The Jewish Emigration from Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century

Gur Alroey

Rabinowitch boarded the ship with all the oarsmen who were leaving the land of Israel because the land didn’t absorb them, so they leave the Land and return outside the Land. Some are glad to get away from the suffering of the Land and some are sad for they don’t know what they will do outside the Land. When they ascended to the Land, they knew why they ascended, when they descend and go outside the Land, they don’t know why they are descending.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, (Barbara Harshav, trans.). Only Yesterday, Princeton University Press, 2000

Introduction

From the beginning of the twentieth century until the First World War, between 30,000 and 35,000 immigrants arrived in Palestine. The immigrants who disembarked on the coast of Jaffa launched a new era in Jewish settlement in Palestine known as the Second Aliyah. It is no exaggeration to say that the Second Aliyah is considered the most ideological of all waves of immigration to Palestine before and after the First World War. From it emerged the leadership of the yishuv and afterwards that of the State of Israel, too.

From a perspective of almost 100 years since the start of the Second Aliyah and the turbulent events of the beginning of the century, I intend to look at the issue of emigration from Palestine during that period. To this end, I would like to focus on the magnitude of this emigration, which was quite large compared with other countries that had taken in Jewish immigrants; the profile of the emigrants; and the reasons for their departure. The return of migrants to their countries of origin is an integral part of the migration process. Whenever there is a flow of migration in one direction, there is also a flow in the opposite direction; in this context Palestine was no different from other countries. However, the subject of immigrants who arrived in Palestine with high hopes and high expectations but left crestfallen and embittered does not only teach us something about the attractiveness of Palestine as a country of immigration and the possibilities of settling there; it can also make possible a realistic assessment of the significance of Zionist ideology as a consideration from the moment of the immigrants’ arrival.
in Palestine, through the tribulations of their adjustment, until they leave their new home.

"Capitalists first": the Zionist institutions and their attitude toward immigration to Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century

The immigrants who arrived in Palestine and disembarked on the coast of Jaffa in the decade from 1904 to 1914 were part of a huge wave of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe and the Austro-Hungarian Empire beginning in 1904. This was the third major wave of migration since the 1880s. It was the result of rapid demographic growth, economic hardship, the struggle to earn a living, and governmental persecution and pogroms. The bulk of the emigrants went to the USA, but ripples reached England, Argentina, South Africa, Australia and Palestine.

The timing of the spike (sharp increase of immigration) was not the only similarity between immigration to Palestine and to other countries; the composition of the immigrants was also similar, as among the Jews who went to the USA, one-quarter of the arrivals in Palestine were children up to the age of 14. In terms of their distribution by sex, the Jews, country of origin and occupation, the immigrants to Palestine and America were amazingly similar. Thus, the people who went to Palestine were not necessarily fervent Zionists; sometimes the push factors in their countries of origin were stronger than the pull factors that Palestine offered in the early part of the century. Ideological immigrants to Palestine were just a small, unrepresentative group of the immigrant population.

In this context, a Zionist policy began to take shape regarding the quality of the immigrants needed to settle Palestine. This policy stressed over and over again that the most essential immigrants were those with capital. Affluent newcomers, it was argued, would establish a broad economic infrastructure that would eventually make it possible for poor and middle-class immigrants to settle in Palestine and earn a respectable living. The policy was based on the assumption that Palestine was a very poor country and therefore could not take in indigent immigrants. The implementers of the policy – Menahem Scheinkin and Arthur Ruppin, who headed the information bureaus in Palestine – stressed repeatedly that the country needed people with capital. Palestine, they said, could not take in immigrants who had no material assets; not only could such people not survive there, but they would jeopardize the entire settlement enterprise. Palestine was not a land of refuge. Ruppin argued, and it could not take in undesirable immigrants; therefore the natural destination for poor immigrants was the USA and not Palestine.

This policy was initially set by the heads of the information bureaus in Jaffa, Menahem Scheinkin and his deputy, Dr. Chaim Chelouche. As early as November 1906 – shortly after Scheinkin’s appointment as bureau director – the bureau announced its policy:

The Palestine information bureau announces the following: the country’s present condition gives impure Jewish immigrants no hope of survival. The other kind of people, who can come without even asking first, are those with capital, with large or even small sums of money. For them conditions in Palestine are very good, even if they are not experts in any trade.

Scheinkin, the director of the information bureau in Jaffa on behalf of the Odessa Committee, was the leading expert on immigration to Palestine until Ruppin arrived and the Palestine Office was established. As the person in charge of immigration, Scheinkin reported to his superiors in Odessa about the country’s absorption capabilities, economic conditions, the type of immigrants needed for the success of the Zionist enterprise, and so on. As the sole official representative of Herzl’s Zion in Palestine, Scheinkin reported to the leaders of the Zionist Organization, too, who took a strong interest in what was happening there. For example, in a 1908 letter to Otto Warburg, a member of the “Smaller Actions Committee” of the Zionist Organization, he wrote:

The yishuv in Palestine is proliferating into the thousands and tens of thousands, and people want to come here and earn a living by their work. The bureau must inform them, as it has done before, that the yishuv has absorbed almost all the skilled tradesmen it can, since there are already skilled tradesmen who have no place in Palestine.

Even toward the end of the period, Scheinkin still believed that Palestine needed healthy immigrants who would be able to succeed financially. Other immigrants would jeopardize the entire Zionist enterprise. "We all have one aspiration, aim, and objective," wrote Scheinkin:

...to enlarge and improve it by increasing the number of people coming to Palestine from among the healthy, solid elements who have the potential to become established, to live, and to sustain life as well. We also know that, on the contrary, it will pose a great risk to the yishuv and to our work in general if undesirable elements, i.e. those who cannot possibly make it here, come at our advice and on our instructions to settle. Because when they return to the countries from which they came, they can destroy in one stroke what we can build in a known period of time. As we know, it is much easier to destroy than to build and reestablish.

