hopeless, she certainly was not the only AIU *institutrice* to leave her family and be appointed in a far away, “God-forsaken” place. She was not also the only one to get pregnant in adverse conditions, or to lose a child on the line of duty. Others before and after her would be in the same situation. Esther Valadji, wife of Jacques Valadji, both AIU teachers in Morocco, would have to travel to her post having given birth to her child only one month before, under torrential rains, and would see her child die nearly two years after that;<sup>377</sup> Claire Confino, wife of Albert Confino, AIU teacher at Algeria, who bore three children and was never reconciled to having left her parents in Istanbul, eventually contracted tuberculosis.<sup>378</sup>

As the wife of the director, Lea would have to cultivate a certain aura around her. She probably dressed according to Alliance expectations, and according to the typical fashion of the nineteenth century. In pictures we have of her, we see her dressed in a classic bourgeois way. That the tight corset lacing that closed off the lungs and pressed the inner organs together and the heavy undergarments and dresses were not appropriate for this new environment did not matter.

For Lea, it was a matter of being able to fulfill the expectations of her class and position, and to create the resemblance of “civilization” where she probably thought existed none. We can only imagine how Lea would feel as the only woman in the establishment, trying to bring up her children, and direct the household, and how she had to live intimate moments of her life, such as labor, childbirth, and its aftermath with minimal privacy, and in harsh conditions.

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<sup>377</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “Les Valadji: La femme adultère” in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 67.

<sup>378</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “Albert Confino: La lutte sur le terrain en Algérie,” in id., *Les Missionnaires Juifs de la France*, 79.

### Section 5 Lea and the Halutzot

As the immigrant women of the Second Aliyah were arriving in Palestine, Lea and Joseph Niego were leaving Mikveh Israel. It was 1903. For these idealistic and militant women, Eretz Israel represented the opportunity to fulfill a dream. For Lea, it would be an experience very different from the experience of the “pioneer” women of the First (1881-1903) and the Second (1904-1914) Aliyah.

Having left behind them the difficulties in Russia, the pioneer women, the *halutzot*, saw life in Palestine under a different light than Lea. An anonymous woman of the First Aliyah, the Wife of Kalman Kantor, from the settlement of Zikhron Yaakov, describes how she was adapting to her new life:

October/November 1889

...After all this, I still yearn for Russia. The heat and the *Khamsin* (the desert wind), are very difficult...When I came to town, the change in climate affected me badly, and on the fifth day after my arrival I got sick with malaria...Every foreigner who comes to live here from a faraway land has to drink from this cup, no one is spared...

February 28, 1890

...We've already forgotten all of the troubles and problems, which I wrote about in my previous letter...We have already grown accustomed to our work and the conditions of life here...and our table has everything that a rich woman in Vilna has, nothing is lacking. Every day I bring home a basket of eggs laid by my own hens; in the morning we drink good, fat milk from my cows...All of us women wear white kerchiefs covering our heads...With all my heart, I wish that I could write you more, but I don't have enough time to write, because there is a lot of work to do today...I will never lack work, and thank God, the household work is always on increase...I have never known a better, more satisfying life than the one I am currently leading.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> As cited in Ran Aaronsohn, “Through the Eyes of a Settler’s Wife: Letters from the *Moshava*,” in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, edited by Deborah Bernstein, 34-42.

It is interesting to see how this simple woman experienced a reversal of attitude towards the idea of settlement in the Land of Israel, and also how satisfied she is with her role as a homemaker and wife. She does not attempt to judge the woman's role in society, nor deal with grand ideological issues and problems. Her letter reflects her satisfaction with the traditional way of life and the roles men and women, a very different attitude from the struggle for gender equality that would come to Israel later on with the Socialist Zionism of the Second Aliyah (1904-1914).<sup>380</sup>

For Lea, immigrating and staying permanently in Palestine was never the aim. Both she, as well as Joseph, were there in order to “enlighten” their degenerate coreligionists, and through education and work in the agricultural farm, to provide them with the tools that would permit them to become self-sufficient, hard-working men. Even though Lea was aware that many of the Alliance teachers passed the rest of their lives in strange lands, far away from their birthplaces, deep inside her she hoped that this was only a post where Joseph had to serve for a period of time—but that then they would be able to leave.

Born and raised in Edirne, she had passed all her adult life abroad, at the fringes of the Empire. Was she excited to go “back”? Back to where? Istanbul was no more the Imperial city of the nineteenth century. It was the scene of innumerable power struggles—between the Sultan and his subjects, the Sultan and his governing

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<sup>380</sup> Ran Aaronsohn, “Through the Eyes of a Settler’s Wife: Letters from the *Moshava*,” in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, edited by Deborah Bernstein, 45.

and military elites, the Sultan and Europe. The Jewish community would undergo immense changes—and Joseph would be a leading actor on this scene.<sup>381</sup>

But Lea was the quintessential bourgeois woman. She would remain so until her death in 1924. Thus preternaturally, she would reflect the long nineteenth century of the Ottoman Empire, a century that started with the reforms of Sultan Selim III in 1789 and ended with the demise of the Empire itself and the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

Back in Palestine, *halutzot* from Eastern Europe had forged a life “in the crucible of *pogroms* [anti-Jewish riots], revolution, and state building.”<sup>382</sup> Behind them, they were leaving harsh socio-economical conditions and persecutions in the Pale of Settlement. In Palestine, they aspired to a new life. These were women who played an important role in the finances of their family and were accustomed to working in commerce, in the clothing industry (both inside and outside the home), as dressmakers, at booths selling produce in the town markets, some of them as maids or servants, or cleaners. In the meantime, they would take care of their house and the rearing of their children. Husbands might work with them, or be on constant trips to sell their goods in other *shtetls*. Others would not work at all, studying the Torah. In such cases, the burden on women was even greater.

Due to their importance in the domestic economy, we can assume that many were influential in the decision of the family to emigrate, to be uprooted and taken to

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<sup>381</sup> See chapter about Istanbul 1903-1923.

<sup>382</sup> Mark A. Raider, “Between Text and Context, The Plough Woman in Historical Perspective,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark A. Raider and Miriam B. Raider-Roth (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), xxxix.

a new country.<sup>383</sup> Others would follow their husband's spiritual quest and would be obliged to come to the Holy Land out of submission. It was only the aura of the land and its grasp on people's imagination that compensated for leaving everything behind in one's country of origin, for the long and perilous trip, and for the harsh living conditions in Eretz Israel. While subsequent waves of Aliyah were much more militant and based on the labor movement that would define the Yishuv, the women who came to Palestine from 1882 to 1903 were mostly Russian and part of families of men, who were politically active and affiliated with the *Hibbat Zion* movement.<sup>384</sup>

There were also a few women immigrants (such as Nehamah Pukhachewsky, Hemdah Ben Yehuda, Ita Yellin, Hannah Luncz) who had been educated in families that valued female education and promoted Zionist ideas, and thus had consciously chosen to be in Palestine. In their writings they would argue the value of the new woman for the new society and the new land.<sup>385</sup>

Lea, unlike most of these women, came from a bourgeois background. From the women of the First Aliyah, very few had bourgeois backgrounds. The majority came from highly patriarchal, gender segregated, traditional Jewish societies of Eastern Europe, and aspired to redefine their role, by breaking away from this society and being part of the building process of a new society in Eretz Israel.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Gur Alroey, "And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land": Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12, 3 (Spring/Summer 2006): 44.

<sup>384</sup> The *Hibbat Zion* movement called for immediate immigration to Palestine and, naturally, the men were the ones who took the decision to emigrate. Once in Palestine, these families led a traditional Jewish life in agricultural villages that were supported by Baron de Rothschild.

<sup>385</sup> Contemporary writing by men would be indifferent to women's aspirations. In their militant literature, female writers of the First Aliyah would confront men for relegating women in the social periphery, while berating women for accepting and perpetuating their condition and lack of rights. Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 54-55.

<sup>386</sup> Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel*, 2.

Although Lea must have shared their apprehensions and fears, the process in reality was smoother for her. She did not have to wait some years for her husband to save money in the new country, and send for her once he was established. Newly married, her husband had a secure, salaried post, and they had no children yet. In the destination, there was a house waiting for her. Moreover, she did not really emigrate to another country, but moved inside the Empire—albeit to a far away place. Joseph, competent, and knowledgeable of the route, must have taken special effort to make the trip as comfortable for Lea as possible.

For Lea, the passage to Palestine did not become a metaphor for her revolt against the status quo. She neither aspired to, nor tried to alter the gender norms of her society and time, like the immigrants from Eastern Europe aspired to. Lea had lived in Paris and was fully acculturated to French culture. Through her education, she had appropriated the bourgeois gender norms, and concomitant personality traits.<sup>387</sup> In their letters, both she and Joseph corresponded in French, and we can safely assume that this was the language spoken at home.

Traditionally, studies about the First Aliyah have focused on the settlement in Palestine of Jewish immigrants and on the institutions and organizations that planned, implemented and supported it. It is usually personalities such as the Baron Edmond de Rothschild or organizations such as the Jewish Colonization Association that are the subjects of research, and their role in practical aspects of the settlement. Up to recently, rarely was the role of individuals, especially women, considered in this process.

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<sup>387</sup> Paula E. Hyman, “Gender and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identities,” *Jewish Social Studies* 8, 2/3 (Winter-Spring, 2002): 156.



While in the last decades Israeli historiography has deconstructed the ideological narratives and the myth of gender equality during the Yishuv period, the contributions of the pioneer women of the First Aliyah and their efforts to change this reality have been marginalized and forgotten.<sup>388</sup>

Although Zionism exalted a new type of Jewish woman, who worked and overcame the difficulties of building a new state together with men, the parallel promotion of manliness in the Zionist discourse was at the expense of equality ideals. While adopting “fashionable socialist notions” of gender equality, most settlers wanted to disassociate themselves from the long-standing image of the sickly, “effete” and weak Diaspora Jewish man and adopted the “muscle Jew” rhetoric—of the Jew who rid himself of anti-Semitic stereotypes and embraced a manliness emanating from his attachment to the earth.<sup>389</sup>

Women’s studies in Israel during the last decades have tried to counteract this, and have been influenced by two trends—the re-examination of the role of women during the Yishuv, and the study of women in contemporary Israeli society. The study of social groups previously ignored in the history of the Yishuv have brought new perspectives in the history of the era that have dispelled the mythical image of the *halutzot* and the effect their struggles had on the position of contemporary Israeli women.<sup>390</sup> As is the case with the history of women in other societies, women’s roles

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<sup>388</sup> Esther Fuchs (ed.), *Israeli Women’s Studies* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 5. See also Introduction in Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo and Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds.), *Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press; Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2008.

