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CANADIAN HADASSAH/WIZO AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WOMEN'S AGRICULTURAL SCHOOL AT NAHALAL

During the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement, which believed that only immigration to *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel, the term used before the establishment of the state in 1948) could solve the “Jewish problem” in the Diaspora, invested most of its available human and financial resources in settlement. This pioneering ideal, however, was usually viewed as the responsibility of men. The female contribution to realizing the vision has not yet been much studied and is still not well known.

The idea of agricultural training for women did not originate with the Zionist movement. It stemmed from an increasingly popular trend in a number of western countries at the beginning of the twentieth century towards opening up to women professions previously regarded as male preserves. Several programmes established by individual women or women's organizations in England, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States aimed to train educated, urban women in agriculture. At the outset, women financed them. Their pupils were trained in household agricultural skills, as well as in home economics; practical work formed the main educational component of these programmes.¹

Even though the idea of agricultural training was not new, there were unique elements to such programmes in *Eretz Yisrael*. Perhaps the most unusual was that the organization of

such programmes in *Eretz Israel* involved unusual cooperation between two groups of women with different socio-economic backgrounds and different ideologies: the pioneering, socialist, immigrant women from Russia and elsewhere in eastern Europe, who needed assistance in settling,² and traditionalist, conservative, middle-class women in western countries who supported them. The cooperation was born of a unity of interests based on the financial assistance, which the women pioneers needed, and the ambition of certain women's organizations to play a role in settling the land. The emerging women's movements in Europe and North America helped to create a sense of "awakening" among Zionist women, which resulted in the establishment of separate women's groupings within the Zionist movement. Such groups sought to develop separate and unique areas of women's Zionist activity. In addition to their ideological identification with the movement, many Jewish women had come to Zionism through their background and interests in social services.³ In the late nineteenth century, when social and economic changes and immigration from eastern Europe created a need to expand the social service structure in North America, England, and elsewhere, Jewish women began to enter the field of social service as volunteers and professionals.⁴ During this period, social services were directed largely towards promoting integration into the new community and country, as well as helping needy individuals to regain their economic footing. In sum, charity gave way to organized, "scientific" philanthropy. In Germany, the feminist movement was directed towards "social betterment through political activity," with the reorganization of the intellectual and technical training of girls and women as one of its basic demands.⁵

The first Zionist women's organization was the Kulturverband, the Women's League for Cultural Work [among women] in *Eretz Yisrael*, which was founded at the eighth World Zionist Congress in the Hague by the wives of the German Zionist leaders. It initiated programmes to combat "the exploitation of women" in the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) with

varying degrees of effectiveness. One of the most successful endeavours was “lace schools” for girls in Jaffa, Safed and Jerusalem, designed to teach young girls of the Old *Yishuv* (the non-Zionist community of pietists) a craft and to attract them to Jewish schools instead of the missionary schools. In the years before World War I, some 600 girls were involved in Kulturverband schools,⁶ although the Kulturverband’s most significant impact was made by the agricultural training farm for girls they helped to establish at the Kinneret Farm in 1911.⁷

Among the immigrants to *Eretz Yisrael* in the second wave of Jewish immigration (the Second Aliyah) which began in 1904, were women who hoped to participate in building the country. In general, at the time, there were three main approaches to women’s participation in the rural Zionist settlements. One was that women should fulfil their traditional role of maintaining the household support system (cooking, laundry, child-care and health care); another maintained that there should be no distinction between men’s and women’s activities, that women should take part in all necessary work. A third was proposed by Hanna Maisel, an energetic and resourceful Russian-born pioneer, who had received agricultural training in France and Switzerland. Maisel had promoted agricultural training for women since arriving in *Eretz Yisrael* in 1909. She saw women’s main area of activity as the household, but she believed that they were also obliged to contribute to the Zionist agricultural revolution by developing those branches of farming in which women traditionally had engaged.⁸

Maisel rejected the idea that because women lacked the physical strength to work in the fields with men, they should remain in the kitchens, laundries and nurseries. Her idea was that by learning how to manage vegetable plots and dairy and poultry farming, women could perform productive, profitable labour in the new settlements.⁹ Since these branches of agriculture were generally not well developed at the time in the *Yishuv*, women might hope that their involvement would not be perceived as a threat to male hegemony.

