

Document A: “A History of Israel”, Howard Sachar (1976)

The son of a Zionist farmer, Aaronsohn was an agronomist of recognized genius. In 1906 he won international acclaim for discovering a weather-resistant primeval wheat. Four years later, encouraged by the United States Department of Agriculture and funded by a wealthy American Jew, Aaronsohn set up an experimental station in Athlit, a coastal village at the tip of the Carmel range. There, in succeeding years, he carried out extensive research on dry-farming techniques. Even as he explored methods of reviving Palestine’s soil, however, Aaronsohn and his associate, Avshalom Feinberg, were driven to the conclusion that neither the Land of Israel nor the Jewish settlement there had a future under the slothful, brutish Ottoman regime. The outbreak of the war, the expulsions and sequestrations carried out against Jews and Arabs alike, the horror visited upon the Armenians, whose pathetic refugees straggled in dying bands through the countryside, appeared to confirm this premonition. The Jews’ best hope, Feinberg and Aaronsohn were convinced, was simply to wrest Palestine away for themselves. This view was shared by a small group of associates, including Aaronsohn’s father, brothers, and sisters, and, besides Feinberg, several other young Palestinians who worked in the research station.

Source: A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, Howard M. Sachar, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976, p. 103.

Document B: “*The Aaronsohn Saga*”, Shmuel Katz (2007)

From the moment Turkey entered the European war in October 1914, its government treated the Syrian-Palestinian provinces as though they were enemy-occupied territory. As Aaronsohn wrote later to Judge Julian Mack (October 9, 1916): “No enemy ever more ruined an invaded, conquered country and ill-treated its inhabitants than the Turks ruined the country and ill-treated the inhabitants of Syria and Palestine.”

The Turks indeed lost no time in launching a policy of comprehensive requisitioning. More correctly described, most of this was sheer confiscation. They denuded farms of their produce, their implements, their machinery, their animals, their medicaments. Even water pipes were torn out of the ground. Stocks of foodstuffs were confiscated. Stocks of flour which had but recently been bought from the government itself were taken away by the government. Food production decreased, as did imports; the main markets for the country’s exports – in the West – notably of vegetable oil and citrus fruits, were closed to them. Other regular sources of aid and investment from the West dried up. The signs of deprivation soon began to show in the population. ...

At first it might have been said that in bringing about mass privation, the Ottomans were evenhanded in their behavior towards their citizens. If, in execution of their policy of plunder, they were more active and brutal towards the Jews, this could be attributed to their belief that the Jews were the wealthier section of the population. It soon became apparent however that they were a purposeful campaign against the Jewish community, even if ostensibly only against manifestations by that community of a Jewish national identity – that is, Zionism. ...

Within weeks of Turkey’s entry into the war, every public manifestation of Zionism had been uprooted: Hebrew shop signs had been removed, Hebrew schools were closed, even the Anglo-Palestine Bank was forced to shut its doors.

Most comprehensive were the measures against the direct beneficiaries of the capitulations, predominantly Russian Jews. They were told they must naturalize, become Ottomans or face expulsion, never to return. Large numbers did so, but already in December 1914, many hundreds were deported at a moment’s notice and sent off to Egypt. (There they were

taken care of by the British military authorities and the Jewish community.) Some applied for “Ottomanization” but were rejected; others who had already been naturalized had their naturalization revoked. All these were deported. The Jewish community, in addition to widespread confiscation of their possessions, were subjected to a stream of harassments. Leaders of the community found themselves summarily under arrest, their homes and offices searched; they were interrogated and just as summarily released. Some were deported from their homes in Jaffa-Tel Aviv to the north of the country or to Syria. ...

It was the brutalities of the Turks that finally impelled Aaronsohn in the spring of 1915 towards active revolt – thought not without much heart-searching. The idea has been occupying his mind for some time. Long before the war, he had nurtured two separate beliefs on the future of the Jewish people. One was that its best hope was that Britain should take Palestine under its wing as a protectorate. ...