<sup>389</sup> Gerald M. Berg, “Zionism’s Gender: Hannah Meisel and the Founding of the Agricultural Schools for Young Women,” *Israel Studies* 6, 3 (Fall 2001): 143.

<sup>390</sup> Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and homemakers: Jewish women in pre-state Israel*, 9.

are difficult to trace, because their lives have been marginal and very little of it has been documented or included in libraries and archives.

The scarce material that we have from that time shows that in general women had a peripheral role in the *moshavot* or in the Yemenite communities, and continued to fulfill their traditional roles, much to the disappointment of well educated, ardently Zionist women authors of the First Aliyah.<sup>391</sup> Authors such as Hemdah Ben-Yehuda and Nehamah Pukhachewsky considered women's inferior education as the reason for their subordination to men.

The daily life of the women in the *moshavot* was very different from Lea's. Although Lea was in charge of the house, the letters of Joseph mention a cook and washing women, thus we must assume that she was not obliged to do the heavy housework. Most of the women of the First Aliyah, though, were housewives. Only few worked in agricultural work, and only a very few worked in the administration of Baron de Rothschild, or in medicine and education—and again, even these did not leave behind them written source material documenting their lives.<sup>392</sup>

Lea definitely did not have to help her husband on the farm—in any case, Mikveh Israel was a school and not the private land of Joseph. But even when the women of the *moshavot* helped out their husbands, this was in an auxiliary capacity, not on a permanent basis since Jewish settlers usually employed Arab workers due to their knowledge of the land and of farming practices.<sup>393</sup> Contemporary accounts

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<sup>391</sup> Deborah S. Bernstein (ed.), *Pioneers and homemakers: Jewish women in pre-state Israel*, 26-27.

<sup>392</sup> Ran Aaronsohn, "Through the Eyes of a Settler's Wife: Letters from the *Moshava*," in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, ed. D. Bernstein, 31.

<sup>393</sup> Once field crops were replaced with vines and almond trees, at the instigation of Baron de Rothschild, tending the new crops was an easier task, thus the colonists did not spend as much time as before in the fields.

chastise these women for their urban comportment, and newspapers described them as “a bunch of farmers’ wives reading novels, each with two Arab maids.” Furthermore Jewish settlers preferred to buy vegetables, eggs, and milk cheaply from the Arabs, instead of burdening their wives with the task of producing them.<sup>394</sup>

After 1903, politically active and passionate women of the Second Aliyah, such as Manya Wilbushewitz-Shohat, would become directly involved with Jewish settlement in Palestine, and aspired to establish an “ideal” Jewish community, where class and gender biases would be abolished.<sup>395</sup> Even then, though, they were quickly disillusioned when upon their arrival in Palestine, they paradoxically found themselves relegated to the traditionally “female” occupations, such as the kitchen, the laundry, and the caring for the children, all the while having to adapt in a new, foreign environment.<sup>396</sup>

But the harsh climate, the land, the malaria, or the typhoid fever were the same for all, for immigrants from Eastern Europe, and for those from North Africa. Why did the pioneer women stay, even though they had to endure hardships disproportionate to their dreams and aspirations? Some had lost husbands; many had lost children. Some settlements, such as Hadera, would lose 40% of their population to illnesses in the course of thirty years. Haya-Rachel Kotler Nahumovsky Millner,

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<sup>394</sup> Margalit Shilo, “The Transformation of the Role of Women in the First Aliyah, 1882-1903,” *Jewish Social Studies* 2, 2 (Winter 1996): 65-68.

<sup>395</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, “Manya Wilbushewitz-Shohat and the Winding Road to Sejera,” in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, ed. E. Bernstein, 97, 105.

<sup>396</sup> Miriam B. Raider-Roth, “The Plough Woman: Identities in the Making,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark A. Raider and Miriam B. Raider-Roth, xvii.

one of the pioneer women of Hadera, lost her husband and four out of her five children to malaria.<sup>397</sup>

Yet these women were fierce in their determination to carve a life, they were “dreamers that refused to surrender.”<sup>398</sup> As Dr. Hillel Yaffe<sup>399</sup> would say in 1894, “the settlers of Hadera dug graves with their own hands, for their next of kin, for their friends and neighbors, but they did not desert their settlement. [It was] courage on the verge of insanity!” Could this be because they believed that only in Palestine they could build a new home, where they could achieve independence and equal status? Or was it because they had no viable alternative to return to?

In a lecture in the B’nai B’rith lodge in Istanbul many years after, in 1913, Joseph would exalt the *halutzot* and their role in the process of nation-building. We can only wonder what were the thoughts and reaction of his very urban audience of upper middle class Jewish men to his description of the Jewish pioneer women in Palestine, Argentina, Brazil and Canada, who “like veritable farmers,” occupied themselves with poplury, milking the cow, and the harvest. He eulogized these women who followed their husbands in foreign lands, where they would be the first to live in “the solitude of the fields, in isolated places, against the forces of nature, against illnesses, against the fever, against the surrounding population.” In his lecture, Joseph juxtaposed these women with the degenerate situation in Jewish homes in the

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<sup>397</sup> Nina Rodin, “The Invisible Women of the Settlement of Hadera in Eretz Israel (1891-1914).” <http://www.khan-hadera.org.il/e-article.html>.

<sup>398</sup> Alexander Aaronsohn, *With the Turks in Palestine*, <http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/1/0/3/3/10338/10338.htm>.

<sup>399</sup> Hillel Yaffe (1864-1936) was born in Ukraine and was involved with Hovevei Zion movement. He immigrated to Palestine during the First Aliyah in 1891. He was instrumental in the fight against malaria. He toured the settlements, offering his services to the settlers. He envisioned eradicating malaria at its source, since individual therapy was difficult and not always successful. Thus he fought against mosquitoes and for the drying of the swamps. Dr. Hillel Yaffe were also taking care of the people of Mikveh Israel.

Orient and the “modern women” who do not occupy themselves with their house, do not nurse their children, do not “direct the education of their sons,” but leave them in the care of nannies who do not inculcate the children with customs or history, but with nonsense and superstition.<sup>400</sup>

Of course Joseph’s admiration of the *halutzot* was not compatible with his very bourgeois ideal of women as creators of the home-abode for their husband. As he argue, “in all eras in the history of the diaspora, even when everything outside was sorrow and misery, suffering and pain,” the Jewish woman would create a saintly foyer, where man could forget all his unhappiness. After working all day long, he would find again joy and comfort in “his wife’s warm and loyal heart, in the immaculate interior of the house, in her impeccable hygiene, scrupulously observed, in the preservation of traditions, in the respectful manner of the children, in the observance of all time-honored customs, in the practice of charity and hospitality.”<sup>401</sup> In this classic bourgeois rhetoric, we can discern Joseph’s desire and nostalgia for this kind of life. We can see it also in all his correspondence with the Alliance, when he describes how his family life had been destroyed because of Lea’s illness.

There was a fundamental difference between Lea and these pioneer East European women. While all experienced a harsh climate and a geography that they were unaccustomed to, their attitudes were diametrically opposite. The *halutzot* came with a legitimizing mythology that would support them through the adversities, and tried to adapt to the land, and make a new life.

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<sup>400</sup> Joseph Niego, “Les trios assises d’un peuple: La terre, la langues et les vertus de la famille” in idem, *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 429-440.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

Lea opted to fight this strange land. Hers was not a fight for creating something, or for taming her environment. It was a futile fight. It ended with her escape, an escape which she achieved mentally long before she was able to do so physically. Dependent on Joseph, she had to be patient and endure life until he gave her the chance to leave. Eventually, he had agreed to leave Palestine only because of her—his wife’s delicate health against the difficult climate was the reason that he would later cite when justifying his leaving Mikveh. He was at the height of his career when they left Mikveh, with the cultures thriving, an array of new buildings he himself had initiated, and the largest body of students up to then.

## Chapter 6: Istanbul

### Section 1 Return to the Cradle

The Palestine that Joseph and Lea left behind in December 1903 was very different from the one at which they had arrived in 1891.

1903 was the beginning of the Second Aliyah, fueled in large measure by a pogrom in Kishinev, capital of Russian Bessarabia,<sup>402</sup> on April 6 and 7. The pogrom prompted worldwide public outcry. Jewish politicians, intellectuals, authors and poets denounced the atrocities committed against Jews and grasped the opportunity to vehemently attack what they saw as Jewish apathy and defenselessness. Aiming to arouse people's indignation, they would write sarcastic, vitriolic verses against

... the heirs  
Of Hasmonians... with trembling knees,  
Concealed and cowering,—the sons of the Maccabees!  
...  
The scurrying of roaches was their flight;  
They died like dogs, and they were dead!<sup>403</sup>

Thousands of Jews fled tsarist Russia for Palestine. This time, newcomers were militantly Zionist and not simply idealistic as those of the First Aliyah. Vladimir Jabotinsky<sup>404</sup> and other prominent Zionists would grasp the opportunity to further

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<sup>402</sup> Today, Kishinev (Chişinău) is the capital of Moldova.

<sup>403</sup> H.N. Bialik, "The City of Slaughter" in *Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Israel Efros (New York, 1948), 129-43.

<sup>404</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940) was born in Odessa, Russia. He became an influential Zionist leader, author, speaker, and soldier. He joined the Zionist movement after the Kishinev pogrom and he soon became known for the passionate way he supported the Jewish causes. He adopted the name Ze'ev ("wolf") and started learning Hebrew. After the death of Herzl in 1904, he became a leading figure in the Zionist movement. During World War I, he joined Eastern European Jews that had been expelled from Palestine by the Ottomans to Egypt, and formed the Zion Mule Corps that fought, among other places, in Gallipoli. In 1917, he joined the English army and entered Palestine with

their cause by organizing groups meant to protect Jewish communities throughout Russia, such as the Jewish Self-Defense Organization. Most importantly, the pogrom precipitated an identity crisis in the Jewish national movement by transforming Palestine from an abstract and idealistic homeland to a territorial solution with a validity of its own.<sup>405</sup>

In Basel, Switzerland, the Sixth Zionist Congress took place in April 1903, only days after the Kishinev pogrom. Herzl and the senior leadership proposed establishing an autonomous Jewish region in Uganda, then a British colony in Eastern Africa. Russian Jews in particular were vehemently opposed to this plan, insisting on the preeminence of Eretz Israel as a Jewish homeland. There were fears that the Zionist movement would split between “Uganda Zionists” and “Zion Zionists.”

