

Buying the Emek

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The acquisition of the Emek Jezreel for Jewish colonization has been the object of Jewish efforts for many years. It was natural that this region, the largest fertile plain of Palestine, should have aroused the interest of the Jewish colonization societies at the very beginning. When the pogroms of 1890 caused large numbers of Jews to emigrate from Russia, some of them turned to Palestine. As a result there arose, in the larger Russian cities, Jewish societies whose aim was the acquisition of land in Palestine for purposes of colonization. These societies had connections with the Odessa Committee of the Choveve Zion, which accordingly commissioned its Jaffa office to buy suitable land in Palestine for these societies. The directors of this office, Tiomkin, Pines and Bentowim, conceived the plan of purchasing a considerable part of the Emek Jezreel and of the Plain of Acco. It was not only the fertility of these plains that attracted the, but also the fact that these were the only regions where it was possible to purchase a large stretch of land from a single owner, while the remainder of Palestine was broken up into small parcels belonging to many individuals, so that the acquisition of a considerable continuous expanse was exceedingly difficult.

In order to execute this plan the Jaffa office communicated with Messrs. Kalvariski and Joshua Hankin. The latter, then a young man of twenty-five had already demonstrated his skill in such negotiations in the acquisition of land for the colonies Rehoboth and Hederah. By energetic work he succeeded, in 1891, in reaching an agreement with large owners in the Emek Jezreel and the Plain of Acco for the purchase of 160,000 dunams at 15 francs per dunam. These 160,000 dunams included the territory which came into the possession of the Haifa Bay Development Company a few years ago, and, lately, of the Jewish National Fund. Hankin had not found it easy to reach this agreement to a low price, for even then speculators of all kinds were surrounding the land owners and attempting to frustrate his efforts by offering a higher price. But Hankin enjoyed the confidence of the Arabs, so that he succeeded in overcoming the competition of the speculators. Before the consummation of the agreement, however the Turkish Government, alarmed by the increasing inflow of Russian Jews, prohibited Jewish immigration entirely. This blow proved disastrous for the negotiations. The Russian societies formed for the purposes of purchasing land were dissolved, failed to send in the money they had promised, and the entire magnificent project fell through.

Two decades passed before another attempt was made to acquire the Emek Jezreel. It was only in 1910 that Hankin -- who, in the meanwhile, had purchased land in Lower Galilee for the ICA -- resumed his negotiations for land in the Emek. Authorized by a Russian Jew, Elias Blumenfeld, to arrange for the purchase of 1,000 dunams on which he,

Blumenfeld, intended to establish a farm with his own means, Hankin concluded an agreement for a stretch of 9,500 dunams in Fule, later Merchavia. He hoped that the ICA, in whose employe he was at that time, would buy the remainder of the land. When, however, the ICA refused to do so, he inquired of me, who was then the director of the Palestine Bureau of the Zionist Organization, whether the Zionists would be prepared to purchase this land. Even before that it had occurred to me, whenever, going from Haifa to Nazareth, I had viewed the broad expanse of the Emek Jezreel, that, because of its proximity to Haifa, its excellent railroad and highway connections, and the ease with which its soil could be cultivated, this land would be preeminently suited for Jewish colonization.

But it was no simple matter to obtain the money for this purchase. Only the fact that Franz Oppenheimer was just then seeking land for the co-operative colonization society he had recently organized, and the simultaneous appearance of some private purchasers, made it possible to carry through this project. 3,500 dunams were taken over by the National Fund for the co-operative colonies, and the rest by the Palestine Land Development Company.

This, however, did not mean that the transaction was consummated, for the Turkish Government refused to authorized the sale, even though official permission was applied for not by the National Fund, nor by the Palestine Land Development Company, but by a Jew, Efraim Krause, who was a Turkish citizen. The Governor in Nazareth, a rabid anti-Zionist, declared that he would fight this purchase to the utmost; furthermore, he ignored the orders of his superior, the District Governor in Acco, who wished no difficulties put in the way of this transaction. We were forced, therefore, to appeal to the Vali, the Governor General in Beyruth. Great haste was necessary, for the purchase was beginning to attract attention, and influential circles were doing their best to nullify it.

I still remember how, in February, 1910, Hankin and I rode on horseback (for the roads were unfit for carriages) from Haifa to Beyruth, through a fearful rainstorm that prevented any ships from plying between the two cities; it was midnight when we reached Sidon, so that we arrived in Beyruth only on the second day. But although we remained there for two weeks, and although official permission for the purchase was promised us from day to day, we were, finally, obliged to leave Beyruth without accomplishing our purpose. Only through the efforts of Hankin and his friends in Constantinople did we at last succeed in obtaining from the ministry the necessary sanction. This meant the gaining of our first foothold in the Emek.; and before long the Oppenheimer co-operative settlement and some private colonists commenced their agricultural work there.