His instinctive reactions ranged further afield. In November 1914 he had “got the conviction,” he wrote, “that Jewish massacres were in sight, were planned by the government, and I acted on that conviction.” His conviction was fortified nearly two years later, shortly before he wrote to Mack from Copenhagen: “I got written evidence from official circles in Berlin that I was right in my conviction.”

However that may be, what is certain is that the reports from Turkey of a massacre of Armenians that was actually in progress played an important part in his coming to the conclusion that it was crucial for the Jews, for whom a similar fate might be in preparation, that Turkey should be defeated.

Source: The Aaronsohn Saga, Shmuel Katz, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 69-73.

Document C: “*The Aaronsohn Saga*”, Shmuel Katz (2007)

The background to the workers’ hostility was broadening at that very time [pre-war 1913]. It was developing from what could be described as an “episode” into a full-scale parochial class war – in Zichron Ya’akov – between workers of the Second Aliyah (the wave of immigration from Eastern Europe between 1904 and 1914) and the children of the First Aliyah (1880-1904). Most of the members of the Second Aliyah breathed not only heroic pioneering Zionism but also Socialist ideas, which they had imbibed in the heady debates in Russia heralding the Russian Revolution of 1905. They – as European sophisticates – looked down on the “rustics” of the First Aliyah and their offspring, most of whom were now farming their own land.

These offspring were by no means a soft and pampered generation. Most of them had endured the horrendous difficulties and raw conditions against which their parents had struggled in those early days of the 1880s and 1890s. They were seen as inferior because they had no “ideology.” Undoubtedly some of the labor sophisticates were dreaming – understandably – of becoming farmers themselves. On the other side, the Zichron Zionists were not blameless. They described these Zionist Socialist newcomers disparagingly as “foreigners” or “Moscopy” (Moscovites).

They had moreover another cause for resentment. The girls of Zichron who had much more free time than the young men, also had more sophisticated interests. They read more books, discussed ideas and literature – subjects not included in the routine of the hardworking boys. They consequently tended to take a feminine interest in the men on the “other side of the tracks.” In short, seen in retrospect, there was material here for a comic opera.

Alexander Aaronshn, Aaron’s youngest brother, made an effort for cooperation – in the cause of improvements in the village and in the development of lands outside. Most of his offers were rebuffed, and he set about establishing a group which would do on its own what had to be done. It was named the Gideonites. The best notion of the relations between them and the Socialists is to be found in an article by Ya’akov Zerubavel, one of the Socialist leaders, in the journal *Ha’ahdut* (“The Unity”) on May 5, 1914:

In truth, the Gideonites have performed many useful functions: they have brought order to the courtyard of the cemetery, they have cleaned out the runnels (imagine, the grandchildren of the Baron cleaning out runnels!)... The young men of Zichron are accustomed to working, and they love work – but that is all ... The same social boorishness ... the same empty life, lacking aspiration or ideals and, especially, the same deadly hatred of the “foreigners.”

These were strange ideas coming from the pen of a Zionist worker, but Socialism was then all the rage – in Tsarist Russia.

No more serious clash seems to have occurred between the parties; and the First World War six months later put an end to the episode. Its only importance lies in the fact that although Aaron was away in the United States when the Gideonites were formed, and never joined the group, the propaganda of the workers against the group, couched in extreme language, was directed against “the Aaronsohn brothers.”

Much more serious and of lasting impact was Aaron’s new quarrel, at precisely that time, with the Zichron community at large. Its origins were in the field of public health. On his first visit to America Aaronsohn had persuaded the millionaire philanthropist and public health activist Nathan Strauss to set up in Jerusalem a public health institute which would place the malaria scourge at the head of its agenda. Aaronsohn’s own practical interest in public health, and his study of the gruesome impact of the disease, had led him to institute a regulation at the station that every worker must take a quarter of a gram of quinine every day. Some of the workers chafed at this order but the result was that there were no cases of malaria at the station.

Strauss, who was a member of the station’s trusteeship committee, put up all the funds for the establishment of the health center, which was to be administered in the name of the committee and managed by Aaron. It was opened in 1912. Aaron, intending to appoint a medical director, had already in 1910 discussed the matter with his old friend Dr. Hillel Joffe (Rahel’s brother). He was startled however to learn from Joffe that he knew nothing about the anopheles mosquito. He admitted that in all his twenty years in the country he had never seen an anopheles mosquito!