Only two years after arriving in *Eretz Yisrael*, Maisel put her vision to work in a new institution: the training farm for women, founded in 1911 at Kinneret on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jewish women from Europe, who had no experience doing physical labor, could acquire agricultural training.¹⁰ In 1910, Maisel had met the women of the Kulturverband in Berlin on her way back to *Eretz Yisrael* after a family visit in Russia, and she had persuaded them to provide the funds for getting the training farm under way. The Kinneret farm was closed in 1917 because of World War I, but two years later in London, Maisel met the founders of the new Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), many of them wives of the leaders of the world Zionist movement. She was appointed to the executive of WIZO and in short order convinced them that agricultural training for women was worthy of their support.

Along with WIZO, other Diaspora and *Eretz-Yisrael* women's organizations were becoming attuned to the needs of women pioneers and seeking ways to identify with the Zionist enterprise. During the 1920s, several of these groups adopted agricultural training for women in Palestine as one of their main projects, shifting their focus away from traditional charitable concerns such as medical aid and nutrition. Maisel, who held a doctorate in agriculture but had immigrated to *Eretz Yisrael* as a rank-and-file pioneer, became the link between the organizations in *Eretz Yisrael* and the Diaspora. Her first-hand experience, as well as her education, enabled her not only to formulate a broad, well-structured programme for agricultural training, but also to put the case for financial support of the programme convincingly. She sought to bridge the gap between the women pioneers in *Eretz Yisrael*, transforming immigrant women into productive workers and ideal mothers, replacing "idleness" with productive work,¹¹ promoting the Hebrew language, and inculcating "positive national ideals" and middle-class Diaspora women, who thought promoting the "value and delight of order, cleanliness, and good taste" should be the paramount goal of the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*.¹²

The Canadian Connection

With Britain's issuance of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 and assumption of the mandate for Palestine following the victory of the Allied Powers, that country became the "headquarters" of the Zionist movement. The World Zionist Organization (hereafter, WZO) established its main office in London; WIZO also set up shop there. Chaim Weizmann, the leader of the WZO, lived in Manchester and taught at the university in that city.

The major women's Zionist organization in the United States, Hadassah, was founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold and her compatriots. The first Canadian chapter of Hadassah was formed in 1912 in Toronto, and the movement spread quickly across Canada. Perhaps, as elsewhere, the rapid growth was partly an expression of a desire among Canadian Jewish women for independence from what they perceived to be a male-led establishment, although the Canadian Zionists were, from the start, remarkably inclusive.¹³ In January 1919, the sixteenth convention of the Federation of Zionist Societies in Canada (later the Zionist Organization of Canada or ZOC) was held in Toronto.¹⁴ Lillian Freiman of Ottawa was chosen to head the newly created Helping Hand Fund to assist homeless and destitute Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* and, as well, Hadassah (soon to be Canadian Hadassah/WIZO) of which she officially became president in 1921. A year later, Hadassah had become the strongest and best-led national organization on the Canadian Jewish scene. By 1925, it boasted a membership of 4,500 women in 68 chapters across the country. From 1920 to 1940, Freiman and her husband, Archie, who became president of the ZOC in 1920, were the foremost leaders of Canadian Zionism and, indeed, of the Canadian Jewish community.¹⁵

In February 1921, the first convention of Canadian Hadassah/WIZO took place. The group had just officially separated from American Hadassah. The split can be attributed to the desire of Canadian Jewry to see itself more as part of the British Empire than as an adjunct of its southern neighbor and to the identification of Canadians with Chaim Weizmann, who lived in

Britain, during the Weizmann-Brandeis struggle for control of the WZO. Having achieved independence from the American organization, Canadian Hadassah sought its own niche with regard to work in *Eretz Yisrael*.