In Palestine, Jewish colonists, with no subvention from Baron de Rothschild since 1900,<sup>406</sup> convened at Zichron Ya’akov in August 1903 for what was the first ever assembly of representatives from the Jewish settlements in order to discuss how to unite and how to provide communities with the tools to be self-sufficient. This effort of organizing a common front in Palestine can be seen as another expression of the maturation of the territoriality idea in the Jewish conscience.

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General Allenby. After his discharge in 1919, he trained Jews in Palestine in self-defense. Later on he would differentiate himself from mainstream Zionism, establishing the Revisionist Zionism and stating as his main objective the establishment of a Jewish state. During the 1930s, he traveled extensive in Eastern Europe calling for the evacuation of the Jewish communities in Poland, Hungary and Romania to Palestine, something that he also discussed with the governments of the respective countries, gaining their support. The British though vetoed such a plan, and Chaim Weizmann dismissed it. Until his premature death from heart attack in 1940, he continued to warn Jews that they had to leave Europe for Palestine the soonest possible.

<sup>405</sup> Eric Zakim, *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity*, 25.

<sup>406</sup> Baron Edmond de Rothschild had decided to terminate his involvement with the colonies as of 1900 and transferred them to the Jewish Colonization Association. The association’s expectation that the colonies become self-sustainable ushered them into an era of financial crisis, and many colonists would leave Palestine during this period.



The years between 1903 and 1910 would be particularly difficult for Joseph. His family issues were a source of constant anxiety and his correspondence with the Alliance reveals that his exit from the organization was not unproblematic.

Before the family left Palestine in December of 1903, the Niegos had already lost a second child and welcomed two others. Marguerite was born on September 30, 1896 but died, possibly from hepatitis, on October 2, 1899.<sup>407</sup> Amelie, named after her maternal grandmother, Amada, had been born on December 6, 1899, and Laura Luna was born on December 21, 1902.

From Joseph's letter to the new director of Mikveh Israel, Samuel Loupo, we learn surprisingly that the infant, Laura, Joseph's and Lea's youngest child, had been left behind at Mikveh Israel under the care of Mme Loupo, wife of the new director, and of his mother when the Niego family left the establishment. We can only assume that Laura stayed at Mikveh because Lea being sick at the time was unable to look after her. Joseph told Samuel Loupo that

Mme Loupo should not be stringent with money in regards to Laura's care for the little time that [Laura] will remain at Mikveh. I have entrusted her with Laura's care. The establishment owes me that.<sup>408</sup>

Lea was sick when the family left for Alexandria. Their ship was diverted to Latakia, a coastal city in Syria, due to suspicions of a cholera epidemic, where they were kept in quarantine for three days. They subsequently set out first for Port Said, then Alexandria, and finally by train to Paris.

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<sup>407</sup> "Maladie de foie." Mivveh Israel Registry, Denis Ojalvo archive.

<sup>408</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, December 20, 1903, CZA J41/249.

The family took quarters in Paris, where Niego was to work for ICA. Looking back later on, Joseph would remember 1904 as a terrible year of “physical and psychological suffering”: While having to travel extensively on behalf of the ICA, he had to support his mother in Jerusalem, his daughter with a nanny in Jaffa, his two sons in the Lakanal boarding school, on the outskirts of Paris, Amelie, his other daughter, at the boarding school of Mme Isaac, and Lea sick at the hospital.<sup>409</sup>

It is quite interesting to see from this letter that his mother, whom other sources present as having died in Edirne together with his father during the cholera epidemic of 1865, was living in Jerusalem. Maybe she had come to Palestine as a widow, after Joseph had started working at Mikveh Israel or right after her husband’s death.

We see a first mention about her in a letter to Joseph by General Secretary Isidore Loeb, dating from October 8, 1891 and telling Joseph that he “sees no inconvenience that your mother is next to you in order to take care of Mme Niego. On the contrary, I am very happy that you have her with you and I authorize you to keep her four or five weeks after the birth.”<sup>410</sup> We do not know if Joseph had brought his mother from Edirne or from Jerusalem.

In any case, there is no other mention about her in Joseph’s correspondence, and we do not know how the family interacted with the grandmother. She resurfaces in 1904, in a letter Joseph writes to Samuel Loupo: “If the occasion arises, you could

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<sup>409</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, October 18, 1905. CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>410</sup> Isidore Loeb to Joseph Niego, October 8, 1891, CZA J41/91.

send my little Laura to Jerusalem so that her grandmother will see her and will kiss her before she leaves the country.”<sup>411</sup>

We can safely assume that Joseph’s mother arrived in Palestine after she was widowed, as was the case for many other Jewish women from the Balkans. Imbued with religious ideals and the desire to die and be buried in the Holy Land, Jewish widows would come and lead a quasi-monastic life mainly in Jerusalem.<sup>412</sup> While some, if not most, of these women were poor and relied on the *halukah*, Joseph’s mother was supported by him,<sup>413</sup> and might have been active in charity in the Sephardic community of Jerusalem.

The sojourn in Paris would not bring respite to the family. They were put up in quarters that were simply too small for the furniture they had brought along, and Joseph mentions that Lea visited Mr. Leven and Mr. Bigart in order to ask them to buy “the dining room set, two armchairs, a lamp and the two hanging night lamps” for the Alliance.<sup>414</sup> In a letter to Loupo, Joseph confided that

the health of my wife does not permit us to establish [our] home in Paris, and take an apartment. I do not know when the doctor will permit Lea to reside in an apartment and take care of the household.<sup>415</sup>

One year later, Joseph came to realize that his position as an ICA employee involved frequent trips to the Orient, and that from then on that would be the center of action for him. At the suggestion of Mr. Leven, president of the Alliance and of ICA,

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<sup>411</sup> J. Niego to S. Loupo, April 6, 1904, CZA J41/253.

<sup>412</sup> Jewish women coming from the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire were known in Ladino as *madrinas*, the word denoting their benevolent and caring nature. In general, the percentage of widows in the population of Jerusalem was particularly high. Margalit Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 9-10.

<sup>413</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, October 18, 1905, CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>414</sup> J. Niego to S. Loupo, January 19, 1904, CZA J41/253.

<sup>415</sup> J. Niego to Samuel Loupo, April 6, 1904. CAHJP HM3/338.

and as Lea's health was not improving, he decided to move the family to Constantinople.<sup>416</sup>

In the beginning of May, 1904, Joseph decided to have Laura brought to her grandparents, and arranged her transportation with Mme Louna and Mlle Rachel Pereira—widow and daughter respectively of the baker of Mikveh Israel, who had died during the malarial fevers of 1891.<sup>417</sup> He asked Loupo to let Mme Louna know that she should “dress my daughter warmly during the trip. The difference of temperature between Jaffa and Constantinople is very big. It is cold right now here.”<sup>418</sup> He also arranged for a man, who would carry the infant, and for his nephew to escort the women from Jaffa to Smyrna, from Smyrna to Constantinople and from Constantinople to Edirne. Joseph went to Smyrna to meet them.<sup>419</sup>

During the same time, it seems that Joseph had financial differences with the Alliance. He wrote to the Alliance, explaining what the Alliance owed him in back payments. Bigart complained that Niego had not consulted the Alliance when transferring to the ICA. But Niego mentions that it was only after consulting with Mr. Leven and Mr. Zadok that he did so, and he continues:

Didn't I ask you for another post? Didn't I beg you to give me a post as director of a primary school in a big city? Everything I did was authorized by the President...In leaving Mikveh, my only aim was to save my wife, whom the doctors have condemned in Jaffa. I wanted to save her at any price. My aim has been achieved. Since she is in Constantinople, Mme Niego's health has been excellent...She is next to her parents, enjoying all the rest that she needs.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Joseph Niego to AIU, July 3, 1905, CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>417</sup> J. Niego to AIU, December 4, 1891, CZA J41/86.

<sup>418</sup> J. Niego to S. Loupo, April 7, 1904, CZA J41/253.

<sup>419</sup> J. Niego to S. Loupo, April 6, 1904; May 4, 1904, CZA J41/253.

<sup>420</sup> J. Niego to AIU, January 31, 1905, CAHJP HM3/338.

The AIU wants back the money the family spent for their trip to Paris, because Joseph was going to be employed by the ICA, and Joseph refuses, saying that the Alliance had promised him this amount, and that it was not fair to demand this for his first change of post in eighteen years.

At the same time he offered to sell the AIU a piece of land that he owned, adjacent to Mikveh, because he could not keep his money tied up in real estate, when he needed to pay for the debts that he had incurred because of his wife's illness. He had bought that piece of land with great expectations.

I wanted to plant an orange grove. Those who did so at Petah Tikva have done an excellent business...When I wanted to create my garden, I had no savings; when I had the resources and I bought the land, I had to leave Palestine because of the illness of Mme Niego.<sup>421</sup>

The Alliance refuses to buy the land, and in a series of letters he tries to show them why they should. He explains that he left Mikveh poorer than he had entered:

My expenses were great in Jaffa, because of the illnesses of all in the family—me, my wife and my children; because of the numerous trips that we were obliged to undertake in order to change environment and to avoid the malaria; because of the kind of life that we had had to lead, due to the relations with the authorities and the administrations of the colonies...Mme Niego and I never abused the allowance that the establishment offered to us. We were so scrupulous to the point of not receiving the pension when my family was absent from the school [although I had to pay for the expenses for their travel].<sup>422</sup>

But his professional troubles did not end here. Later on he fell out with Samuel Loupo. It started with a report on Mikveh Israel when Joseph visited the

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<sup>421</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, November 1, 1906.

<sup>422</sup> M. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, February 14, 1905.

agricultural school as an ICA inspector. He found the school in a bad situation, and reported on Samuel Loupo's incompetence as a director.

