

WITH THE TURKS IN PALESTINE

BY ALEXANDER AARONSOHN

With Illustrations

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TO MY MOTHER

WHO LIVED AND FOUGHT AND DIED FOR A
REGENERATED PALESTINE

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly*, to the publishers, and to the many friends who have encouraged me, I am and shall ever remain grateful

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INTRODUCTION

While Belgium is bleeding and hoping, while Poland suffers and dreams of liberation, while Serbia is waiting for redemption, there is a little country the soul of which is torn to pieces—a little country that is so remote, so remote that her ardent sighs cannot be heard.

It is the country of perpetual sacrifice, the country that saw Abraham build the altar upon which he was ready to immolate his only son, the country that Moses saw from a distance, stretching in beauty and loveliness,—a land of promise never to be attained,—the country that gave the world its symbols of soul and spirit. Palestine!

No war correspondents, no Red Cross or relief committees have gone to Palestine, because no actual fighting has taken place there, and yet hundreds of thousands are suffering there that worst of agonies, the agony of the spirit.

Those who have devoted their lives to show the world that Palestine can be made again a country flowing with milk and honey, those who have dreamed of reviving the spirit of the prophets and the great teachers, are hanged and persecuted and exiled, their dreams shattered, their holy places profaned, their work ruined. Cut off from the world, with no bread to sustain the starving body, the heavy boot of a barbarian soldiery trampling their very soul, the dreamers of Palestine refuse to surrender, and amidst the clash of guns and swords they are battling for the spirit with the weapons of the spirit.

The time has not yet come to write the record of these battles, nor even to attempt to render justice to the sublime heroes of Palestine. This book is merely the story of some of the personal experiences

of one who has done less and suffered less than thousands of his comrades.

ALEXANDER AARONSOHN

WITH THE TURKS IN PALESTINE.

CHAPTER I

ZICRON-JACOB

Thirty-five years ago, the impulse which has since been organized as the Zionist Movement led my parents to leave their homes in Roumania and emigrate to Palestine, where they joined a number of other Jewish pioneers in founding Zicron-Jacob—a little village lying just south of Mount Carmel, in that fertile coastal region close to the ancient Plains of Armageddon.

Here I was born; my childhood was passed here in the peace and harmony of this little agricultural community, with its whitewashed stone houses huddled close together for protection against the native Arabs who, at first, menaced the life of the new colony. The village was far more suggestive of Switzerland than of

the conventional slovenly villages of the East, mud-built and filthy; for while it was the purpose of our people, in returning to the Holy Land, to foster the Jewish language and the social conditions of the Old Testament as far as possible, there was nothing retrograde in this movement. No time was lost in introducing progressive methods of agriculture, and the climatological experiments of other countries were observed and made use of in developing the ample natural resources of the land.

Eucalyptus, imported from Australia, soon gave the shade of its cool, healthful foliage where previously no trees had grown. In the course of time dry farming (which some people consider a recent discovery, but which in reality is as old as the Old Testament) was introduced and extended with American agricultural implements; blooded cattle were imported, and poultry-raising on a large scale was undertaken with the aid of incubators—to the disgust of the Arabs, who look on such usurpation of the hen's functions as against nature and sinful. Our people replaced the wretched native trails with good roads, bordered by hedges of thorny acacia which, in season, were covered with downy little yellow blossoms that smelled sweeter than honey when the sun was on them.

More important than all these, a communistic village government was established, in which both sexes enjoyed equal rights, including that of suffrage—strange as this may seem to persons who (when they think of the matter at all) form vague conceptions of all the women-folk of Palestine as shut up in harems.

A short experience with Turkish courts and Turkish justice taught our people that they would have to establish a legal system of their own; two collaborating judges were therefore appointed—one to interpret the Mosaic law, another to temper it with modern jurisprudence. All Jewish disputes were settled by this court. Its effectiveness may be judged by the fact that the Arabs, weary of Turkish venality,—as open and shameless as anywhere in the

world,—began in increasing numbers to bring their difficulties to our tribunal. Jews are law-abiding people, and life in those Palestine colonies tended to bring out the fraternal qualities of our race; but it is interesting to note that in over thirty years not one Jewish criminal case was reported from forty-five villages.