When a letter written by Hanna Maisel was read to the convention by Dr. Shmarya Levin, the great Zionist orator and organizer, the women sensed the opportunity for which they were looking. Maisel challenged the new organization to extend its patronage to a yet to be established agricultural school for women. Maisels claimed that the “Jewish village could never be built without the active participation of women Therefore, the first work of Zionist women should be the immediate establishment of a central agricultural school for women in this country [*Eretz Yisrael*], branches of which could be extended all over the country in the course of time.”¹⁶

Mrs. Freiman was in any case a firm believer that instead of charity, productivity should be fostered. Earlier, she had suggested sending sewing machines and material to the *Yishuv* instead of clothing. As she put it, “We must concentrate on the work of rehabilitation and reconstruction.”¹⁷ The convention accepted the challenge offered by Maisel and adopted the following resolution: “That Canadian Hadassah be directly associated with one specific undertaking in Palestine and that this be to establish a school for Household Science, as outlined in Maisel’s letter.”¹⁸ Within half a year, \$88,000, a large sum of money for that time and place, was collected for the establishment of the school. This amount was the estimated budget needed to build an agricultural school for 60 students, including the buildings, the farm, and inventory. Since no land had been set aside for the school, the money was appropriated by Keren Hayesod, the Palestine Foundation Fund for settlement activities, for other purposes.¹⁹

On the first visit of Professor Chaim Weizmann to North America in 1921, his wife, Dr. Vera Weizmann met with Lillian Frieman, who had become the Dominion President of Hadassah, and persuaded her that Canadian Hadassah should become part

of the new WIZO organization that had been established not long before in London, in part as a counterweight to the increasingly influential and independent Hadassah organization in the United States. (One of the issues of the Americans was the offhand administration of funds by the WZO, as exemplified by its arbitrary redirection of the Canadian funds raised for the proposed new women's agricultural school.)²⁰

At the 12th Zionist Congress in Carlsbad, in which delegates from WIZO, which now included Canadian Hadassah participated, a budget of £20,000 (Egyptian) was allocated for the establishment of an agricultural school for women.²¹ This was the first time money had been specifically designated exclusively for women workers, and the lobbying of the WIZO women from Canada had influenced that historic decision. Although the importance of such a school was thus acknowledged by the Zionist authorities, neither the Congress nor the Department for Agriculture and Settlement allocated land for it. And again, the funds were used for other projects. Only at the end of 1922, were 500 dunams of land near Nahalal designated for the school. But now there was no budget. Of the original sum of £E20,000 appropriated by the Congress, only £E400 were given to Maisel by the Zionist Executive to start the school.²²

With that meager sum, Maisel began her preparations. The first women workers came to Nahalal in March 1923 and lived in tents. Then they moved into coops that had been built for the poultry. The Dutch WIZO sent the first two cows to the school, and practical work began.²³ Conditions improved only at the end of 1923 after the second WIZO convention at which that organization granted the school a monthly stipend of £E100.²⁴

Soon, however, arguments broke out between WIZO and the Zionist Executive over the ownership and supervision of the school. The Executive was not willing to acknowledge WIZO's ownership and supervision of the school in Nahalal, despite the fact that WIZO had created it.²⁵ Furthermore, the Executive insisted on being reimbursed for the initial investment. The cornerstone for the first school building could be laid

in January 1924 only because of the financial support of Canadian Hadassah/WIZO. The official opening of the modern buildings, which became a source of pride for the whole *Yishuv*, took place in April 1926.²⁶

Another milestone in the development of both the school, and the *Yishuv* as a whole, was Lillian and Archie Freiman's first visit to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1927.²⁷ Impressed by the school and its achievements, Lillian Freiman convinced Hadassah/WIZO to assume full financial responsibility for the "First Agricultural College for Women in Eretz Yisrael," as she called it. At the fifth Hadassah/WIZO Conference held in Winnipeg in July 1927, they did just that, and ownership of the school was officially transferred to the Canadian organization. For years to come, the agricultural school for women would be the main project of Hadassah/WIZO.²⁸