The “undesirable elements,” Scheinkin argued, will not only encumber the yishuv, but when they return to their countries of origin – on account of their inability to support themselves – they will spread negative reports about Palestine. By so doing, he maintained, they might prevent the immigration of well-to-do people who could support themselves and would contribute to the development of the country. The policy, which was drawn up by Scheinkin and later adopted by Ruppin, was also manifested in replies that the two of them sent to people who wrote to their bureaus to ask about Palestine and about the modest economic opportunities that the country offered. Without coordinating their stances, Scheinkin and Ruppin recommended to 61 per cent of the correspondents that they not come to Palestine. Another 18 per cent were advised to come and examine the country before receiving a response, and the other 21 per cent – those with capital – were encouraged to come and settle in Palestine.

But despite the “capitalists first” policy, the influx of immigrants into Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century was not consistent with the Zionist immigration policy. Numerous articles in the contemporary press and letters by Scheinkin to the leaders of the Zionist Organization described the newcomers with great concern and foreboding. In a letter to the Odessa Committee in Shevat 5669...
(January–February 1909, Sheinkin stated very pessimistically that "unless people start to invest substantial sums in Palestine and a certain number of new settlers start to come, we will be in danger here from within and without. We can expect annihilation, natural death from exhaustion." This policy, as well as the type of immigrants who arrived, had an impact on emigration from Palestine during the Second Aliyah period, as I shall show below.

The magnitude and direction of emigration from Palestine during the Second Aliyah period

Choosing to return to one's country of origin or go on to another country is an integral part of the migration process. In every country that takes in immigrants, there will be some who, for various reasons, will choose to go back where they came from or to migrate to new lands. In this sense Palestine was no different from other immigration destinations. The people who moved to Palestine in the early twentieth century and then left were no different from those who went to the USA during the same period, tried their luck there, and went back to their countries of origin. The difference is quantitative, not qualitative. The historian Yehoshua Kaniel was the first to attempt to estimate emigration from Palestine during the First and Second Aliyah. Kaniel begins his article by noting the methodological difficulty of obtaining absolute numbers and maintains that the available numbers are generally scattered reports, sometimes written down by chance, and there are almost no yearly totals. He also explains that the quantitative data on emigration tend to come from reports that proliferated in times of crisis, when the entire yishuv was given to despair, or are exaggerations prompted by anxiety over the future of the yishuv, on the assumption that exaggeration would alert the Zionist institutions to the problem. Despite his numerous reservations, Kaniel states that it is possible to come up with a realistic estimate of emigration from Palestine, which he claims averaged around 40 per cent of immigration during the Second Aliyah. Kaniel's sources were articles about the magnitude of emigration, especially in 1922–1914, published in HaPo'el haTsair.

My sources of quantitative data on emigration from Palestine are different from Kaniel's. I have some figures from Sheinkin's information bureau and numerous reports by the statistician Zeev Smilansky on emigration from Palestine in 1905–1907, which were not available to Kaniel. I also have contemporary reports on the subject from the East European Jewish press. In addition, in the Central Zionist Archives I found the raw data on which the HaPo'el haTsair articles from which Kaniel drew his conclusions were based. These archives have a large quantity of additional data that were not printed in the newspaper and consequently were not available to Kaniel. By combining the sources from 1905–1907 and 1912–1914, I would like to present a picture that differs somewhat from Kaniel's and to point out that emigration from Palestine during this period always exceeded 40 per cent and initially even reached about 80 per cent.

1904–1907

Precise statistics on the number of people who left Palestine in the early years of the Second Aliyah do not exist. However, reports by Menahem Sheinkin and Ze'ev Smilansky can give us a general estimate of the extent of emigration from Palestine in those years. When Sheinkin arrived in Palestine and opened the information bureau, he wrote several reports on the state of the country's economy. The limited employment options and the country's inability to absorb the thousands of migrants who had come to escape the pogroms, Sheinkin wrote, left many people with no livelihood, roaming around jobless. The large number of immigrants who could not find work indicates a high potential for emigration. As the director of the information bureau, Sheinkin estimated the number of jobless immigrants as 75–80 per cent of all people who entered the country during that period. Of all the newcomers, he maintained, only 20–25 per cent managed to settle in Palestine. The harsh conditions in Palestine caused a "natural selection", retaining only the strongest and most determined of them; the weaker ones -- often those with large families -- had no choice but to leave the country.

a. The number of people who have settled in Palestine by immigration is very small, approximately 20–25 per cent of the number who came.
b. Of those with property, at most one percent of the immigrants settled.
c. The rest of the settlers are laborers, skilled tradesmen, and a few members of the liberal professions.
d. Even they settled in Palestine after a harsh natural selection; anyone who was weak and everyone with a large family was forced to leave the country. The only ones who stayed are the younger people, who are stronger materially and ideologically and whose number of working hands is appropriate to the number of eating mouths.
e. This natural selection becomes harsher and harsher from day to day. The local society's entire capacity to absorb European crafts and arts based on its present state of development has already been filled.

In another report, Sheinkin noted: "There are facts. They cannot be denied and they must not be denied."

In recent months, Jews have been fleeing Palestine in the hundreds: young people and people with families that were born there are fleeing. "Pioneers" are fleeing. Householders who have tried to earn a living there and even to save money are fleeing. To put it briefly, they are fleeing, drawn to that place from where the dollars come, drawn even back to Poland and Romania and Russia.