About this time, too, the interest of the wealthier Russian Jews in the purchase of Palestinian land was revived. After the acquisition of Merchaviah, Hankin had gone over from the ICA to the Palestine Land Development Company, which offered him the opportunity to exercise his abilities to the fullest extent. He neglected no occasion for the increase of our land holdings in Palestine, and, in 1913, commenced negotiations for a stretch of 20,000 dunam in Meshach, adjoining Merchaviah, reaching a provisional agreement for a price of about forth francs per dunam.

On a visit to Russia, and by correspondence, I endeavoured to find buyers for this land; the Odessa Committee, too, made efforts in this direction. With the assistance of the late engineer Nachum Syrkin of Kiev the interest of the wealthy sugar manufacturer Brodski was aroused in this land, where he expected to attempt the cultivation of sugar beets. Accordingly Brodski commissioned us to buy the land. But he had hardly declared himself willing to purchase it when Baron Rothschild also decided that he wanted it. There was no doubt that Brodski would have to cede to the Baron. I therefore telegraphed to Brodski -- it was late in July, 1914, asking him to let Baron Rothschild purchase the land; he immediately telegraphed his assent from a German bathing resort. This was approximately the time of the outbreak of the war, so that Brodski manifestly was no longer in a position to forward the purchase money. Baron Rothschild, on the other hand, sent half a million francs to Palestine for the land. As the war had already broken out it was, of course, impossible to use this money for the purchase of the land; but it was the last contribution received by the ICA during the war, and proved of inestimable value for the continuation of its work.

During the war, and for two years after, land purchases were prohibited by law. It was only after the establishment of the civilian government under Herbert Samuel, in 1920, that they were permitted again. Hankin immediately grasped the opportunity to conclude a provisional agreement for 70,000 dunam. Half of this land (Nahalal, Djindjar and Nasra) was not irrigated, and cost £3 per dunam, while the other half (Nuris) was partly irrigated, and therefore sold at the higher price of six and a half pounds sterling. The entire amount was about £300,000, which was to be paid upon transfer of the deed. But when Hankin submitted this agreement to me I was forced to point out that the financial situation of the Zionist Organization and its institution precluded any purchase of this sort. Hankin, however, repeatedly emphasized the importance of the transaction; and I realized that this represented our first opportunity to commence extensive colonization on a stretch of land larger than any which had ever been placed at our disposal.

But I saw no way of raising the huge sum required. We discussed the matter at length, and apparently without result, until I finally told Hankin that I would try to persuade the Jewish National Fund to buy the land, provided it would be possible to pay the purchase price in ten annual instalments. This suggestion appeared almost Utopian at that time, for the Arabs were willing to sell their land only because they wanted to have the cash immediately, and had never agreed to accept payment on an instalment basis. Hankin, too, seriously doubted the possibility of carrying through this plan; nonetheless he did attempt it, and actually succeed in obtaining from the owners an option according to which they were to be paid not in ten, but in six yearly instalments.

The Committee which then represented the Jewish National Fund in Palestine, consisting of Messrs. Ussishkin and Ettinger and myself, ratified this agreement in principle, and submitted it to the European governing board of the National Fund for approval. Here, however, the purchase met with keen opposition. The Reorganization Commission, which came to Palestine just then, declared itself against it; and the Director of the National Fund vetoed it. The Purchase would probably have fallen through had not the Zionist Executive intervened and, with the deciding vote of Dr. Weizmann, declared itself in favour of it. Thus, and despite many other difficulties, the purchase was finally

made, rendering possible the establishment of a considerable number of new colonies in the Emek (Nahalal, Djindjar, Kfar Yechezkel, Geva, Ein Charod, Tel Yosef, Beth Alpha).

In the next few years Hankin succeeded in acquiring further large expanses in the Emek Jezreel for the National Fund, the Palestine Land Development Company, and the American Zion Commonwealth. In addition he bought, in 1924, 60,000 dunams in the Plain of Acco, of which 46,000 dunams lay on the coast between Haifa and Acco. One fourth of this was taken over by the National Fund, and the remaining three-fourths by the Palestine Land Development Company, which later sold this land to the Haifa Bay Development Company, founded by the American Zion Commonwealth together with and at the initiative of Joseph Löwy. Then, in 1928, the major portion of the Haifa Bay Development Company's land came into the possession of the Jewish National Fund. The acquisition of this land is, therefore, of unusually great importance, for it assures the Jewish National Fund of a lasting influence upon the development of Haifa.