Mr. Leven,

I hesitated for long before writing you this letter...but I have to let you know what I saw at Mikveh during the days of my passage in Palestine...The agricultural institution...disintegrates...It is not only merely a conflict between the director and the personnel...There is no authority, no energy...The personnel is completely disinterested in their work...The groves, ...the gardens, ...the wine cellars, ...the olive tress,...the orange trees...are badly kept and give very little produce...What is worst is that all discipline has disappeared and the students are now the masters...They have got together and were shouting in front of the director's windows: "Down with Mr. Loupo, Go so-and-so teacher." They don't go to work...They pretend to be sick. When the teacher comes to class, he finds hardly half of the students...The administration of Mikveh Israel has become the laugh of everyone in Palestine...You cannot remedy this if you do not put at the head of the agricultural school an agronomist. The experiment of making a teacher [director] has not succeeded...You will not find a better agronomist than Mr. Krause, married, intelligent, serious, energetic, and experienced.<sup>423</sup>

Probably, Samuel Loupo learned about the contents of the report, and that he was reprimanded by the Alliance, because in subsequent letters by Joseph to the Alliance we understand that he is being slandered, and that Samuel Loupo is accusing him of taking with him the archives of Mikveh when he left:

I see that people with bad intentions have reported bad things about me. What frightens me greatly is that you have believed them. As for me, I just ignore these ignominies that no one dares to state to my face and that they have fabricated behind my back.<sup>424</sup> When I left Mikveh, I did not bring along the archives of the school...Never has any teacher left in any other school such orderly archives as I left in the agricultural school at Jaffa...I have taken with me the copies of the letters that

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<sup>423</sup> J. Niego to N. Leven, April 2, 1906, CAHJP HM3/338. Krause would eventually become director of Mikveh Israel in 1914.

<sup>424</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, March 9, 1907, CAHJP HM3/338.

belong to me, and I have left at Mikveh all the correspondence with the Central Committee...and the business correspondence...<sup>425</sup>

Despite his efforts in his private life, his family life had disintegrated.

But Joseph's main characteristic was his disciplined and efficient tackling of situations that arose. He dealt with his family issues in the same methodical way:

Dear Mr. Leven,

...Directly after finishing my mission in Anatolia, you order me to leave for Mesopotamia. Please permit me to inform you about the difficulties I am facing in regards to my family. You do not ignore the terrible illness that has afflicted my wife during her sojourn at Mikveh Israel. Her spirit has a remarkable lucidity, but at intervals...she relapses into a terrible nervousness. She becomes then incapable to take care of the household and to supervise the education of her children...While my father-in-law was alive, he came to stay with us during my absence and took care of his daughter..., and directed the household. But some months ago my father-in-law died and I am at loss of how I could get away for many months leaving my household in such a situation. Many people have advised me—and there is no other solution than that—to place my children in board and to leave my wife in the company of a lady who would supervise her. I will place my daughters probably in board at Constantinople and I will send after Pesach my eldest son to Vienna, where he will study German...I need still to place somewhere my second son, David...I have no means to do any more, since I have to pay for the upkeep of my mother in Jerusalem, for that of my other children in the schools, and for the expenses of the treatment of my wife.

So, if you want me to travel with a sound mind...and that I conduct my work, I would like to ask you to help me place my second son in a boarding school or to accept him as a student at the École Normale Orientale in Paris.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, October 15, 1908, CAHJP HM 3/338.

<sup>426</sup> J. Niego to N. Leven, March 9, 1907, CAHJP HM 3/338.

His son is accepted at the ENIO and the family is reunited, at least partly, whenever Mme Niego goes to Europe for treatment. A trip to the medicinal baths at Marienbad gives her the opportunity to see David, whom Joseph brings to her.<sup>427</sup>

He was still disputing with J. Bigart in 1911. Writing for past salaries or compensations that the Alliance owed him, Joseph once more reminds Bigart of Lea's illness as being the result of his appointment at Mikveh and the demands of his position, and bitterly states that "no compensation in the world could recompense my broken life, my destroyed happiness, my split family, my non-existent future, my dispersed economies, and my many expenses."<sup>428</sup>

### Section 2 "Last Soldier of an Elite Army"<sup>429</sup>

The period from 1903 until 1923 was one of personal and family turmoil for Joseph and Lea. Joseph was appointed as an inspector for the ICA, and would pass twenty years like a "nomad, an errant Jew"<sup>430</sup> visiting communities and regions until Baghdad.

At the same time this was a time of cataclysmic changes for the region. This period was defined by events such as the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the two Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913, World War I from 1914 to 1918, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the subsequent War of Independence in Turkey from 1919 to 1922, and the proclamation of the Turkish

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<sup>427</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, August 10, 1910, CAHJP HM 3/38.

<sup>428</sup> J. Niego to J. Bigart, October 3, 1911, CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>429</sup> J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, February 11, 1923, CAHJP HM3/338.

<sup>430</sup> Niégo, Joseph. *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 19.



Republic in 1923. It is in this period that Joseph dominated in communal politics. And it is this period of his life that can only be understood in light of his years at Mikveh Israel.

During these times and while Jewish communities in the Balkans underwent the traumatic process of adapting to the reality of the new nation-states, the Jewish community of Istanbul, part of the mosaic of the Ottoman capital, was found in the middle of winds of change. It was not only the wars being fought all around the Imperial capital. Inside the capital, behind closed doors, other wars were fought.

The Jewish community was the scene of bitter power struggle among different groups that interpreted the flickering of a national soul in varied ways. Ashkenazim from Russia and Germany made Constantinople the arena of their Zionist aspirations. Local Jews were split among a multitude of ideas. The newcomers propagated territorial Zionism and tried to lure people to their cause. Cultural Zionism was promoted by local Jews, who tied the longing for the Zion to the Jewish soul and not to a homeland in Palestine. Ottomanism was fast becoming obsolete with the rise of Turkish nationalism. And then there were the “Alliancists,” enjoying their preeminence in the communal politics of the era.

In May 1911, a meeting took place at the house of Joseph Niego in Istanbul. He and other notables of the Jewish community were gathered to meet with Siegmund Bergel, treasurer of District No. 8 of B’nai B’rith in Germany, who was returning to his country from a voyage to the Orient. During his trip, Bergel had founded lodges in Belgrade, Sofia, Adrianople, Constantinople, Salonica, Smyrna, Alexandria, and Cairo, Zichron Yaakov and Beirut. It was during this meeting that he

founded District XI-Orient of the B'nai B'rith, and its Grand Lodge in Istanbul. First mentor of the Lodge was Rabbi Avram Danon,<sup>431</sup> who was considered the most learned Sephardi of his epoch and was later professor at the school of oriental languages in Paris. Dr. Israel Auerbach<sup>432</sup> was appointed Grand Secretary. The common language of the lodges spread over seven countries was French.

Joseph was elected president of the Grand Lodge and of all District XI, a position that he would keep until the dissolution of the lodges in 1937. The position was one of prestige and honor, and not a paid one. In the context of B'nai B'rith, Joseph had built for himself an arena in which to prove his leadership skills. Overseeing lodges from Yugoslavia to Egypt,<sup>433</sup> he was once more at the forefront of the community.<sup>434</sup>

One of the first tasks of the District Grand Lodge was to appeal to the Executive Committee of B'nai B'rith in Chicago asking for help for the victims of the

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<sup>431</sup> Abraham Danon (1857–1925) was a pupil of Joseph Halevy, and established under the latter's influence the *Doreshei Haskalah* group. In 1888 edited the historical periodical *Yosef Da'at* (in Hebrew and Ladino) in order to collect and publish Jewish historical studies. The periodical was closed down by the government after a short time. In 1891, Danon opened a rabbinical seminary that taught both secular and religious subjects. The teaching was partly in Turkish and was considered a major innovation for the period. The seminary moved to Istanbul in 1898. In his writings, Danon attempted to reconcile traditional and Western knowledge. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Danon, Abraham."

<sup>432</sup> Israel Auerbach (1878-1956) was born in Berlin. He was an educator by profession. In 1908, he was sent to Constantinople as the local representative for the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, a German Jewish organization founded in 1901 in competition with the Alliance in order to improve social and political conditions of Jews in Eastern Europe and Orient. While in Istanbul, he would write each week for "Die Welt," the weekly organ of the Zionist movement. He became a respected member of the community during his stay in Turkey. After World War I, Auerbach returned to Berlin, and later immigrated to Israel, where he died.

<sup>433</sup> Originally District XI was composed from the following lodges: Serbia Lodge no. 676, Belgrade; Carmel Lodge No. 674, Sofia; Ottoman Lodge No. 677, Adrianople; Constantinople Lodge No. 678, Constantinople; Salonica Lodge No. 680, Salonica; Smyrna Lodge No. 680, Smyrna; *Eliahu Hannabi* Lodge No. 681, Alexandria; Cairo Lodge No. 687, Cairo; Adolf Kraus Lodge No. 689, Zichron Yaakov Colony; Paul Nathan Lodge No. 690, Haifa; Beirut Lodge No. 691, Beirut; Jeruschelajim (sic) Lodge No. 376, Jerusalem; Schaar Zion Lodge No. 402, Jaffa; *Galil* Lodge No. 418 at Safed; Maimonides Lodge No. 366, Cairo; *Mitzpah* Lodge No. 466, Philippopolis; *Geoulah* Lodge No. 558, Slivno; *Ezra* Lodge No. 633, Varna.

<sup>434</sup> We can follow Joseph's activities in Istanbul through his lectures in the book *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*.

earthquake in 1912 in Turkey, in the Sea of Marmara, when Çorlu and Gelibolu—both cities with substantial Jewish communities—were destroyed.

In 1914, approximately at the same time that the Order in the US was combating the White Slave Traffic, the Grand Lodge formed an International Committee for this specific reason. Its president was Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire at that time, and its secretary Dr. Israel Auerbach. Unfortunately, World War I interrupted the work of this Committee.

During this time all lodges were enthusiastically engaged with the welfare of their communities. In 1914, at the eve of the war, Joseph was instrumental for the foundation of the *Yabne* School, a Jewish high school, which had 33 pupils at the beginning, and by 1920 more than 450. New schools under the tutelage of B'nai B'rith opened up in other cities, such as in Smyrna, with 536 students and Salonica. The very new Lodge of Athens founded an elementary school. The Lodge of Rhodes founded a seminary for the preparation of rabbis and Hebrew teachers. The Lodges of Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Adrianople, Damascus and Cairo maintained orphanages and clinics for infants. Members of the lodge in Beirut supported the *Bikur Holim* Society, the orphanage, the kindergarten and the Jewish school. The District encouraged the study of Hebrew in its schools and instituted special prizes for the efforts made in the study of Hebrew. At the Orphanage of Philippopolis, (*Beth Mahse Layetomim*) Hebrew was the common language of the children. In Rustchuk, the Executive Committee has supported a Kindergarten of 200 children and the Lodge administered a “Literature Fund” designed to encourage poetic work in Ladino. Several Lodges possessed libraries and lecture rooms, Homes for the Aged, polyclinics, and popular

kitchens. The District Grand Lodge published its own journal called *Hamenora*. Festivals, banquets, dances, concerts and lectures were organized in order to build a greater fraternal feeling among members and for the intellectual advancement of the community.