In contrast to Kaniel's overall estimate, then, the number of people leaving -- at least in the early years of the Second Aliyah -- was far more than 40 per cent of those who had come. Sheinkin's estimates are consistent with Smilansky's remarks in his article "On the Jewish Immigration to Palestine". Although he does not give precise quantitative data on emigration, it is clear from his descriptions that the numbers were large and that few people succeeded in settling in Palestine.

The exodus of Jews from there has reached dreadful proportions that would have been inconceivable in previous years. When we try to estimate the number of new Jews who have been added to the Jewish community in Palestine in the past three
years, we will be quite astonished to discover that not only will their number not reach 10,000, but we will barely be able to count a few thousand of them. Although the number of Jews who have moved to Palestine in the past three years is undoubtedly more than 10,000, the number of Jews who have remained to live in our land is very small.\footnote{19}

Smilansky's reports also give us an idea of where the emigrants headed and what countries they preferred. According to his reports, Egypt and the USA were the main destinations, and only a small minority went to South Africa, Australia, and various countries in Western Europe.

The Ashkenazi community is already accustomed to migrating overseas to distant lands at the four corners of the earth. Among the countries that have swallowed up the larger part of those who have left Jaffa are Egypt and the United States of North America. In the first place, Sephardim and Yemenites do not travel far from Egypt; with a few exceptions who have migrated to Western Europe and America, they have all chosen to settle in countries near Jaffa. And since Egypt has experienced a revival in recent decades and has advanced much more than the other eastern countries, so many have given precedence to Egypt. Egypt is also the country nearest Palestine, it takes just one night to sail to Alexandria, Egypt, or to Port Said, and the voyage from Jaffa to Egypt is inexpensive. For this reason, many of the Jewish immigrants who were left without a position or without work would immediately choose to try their luck in Egypt. Most of the Ashkenazim go to the United States, since they already have relatives there, and just reading a few letters about the quantity of dollars is enough to disturb them with a thought that gives them no rest until the slightest incident can influence them.\footnote{13}

A minority of the emigrants went to South Africa and Australia. Unlike in the USA, Smilansky said, where the immigrants quickly found themselves in a large Jewish community "and they latch on to the network of Jewish community life, with all its special qualities and properties", in Australia and South Africa they generally found "the absence of the kind of Jewish community to which they were accustomed. They feel alone, lonely, and abandoned without the advantages of the public life of a Jewish community, and therefore they yearn so strongly to return to Palestine."\footnote{16}

1912-1913 Quantitative data on emigration from Palestine in 1908–1911 are lacking, but data for 1912–1913 are available. The establishment of the Palestine Office in 1909 somewhat institutionalized the gathering of data on immigration to Palestine and introduced order into the figures on both immigration and emigration. Chaim Ridnik, who had been an immigration clerk for the Palestine Office and a representative of the Palestine Office at Jaffa Port, was put in charge of this work. Ridnik kept records of the immigrants who disembarked at Jaffa Port, questioned the people leaving, and wrote reports summarizing the extent of immigration and emigration. Some of his reports were published in Hapوel Hutzat'ir, others are unpublished but are stored in one of the Palestine Office divisions of the Central Zionist Archives.

In an article in Hapоel Hutzat'ir about the magnitude of emigration from Palestine, Ridnik mentioned his data-gathering methods and the difficulties that he had to deal with in the port:

For three years now my job has included dealing with the Jewish immigrants entering Jaffa. During this time I have seen many decreases in the influx, and the same is true of the flow of people leaving the country. When I read in the many newspapers – in Palestine and abroad – about the course of development of our ens, I realized to what extent our press and our leaders have no real idea of our numerical growth or decrease in Palestine. They have no real idea and not even anything close to a real idea of the number of people coming and going or of their ages, occupations, property, and so on. But obtaining such information under our local conditions would take time and a great deal of work, which is beyond the power of the private individual. On my own initiative, I nevertheless took it upon myself to accomplish a small portion of this goal.\footnote{17}

Table 1 shows that 2280 immigrants arrived in Palestine, but 1534 people left – 58 per cent of the number of people who entered the country in that year. According to the table, 66 per cent of those who left returned to Russia (their country of origin), 22.2 per cent went to America, 4.6 per cent went to South Africa, and 2.3 per cent went to Australia. The data in Table 2 relate to eleven of the fifteen Hebrew months from Shvat 5673 to Adar 5674 (5673 was a leap year and therefore had 13 months), corresponding to 9 January 1913–27 March 1914. I could not find figures for Siwan, Tamuz, Av or Elul 5673 (6 June 6-1 October 1913). The figures in brackets in column 1, beginning in Shiḇir, are those published in Hapоel Hutzat'ir and are presented alongside the figures from the Palestine Office. The differences are slight and do not alter the overall picture. Regarding emigration, there was no difference between the figures from the Palestine Office and those published in Hapоel Hutzat'ir.

The table shows that, in 1913 and the first three months of 1914, emigration was equal to 43.6 per cent of immigration. Of the emigrants, 50 per cent returned to Russia; 15.7 per cent went to America; 34.6 per cent went to Europe; 9.4 per cent went to Egypt; 7.5 per cent went to Australia; and 4.5 per cent went to South Africa.

