

THE GERMAN ATTACK
ON THE
HEBREW SCHOOLS
IN PALESTINE



BY

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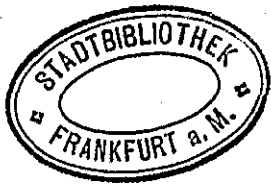
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THE GERMAN ATTACK ON THE HEBREW SCHOOLS IN PALESTINE.

THE development of Jewish life in Palestine during the last few decades has been notable, not only for the return of the Jews to the land, but also for their resumption of their ancient language as the medium of daily intercourse. The use of Hebrew as the vernacular of the Jews in Palestine was based not only upon an immemorial historic claim, but also upon purely practical considerations. The Jews who settled in the Holy Land originally spoke the languages of their different native countries, and it was therefore necessary for their mutual understanding and communal harmony that they should all express themselves in the same tongue.

The use of Hebrew for secular purposes had at first to encounter no little opposition among the adherents of extreme Orthodoxy, but this opposition was gradually overcome by the national enthusiasm that inspired the majority of the latter-day Jewish settlers in Palestine. It was felt that if Jewish life was again to have a distinctive national

character, it must express itself through the language which had been spoken by the Jewish people when it formerly lived as a nation on its own soil.

A natural corollary of the use of Hebrew as the national language was its adoption as the medium of instruction in the Jewish schools of Palestine. Such a measure could not be carried out uniformly owing to the fact that the modern schools were established by Jewish organisations of different countries, each of which had an interest in fostering the language of its particular country. And a practical difficulty consisted in the fact that there were no text-books in Hebrew for subjects of general knowledge, and the terminology had to be created by the teachers in the course of their work.

But the Jewish national spirit gradually asserted itself against these obstacles. The Hebrew language became more and more the medium of tuition in the schools of Palestine, and nothing impeded its progress until the *Hilfsverein*, the German Jewish philanthropic organization, acting, it is understood, at the instance, direct or indirect, of the German Government, began to suppress the use of Hebrew in its institutions in favour of German. This action at once aroused bitter opposition, both among the schools and the population, and the struggle that ensued formed one of the most striking and significant episodes in the contemporary history of Palestinian Jewry. The conflict, which raged most furiously towards the

end of the year 1913, was the outcome of a feeling of discontent that had been growing for some years, and in order to show how this arose, in what forms it manifested itself, and what were its results, it is necessary to describe briefly the Jewish educational system in Palestine.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century Jewish education in Palestine was conducted almost entirely on a religious basis, and without any regard to the requirements of modern life. The bulk of the Jewish population depended on the *Chalukah*, the fund contributed by Jews in the Diaspora for the maintenance of their brethren who, impelled by motives of piety, settled in the Holy Land in order that they might be laid to rest there. The spirit by which these Jewish settlers were animated was reflected in the schools attended by their children. The object of these schools was solely to foster religious traditions. They represented the standpoint of extreme orthodoxy; and they were wholly defective in pedagogical respects. Such schools still existed even before the war.

The first modern schools were established by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, an organisation founded in 1860 in Paris for the protection and promotion of the interests of the Jews in the Orient. It first established an agricultural school, *Mikveh Israel*, in 1870, near Jaffa, and then, between 1881 and 1906, it founded over a dozen schools in the

principal towns—Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Safed, and Tiberias. The object of these schools was to give the children a modern French education with a slight Jewish colouring. The language of instruction was French, and the teachers were for the most part imbued with French culture, so that the pupils were not infused with any particular love for Palestine, and generally aimed at leaving the country.

The contribution of English Jewry to Palestinian education consists of the Evelina de Rothschild School, which was founded in 1880, and was taken over eighteen years later by the Anglo-Jewish Association. The official language of instruction was, of course, English, but in the course of time Hebrew became the medium of instruction for nearly one-half of the curriculum.

The *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, a German-Jewish organisation which was founded in 1901 for the relief and betterment of the Jews in Eastern Europe, extended its scope of activity by also founding schools in Palestine. It was originally animated by the desire to fulfil the wishes and requirements of the native population, and accordingly an important place was devoted to Hebrew, which was intended to supplant the Oriental babel, and thus remove one of the causes detrimental to good education. In 1908 Dr. Paul Nathan, the honorary secretary and guiding genius of the *Hilfsverein*, emphasised the necessity of the Hebrew

medium of instruction as the basis of Jewish education in Palestine. Hence Hebrew was adopted as a language of instruction in the schools of the *Hilfsverein*, and as the exclusive medium in its kindergarten schools.