World War I stopped the work of the Grand Lodge but it also gave new meaning to the lodges' work: Funds that were initially designated for members of lodges were now being used for non-members too. And World War I greatly affected the organizational pattern of the District: Relations between various countries, and therefore between the lodges, ceased. Censure was the main obstacle to their relations. Many of the lodges had been obliged to close their doors temporarily as many of their members were actively engaged in the wars or were prisoners.

The scope and outreach of the work of the Central Relief Commission, created in 1916 on the insistence of the Grand Lodge of District XI and greatly aided with funds from the American lodges, was tremendous as is clear from a list of its subcommittees: Welfare Commission; Commission on Soldier's Families; Commission on Orphan Asylum; Commission on Provinces; Commission on Public Kitchens; Commission on Schools.

The Central Commission also organized subcommittees in other cities, such as Proussa (Bursa), Smyrna (Izmir), Halep (Aleppo), Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Adrianople (Edirne). These committees organized the distribution of financial aid to the families of soldiers and their widows and orphans; the installation of popular kitchens (five in Constantinople alone); the support of schools; the care of refugees.

Some of these institutions, such as the orphanages, lived on even after peace was declared.

Something that should be pointed out was the extent to which American lodges helped District XI in its noble work. J. Niego reported:

Almost all the funds which have come to Turkey during the war for general welfare work have come from our American coreligionists. For this reason, in the first place, and for the further reason that all the leaders in welfare work here are members of the Order (...), our Order has acquired a widespread and most favorable reputation in all of Turkey and has been a real blessing for Jewry in this country.<sup>435</sup>

After the war, District XI was once again active and vigorous. New lodges were being founded and others that have been inactive for years were reinstated.<sup>436</sup> In addition, women's auxiliaries were established, as the District had not accepted women as members of the Order. The first auxiliary in 1923 was established under the name of *Benot B'rith Miriam* in Constantinople. In Sofia it was the *Shulammitte* Lodge of women and the *Havazelet Acharon* in Adrianople.

The District had been able to maintain itself during the war and offer relief and welfare, but the political and economic changes had created adversities and obstacles that would prove to be impossible to surmount. J. Niego reported:

We have received no news of the Belgrade lodge for five years. (...) I have received no news for five years from the three lodges in Egypt. This is due to the censorship and to the difficulty of communication, but I have a reason to believe that they have followed during the war, as before the war, a serious line of activity.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> J. Niego, op.cit.

<sup>436</sup> In 1921, at Viddin in Bulgaria and at Tantah in Egypt; in 1922 in Tiberias in Palestine. The same year the lodge in Haifa, inactive for nearly a decade, was reborn as *Hakarmel* Lodge (it was formerly known as *Pal Nathan* Lodge). In 1923 *Magen David* Lodge is founded at Mansura in Egypt, in 1924 at Port Said, Damascus, Aleppo, Athens, in 1925 *Ben Yehudah* lodge at Tatar in Bulgaria, and in 1927 the lodge of Zagreb.

<sup>437</sup> J. Niego, op. cit.

Adolf Kraus, B'nai B'rith's President in the United States, remarked:

Before the war the District embraced within its jurisdiction lodges located in various countries scattered throughout the Balkan Peninsula, Asia Minor and Egypt. It is hoped that in spite of new national differences, a way may be found to keep in one District the lodges now so widely separated and under rival sovereignties.<sup>438</sup>

Unfortunately, this wish would not materialize.

District XI held Congresses in Constantinople in 1914 and 1924 at which the new Regional Associations were announced. A more flexible and decentralized Order could respond better to the political changes that had made communication among the lodges extremely slow and difficult. Eventually this led to the division of District XI in to other independent districts, such as Palestine, which was elevated to the rank of District XV, and Egypt, which became District XVI from 1932 on. By 1935 there was another new District: District XVIII, which encompassed the Yugoslavian lodges.

We have no correspondence of Joseph with the Alliance during this period on the subject of his wife's health. We can only trace him through his stellar career in B'nai B'rith and in communal politics. For his involvement with B'nai B'rith and rapprochement with the Hilfsverein, Niego would be accused of betraying his French affinities and labeled a pawn in the hands of the Germans. Albert Antébi, residing in Istanbul during this period, but previously director of the vocational school in Jerusalem during Joseph's time at Mikveh, wrote with bitterness about Joseph's involvement during the 1919 events that shook the community and resulted in the

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<sup>438</sup> Excerpt from Adolf Kraus' "President's Message," at the B'nai B'rith Convention, 1920.

subversion of Chief Rabbi Nahum. Antebi would accuse Joseph that “although ex-Allianciste and a Sephardi” he had sided with the Germanophiles.<sup>439</sup>

But Joseph never betrayed his Alliance past. In all his lectures until the end of his public life, he would speak fondly of the organization and of its monumental impact on the Ottoman Jewish communities. His involvement with B’nai B’rith must not be seen as a betrayal, but as an expression of Joseph’s character and of his life experiences. B’nai B’rith gave Joseph the initiative and the possibility to work in an organization which, coming from beyond the Atlantic, had “no political interest to support in the Orient,” instead “declaring Jews independent” and responsible to work for their own “regeneration, moral and material improvement.”<sup>440</sup>

In his lectures and talks, Niego never spoke of Palestine as an entity separate from the Ottoman Empire. He did not defend the creation of a separate state, but promoted the idea of a cultural regeneration and of the right of the Jews to establish themselves in Palestine and cultivate its land. Speaking of Palestine, he emphasized that it was in the process of “becoming one of the best cultivated provinces of Turkey.” Analyzing the agricultural development in Palestine, he spoke of the transformative role of Jews on the land, and how Hebrew functioned to cement the bond among Jews of various countries. It is an anomaly, he stated, that “the Jews in Istanbul are obliged to speak in French or German in order to understand each other, without using...Hebrew, their ‘national language.’”<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Élisabeth Antébi, “Albert Antébi (1873-1919) ou La Religion de la France. Lettres,” 94-95.

<sup>440</sup> Joseph Niego, “Rapport Général sur le District XI,” *Bulletin de la Grande Loge de district XI et de la Loge de Constantinople No 678 de B’nai B’rith* (February 1913-December 1921): 33.

<sup>441</sup> Joseph Niego, “La Palestine,” *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 417, 425.

Niego's fusion of Ottomanism and Judaism is an expression of the "unique 'Ottoman Zionism'—one that stood distinct from European Zionism in its support for cultural Hebraism without the corresponding separatist political aims" argued for by historians.<sup>442</sup> Joseph saw Palestine as a common point of reference for Jews that would inspire them to move there, and, always in the context of the Ottoman Empire, cultivate its land. He argued that Jews had been denied possession of land and working in agriculture in the lands that they had lived, and how land and language were essential conditions for their regeneration and advancement and for their vitality as a nation.<sup>443</sup> Thus his actions were consistent with that of other Ottoman Zionists who aimed at a non-territorial Jewish cultural revival and whose activities were conducted almost exclusively in a communal level and with the aim to influence the community leadership.<sup>444</sup>

Speaking to an audience of young people at the Maccabi association in 1913 Joseph describes his vision of Ottoman Judaism:

Founding Maccabi, you have succeeded to do a great work for physical regeneration and for patriotism. But...you have still a lot to do. Be prepared to fight, to do future work and to play a role in your country, your communities. Come join us and give a new breath of life in all our institutions...Create new ones and hold high the flag of

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<sup>442</sup> Campos, Michelle U. "Between "Beloved Ottomania" and "The Land of Israel": The Struggle over Ottomanism and Zionism among Palestine's Sephardic Jews, 1908-1913," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 461. For Zionism in Turkey during the two first decades of the twentieth century, see Esther Benbassa, "Des sionistes sans sionisme," *Cemoti* 28 (2004), <http://cemoti.revues.org/document584.html>; Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, "Paths of Politicization" in *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, 116-158; Isaiah Friedman, *Germany-Turkey-Zionism, 1897-1918* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998); Esther Benbassa, "Le sionisme dans l'Empire ottoman à l'aube du 20e siècle"; Ilber Ortaylı, "Ottomanism and Zionism during the Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1915"; Minna Rozen, "The Istanbul Community between the *Hatt-ı Şerif* of Gülhane and the Treaty of Lausanne (1839-1923)" (especially 102-130).

<sup>443</sup> Joseph Niego, "Les trios assises d'un peuple: La terre, la langues et les vertus de la famille" in idem, *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 427-428.

<sup>444</sup> Ilber Ortaylı, "Ottomanism and Zionism during the Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1915."



Ottomanism and of Judaism that must always be interlaced and must always advance towards the same impetus for love and concord.<sup>445</sup>

We can safely assume that in the case of Joseph Niego what might be seen as “anti-Alliancism” and “Zionism” can be explained by the ardent bond he had developed with the land itself during his years in Palestine and by his disillusionment with the Alliance and the way he perceived he had been treated by the organization. Can it be because he felt betrayed by the organization and that the Alliance was responsible for the illness of his wife and the dissolution of his family life?

In 1923, Joseph sent a lengthy report to the Alliance giving a sweeping overview of his life and work, and positioning himself among the pioneer graduates of the organization.<sup>446</sup> The report would reveal his pride in his work and a deep nostalgia for his friends of the Rue des Rosiers,<sup>447</sup> and for those simpler times when in his eyes, AIU was still the preeminent Jewish organization fighting for the rights of Jews everywhere:

I am the last soldier of that elite army that the Alliance had formed in the beginning of its work in order to fight its worthy cause within the Universal Judaism, when [the Alliance] was the only one to undertake such a mission and that the various Jewish organizations, since then established, did not exist yet.

Niego was a tired man, and his married life was soon to end. Some months after, Lea, who had “assisted him with devotion and intelligence,” would die in Paris, on August 14, 1923.<sup>448</sup> Joseph would go on to live to 82, dying in 1945 in Istanbul.

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<sup>445</sup> Niégo, Joseph. *Cinquante années de travail dans les oeuvres juives: Allocutions et conférences*, 426.

<sup>446</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>447</sup> The other Sephardic students studying with him at the ENIO.

<sup>448</sup> Lea Niego, Obituary, *Hamenora* 7/8 (July-August 1924): 212. See Appendix.