Thus we see from Ridnik's and Smilansky's descriptions that a fairly high percentage of the emigrants moved to the USA. For many of the newcomers, Palestine was merely a temporary shelter from the hardships and persecutions that were their lot in Eastern Europe, and as soon as they received money from relatives in America, they left for good. A comparison of the percentage of immigrants who left Palestine with the percentage who left the USA in those same years shows that a substantially higher proportion left Palestine. According to Jonathan Sarna in "The myth of no return", the number of Jewish immigrants to the USA who left the country in 1908–1925 was equal to about 5 per cent of total Jewish immigration to the USA in those same years. Among non-Jews the figures were much higher.\footnote{18} 55.8 per cent among Italian immigrants, for example. Sarna found that, unfortunately, government statistics do not provide information on Jewish immigrants who left before 1908, but he believes that the figure was greater than 5 per cent and he estimates it at 22.4 per cent.\footnote{19} In the case of Palestine, too, we see that the percentage of emigrants before 1908 was higher than later, in 1913–1914.
Table 1. Emigration from Palestine, 1912 (Source: Chaim Rabinov, "Jewish migration via Jaffa Port in 1912", Central Zionist Archives, division 12, file 75/2, in Hebrew)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Immigrants</th>
<th>Emigrants</th>
<th>Pot. ratio of no. emigrants to no. immigrants in the same month</th>
<th>Emigrants (3)</th>
<th>Destination (815 people asked) (4)</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>(a) (b) (c)</td>
<td>(d) (e) (f) (g) (h) (i) (j) (k)</td>
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<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.90</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>September</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>61</td>
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<td>October</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2280</td>
<td>1324</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1037</td>
<td>212</td>
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Table 2. Emigration from Palestine, 1913 (8 months) and 1914 (3 months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Immigrants</th>
<th>Emigrants</th>
<th>% ratio of no. emigrants to no. immigrants in the same month</th>
<th>Emigrants (3)</th>
<th>Destination (1418 people asked) (4)</th>
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<td>(2)</td>
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<td>(a) (b) (c)</td>
<td>(d) (e) (f) (g) (h) (i) (j) (k)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Jan–7 Feb 1913</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Feb–9 March 1913</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 March–7 April 1913</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 April–7 May 1913</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 May–5 June 1913</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1913</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1913</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 1913</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1914</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1914</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1914</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3261</td>
<td>1423</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>67</td>
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</table>
Profile of the emigrants

An analysis of the profile of people who left Palestine in 1904–1914 shows that the emigrant population in the first period (1904–1907) was quite different from that in the second period, at the end of the Second Aliyah (1912–1914).

In the first period, most of the people who left were entire families of immigrants whom the country was too small to absorb. Failure to find work, or low wages on which they could not support their families prompted them to leave. In an article entitled “Instructive numbers: on the state of the yishuv in Palestine”, Sheltkin wrote that “only the small families, that is, the single people and married people with no more than one child, could settle in Jaffa. Large families were almost all compelled to leave the city.” Although he doesn’t say where they went, conditions in Jerusalem, Haifa, and the moshavim were no better. We can therefore assume that they soon realized they could not survive much longer in Palestine and once again picked up their wanderers’ staff and left Palestine for somewhere else. A typical description of the immigrants to Palestine in a contemporary newspaper tells us of the fate of those who failed to find work there:

The immigration to Palestine, which took a bit of a break for the holidays, is starting to return to its previous state – a state of panic. They come with no money, no specialization, no preparation, no information, and most importantly, no love for the land. These miserable people wander around Jaffa like shades, wandering and cursing the day, wandering and eventually opening one shop next-door to another – shops selling a few loaves of bread, a few bottles of wine, and a few pounds of onions. It is surprising that such immigration doesn’t strike roots.

Unmarried labourers found themselves in a position similar to that of the immigrants with families as soon as their jobs in the moshavim came to an end. Having no way to support themselves, they left the country.

At the end of last year (1905), many began to leave the country. During the winter almost all those who had come without money and without a trade left the country. Even skilled tradesmen left; they had earned little, because there were more than needed (poor shoemakers and tailors). Finally even a few of those who could make enough of a profit to support their families (left). In the months of Heshvan, Kislev, and Tevet, that is, when the work in the moshavim stopped during the season between the harvest and the rains, there was a crisis among the labourers, and dozens of them left the country (especially members of Po’alei Zion).

In his article on Jewish immigration to Palestine in 1905–1906, Smilansky prints a picture similar to Sheltkin’s and notes that a considerable proportion of the emigrants were people with families who came (intending to settle but were forced to leave owing to an inability to make a living).

By the second period (1912–1914), as stated above, the trend had changed. Now most of the emigrants were young people. According to Ridnick’s reports, people aged 30 or under accounted for 30 per cent of arrivals and about 60 per cent of departures in 1912. “We see from the numbers,” Ridnick wrote:

that 2,280 Ashkenazim came and 1,324 left; thus a surplus of 956 people remained.

But if we keep in mind that young people were 30% of those who came and 60% of those who left, we will realize that this minuscule number is worthless because it was mainly the old people coming to Jerusalem who stayed. For 1913 and the first three months of 1914, the data on emigration are similar to those for 1912 (see Table 3). In Shevat 5673 (9 January–7 February 1913), 68 per cent of the emigrants were aged 30 or under and 8 per cent were skilled tradesmen; in Adar and Iyar of the same year (8 February–7 April), 56 per cent were aged 30 or under and 6 per cent were skilled tradesmen; in Nisan (8 April–7 May), 66 per cent were aged 30 or under and 6 per cent were skilled tradesmen; and in Iyar (8 May–5 June), 53 per cent were aged 30 or under and 7 per cent were skilled tradesmen. In 1913 as a whole, close to 62 per cent of the emigrants were aged 30 or under and only 6.5 per cent were skilled tradesmen.