Here was a dilemma. Aaronsohn saw however that he could not possibly appoint as head of the campaign against malaria a man ignorant of one of its crucial carriers. Moreover he had at hand a young doctor, Ze'ev Brinn, two years in the country after qualifying in Germany as a specialist in tropical diseases. When Aaronsohn announced the appointment of Brinn the roof fell in. Joffe himself was devastated. He had no doubt that his seniority and general experience made him an automatic choice. He felt personally insulted. As Joffe was a popular family physician in the community – where Aaronsohn had enough enemies as it was – Aaronsohn was attacked on all sides. Explanations did not help. Even another close friend, Naftali Weitz, himself a physician, believed Aaronsohn had made a grievous error. Aaronsohn, conscious of his obligation to the founder of the center to provide the best professional service, was not to be moved from his decision.

The lines of battle were carried abroad. Joffe was well known and liked throughout the Zionist movement, and even the current leader of the movement in Russia, Dr. Yehiel Tchlenov, wrote Aaronsohn in his behalf. Aaronsohn was adamant. He offered a full explanation of his decision, but it did not help. Not only Joffe, but Tchlenov too became a lifelong enemy. Nor were they alone – the denigration of Aaron Aaronsohn spread throughout the upper echelons of the world Zionist movement. Otto Warburg was, it seems, the only one who did express support for Aaronsohn. But Aaron's "mistreatment" of Dr. Hillel Joffe was added to the burden of "sins" that Aaron carried with him into the era of the World War.

Source: The Aaronsohn Saga, Shmuel Katz, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 66-68.

**Document D: “From the Diary of a Man from NILI”, Liova
Schnierson (1967)**

Suddenly I hear Aaron and a British officer talking as they approach me. Then Aaron says to me, “Liova, maybe you know a suitable name for our undertaking?”

For a moment I didn’t realize what he was talking about.

“You know,” he said, “but it must be brief and sound good!”

My head is heavy. I’m not used to the swaying of the boat. I sit down on the deck-chair and try to think. I shut my eyes. ... Suddenly a flash in my mind. Why not try the little Bible in the pocket of my coat. Whenever I am troubled by a problem, I take the Bible, stick my finger in among the pages, count down seven lines from my finger, and the next line gives me the answer.

Source: From the Diary of a Man of Nili, Liova Schneirson, Renaissance Publishers, Haifa, 1967.

Document E: “*The Aaronsohn Saga*”, Shmuel Katz (2007)

Forced on [Sarah Aaronsohn] was the understanding that the mantle of leadership had fallen on her shoulders. It was when it became clear that Aaron was not coming back, and would not be able to come back before the British army, nerve-wrackingly tardy, liberated the country. The letter Yosef Lishansky had brought from Aaron informed her, in due formality, that Yosef was to be her deputy. In it Aaron had listed what range and quantity of intelligence the British lacked, and what Aaron thought they needed in addition. It had to do with heavy arms; with identification of Turkish army units and their bases at the front; with units on their way to, or being withdrawn from, the front, and which trains were going where – through Affula and Ramle, and Dera’a across the Jordan, and Damascus in Syria. And never, never, must she omit to devote a page in her report to the state of the Jewish community. ...

When she took over the leadership she had lost no time in preparing a program of action. Nasser Raghem, the Aaronsohn’s veteran driver (and a member of Nili) harnessed the horse to the station carriage, and Sarah with Yosef went out on their first tour to brief the Nili agents throughout the country. Some of them did not know Yosef; all of them had to be told that he was henceforth the man in charge of the daily operations, appointed by Aaron. Subsequently he could do the rounds himself, collecting reports and conveying instructions. ...

It was on this tour that Sarah achieved a scoop of great importance. At Affula she succeeded in enlisting Moshe Neiman, the medical officer in the Turkish army who was to perform wonders in reporting on the movement of trains, of arms and men, to and from the Turks’ Beersheba-Gaza front, and who, with his large quiver of languages, [he spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, English, French, Turkish and German] established friendly relations with a host of talkative Turkish and German officers – and with British prisoners-of-war.