### Section 3 Epilogue

Lea's and Joseph's story can be read on many levels. It is certainly a story of the struggle between the public and the private, the male and the female. These categories by themselves do not describe the way that Joseph, as a late nineteenth-century man, lives out his life in the public sphere, or the way that Lea was defined out of the public sphere by child-birthing and rearing. This is expected and not surprising. What is unexpected is that Joseph's all-consuming family issues are not being considered when historians write about his activities that span more than half a century, nor is the way his professional life affected Lea.

The "uninitiated" will not readily discover Lea as a person in her own right except in her obituary. During her employment with the Alliance, her life was documented, one of hundreds of other lives of Alliance teachers kept in the archives of the organization. In contemporary accounts, such as in Herzl's diary, she was always "Madame Niego."

If we take Joseph as the starting point of our tale, Lea is not part of the picture. The announcement of her death in 1923 comes as a surprise: Did Joseph Niego had a wife? How does she fit in to the picture? Why is she absent from Joseph's active communal and social life, particularly during the decade of 1911-1920? And why does she not take a leading role in the establishment of the Lodge "Miriam" of the Benot Berith, i.e. of the Women's Auxiliary of B'nai B'rith, as would be expected for the wife of the president? One has to decipher her life through other accounts.

Lea and Joseph Niego were two among a plethora of other “Oriental” Jews, who were brought to Paris to become teachers by the Central Committee of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. The organization would first test its *mission civilisatrice* on these hapless children, before sending them out to promote the lights of France to the rest of their brethren. They were not the first ones to be sent far away from their hometowns—other teachers before and after them would change posts, some more frequently than others. What is defining in the case of Joseph and Lea is the breadth of their experience.

Lea and Joseph lived in a time of profound change. The Ottoman Empire waned and ebbed as slowly but steadily the Balkans moved away. Continuous defeats, social conflicts, weakening economy, political instability, European interventionism, and population changes gave rise to internal rebellions that in turn gave preeminence to the ethnic Turkish element that would gradually overshadow the short-lived Ottomanism of the turn of the century.

Technological and scientific innovations, such as the development of steamships and railroads, would revolutionize travel, and would bring into contact disparate parts of the population. For Europeans, the new phenomenon of “leisure tourism,” unheard of in previous centuries, would be en vogue after the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>449</sup> Travel would define the lives of Lea and Joseph and would bring them from the Ottoman Empire to Western Europe, to North Africa, and to the Levant. In fact, Lea and Joseph are exceptional among Ottoman Jews, because their

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<sup>449</sup> Mark Mazower offers a comprehensive analysis of this trend in his article “Travellers and the Oriental City, c. 1840-1920,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 12 (2002): 59-111.

travels brought them into contact with so many different aspects and embodiments of Judaism.

Changes in schooling and literacy were also instrumental in shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape of the era, and in fostering latent nationalisms. The establishment of foreign schools and the introduction of Western-style education brought with it the introduction of Western Enlightenment ideas into the Empire. Together with the circulation and prestige of newspapers, pamphlets, and journals, it contributed to the awakening of nationalisms, especially among the minorities.

Lea's and Joseph's Alliance schooling and subsequent process of assimilating and interpreting their received education are examples of these trends. Minna Rozen argues that the Alliance schools, by teaching Hebrew and Jewish history, unwittingly introduced their students to the two most powerful instruments of nationalism, and that it was because of this that a number of its graduates later became "the standard bearers of Zionism."<sup>450</sup>

Was Joseph a Zionist? And what about Lea? Theirs was not a life lived in the margins; quite the opposite. They lived in a world defined by nationalisms and interacted with the elements that were shaping Jewish nationalism. Relegated to the domestic sphere, and in any way leading an intermittent existence for most of her life, what were Lea's feelings and ideas about the rising tide of Jewish nationalism? Having met Herzl, she probably was aware of Zionism, but she must have seen it as a phenomenon of Jewish life in Palestine, not something that she could connect with the Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>450</sup> Minna Rozen, *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808-1945*, 110.

Joseph, however lived in the midst of it. His many lectures let us glimpse an “Ottoman Zionist,” an idealistic Palestinophile that ardently supported a Jewish cultural identity, never tying it with territorial aspirations. It was his directorship at the agricultural school Mikveh Israel, later to be exalted in Zionist discourse, that made him unwittingly part of the Jewish state-building, and this in spite of the fact that he was an employee of the anti-Zionist Alliance Israélite Universelle.

As is the case with other contemporary coreligionists, Lea and Joseph are usually seen as Westernized, modernizing Jews in the Ottoman Empire. Although their Western education was a catalyst in their lives, they nevertheless lived in an Ottoman world, and their experiences resembled those of other Ottomans of their times, who faced the difficult processes of embourgeoisement and national awakening. In essence, they were part of the Ottoman bourgeoisie that failed to organize, instead polarizing into different ethnic and religious groups with different visions of their future.

Fatma Müge Göçek argues that it was this phenomenon of the bifurcated bourgeoisie that led to the demise of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>451</sup> Göçek also invites readers to go against the paradigm of the omnipotence of the West, and consider the agency of the local societies. Mark Levine speaks of this “teleological narrative of Europe as the prime mover of modernity and everyone else as responding to it,” and invites us rather to construct a narrative of “a polycentric world with long-standing interconnections and no dominant center.”<sup>452</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein also comments on

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<sup>451</sup> Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demis of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 134, 138.

<sup>452</sup> Mark Levine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948*, 8.

the pivotal role that Westernization and modernization have occupied in the scholarship on modern Ottoman Jewish history, and Ottoman history as a whole. Stein remarks that scholarship has been focusing on how Ottoman Jewries responded to events that were motivated by or took place in Western Europe, thus making them seem as ‘agents’ of Western Europe and stripping them from their place within the indigenous Ottoman social and economic fabric.<sup>453</sup>

Glamorous as it might have seemed at the time, the Alliance experiment of plucking children from their hometowns and sending them to be trained as teachers in Paris seems today a particularly cruel thing to do. Another example of social engineering, it was done to serve the aims of the organization, while those children were sacrificed on the educational “factory belt” of the Alliance, an eminent example of nineteenth century scientific and industrial approach to the management of workers. This experiment did not create a glorious, Gallicized corps of teachers, as scholarship usually relates, but a group of individuals that were torn among loyalties and that had difficulties balancing their multiple identities.

Lea’s and Joseph’s experience was defined by their appointment at another Alliance experiment, the agricultural school of Mikveh Israel. Both from urban environments, they were placed in a rural setting—later to be exemplified as the utopian Arcadia of early settlement in Eretz Israel—with no apparent organized center of life. Mikveh Israel, seemingly the high point in their life as a married couple, certainly the highest point in Joseph’s career, was exactly the moment when we can see the cost of success and of modernization on these individuals.

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<sup>453</sup> Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries since 1492,” 341-342.

Lea's life in Mikveh was a life in limbo. She existed neither as a respected AIU teacher in an urban school, nor as part of the nation-building process that the *halutzot* undertook in the agricultural colonies of the Baron. That in reality these women were not integral parts of the nation- and state-building process is irrelevant. At the time, their understanding of and belief in this processes legitimized their sacrifices and gave them power to go on.

Lea was there as Joseph's wife. The intensity of Joseph's experience at Mikveh Israel stemmed from the fact that his was a real "love at first sight" for the land. Despite and in spite of his Alliance indoctrination, and far away from the Imperial capital, he was an Ottoman Jew caught in the whirlwind of Jewish national awakening and became an unwitting, but ardent "accomplice" of the Jewish state-building process.

Lea had to live in the experiment that was the agricultural establishment of Mikveh Israel. As a bourgeois woman, she was expected to create a home out of a foreign, unforgiving environment and to raise her children to be worthy according to bourgeois ideals. Did she come to loathe Mikveh Israel? Is that why she so frequently escaped to "civilized" places—to Edirne next to her parents or to Europe for socializing with other Alliance graduates—whenever possible?

While Joseph was out tilling the land, teaching the students, surveying land for possible purchase or reporting on Jewish communities as far as Baghdad, Lea and the children would live in the building allocated to the director of the school. Furnished and decorated in the European way, as was the trend in the houses of the bourgeoisie in the Ottoman Empire, it sought to project the ideals of respectability

and moral status, domesticity and modernization, by omitting vestiges that could imply Oriental backwardness and exoticism. In the meantime, “Turkish corners” with coffee mills, copper trays, sofas or Oriental rugs staged so as to conjure up an exotic, imaginary East were all the rage in the fashionable homes of the wealthy in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>454</sup>

It is the dichotomy of the domestic and the public that defines them as couple. Lea’s orientation was towards the home, the only place that she could sit, shutting off the heat and the dust of the surroundings. For Joseph, it was the public space that defined him. His vision did not stop at the multiple new buildings that he erected in Mikveh Israel. In his imagination, he longed to see new farms, estates, and colonies spring up throughout the land. By repeatedly denying being “either Zionist or Palestinophile or any other idealist of that ilk,” and by protesting too much, Niego walked the fine line between nationalisms.<sup>455</sup>

Reconstructing a common biography for Joseph and Lea brings us back to the year 1891. At that moment in time, everything was in place: They were two young Ottoman Jews, newly married and with a promising life ahead. They were happy. Serene. He was appointed director of a prestigious establishment. She was the epitome of the bourgeois woman, educated, learned, and an asset for her husband. Around them, the Empire still reigned supreme. The Sultan’s Jews were getting ready to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their arrival to the Ottoman lands. It was spring. And soon, all of this would disappear.

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<sup>454</sup> D. Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922*, 10.

<sup>455</sup> Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism and Technocracy: The Engineering of Jewish Settlement in Palestine, 1870-1918*, 28-29.