Zicron-Jacob was a little town of one hundred and thirty "fires"—so we call it—when, in 1910, on the advice of my elder brother, who was head of the Jewish Experiment Station at Athlit, an ancient town of the Crusaders, I left for America to enter the service of the United States in the Department of Agriculture. A few days after reaching this country I took out my first naturalization papers and proceeded to Washington, where I became part of that great government service whose beneficent activity is too little known by Americans. Here I remained until June, 1913, when I returned to Palestine with the object of taking motion-pictures and stereopticon views. These I intended to use in a lecturing tour for spreading the Zionist propaganda in the United States.

During the years of my residence in America, I was able to appreciate and judge in their right value the beauty and inspiration of the life which my people led in the Holy Land. From a distance, too, I saw better the need for organization among our communities, and I determined to build up a fraternal union of the young Jewish men all over the country.

Two months after my return from America, an event occurred which gave impetus to these projects. The physician of our village, an old man who had devoted his entire life to serving and healing the people of Palestine, without distinction of race or religion, was driving home one evening in his carriage from a neighboring settlement. With him was a young girl of sixteen. In a deserted place they were set upon by four armed Arabs, who beat the old man to unconsciousness as he tried, in vain, to defend the girl from the terrible fate which awaited her.

Night came on. Alarmed by the absence of the physician, we young men rode out in search of him. We finally discovered what had happened; and then and there, in the serene moonlight of that Eastern night, with tragedy close at hand, I made my comrades take oath on the honor of their sisters to organize themselves into a strong society for the defense of the life and honor of our villagers and of our people at large.

These details are, perhaps, useful for the better understanding of the disturbances that came thick and fast when in August, 1914, the war-madness broke out among the nations of Europe. The repercussion was at once felt even in our remote corner of the earth. Soon after the German invasion of Belgium the Turkish army was mobilized and all citizens of the Empire between nineteen and forty-five years were called to the colors. As the Young Turk Constitution of 1909 provided that all Christians and Jews were equally liable to military service, our young men knew that they, too, would be called upon to make the common sacrifice. For the most part, they were not unwilling to sustain the Turkish Government. While the Constitution imposed on them the burden of militarism, it had brought with it the compensation of freedom of religion and equal rights; and we could not forget that for six hundred years Turkey has held her gates wide open to the Jews who fled from the Spanish Inquisition and similar ministrations of other civilized countries.

Of course, we never dreamed that Turkey would do anything but remain neutral. If we had had any idea of the turn things were ultimately to take, we should have given a different greeting to the *mouchtar*, or sheriff, who came to our village with the list of mobilizable men to be called on for service. My own position was a curious one. I had every intention of completing the process of becoming an American citizen, which I had begun by taking out "first papers." In the eyes of the law, however, I was still a Turkish subject, with no claim to American protection. This was sneeringly

pointed out to me by the American Consul at Haifa, who happens to be a German; so there was no other course but to surrender myself to the Turkish Government.

CHAPTER II

PRESSED INTO THE SERVICE

There was no question as to my eligibility for service. I was young and strong and healthy—and even if I had not been, the physical examination of Turkish recruits is a farce. The enlisting officers have a theory of their own that no man is really unfit for the army—a theory which has been fostered by the ingenious devices of the Arabs to avoid conscription. To these wild people the protracted discipline of military training is simply a purgatory, and for weeks before the recruiting officers are due, they dose themselves with powerful herbs and physics and fast, and nurse sores into being, until they are in a really deplorable condition. Some of them go so far as to cut off a finger or two. The officers, however, have learned to see beyond these little tricks, and few Arabs succeed in wriggling through their drag-net. I have watched dozens of Arabs being brought in to the recruiting office on camels or horses, so weak were they, and welcomed into the service with a severe beating—the sick and the shamblers sharing the same fate. Thus it often happens that some of the new recruits die after their first day of garrison life.