Thus there have been acquired, since 1910, approximately 225,000 dunams in the Emek Jezreel and about 65,000 dunams in the Plain of Acco -- a total of 290,000 dunams, purchased at the price of £970,000.

It has often been asked why the Zionist Organization has chosen the Emek for colonization purposes, and has neglected the coastal plain, which is suitable for plantations of all sorts and for orange groves in particular. This question can best be answered by pointing out that the coastal plain has not been neglected at all. Since 1910 the Palestine Land Development Company alone has acquired 70,000 dunams in the coastal plain between Gaza and Haifa; and when we count the plain of Acco the total mounts to 135,000 dunams. This notwithstanding the Zionist public has heard much more of the purchases in the Emek Jezreel than of those in the coastal plain -- largely because it was possible to buy large stretches of land at once in the Emek, while in the coastal plain only small parcels of a few hundred or a few thousand dunams could be bought at one time.

In addition to the above purchases on the part of the Palestine Land Development Company in the coastal plain we must also mention the 60,000 or 70,000 dunams near Benjamina which were partly bought by the ICA, and partly leased by it from the government on long-term leases. A few small parcels of land in the coastal plain have also been purchased by some private individuals and companies. When we consider also about 50,000 dunams for the purchase of which negotiations were begun several years ago by the Palestine Land Development Company, acting on behalf of the Jewish National Fund, and other companies, we see that approximately 250,000 dunams of land in the coastal plain (including the Plain of Acco) have become Jewish property -- i.e., even more than in the Emek Jezreel.

It is, of course, true that in the first few years after the world war the Zionist Organization concentrated its colonization efforts upon the Emek; for only here could it hope to acquire, in a short time, extensive stretches of land for colonization on a large scale. Transactions corresponding to those which were completed in the Emek within a few months required many years where the coastal plain was concerned. But at that time it was absolutely necessary, in the interests of the entire Zionist movement, to begin

colonization immediately, and not to postpone it for years. Furthermore, in the coastal region colonization must be based principally upon the cultivation of oranges; and orange plantations yield no profit for six years. Under uncertain financial conditions prevailing in the Zionist Organization in 1920 and 1921 such colonization in the coastal plain would have been attended by a great risk, for the living and working expenses of the settlers would have had to be drawn from the Zionist funds for at least six years. And at that time, when the Keren Hayesod was in its infancy, it was quite impossible to take over such an obligation for six years. It was necessary to find a form of colonization in which the settlers would be able to become self-supporting as soon as possible; and here general agriculture, with dairying as its most important branch, afforded the best opportunity.

None of the colonists of 1921 had the means to start orange plantations on their own account. For this was during the European inflation period, when the sum required for a Palestinian orange plantation amounted to millions and billions in European currency. Besides, orange growing was not very popular then. This branch of agriculture had been very unprofitable during the war and even in 1921 it was impossible to find a Jewish purchaser for one of the finest and best situated orange plantations in Palestine (although it was offered at an exceedingly low price), so that it had to be sold to an Arab.

Thus we may say that the Zionist Organization concentrated its land-purchasing efforts upon the two great plains of Palestine almost simultaneously. It is only in the mountainous country adjoining these plains that, recognizing the greater difficulties of colonization in the mountains, it bought nothing. One therefore receives a curious impression when one reads, in the report of the Jewish Agency Experts Commission, a detailed attack upon the Zionist mountain colonies. The colonies meant are Ataroth (Kalendie) and Kiriath Anavim, near Jerusalem. But these should be considered suburban rather than mountain colonies, for their very existence is due to the immediate proximity of the Jerusalem market. This proximity enables them to command such excellent prices for their milk, eggs, vegetables, and fruit that their financial situation is eminently satisfactory, and much better than that of many colonies in the plain.

When we look back upon the history of our acquisition of Palestinian land, we see clearly that the purchase of land in the Emek has been a deciding factor in the Jewish work in Palestine. This has been the first time that Jews have come to constitute the majority of the agricultural population of a considerable area, and that they have been able to establish themselves in the manner best adapted to their special requirements. The construction of the Port of Haifa and the growth of the city will bring out the significance of the Emek even more clearly. Next to the industrial development due to Nesher, Shemen and Grands Moulins, it is Jewish colonization in the Emek to which we must credit the increase of the Jewish population of Haifa from three thousand to fifteen thousand since the war, and the fact that the strong Jewish influence upon the city itself is evident to even the most casual observer.