## Appendices

### Joseph Niego and Lea Mitrani Timeline

- 1863** Joseph Niego born (Edirne)  
Parents: Ezra Niego (?-1865) and ? Behmoiras (1835-?)
- 1867** (December 26) Lea Mitrani is born (Adrianople)  
Parents: David and Amada Mitrani
- 1876** Joseph Niego leaves for Istanbul to further his studies (AIU school in Galata)
- 1878-1882** J. Niego studies at the ENIO in Paris
- 1884-1887** Lea leaves Adrianople for Paris (École Bischoffsheim)
- 1882-1885** J. Niego obtains diploma of engineer agronomist from Montpellier
- 1886** Joseph appointed assistant director to S. Hirsch at Mikveh Israel
- 1887-1889** Lea in Tetuan, teaching at AIU school
- 1889-1891** Lea in Adrianople, teaching at AIU school
- 1891** Joseph Niego marries Lea Mitrani. Appointed director of Mikveh Israel.
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#### Children:

- 1891** (December 18) Son Ezra is born
- 1893** (March 4) Son David is born
- 1894** (September or October) Birth of son Charles
- ? Death of son Charles (from enteritis)
- 1896** (September 30) Birth of daughter Marguerite
- 1899** (October 2) Death of daughter Marguerite (from “maladie de foie”—hepatitis?)
- 1899** (December 6) Birth of daughter Amélie-Amada
- 1902** (December 21) Birth of daughter Laura-Luna
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- 1904** Return to Istanbul. J. Niego appointed agronomist for JCA.
- 1911** J. Niego founds Grand Lodge of B’nai B’rith, and becomes its first president.
- 1915** J. Niego founds Jewish lyceum “Yabneh”
- 1923** J. Niego’s employment with JCA is terminated
- 1923** Lea Niego dies in Paris
- 1945** Death of Joseph Niego in Istanbul

## Herzl's visit to Mikveh Israel

### *Herzl's account*<sup>456</sup>

Herzl's account of his visit to Mikveh Israel in his *Diaries* is as follows:

“I drove out to Mikveh Israel early yesterday morning. I was beginning to feel unwell, but with effort managed to keep on my feet. The picture of the students standing by their farm implements delighted me. Among the inquisitive onlookers turned up the rather sniffy and baronial Rothschild administrators. I told the director of Mikveh Israel, [Joseph] Niego, I would introduce him to the Emperor, should the latter recognize and speak to me. Niego begged me not to do it, as it might be regarded as a Zionist gesture and prejudice him. I was there as the guest of Mikveh Israel and should not therefore undertake to introduce its director. This was in effect a mild reprimand, but I took it in good part as coming from an otherwise amiable person.

At nine o'clock a commotion on the highway, which was lined with a ‘mixed multitude’ of Arab beggars, womenfold, children and horsemen, heralded the approach of the Imperial party. Fierce-looking Turkish cavalry galloped by at breakneck speed, hurling threatening glares and brandishing still more threatening rifles at the crowd. Then the advance couriers of the Emperor. And riding among a grey-clad group, including several ladies, the Kaiser himself.

I signaled the children's choir of Mikveh Israel to strike up “Heil Dir im Siegerkranz.” I stood next to a plough and took off my cork-helmet. The Kaiser

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<sup>456</sup> Marvin Lowenthal (ed.), *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 280-283.

recognized me at a distance. It gave him something of a start, he reined in his horse where I stood, and pulled up across from me. I moved forward a pace or two, and when he leaned down past the neck of his horse and held out his hand to me, I stepped close to the mount and stretched up my own hand.

He laughed and darted one of his imperious glances at me:

“How are you?”

“Thanks, Your Majesty; I am having a look at the country. And how has Your Majesty found the journey?”

“Very hot! But the country has a future.”

“It is still sick,” I said.

“Water is what it needs,” he said, bending down, “much water.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, irrigation on a large scale.”

He repeated: “It is a land with a future.”

Perhaps he said further things which have escaped me, for he stopped for several minutes. Then he held down his hand to me again, and cantered off. The Empress, too, had ridden forward and gave me a smiling nod. Then the Imperial procession once more got under way, to the refrain of “Heil Dir im Siegerkranz” welling from the childish throats. The Kaiser drew himself up prouder still in the saddle, and saluted the hymn as, back in Breslau, he had saluted the statue of his grandfather.

Among the retinue I recognized the Court-Marshal Eulenburg, who greeted me affably.

The spectators at Mikveh Israel were altogether dumbfounded. Some of them asked, who it had been. The Rothschild administrators looked sullen and annoyed.

Wolffsohn, that trump, had taken two snapshots of the scene. At least he thought he had. He patted his Kodak proudly: "I wouldn't part with these negatives for ten thousand marks." But when we went to the photographer's at Jaffa and had the negatives developed, it turned out that the first picture showed only the outline of the Kaiser and my left foot; the second was completely spoiled.

We then took the train in the frightful heat to Jerusalem. It took an hour merely to leave the Jaffa station. Sitting in the cramped, crowded, burning-hot compartment was pure torture. While crossing the dismal and desolate countryside I began to develop a fever...

*Niego's account*<sup>457</sup>

Dear Mr. President,

I have the honor of reporting that Dr. Herzl of Vienna and his companions, Mr. Wolfsohn, Bodenheimer, and Schnirer, visited Mikveh Israel... Mr. Herzl and his companions requested that I assign them places among the other colonists so that they could be present at the passage of the Emperor's procession on Friday morning.

It is thanks to the efforts of Dr. Herzl...that the German Emperor has stopped for some minutes in front of Mivkeh Israel...Without risking being impolite...I could not refuse Dr. Herzl a place among our visitors. But I made a point to explain myself

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<sup>457</sup> J. Niego to AIU, November 6, 1898. CZA J41/88.

to him: “The event that we are organizing at this moment, I told him, can be considered under any circumstances as a Zionist event...: We are organizing it in order to be appealing to the authorities of the country.”

-This is also how I see it, he replied to me. I consider myself as your visitor: I am passing by here, in travel attire. If I would be here under another official title, I would be dressed differently. But if the Emperor of Germany recognizes me and speaks to me, I am obliged to respond to him.

-Certainly I cannot prevent you from speaking with the Emperor, if he addresses you the word.

-Do you want me to introduce you to him?

-Under no circumstances: I must tell you that your presence here is not and cannot be official.

In various occasions, Dr. Herzl insisted that I be introduced to the Emperor by him, but I was able to avoid this honor.

When the Emperor stopped in front of Mikveh Israel, he recognized Dr. Herzl, he gave him his hand, he asked him about his health and his trip and Dr. Herzl in his turn asked him if his trip to Constantinople had tired him...Then the Emperor passed slowly in front of the students, saluted and left.

I wanted to inform you about these things, because it seems to me that certain newspapers will make a lot of noise about the handshaking between the Emperor and Dr. Herzl. One of the companions of Herzl had the audacity to take a photograph at the moment of the handshaking.

Dr. Herzl and his companions liked Mikveh Israel a lot.

I saw Dr. Herzl in Jerusalem again. Because he had not found anything decent in any of the hotels..., he made it clear that he wanted to stay for some days in Mikveh, but in a friendly way I explained to him that I found myself in the difficult position of having to refuse him the hospitality, because I do not want the authorities of the country to believe that Mikveh is becoming a Zionist center.

### Joseph Niego's account of his life<sup>458</sup>

J. Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle

Paris, February 11, 1923

Mr. President,

...The Jewish Colonization Association has just informed me that I am not anymore at its service and it compensates me for the nineteen years that I have exclusively worked in its Administration by assigning me a certain retirement.

You are aware that it is the Central Committee that had put me at the disposal of the Jewish Colonization Association, according to a decision taken during its meeting of September 29, 1903 that was communicated to me by a letter dated July 23, 1904.

I have joined the Alliance in March of 1886, after having obtained my diploma as Agricultural Engineer at the National School of Agriculture of Montpellier, where the late S. H. Goldschmidt, my unforgettable mentor, had

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<sup>458</sup> CAHJP HM3/338 (TURQUIE LXIV E 770.3)

undertaken my maintenance at his expense. Mr. S. H. Goldschmidt...encouraged me to go to Jaffa without delay and advised me to set up a contract with the Alliance, something that I neglected to do, because his letter was already a commitment for me.

So I was at the service of the Alliance for 18 consecutive years in an uninterrupted way, and while consecrating all my efforts to the Agricultural Institution of Mikveh Israel, I was appointed by the Alliance to diverse works and special missions: studies of then existing colonies in Palestine, mission to Harran, where I lived for one month under a tent in the desert; examination of the district of Tiberias, the importance of which I was the first to point to the attention of the Jewish world interested in Palestine' buying of the property of Sedjerah; studies in Cyprus for the creation of an agricultural establishment; trip to Tunisia for acquiring Djededah; mission in Bulgaria near Philipopoli and in Dobrudja; inspection mission in Anatolia for examining the agricultural colonies, for the acquisition of the property of Or-Yehudah, for studying the property of Bournabad<sup>459</sup> and for the installation of Sabbateans in Aydin; mission in Galicia for the creation of Slobodka-Lesna; voyage in Egypt for the placement of our students, etc. etc.

Thirty-five years ago, it was the Alliance that had assigned the direction of all Jewish agricultural works to Mikveh Israel, because at that time there was neither the administration of Hoveve Zion or the Zionists, nor representatives of the Baron de Rothschild or of the JCA, and it was our honor to respond always to the appeal of our President..., to be always on duty, and to prepare all the projects that were demanded from us.

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<sup>459</sup> Modern day Bornova, a district of the city of Izmir (Smyrna), was called Birunabad in Ottoman times, and usually Bournabad in Western languages.

I accomplished all these missions according to your desires and my numerous reports on all these questions, now in your archives, testify for my past activity. It is not necessary here to remind you of all the signs of fondness that you showed me in various occasions. ...

Should I remind you, without false modesty, all the work that was conducted in Mikveh Israel under my direction, the development of the institution, from point of view of studies, cultivation, numerous buildings that I have constructed (wine cellar, synagogue, schools, shops, stables for horses and cows, ...lodging for the Director and the personnel, etc.) and all the planting conducted; groves of oranges, olive trees, almond trees, tree nurseries, extending the cultivation of vines, ..., drying of the swamps, draining works and finally forest plantations. All of these works were done often to the detriment of my health and that of members of my family.

Even after you put me at the disposal of the Jewish Colonization Association, I did not stop being in touch with the Alliance and I undertook on your behalf various missions in 1905 and 1906, to Rodosto and in Mesopotamia.

The members of the Central Committee have not probably forgotten the reports on the communities of Antioch, Halep, Urfa, Severak, Diyarbakır, Djezira, Mossul, Baghdad, Hilleh, Bassorah and all the Kurdish (sic) region.<sup>460</sup> I did this dangerous voyage on your behalf, risking my life, and going all alone in an inhospitable region, overrun by brigands, and devastated by the famous Kurdish horse

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<sup>460</sup> During his mission to this region, J. Niego drafted lengthy reports on the Jewish communities in each city. These reports were extensively used in the book *History of the Jews in Turkey* by Abraham Galante, prominent journalist, historian, and professor at the University of Istanbul, who had served in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, and was a pioneer in the study of Jews in the Ottoman Empire (for more information on his life, see Albert Kalderon and Marc Angel, *Abraham Galante – A Biography* (Sepher-Hermon Press, 1983).



riders of the infamous Ibrahim Paşa. It took me 14 consecutive days to go by car from Halep to Diyarbakır, by the route through Euphrates and the Upper Mesopotamia, and 14 days in Kelek on the Tigris, in order to go from Diyarbakır to Baghdad. Upon my arrival to that city, my legs were completely numb and I have acquired rheumatism and a sciatique that I still can feel.