Together with twenty of my comrades, I presented myself at the recruiting station at Acco (the St. Jean d'Acre of history). We had

been given to understand that, once our names were registered, we should be allowed to return home to provide ourselves with money, suitable clothing, and food, as well as to bid our families good-bye. To our astonishment, however, we were marched off to the Hân, or caravanserai, and locked into the great courtyard with hundreds of dirty Arabs. Hour after hour passed; darkness came, and finally we had to stretch ourselves on the ground and make the best of a bad situation. It was a night of horrors. Few of us had closed an eye when, at dawn, an officer appeared and ordered us out of the Hân. From our total number about three hundred (including four young men from our village and myself) were picked out and told to make ready to start at once for Saffêd, a town in the hills of northern Galilee near the Sea of Tiberias, where our garrison was to be located. No attention was paid to our requests that we be allowed to return to our homes for a final visit. That same morning we were on our way to Saffêd—a motley, disgruntled crew.

It was a four days' march—four days of heat and dust and physical suffering. The September sun smote us mercilessly as we straggled along the miserable native trail, full of gullies and loose stones. It would not have been so bad if we had been adequately shod or clothed; but soon we found ourselves envying the ragged Arabs as they trudged along barefoot, paying no heed to the jagged flints. (Shoes, to the Arab, are articles for ceremonious indoor use; when any serious walking is to be done, he takes them off, slings them over his shoulder, and trusts to the horny soles of his feet.)

To add to our troubles, the Turkish officers, with characteristic fatalism, had made no commissary provision for us whatever. Any food we ate had to be purchased by the roadside from our own funds, which were scant enough to start with. The Arabs were in a terrible plight. Most of them were penniless, and, as the pangs of hunger set in, they began pillaging right and left from the little

farms by the wayside. From modest beginnings—poultry and vegetables—they progressed to larger game, unhindered by the officers. Houses were entered, women insulted; time and again I saw a stray horse, grazing by the roadside, seized by a crowd of grinning Arabs, who piled on the poor beast's back until he was almost crushed to earth, and rode off triumphantly, while their comrades held back the weeping owner. The result of this sort of "requisitioning," was that our band of recruits was followed by an increasing throng of farmers—imploring, threatening, trying by hook or by crook to win back the stolen goods. Little satisfaction did they get, although some of them went with us as far as Saffêd.

Our garrison town is not an inviting place, nor has it an inviting reputation. Lord Kitchener himself had good reason to remember it. As a young lieutenant of twenty-three, in the Royal Engineering Corps, he was nearly killed there by a band of fanatical Arabs while surveying for the Palestine Exploration Fund. Kitchener had a narrow escape of it (one of his fellow officers was shot dead close by him), but he went calmly ahead and completed his maps, splendid large-scale affairs which have never since been equaled—and which are now in use by the Turkish and German armies! However, though Saffêd combines most of the unpleasant characteristics of Palestine native towns, we welcomed the sight of it, for we were used up by the march. An old deserted mosque was given us for barracks; there, on the bare stone floor, in close-packed promiscuity, too tired to react to filth and vermin, we spent our first night as soldiers of the Sultan, while the milky moonlight streamed in through every chink and aperture, and bats flitted round the vaulting above the snoring carcasses of the recruits.

Next morning we were routed out at five. The black depths of the well in the center of the mosque courtyard provided doubtful water for washing, bathing, and drinking; then came breakfast,—our first government meal,—consisting, simply enough, of boiled rice, which was ladled out into tin wash-basins holding rations for ten

men. In true Eastern fashion we squatted down round the basin and dug into the rice with our fingers. At first I was rather upset by this sort of table manners, and for some time I ate with my eyes fixed on my own portion, to avoid seeing the Arabs, who fill the palms of their hands with rice, pat it into a ball and cram it into their mouths just so, the bolus making a great lump in their lean throats as it reluctantly descends.