What, then, were the reasons for emigration? Why were the young people – who belonged to the labour movement and came to Palestine with a strong ideology and clear national aspirations – the first to leave?

Reasons for emigration

The main reason why people left Palestine during the Second Aliyah period was the poor state of the economy, which was not capable of absorbing the thousands of immigrants who were streaming in. The constant quest for work, hunger, and low wages led many people to the conclusion that sources of a livelihood were scarce in Palestine and they would have to seek them elsewhere.

The number of Jews leaving Palestine is increasing from day to day, and the reason is clear: there is no work or commerce here. The question of what they will eat forces them to leave our land for America and Australia.

The profile of the emigrants presented above corroborates this statement. The people who worked in Palestine and could support their families with dignity stayed and settled there. Those who could not find an adequate source of livelihood were forced to seek their fortunes elsewhere. For this reason, few of the skilled tradesmen who came to Palestine left, whereas merchants and peddlers were more likely to leave, at least in the first period (1905–1907). In the early years, adjustment and acclimation were extremely difficult, especially for the small merchants and peddlers who not only had to compete with their Arab counterparts but also had to learn the local languages and become familiar with the exchange rates. Since it took them quite a while to adjust, they had to spend their meagre funds and soon found themselves destitute, out of work and, most importantly, despised. This plight – in many cases an unbearable one – led many of them to leave the country.

In contrast, our brethren who were merchants, middlemen, and merchants in the Haibors do not find job opportunities right away. They have to get used to the standard weights and measures of the land, practice with the complicated exchange rates of the various currencies used in Palestine, and acquire some little knowledge of the language of the market. All this takes time and knowledge. Quite a bit of time passes in this manner, and they don’t make any definite decision. Meanwhile, the money dissipates and becomes scarcer from day to day, and worry and doubt sap their ability to make a definite decision about what to
do and to whom to turn. In such a situation, we can easily understand how the slightest incident will induce such people to leave the country.\(^ {23} \)

By contrast, few skilled tradesmen left the country. Although this occupational category accounted for a sizeable percentage of the newcomers, only 6.75% of all immigrants who left in 1912–1914 were skilled tradesmen. Because they had guilds that gave them moral and financial support, their adjustment was easier and it was less difficult for them to remain in Palestine. Many of them felt secure and protected and knew that in times of trouble someone would help and take care of them. The guilds accepted new members—recent immigrants and their families—thereby reducing the likelihood that skilled tradesmen, like merchants and peddlers, would use up their money before finding work and have to leave the country. In an article entitled “The New yishuv and the Old yishuv before the World Crisis [World War II], Yosef Nachmani discusses emigration from Palestine:

> Most of the skilled tradesmen here are genuinely attached to the land in practice. When a skilled tradesman comes here, he does not find those obstacles that the Jewish labour finds in Palestine. When a new artisan comes, he also finds work in his field right away. After a while, he becomes familiar with and gets used to the environment and starts to love the place. He saves some money, buys himself a plot to build on, and builds himself a house. Once he has a house in Palestine, he is bound to the land and nothing in the world would take him away from here.\(^ {26} \)

The Organization Mercaz Baale Melaha (Centre for Skilled Tradesmen) in Jaffa, for example, the largest and most important guild, made sure it accepted new members and added “a big mass of diverse elements, most of them recent immigrants who have not yet adjusted to conditions in Palestine.”\(^ {27} \) The Centre found them work and supported them until they had acclimatized completely. During the major crisis that the yishuv underwent in the First World War, the skilled tradesmen were in better shape than others financially. When the question of accepting Ottoman citizenship came up, the Centre had no trouble deciding in favour. “Very few members left the country voluntarily. The Centre participated in the Ottomanization arrangements in general and in this respect made the Ottomanization arrangements for all the skilled tradesmen in Jaffa— even those who are not members of the Centre,\(^ {28} \) in order to prevent deportation by the Ottoman authorities.

For these reasons, few skilled tradesmen left the country. This fact bolsters the argument that the main factor in the decision to leave or stay was the economic consideration, that is the ability to earn a living.

The voyage to Palestine was sufficiently inexpensive so that large numbers of people—even those who were practically destitute—could easily obtain the price of a ticket. While the fare from Palestine to America, South Africa or Australia was quite costly (for many of the migrants, a sizeable proportion of their capital), the fare from Jaffa to Russia was much lower.

The cost of the voyage is so low that anyone with 15–20 rubles in his pocket can easily return to Russia, and anyone with just 10 francs can go to Egypt. The Jews who come to our land always know that with a small sum they can go back to Russia, and even if they lack this small sum they can easily get it from relatives