In building the new Jewish society, Zionism emphasized creating a new Jew who would engage primarily in physical labour. Through their support of agricultural training for women in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Diaspora Zionist women's organizations furthered the emergence of Jewish women workers also engaged in manual labour on their "native" soil. Agriculture, then was the most prestigious occupation in the *Yishuv*, and the agricultural training of Jewish women was more than a footnote to history. The training received at Nahalal, which was the main centre for teaching women agriculture in the 1920s, made it possible for graduates to live successfully in all types of rural settlements and even to become agricultural instructors. By giving women the chance to learn a prestigious occupation, the school encouraged independence and enabled them to take the first steps toward equality. And indeed, many of the founders and early leaders of the Women's Workers Movement in *Eretz Yisrael* and later in the new state were alumni of the training farm and school: Ada Fishman, Yael Gordon, Hanna Chizik and Sara Malchin, to name a few.²⁹

Thus we see that by changing the direction of its charitable endeavours from philanthropy to production and devel-

opment, Canadian Hadassah/WIZO affected the role of women in the *Yishuv*. While other middle-class women's organizations at that time reinforced traditional women's roles by supporting projects such as health care, Hadassah/WIZO contributed to the forging of a "new woman" by supporting an agricultural school. Had change depended upon the Zionist Congress or the WZO Department of Agriculture and Settlement, it would probably not have occurred. Only the support of women's organizations in the Diaspora made agricultural training for women possible, first at the farm in Kinneret, then at the school in Nahalal. Without that crucial support, no agricultural training would have been possible. Lillian Freiman herself put it this way: "Ladies first, in ordinary parlance, has become merely a form of courtesy, a sort of graceful tribute from the gentlemen to the feminine frailty of women. But these two innocent-looking words take on an entirely different meaning when spoken in certain Zionist circles. They stand for something definite. They are a tribute not to feminine frailty but to feminine ingenuity."³⁰

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NOTES

¹ The following sources deal with this topic: Louisa Wilkins, *The Work of Educated Women in Horticulture and Agriculture* (London, 1915); Ortrud Woerner-Heil, *Frauenschulen auf dem Lande, Reifensteiner Verband 1897-1997* (Kassel, 1997); Dr. Heidi Neuenschwander-Schindler, "Blauer Rock und weisse Bluse" [Blue Skirt and White Blouse], *Zentralblatt des schweizerischen gemeinnuetziger Frauenvereins*, Maerz 1994); *Woman on the Land* (New York, 1918).

² In 1910, men could receive training in one of the five institutions

for agricultural training in Eretz Yisrael: Mikve Israel, Sejera, Kinneret, Hulda, and Ben Shemen. They could also receive agricultural training as hired workers on the farms established by the first wave of immigrants beginning in the early 1880s. These options, however, were not available to women, who were only hired to cook and do the laundry for the male pioneers. In order to begin working in agriculture, women needed training.

³ Michael Berkowitz, "Transcending 'Tzimmes and Sweetness': Recovering the History of Zionist Women in Central and Western Europe, 1897-1933," in *Active Voices, Women in Jewish Culture*, ed. Maurie Sacks (Chicago, 1995), pp. 41-62.

⁴ Marion Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany* (London, 1979), pp. 177-78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Their aim was to teach the girls a profession as well as train them to fight against the mission schools. See Shimon Rubenstein, *Mashber Utemura [Crisis and Change]*. 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 609. [Hebrew].

⁷ The Kinneret Farm, established in 1908 by the World Zionist Organization, was the first Zionist women's agricultural farm.

⁸ Hanna Maisel Shochat, "Ha'chinuch Ha'kafri shel Ha'tzeirot" ["Rural Education of Young Women"]. *Besha'a Zo [At This Time]*, 3 (Jerusalem, 1916), pp. 56-62 [Hebrew].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Margalit Shilo, "The Women's Farm at Kinneret, 1911-1917: A Solution to the Problem of the Working Woman in the Second Aliyah," in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, ed. Deborah Bernstein (New York, 1992) pp.119-44.