The practical necessity of Hebrew as the uniform medium of instruction arose from the polyglot character of the Jewish population. The school children, according to their respective origin, spoke different dialects—Yiddish, Ladino, Arabic, Bokharan, Persian, and Grusinian, and the only way in which they could be taught together was through the medium of the Jewish national language. But although Hebrew was at first employed more extensively in the schools of the *Hilfsverein* than in those of the *Alliance Israélite* or of the Anglo-Jewish Association, it was used, on the other hand, in a much smaller measure than in such institutions as the Hebrew "Gymnasium" (Higher Grade School) in Jaffa and Jerusalem or the Orthodox "Tachkemoni" School and the Women Teachers' Seminary in Jaffa. At these institutions, particularly in the Higher Grade Schools, it has been convincingly demonstrated that Hebrew can be used as the sole medium of instruction with the same degree of success as any modern language. At the Hebrew "Gymnasium" in Jaffa, which was established in 1906, all subjects were taught in Hebrew, although in most cases the teachers had no text-books and had to create their own vocabulary. At the time

of the outbreak of the war this institution contained 700 students, who received a thoroughly up-to-date education in languages, science, and all modern subjects. Its leaving certificate was recognised by European and American Universities, and some of its past students had already been admitted to the Universities of Paris, New York and other cities.

But although the German organisation began with the laudable intention of fostering a Hebraic spirit in its schools, its enthusiasm gradually waned, and a contrary tendency set in. The retrogression was sufficiently appreciable in 1911 to be noticed even by the discerning tourist. The first occasion on which attention was publicly called to this tendency was at a general meeting of the Palestinian Teachers' Union, held in August, 1913, at Jaffa. The meeting was attended by more than 100 teachers from all parts of Palestine, one-third of whom were in the employ of the *Hilfsverein*. The conditions in the schools of this organization were trenchantly discussed, and severe criticism was directed against the tendency to repress the use of Hebrew in favour of German as the language of instruction.

The meeting concluded by adopting, almost unanimously, a resolution in the following terms: "The principles of national education demand that all subjects of instruction shall be taught in the Hebrew language, and this meeting pledges the members of the Teachers' Union to fight with all

energy against the instruction of secular subjects in a foreign language." This resolution was based not upon a mere rumour or a vague suspicion, but upon a series of concrete facts which had come under the notice of the *Hilfsverein* teachers themselves, and which they could not help regarding as symptomatic of a deliberate policy. A few instances should suffice.

In the winter session 1912-13 Dr. Braver, at the Von Lämél School, taught pedagogy, geography, and history in Hebrew. Thereupon the Director of the *Hilfsverein* Schools, Mr. Ephraim Cohn, ordered that these subjects should be taught in German in the recapitulatory lessons, and as Dr. Braver declined, Mr. Cohn took these lessons himself. At Easter, 1913, Mr. Cohn demanded that German, geography, history, and pedagogy should always be taught in German, and not merely in the recapitulatory lessons, and he effected this change with the help of other teachers. During the year 1911-12 mathematics was taught in Hebrew, but in 1912 a new teacher for this subject was appointed, Dr. Hebroni, a Palestinian, who, although poorly acquainted with German, was compelled to teach mathematics in that language. Gymnastics, moreover, was taught only in German.

In Jaffa there were formerly two Directors of the *Hilfsverein* educational work, one who was responsible for the subjects of instruction in Hebrew and the other for those in German. In 1913 the

latter, Mr. Cohn, was placed in sole control of all the schools. Many of the changes in an anti-Hebrew direction were made by Mr. Cohn surreptitiously in order not to arouse any energetic protests from the teachers. But that both teachers and pupils were conscious of the changes, and were stirred by a deep sense of dissatisfaction, was made evident enough in the petitions which they addressed to Dr. Paul Nathan, who had the power—if he wished to use it—to suppress the anti-Hebrew tendency.