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>No. of immigrants</th>
<th>Young people (1)</th>
<th>Elderly (2)</th>
<th>Skilled tradesmen (O.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>June–July 1914</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July–August 1914</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August–September 1914</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9.9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>October–November 1914</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<td>75</td>
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<tr>
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<td>January–February 1915</td>
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<td>156</td>
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<td>70</td>
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Corroborating this argument from a slightly different direction can be found in reports by the information bureaus of the Jewish Colonization Association (ICA). As the third wave of immigration swelled in the early twentieth century and hundreds of thousands of migrants set out, the ICA established a ramifications, orderly system of information bureaus to help them with difficulties that arose in their migration overseas. The people in charge of the local bureaus—which were scattered throughout the Pale of Settlement—came into contact with potential migrants on a daily basis. Based on these encounters, they drafted reports that provide fascinating information about Jewish migration in general and that to Palestine in particular. The official charge of the local bureau in Berdichev (Kiev province), for example, reported an increase in 1909 in the number of people consulting the information bureau. The large majority went to the USA; the others went to Argentina and Palestine. According to the official, was chosen by poor immigrants who could not afford the fare to the USA. Because many of the people who consulted the bureau sought to flee their countries of origin, they settled for their only option: nearby, inexpensive Palestine. The fact that these destitute immigrants went to Palestine is also what enabled them to return without difficulty to their countries of origin. Financially speaking, the voyage to Palestine was less risky than that to America; therefore, just as it was easy to go to Palestine, it was easy to leave it. From their very first encounters in Jaffa, the newcomers met with a chilly reception from residents of Palestine—especially hoteliers, people from the meshiach, and other recent immigrants who were already on their way out—who cast doubt on their chances of making it in Palestine and recommended that they take the next ship right back to where they came from. This encounter confounded and disturbed the newcomers; they had just arrived, had not even seen Jaffa yet or come to know its way of life, and they were already hearing stories about the country from those who had not succeeded and were waiting in Jaffa for a ship to take them on to their next destination.

The hotels were essentially the newcomers’ first real encounter with Palestine and its inhabitants. Most of the immigrants spent at least their first day at one of the hotels in Jaffa and met Jewish passers-by—settlers from the meshiach who were in town on business and families who had decided to leave the country and were waiting in hotels until they sailed. This encounter created interesting dynamics between the newcomers on the one hand—who were full of expectations of a new beginning in Palestine—and cynical old-timers and people leaving in despair on the other. The encounter quickly crushed the hope the immigrants had brought with them from the Diaspora. "In a Jaffa hotel, guests who had disembarked from the ship and people from the meshiach who had come decades before were sitting around a table," Ze‘ev Simanovsky wrote in Hayom. In the conversation that ensued, a farmer asks an immigrant why he came to Palestine and the guest replies that, in his opinion, with money one can become established Palestine. [The farmer responds] “I’ve been here in Palestine for more than twenty years, and I promise you that you can’t do anything here even with lots of money.” A second guest quickly replies that they have fled from pogroms. A second farmer hastens to ask: “And what makes you so sure there won’t be pogroms here in Palestine, too?” A few of the immigrants sigh, and one woman sheds tears. [The farmers then continue to inveigh the newcomers with despair, telling them not to worry about the cost of the voyage.] “Leave the country quickly, while you still have money in your pockets; otherwise you may not even have any left afterwards for the fare.”

Smilansky added:

When they [the farmers] chance upon a Jewish settler, they see fit to throw cold water on him right away and dash his hopes with mockery and various sarcastic comments. We can easily understand the position of the immigrant who comes to a strange land and finds a new environment. Conditions are unfamiliar, and aside from lacking reliable information, he encounters indifference here from his brothers who live in the land. Moreover, they make fun of his desire to become established in his land. All these sap his strength until even an energetic, strong-willed person will start to regret his decision to come to Palestine and will stop believing that he will manage to survive and earn a decent living in our land.

In addition to those that I have mentioned, there were two more factors that prompted people to leave Palestine. In my opinion, these two factors explain why so many of the pioneer labourers of the Second Aliyah left. Not only did they, like the rest of the immigrants, have to deal with the objective difficulties of finding work, low wages, and an unwelcoming attitude; their youth and their desire for excitement and stimulation, which were not available in Palestine, as well as their ideological aspirations that were not visibly being realized, led many of them to decide that the Jewish people might indeed belong in Palestine, but not just then and not at any price.

The stimulation to which the young immigrants had been accustomed in the big cities of the Pale of Settlement was not to be found in Palestine, which was no more than a remote province on the edge of the Ottoman Empire. Although Jaffa was an important local metropolis, it was nothing like the big urban centres. Consequently, it could not satisfy the immigrants’ cultural and intellectual yearnings. In Latifadun, a humour newspaper from the time of the Second Aliyah, a man calling himself Paul describes the sense of boredom that has gripped him and his feeling of being a victim of the dreary, unexciting life in Palestine.

Poor me, how tremendously different the aspirations are from reality. I am miserable in a life that is like none other. At nine o’clock I have to go to sleep; on Saturday I have to sleep all day. How pleasant it was in Berdichev to doze off on a bench and be woken suddenly by noise, applause. What tenderness and delight pervaded your whole body when you felt that you, too, were being included in meetings. And here? One isn’t included in anything. I am a sacrifice! A terrible, dreadful sacrifice on the altar of my love for my homeland. Others have left the country. I have not! Here I will remain, here I will be, here I will die. A sacrifice I am; a sacrifice I will be. They talk about the labourers who have been slain; I, too, am slain.
The sacrifice, according to Paul, was his move from a place bustling with cultural and intellectual life to a desolate, boring place. The price that he is paying, he believes, is no different from the price paid by the guards protecting the masoret. Consequently, he considers his article "a literary work that for an extraneous reason was not printed in Yizkor" - the memorial book for the members of Hashomer who fell in the line of duty and were mythologized in their deaths.38

Alexander Breckner, a shepherd at Kinnet, describes a similar feeling of loneliness in a letter to Elyahu Oliksky. Breckner came to Palestine from Russia in 1906. After a few days in Jaffa, he moved to the masoret of Zikhron Yaakov and then to nearby Sheveya. In July 1911 he moved to Kinnet. Two months later he committed suicide after being confined to bed following an epileptic seizure. In his letter, Breckner describes his loneliness and his longing for the printed Hebrew word.