Source: The Aaronsohn Saga, Shmuel Katz, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 229-232.

Document F: “A History of Israel”, Howard Sachar (1976)

When Allenby assumed command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in the spring of 1917, he asked the NILI spies for particulars on Turkish defenses around Beersheba, the site of his intended offensive. Sarah Aaronsohn and her associates at once set about fulfilling the assignment. Their dispatches included vital data on the weather, on the location of water sources and malarial swamps, on the precise condition of every known route to Beersheba from the Negev. “It was very largely the daring work of the young spies ...,” wrote Captain Raymond Savage, Allenby’s deputy military secretary, “which enabled the brilliant Field-Marshal to accomplish his undertaking so effectively.”

Source: A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, Howard M. Sachar, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976, p. 105.

Document G: *“The Aaronsohn Saga”, Shmuel Katz (2007)*

When the Turkish soldiers began the operation in the evening, it soon became apparent that this was not to be a general attack on the village. They worked by a prepared list of suspects. There were, no doubt, some Nili members and sources that Na’aman did not know, but judging by the people who were interrogated by the Turks he had given them enough and more for their purpose. ...

What was done at Zichron that day and the days that followed was done largely in the public gaze, certainly in public earshot – in one or another of several houses in the village. Little could be hidden.

Nor did they have inhibitions. Torture was an acknowledged procedure of Turkish justice.

Dr. Hillel Joffe, the physician of the village who evidently made notes at the time, wrote in his diary, after published in his memoirs:

On Tuesday, October 2, I was brought to old Aaronsohn’s house. He had been beaten mercilessly. His legs were swollen and blue, he breathed with difficulty, but he was holding out bravely. Sarah showed me the marks of whipping on her legs and her waist. ...

But there was no mercy for Sarah. She suffered the more – for they forced her to see her father tortured. She tried to strengthen his spirit. From time to time she called to him, “Father, say nothing” – and screamed to Osman: “My father is innocent.” But they paid no attention.

Then they started in seriously on Sarah. Osman Bey, holding his whip, would order her to reveal Yosef’s hiding place, and then would lash her body. After a while he varied the procedure: he and his assistant tweaked her flesh with tongs, they pressed hot boiled eggs into her armpits and behind her knees, they crushed her fingers; her body became a mass of black and blue stripes.

She told them nothing of what they wanted to hear. ...

With soldiers guarding her [Sarah] slowly made her way home. Though her legs were swollen, she walked erect. At the gate of her house she paused,

and looked around for a moment at the rolling hills. Inside the house the soldiers took up positions at the doors.

She went in and made straight for the bathroom. Paper and pen must have been in one of the Nili hiding places, and she sat down to write.

After a minute or two she turned on the faucet full volume, and then went on with her letter. She broke off writing when she heard “them” coming, threw the letter out of the window, picked up the revolver from its hiding place, and shot herself through the mouth.

Source: The Aaronsohn Saga, Shmuel Katz, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 271-274.

Document H: “A History of Israel”, Howard Sachar (1976)

Although the merest handful of Palestine Jews were aware of the NILI plot, it was only the imminent British capture of Jerusalem that saved the Yishuv from mass arrests and possibly mass hangings and deportations. Under these conditions, most of Palestine’s Zionist settlers took an ambiguous, even hostile, attitude toward the espionage. They had always disliked Aaronsohn anyway for his known antipathy to socialism. Many of the Poalei Zion, too, we recall, had gone to considerable lengths to affirm their loyalty to the Ottoman regime. The Yishuv accordingly refused to give aid or comfort to the NILI survivors. There were few enough of these, in any case. Aaron Aaronsohn himself, living in Cairo, managed to survive the war. With a certain classic inexorability, however, the NILI story ended in May 1919, when Aaronsohn’s plane crashed into the English channel en route from London to the Paris Peace Conference.

Source: A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, Howard M. Sachar, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976, p. 105