In the course of that same morning we were allotted our uniforms. The Turkish uniform, under indirect German influence, has been greatly modified during the past five years. It is of khaki—a greener khaki than that of the British army, and of conventional European cut. Spiral puttees and good boots are provided; the only peculiar feature is the headgear—a curious, uncouth-looking combination of the turban and the German helmet, devised by Enver Pasha to combine religion and practicality, and called in his honor *enverieh*. (With commendable thrift, Enver patented his invention, and it is rumored that he has drawn a comfortable fortune from its sale.) An excellent uniform it is, on the whole; but, to our disgust, we found that in the great olive-drab pile to which we were led, there was not a single new one. All were old, discarded, and dirty, and the mere thought of putting on the clothes of some unknown Arab legionary, who, perhaps, had died of cholera at Mecca or Yemen, made me shudder. After some indecision, my friends and I finally went up to one of the officers and offered to *buy* new uniforms with the money we expected daily from our families. The officer, scenting the chance for a little private profit, gave his consent.

The days and weeks following were busy ones. From morning till night, it was drill, drill, and again drill. We were divided into groups of fifty, each of which was put in charge of a young non-commissioned officer from the Military School of Constantinople or Damascus, or of some Arab who had seen several years' service. These instructors had a hard time of it; the German military

system, which had only recently been introduced, was too much for them. They kept mixing up the old and the new methods of training, with the result that it was often hopeless to try and make out their orders. Whole weeks were spent in grinding into the Arabs the names of the different parts of the rifle; weeks more went to teaching them to clean it—although it must be said that, once they had mastered these technicalities, they were excellent shots. Their efficiency would have been considerably greater if there had been more target-shooting. From the very first, however, we felt that there was a scarcity of ammunition. This shortage the drill-masters, in a spirit of compensation, attempted to make up by abundant severity. The whip of soft, flexible, stinging leather, which seldom leaves the Turkish officer's hand, was never idle. This was not surprising, for the Arab is a cunning fellow, whose only respect is for brute force. He exercises it himself on every possible victim, and expects the same treatment from his superiors.

So far as my comrades and I were concerned, I must admit that we were generally treated kindly. We knew most of the drill-exercises from the gymnastic training we had practiced since childhood, and the officers realized that we were educated and came from respectable families. The same was also true with regard to the native Christians, most of whom can read and write and are of a better class than the Mohammedans of the country. When Turkey threw in her lot with the Germanic powers, the attitude toward the Jews and Christians changed radically; but of this I shall speak later.

It was a hard life we led while in training at Saffêd; evening would find us dead tired, and little disposed for anything but rest. As the tremendous light-play of the Eastern sunsets faded away, we would gather in little groups in the courtyard of our mosque—its minaret towering black against a turquoise sky—and talk fitfully of the little happenings of the day, while the Arabs murmured gutturally around us. Occasionally, one of them would burst into a quavering,

hot-blooded tribal love-song. It happened that I was fairly well known among these natives through my horse Kochba—of pure Maneghi-Sbeli blood—which I had purchased from some Anazzi Bedouins who were encamped not far from Aleppo: a swift and intelligent animal he was, winner of many races, and in a land where a horse is considerably more valuable than a wife, his ownership cast quite a glamour over me.

In the evenings, then, the Arabs would come up to chat. As they speak seldom of their children, of their women-folk never, the conversation was limited to generalities about the crops and the weather, or to the recitation of never-ending tales of Abou-Zeid, the famous hero of the Beni-Hilal, or of Antar the glorious. Politics, of which they have amazing ideas, also came in for discussion. Napoleon Bonaparte and Queen Victoria are still living figures to them; but (significantly enough) they considered the Kaiser king of all the kings of this world, with the exception of the Sultan, whom they admitted to equality.

Seldom did an evening pass without a dance. As darkness fell, the Arabs would gather in a great circle around one of their comrades, who squatted on the ground with a bamboo flute; to a weird minor music they would begin swaying and moving about while some self-chosen poet among them would sing impromptu verses to the flute *obbligato*. As a rule the themes were homely.

"To-morrow we shall eat rice and meat," the singer would wail.

"*Yaha lili-amali*" (my endeavor be granted), came the full-throated response of all the others. The chorus was tremendously effective. Sometimes the singer would indulge in pointed personalities, with answering roars of laughter.