¹¹ The reference here is to the women and girls of the "Old Yishuv" who lived on the charity of Diaspora Jews. The Diaspora Zionist women wanted to teach these women how to support themselves.

¹² Letter from Elfriede Bambus, teacher at Kinneret, to Betty Lescynsky, secretary of the "Kulturverband", Kinneret, 26 December 1913, trans. Elisheva Tamir, in Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter, CZA), File A/76 I.

¹³ See Michael Brown, "From Gender Bender to Lieutenant Governor: Jewish Women in Canada, 1738-2005," in *A Maturing Community: Jewish Women and Seniors, Centre for Jewish Studies Annual 7*

(2005), pp. 12-14. The essay will also appear in a somewhat different form in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, scheduled for publication in 2006.

¹⁴ *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, 12 December 1919, p.1; Bernard Figler, *Lillian and Archie Freiman* (Montreal, 1961), pp. 22 – 24, 33 -34 (hereafter, Figler, *Freiman*); Carole Anders, unpublished papers, "Building Identity: Lillian Freiman and Charlotte Whitton," pp. 6 – 9, and "The Jewish War Orphans Committee of Canada 1921," pp. 62-63.

¹⁵ Figler, *Freiman*, pp. 22-24, 33.

¹⁶ Memo from Hanna Maisel, to the Zionist Executive, Jerusalem, 11 July 1920. Original in Hebrew and translated into English. CZA, File S15 20/100 II .

¹⁷ Figler, *Freiman*, p. 39. There is room to investigate whether or not Lillian Freiman was responsible for Hadassah/WIZO's adoption of agricultural training for women as the focus of their activity in Eretz Yisrael.

¹⁸ Figler, *Freiman*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Rina Farber, *Hed Kinneret Higia Ad Halom* [*The Resonance of Kinneret Reaches Hither*] (Israel 1980). pp. 59-60. [Hebrew].

²⁰ Vera Weizmann, *Chayai im Weizmann* [*My Life with Weizmann*] (London, 1967), pp. 87-91. [Hebrew].

²¹ For the Congress Resolutions see: "Stenographisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des XII." *Zionisten-Kongresses in Karlsbad, vom 1. bis 14. September, 1921* (Berlin, 1922), p. 761.

²² Letter from the Zionist Executive, to Hannah Maisel, Jerusalem, 25 January 1923, Nahalal School Archive, File 1923.

²³ Chaya Brasz, *Irgun Olei Holland* [*The Association for Immigrants from Holland*] (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 10. [Dutch].

²⁴ Letter from the secretary of WIZO to the Zionist Executive, London, 8 February 1924, CZA, File. Z4, 1927, declaring WIZO's responsibility for the school.

²⁵ Letter from the Zionist Executive to the secretary of WIZO, Jerusalem, 27 February 1924, CZA, File Z4, 1927.

²⁶ "Mechagigat Nahalal" [At the Nahalal Opening Ceremony], *Ha'Aretz*, 12 April 1926 [Hebrew]. Chaim Weizmann, Lady Samuel (who made her congratulatory remarks in Hebrew), representatives from the Histadrut and all the other workers' parties were in attendance.

²⁷ Figler, *Freiman*, pp. 95-102; *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, 25 March 1927.

²⁸ *Emek Hefer: Arba'im Shana la'Aliyah leWadi Hawarat Emek Hefer, 5650-5690* [Hefer Valley, etc.], eds. Haim Ben Zvi et al (Emek Hefer, 1930), pp. 242, 244. [Hebrew].

²⁹ Ada Fishman, *Tenuat Ha'poalot Be'eretz Israel* [The Women's Movement in the Land of Israel] (Tel Aviv, 5689 [1929]). [Hebrew].

³⁰ Figler, *Freiman*, pp. 122-23.