I have become weak, overcome by sadness. The days of gaiety and joy from the early years have passed and my heart has lost its strength. Everything in my soul is still, as if my blood flow had ceased. I stand here helplessly in sorrow and my gaze wanders over the path our nation is travelling. Silent grief has spread over me and the spirit of joy has left me. My soul is in a remote island. I am far from book and newspaper here, like a savage on a remote island. My soul simply overflows with longing for a printed Hebrew word, for news from the Hebrew world.39

We see in the letter a powerful yearning for contact with civilization. He is depressed by his isolation, and the printed Hebrew word symbolizes for him what he left behind and longs for: society, culture and perhaps even his old identity. Breckner’s loneliness stems from his distance from the bustle of life. He sees himself as a savage, like Robinson Crusoe - a civilized man stranded on the desert island of Kinnet.

For the labourers - who were young people - Palestine was a depressing place, nothing like what they had known in Europe. Having broken the bonds of ideology and commitment, their quest for "the good life" induced many of them to leave Palestine for the big city. Cairo was such a place - a major city near enough that the voyage was affordable. "In recent years, there have been more and more educated young people here [Cairo] who were born in Russia, spent a few years in Palestine, and then went somewhere else."40

But it was not only the young labourers who left Palestine because of the shortage of intellectual stimulation; children of farmers from the First Aliyah also felt out of place in the masoret and left the country for the same reason:

The Palestinian colonies are almost devoid of young people. Not only colonies like Rishon LZeion and Pehat Tsiya, but even the masoret of Bahir and Zikhron Yaakov have already begun to provide material for emigration. In Rishon LZeion, in twenty-five years of existence, only about ten young people have remained. I don’t mean to speak ill of the colonists’ children. It isn’t their fault. They are leaving the country because there is nothing for them to do in their parents’ home. They have nothing in which to invest their fresh forces and their energy. They are suffering at home, in body and soul, and they see no future ahead of them.41

This feeling of boredom and lack of intellectual and cultural stimulation in Palestine is expressed by Agnon in his book Only Yesterday. While accompanying his friend Rahmovitch to the ship that is to take him to Europe, Isaac Kumer muses upon the European life that he experienced on his train ride from his village to the port.

Tall buildings rise and pleasant parks are spread out and delightful statues spray water and well-dressed people sit in the cafe and smell of black cigars wafts up with the smell of cakes and coffee and suddenly all the fine places disappeared, and once again Isaac saw himself in place where he is standing, in this city of Jaffa that his comrades were leaving. And once again day will come with no change, no transformation. Day follows day and week follows week.42

For some people, it was a relief to leave Palestine; they felt freed of the oppressive burden of having to make a personal sacrifice that was greater than many of them could bear. Some people were overjoyed rather than sad to leave. One labourer described the moment he boarded the ship in 1911:

Before I left Palestine I had a fever for about a month. I said at the time: Palestine is giving me a parting gift. My desire to leave the country mounted from day to day and my distress increased greatly, as I stopped believing that the happy moment would ever arrive. When the time did come, I was filled with boundless joy and felt no sorrow whatsoever about leaving. On the contrary, my last glance at Jaffa evoked arrogance and disdain.

When the ship reached Italy, the man wrote:

Italy. Italy made me feel like singing. I had come from Palestine, from a warm land, but nevertheless I was surprised by this wind, as if I had come from the cold of Siberia. I don’t know how and when Palestine suddenly entered my mind. My soul immediately started overflowing there’s no air like this in your Palestine; it’s hot there, too, but it’s dry heat and not performed.43

There was another facet, too, to the labourers’ departure. The “pioneers”, who came to Palestine with solid national aspirations, sincerely committed to building and transforming themselves, remarking the social order and turning the Jewish people into a nation of farmers, were the first to leave the country. Just as ideology was the main factor that had brought them to Palestine, it was also what drove them out. The height of their expectations - of a gratifying, fulfilling new life in Palestine - was matched by the depth of their bitter, painful disappointment. Many of the young emigrants had imagined life in Palestine as being heaven, but the reality that they encountered was very different: dreary, exhausting, and boring. Many people began to realize that they would have to pay a much higher personal price than they had expected to, and they became plagued by doubts about whether their vision would be fulfilled. Aliza Shidlovsky, who came in the Second Aliyah, wrote this feeling at the Kinnet
cemetery on the 30th day after the death of Berl Katznelson, when she tried to analyse why many of her friends had put an end to their lives.

There were those who had imagined life in Palestine differently, who had pictured a life rich in heroism and poetry, but whose imagination was not powerful enough to clothe the dreary day in the pastures of the bald hills with poetry and to see heroism in walking behind the plough on the long, stretching Jordan Valley day, and who were exasperated by doubt about fulfilment and about their capacity to bear the burden.\[87\]

The numerous suicides in the pioneering society of the Second Aliyah period are a drastic, tragic illustration of the reasons why people left Palestine.\[87\] Many of them had come with good intentions and plenty of hope but could not bear the disillusionment, and especially the sense of personal failure, and their world collapsed upon them in an instant as soon as they arrived in Palestine. They suffered there from loneliness, were overwhelmed by the tedious, exhausting day-to-day life, and were unable to realize the Zionist dreams of a satisfying life. The examples of Rachel Meisel and Tamar Berstein illustrate the magnitude of the crisis and disappointment in the Palestine. Unlike their comrades, these young women refused to compromise their dignity and so they chose death over life. Rachel Meisel, a labourer who put an end to her life in March–April 1910, wrote:

Forgive me, all my relatives, in the absence of God there is nothing to do, not a single step. Life looks nice from a distance but I have lost the distance. Close up, life is cruel and not pretty, and I am going. I am tranquil and fine. Goodbye, Rachel.\[82\]