These dances lasted for hours, and as they progressed the men gradually worked themselves up into a frenzy. I never failed to

wonder at these people, who, without the aid of alcohol, could reproduce the various stages of intoxication. As I lay by and watched the moon riding serenely above these frantic men and their twisting black shadows, I reflected that they were just in the condition when one word from a holy man would suffice to send them off to wholesale murder and rapine.

It was my good fortune soon to be released from the noise and dirt of the mosque. I had had experience with corruptible Turkish officers; and one day, when barrack conditions became unendurable, I went to the officer commanding our division—an old Arab from Latakieh who had been called from retirement at the time of the mobilization. He lived in a little tent near the mosque, where I found him squatting on the floor, nodding drowsily over his comfortable paunch. As he was an officer of the old régime, I entered boldly, squatted beside him and told him my troubles. The answer came with an enormous shrug of the shoulders.

"You are serving the Sultan. Hardship should be sweet!"

"I should be more fit to serve him if I got more sleep and rest."

He waved a fat hand about the tent.

"Look at me! Here I am, an officer of rank and"—shooting a knowing look at me—"I have not even a nice blanket."

"A crime! A crime!" I interrupted. "To think of it, when I, a humble soldier, have dozens of them at home! I should be honored if you would allow me—" My voice trailed off suggestively.

"How could you get one?" he asked.

"Oh, I have friends here in Saffêd but I *must* be able to sleep in a nice place."

"Of course; certainly. What would you suggest?"

"That hotel kept by the Jewish widow might do," I replied.

More amenities were exchanged, the upshot of which was that my four friends and I were given permission to sleep at the inn—a humble place, but infinitely better than the mosque. It was all perfectly simple.

CHAPTER III

THE GERMAN PROPAGANDA

So passed the days of our training, swiftly, monotonously, until the fateful December morning when the news came like a thunderbolt that Turkey was about to join hands with Germany. We had had reports of the war—of a kind. Copies of telegrams from Constantinople, printed in Arabic, were circulated among us, giving accounts of endless German victories. These, however, we had laughed at as fabrications of a Prussophile press agency, and in our skepticism we had failed to give the Teutons credit for the successes they had actually won. To us, born and bred in the East as we were, the success of German propaganda in the Turkish Empire could not come as an overwhelming surprise; but its fullness amazed us.

It may be of timely interest to say a few words here regarding this propaganda as I have seen it in Palestine, spreading under strong and efficient organization for twenty years.

In order to realize her imperialistic dreams, Germany absolutely

needed Palestine. It was the key to the whole Oriental situation. No mere coincidence brought the Kaiser to Damascus in November, 1898,—the same month that Kitchener, in London, was hailed as Gordon's avenger,—when he uttered his famous phrase at the tomb of Saladin: "Tell the three hundred million Moslems of the world that I am their friend!" We have all seen photographs of the imperial figure, draped in an amazing burnous of his own designing (above which the Prussian *Pickelhaube* rises supreme), as he moved from point to point in this portentous visit: we may also have seen Caran d'Ache's celebrated cartoon (a subject of diplomatic correspondence) representing this same imperial figure, in its Oriental toggery, riding into Jerusalem on an ass.

The nations of Europe laughed at this visit and its transparent purpose, but it was all part of the scheme which won for the Germans the concessions for the Konia-Bagdad Railway, and made them owners of the double valley of the Euphrates and Tigris. Through branch lines projected through the firman, they are practically in control of both the Syrian routes toward the Cypriotic Mediterranean and the Lebanon valleys. They also control the three Armenian routes of Cappadocia, the Black Sea, and the trans-Caucasian branch of Urfa, Marach, and Mardine. (The fall of Erzerum has altered conditions respecting this last.) They dominate the Persian routes toward Tauris and Teheran as well; and last, but not least, the Gulf branch of Zobeir. These railways delivered into German hands the control of Persia, whence the road to India may be made easy: through Syria lies the route to the Suez Canal and Egypt, which was used in February, 1915, and will probably be used again this year.

To make this Oriental dream a reality, the Germans have not relied on their railway concessions alone. Their Government has done everything in its power to encourage German colonization in Palestine. Scattered all over the country are German mills that half of the time have nothing to grind. German hotels have been opened

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