I was afterwards charged with two other missions in Mesopotamia on behalf of the Jewish Colonization Association, but those trips were done in the best possible conditions and I was accompanied by two other persons, each receiving a bonus of 5,000 francs—while I have been paid nothing for the first trip that was the most difficult and dangerous, and was done on your behalf.

Many members of the Central Committee had expressed their satisfaction on the results of those missions, both verbally, as well as by writing.

All these supplementary works conducted in Palestine, beyond my responsibilities as Diretor, all these services conducted on your behalf in other places of the world, allow me, I think, that the years of my service in your organization be elevated at least from 18 to 20.

Beyond that, I have neglected to collect the amounts that were due to me for my alimony and for supplementing my salaries, because I neglected to follow up [...], although this has affected my financial situation and my family has reproached me on this.

The honoraria of the Director of Mikveh Israel were composed by three parts, as this was set forth by the late Mr. Charles Netter himself,<sup>461</sup> since the opening of the School, with the approval of the Central Committee:

First by a fixed annual salary, second by a fixed alimony in the budget, third by a supplementary amount that were to be paid every five or ten years.

I have received in full the first part of my wages. For the second one, I have presented you with an account of 4,530.70 francs in my favor, that I attach to this letter. For the third, the Administration knows very well that that supplementary wage was 1,000 francs per year for Mr. Herzberg, 1,500 francs for Mr. Schamasch [...] and 2,000 francs for Mr. Hirsch and for me. My predecessor, Mr. S. H. Hirsch, had received regularly that amount every five years from Mr. S. H. Goldschmidt. As for me, I have not received that supplement, except only during the first five years of my directorship, and for the seven others, representing the amount of 14,000 francs, I have neglected to ask them from Mr. S. H. Goldschmidt towards the last years of his life, and I did not have the boldness to demand them from you, after his death.

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<sup>461</sup> Charles Netter (1826 - 1882), founded Mikveh Israel in 1870, was its first director, and died there in 1882 during a subsequent visit. In 1860, he was one of the six founding members of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, and its first General Secretary. In 1868, Netter was sent by AIU to Palestine to examine the condition of Jewish communities there, and upon his return suggested to the AIU the creation of an agricultural school for men. He obtained an audience with Sultan Abdülaziz in Constantinople, whereby he explained his aim and was awarded land near Jaffa. AIU provided the necessary funds, and Netter founded Mikveh Israel in 1870. From 1870 to 1873, he was its first director and lived on site, initially in primitive conditions, having to struggle both with the leaders of the Old Yishuv, as well as the Arab inhabitants of nearby villages. These hindered the development of the school, and when funds ran out, Netter financed the school with his own money. He also solicited funds from philanthropists such as Baron Maurice de Hirsch and Adolphe Crémieux. Although he successfully overcame the reactions to the school, and had firmly established it as an agricultural settlement, he had to abandon his post in 1873 because his health deteriorated due to the climate and the harsh living conditions. Upon his return to Europe, he continued actively to support Mikveh Israel through his involvement with AIU. During a subsequent visit to Mikveh Israel in 1882 he died and was buried there. His grave can still be seen on the grounds of Mikveh Israel, and his tombstone was erected by AIU.

I now pass to the subject of Mme Niego. She was one of the most capable and devoted teachers of the Alliance. She deployed all her qualities in the posts that she had occupied, at Tetouan, at Adrianople and at Mikveh Israel, since 1886 until 1903, for 18 years. It is true that she was not paid for her work during the twelve years of her presence in the agricultural school, during which years she was busy with taking meticulous care of all the services of the establishment, with great order, propriety and frugality, while Mme Antebi<sup>462</sup> in Jerusalem was being paid and, later at Mikveh Israel, Mme Loupo<sup>463</sup> was too, although she was not a teacher of the Alliance; but this is not a reason not to recognize the unselfish services of Madame Niego and you should not fail to appreciate them for their true value, such as was the case with Mr. S. Benedict and Consul Simon de Hanovre, during their inspections at the agricultural school.

I also would like to request that you take into account that Madame Niego has gotten sick during her service, and you know how this illness has caused me sorrow and expenses.

We were obliged, due to the necessities of my service, to leave Dedeagatch<sup>464</sup> in a hurry, although Madame Niego had only given birth seventeen days before, with three children in small age, two in the arms and one at the breast.

In Smyrna, I had to leave her alone at the hotel, in order to go to Aydin, my mission being to examine the situation of the Russian Sabbatean (sic) refugees and

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<sup>462</sup> Wife of Mr. Antebi in Jerusalem.

<sup>463</sup> Wife of Mr. Loupo, who was appointed director to Mikveh Israel after J. Niego.

<sup>464</sup> Today the city of Xanthi in Northern Greece.

my wife fainted at the hotel in many cases and it is Mr. Gabriel Arié<sup>465</sup> who brought help to her during my absence. Upon our entry to Alexandria, we fell upon a terrible tempest, and when we arrived at Jaffa, Madame Niego had lost all her mental equilibrium.

Since then, since more than twenty years, she is searching for serenity and for her health without ever finding them anywhere, going from city to city and from sanatorium to sanatorium. What money in the world can ever compensate for the loss of home, the breakup of our family, the evanescence of the conjugal happiness?<sup>466</sup>

When deciding about my compensation, please consider the past services of Mme Niego and the present situation of her health.

I don't think that I exaggerate in stating that I deserve at least, if not more, the same compensation that you have granted to Mr. Antébi<sup>467</sup> and proportionally to the widow of Mr. Parienté, who had the right only to half of the pension of her husband.

[...]

Please consider also that in order to have my rights reviewed, I was obliged to spend nearly 5,000 francs for expenses of my trip to and back from Paris and my stay there.

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<sup>465</sup> Gabriel Arié (1863 – 1939) was born in Bulgaria and was a teacher, historian, community leader, and businessman in the Ottoman Empire. A student of Alliance, he first studied at the school in Samakov and then in Balat, the Jewish quarter in Istanbul, where he went with his family, fleeing—as thousands of Jews—the upheavals of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877- 78. In Istanbul, he was a student of Nissim Béhar—brother of Rachel Béhar—and fellow student of Niego, Loupo, Navon, and others, who were sent to the ENIO (École Normale Israélite Orientale) in Paris, and later would become important personalities in the organization. For a full account of his life, see Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *A Sephardi Life in Southeastern Europe: The Autobiography and Journal of Gabriel Arié, 1863-1939* (Seattle and London, 1998).

<sup>466</sup> The title of this thesis alludes to this phrase of Joseph Niego.

<sup>467</sup> Teacher and director of the AIU vocational school in Jerusalem, and prominent figure.

I do not want to boast about the voluminous correspondence that I have from deceased members of the Central Committee: of the late Baron and Baroness de Hirsch, late M. Michel Erlanger, Saeki Kahn, Zadoc Kah, and most importantly of S. H. Goldschmidt and Narcisse Leven, and that I could spread before you in order to support my cause, like voices from beyond the grave.

I am the last soldier of that elite army that the Alliance had formed in the beginning of its work in order to conduct the good fight within the Universal Judaism, when it (the Alliance) was alone to undertake such a thing and that the various Jewish organizations, created since, did not exist yet. Please, see that in his retirement this soldier, sorely tried, receives the rightful compensation for his selfless services to the cause that you defend. I count on the kindness and the justice of the present members of the Central Committee.

Please accept, Mr. President, my most distinguished consideration.

[Signature: J. Niego]

Lea Niego to the Alliance Israélite Universelle<sup>468</sup>

Voslau,<sup>469</sup>  
June 9, 1923  
Lea Niego  
Sanatorium of Dr. Friedmann  
Voslau, Grainfarm  
Near Vienna (Austria)

To the Alliance Israélite Universelle

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<sup>468</sup> CAHJP HM3/338 (TURQUIE LXIV E 771).

<sup>469</sup> Voslau is a location approximately nineteen miles south of Vienna with various arrangements for hydrotherapeutic treatments in the turn of the century. It is two and a half miles south of Baden, a popular summer resort for the Viennese, with thermal baths and various treatments.

45, Rue La Bruyère, 45 (sic)  
Paris

Mr. President,

The present letter should have been sent to you since March 20, but I have been suffering so much from my heart and kidneys that it's only today that I can give you a sign of life. It is then that I learned in Volsau, in the sanatorium where I am, that my husband, Mr. Joseph Niego, after 37 years of consecutive services to the Alliance and the ICA has been put in retirement by the Administration of the Jewish Colonization Association and that your Administration has granted him a compensation for the services for the Alliance.

You know that I am myself an old teacher of the Alliance, which I have served for sixteen or seventeen years. Née Lea Mitrani, I served from 1887 until 1891 as teacher of the Alliance in the schools of Tetuan and of Adrianople under the directorship of Mlle Rachel Béhar and of Mlle Sara Ungar.<sup>470</sup>

After my marriage, in 1891, during twelve consecutive years, I dedicated myself to Mikveh Israel, to the work of the establishment with a dedication and selflessness that were admired by all the Inspectors of the Alliance. The testimony of Mr. Benedict and the Consul S. de Hanovre are there in order to attest to the work that I accomplished without remuneration, while Madame Antébi was paid in Jerusalem and Madame Danon, in Paris, for lesser students. I was taking care of the kitchens, of the linen room, of the laundry, of the clinic. I underline the fact that I have not been compensated during twelve years, and, at the moment when my

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<sup>470</sup> Sarah Ungar served for long years in the Alliance schools in Turkey, especially in Adrianople.

husband is being separated from the organizations to which we have devoted all our existence, I think that equally I have the right to a compensation, since the illness that I suffer from and that requires diligent care has been contracted during my service to the Alliance, while I had just given birth and that we were coming back from Dedeagatch to Jaffa, with three children.

The Central Committee of the Alliance should well remember all my past services, the loss of two of my children at Mikveh Israel, my present state of health. I am appealing to the committee's generosity and to its kindness so that it will grant me either a compensation for twelve years of service not paid, or that it will set forth a pension for me.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurance of my perfect consideration.

[Signature: Lea Niego, née Mitrani]

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