The routine and the dreariness made it hard for her to look at Palestine with the eyes of a far-off dreamer, and it became clear to her, to her disappointment, that life in Palestine was in fact ugly and cruel, despite the attraction from a distance—that is, from the Diaspora. In an obituary for Tamar Berstein, printed in Ha'apē'd hatsinor, her brother wrote:

Not a year has passed since the day she set foot on the soil of our land, where she thought she would be able to quench her soul's thirst for a whole, free life. But here, too, her hopes were dashed: instead of light and brightness she encountered only shadows and darkness; instead of a creative life she saw around her just trouble and torment. May the soil rest lightly upon you, good sister! May your soul be bound up in the bonds of life. Your brother who mourns for you, Avraham Yitzhak.\[80\]

Conclusion

At an assembly marking the 25th anniversary of the Second Aliyah, David Ben-Gurion, one of the leaders of the labour movement and later the first Prime Minister of Israel, spoke of the magnitude of emigration from Palestine during the Second Aliyah period.

We do not have precise figures on emigration but we can perhaps state, without being too far off, that no more than 10 per cent of the Second Aliyah people who came to Palestine during the ten years from 5664 [1904/05] until the outbreak of the war remained in the country. The [other] 90 per cent went back where they came from.\[46\]

It is not clear from Ben-Gurion's speech whether by "Second Aliyah people" he meant all the immigrants who arrived in 1904–1914 or just the young people who came with specific national and social viewpoints. Whether he was referring to chronology or to sociology and ideology, the number of emigrants did not exceed 80 per cent even in the peak years of emigration (i.e. the first years of the Second Aliyah). Toward the end of the period, in the three years from 1912 to 1914, emigration averaged about 50 per cent. Many of the people who left—48 per cent on average—returned to their countries of origin; 15 per cent went to America, and the others went elsewhere: Egypt, Australia, South Africa and various European countries. Ben-Gurion's over-estimation of the number of emigrants was not a mistake. He meant to glorify and praise those who had remained in the country, and who had not abandoned their fellows in the midst of the struggle for the land. Ben-Gurion's speech at the anniversary festivities is an example of how the myth of the Second Aliyah developed and how the Second Aliyah was turned into the most ideological of the waves of immigration to pre-state Palestine.

An analysis of the profile of the emigrants shows that the pioneer labourers who moved to Palestine for ideological reasons, out of faith in the Zionist idea, were the first to leave. Just as their ideology—directly or indirectly—brought them to Palestine, it also drove them out. The ideological crisis that followed the initial encounter with Palestine cast serious doubt on their ability to fulful the tasks and meet the challenge that they had set for themselves. Consequently, many people left the country in despair, with a sense of failure, but also with a certain sense of relief because they were going to resume "normal" life, in an environment that they had left and probably missed.

Interestingly, the immigrants who did not come to Palestine mainly for ideological reasons were the ones who remained and settled there. It is no coincidence that, in his book Only Yesterday, Agnon has the ideologically motivated Rabinovalch leave and not Isaac Kumer: "As others had done before him and as others do after him, coming as dreamers and leaving as doers."\[93\] Quite likely, unlike the labourers, the "regular" immigrants did not have high expectations. People who were not trying to create a "new Jew" ex nihilo and whose expectations were limited to improving their economic and material circumstances were not disillusioned with Palestine. Once they found work, they could stay in Palestine and not drag their families on further journeys. Concern for their families—a desire for stability and a normal life—was perhaps the main reason why they remained in Palestine.

Despite the high percentage of people who left the country, the sources that I have seen do not seem to attribute any moral significance to their leaving; they were not judged and deemed traitors who were abandoning the yishuv in its time of trouble. The word yishuv, for example, which later became the standard term for emigration from Palestine, casts expatriates on the emigrants with its connotation of the illegitimacy of leaving the country, but this was not yet the standard term. Instead, people used the more neutral words oznim ("leaving") and yetz'im ("going out"). The reports tended to be factual attempts to analyse and explain the phenomenon, without offering interpretations or aspersions blame. The
primary reason for this, it seems to me, is that immigration to Palestine in the period before the First World War was mostly ordinary, non-ideological immigration. Most of the newcomers were peddlers, small merchants, skilled tradesmen, and members of the liberal professions seeking to improve their lives in Palestine. Because the yishuv was too small to absorb them all, many of them realized that it would not be their salvation and they therefore picked themselves up and left. Moreover, the information bureau headed by Sheinkin and Ruppin clearly preferred people with capital over immigrants from the lower middle class; the latter were told repeatedly—both in the local press and in letters from class—"not to come to Palestine. When they came anyway, realized their mistake, and left the country, it was the natural, self-evident thing to do and involved no disgrace or shame.”

Notes and references
4. Sheinkin to Warburg (1908), Central Zionist Archives (CZA), A24, file 52 (in Hebrew).
9. On the returnees from the USA, see Jonathan D. Sarna, “The myth of no return: Jewish return migration to Eastern Europe,” American Jewish History 73 (1983), pp. 256–268. On the specific case of a person who reached the USA and went back to Eastern Europe, see the memoirs of Yossel lasser Katzovich, 60 Years of Life (in Hebrew), Berlin, Divri Publisher, 1922/1923, pp. 156–160.
10. See Yehudah Kastef, “Jewish emigration from Palestine during the period of the First and Second Aliyah” Cathedra 46 (1990), vol. 73, pp. 115–138.
11. Ibid., p. 137.
16. Ibid.
17. Chaim Rimon, “Jewish migration via Jaffa Port in 1912” (in Hebrew), Hapoel haTa’avor 16 (1913), pp. 11–12.