The growing discontent among the teachers came under the notice of Dr. Schmaryah Levin, a member of the Executive Committee of the Zionist Organisation, who, as a member of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Institute for Technical Education, spent several months, in 1912-13, in Palestine in the interests of this Institute. He hoped that Herr James Simon, the President of the *Hilfsverein*, and Dr. Nathan, the honorary secretary, who represented their organisation on the Board of Governors of the Jewish Technical Institute, would, in fixing the curriculum of this Institute and of the middle school affiliated to it, give practical proof that they did not intend pursuing the policy of repressing Hebrew in Palestine. But, unfortunately, the hopes of Dr. Levin were doomed to disappointment.

The Jewish Institute for Technical Education was projected at Haifa in order to fill a serious gap in the higher educational system of the country. It

was intended to train Jews in all branches of technical education, especially as civil engineers, surveyors, architects, and chemists, with a view to their obtaining responsible positions in Palestine and the neighbouring countries. A site, of the value of £4,000, at the foot of Mount Carmel, was provided by the Jewish National Fund, and a number of Jews of Europe and America, both Zionists and non-Zionists, as well as organisations, combined to raise funds for the building and equipment of the Institute. The largest amount was raised by Russian and American Jews, the Wissotzky family giving £21,500 and Mr. Jacob H. Schiff £21,000. Several scholarships were also endowed by American Jews and the B'nai Brith Lodges.

In Germany 12 scholarships were subscribed. Herr James Simon contributed £5,000, and Dr. Paul Nathan contributed the annual income, amounting to £650, of the Cohn-Oppenheim Foundation. In accordance with their respective financial support American Jewry had nine places on the Board of Governors, and the Wissotzky family six places. The support derived from America was almost entirely due to the personal efforts of Dr. Levin, who went on a propaganda tour through the United States and emphasised the service that would be rendered to Hebrew culture by the establishment of a Technical Institute in which the Hebrew language would predominate. It was solely for this reason that Dr. Levin, Dr. E. W. Tschlenow, and

Mr. U. Ginzberg ("Achad-ha-Am"), as representing Zionist interests, joined the Board of Governors. The direction of the Board was placed in the hands of Herr James Simon and Dr. Nathan. At the request of the Governors Dr. Levin, in 1912, went to Haifa to expedite the building of the Institute, and, thanks to his efforts, it was brought very near to completion.

After his return Dr. Levin and his friends requested that the curriculum of the Technical Institute should be fixed and that Hebrew should be adopted as the language of instruction. At a meeting of the Board of Governors, held on October 26th, 1913 (at which there were no representatives of American Jewry), Dr. Levin and his friends proposed that Hebrew should be the sole medium of tuition at the Intermediate School and the medium for at least one scientific faculty at the Technical Institute.

This proposal was really intended in the nature of a compromise, but it was nevertheless rejected by the Board, on which there was for practical purposes a German majority. The Russian members, Messrs. Wissotzky and Zeitlin, agreed in principle with Dr. Levin, but they voted for the resolution submitted by Herr Simon and Dr. Nathan because the latter threatened, in the case of its non-acceptance, resignation and political difficulties. This resolution declared that no official language should be introduced as obligatory for all faculties, that all scientific and technical subjects should be taught in

German, and that Hebrew should be taught only so far as to enable the students to read Hebrew literature in the original. Professor Martin Philippon proposed that at least history and geography should be taught in Hebrew, but this proposal was lost, and the pro-German resolution of the *Hilfsverein* representatives was carried. As this resolution ran directly counter to the advancement of Hebrew culture in Palestine, to which Dr. Levin, "Achad-ha-Am," and Dr. Tschlenow had devoted years of labour, these three members resigned from the Board of Governors.

The effect produced in Palestine by this resolution was an outburst of righteous indignation. The Jews in Palestine felt that an attempt was being made to impede or suppress the natural intellectual expression of their national life, and they accordingly rose in protest. At Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa imposing demonstrations were held, at which resolutions were passed demanding that the Board of Governors should reconsider its decision and appoint Hebrew as the dominating language at the Technical Institute. The lead in these demonstrations was taken, fitly enough, by the *Merkaz Hamorim*, the Union of Teachers, which was the legitimate guardian of Hebrew culture in Palestine. The most notable meeting of protest was that held on November 15th, 1913, at Haifa, on an open site exactly opposite to the Technical Institute, whose future had been the cause of this growing upheaval.

Not only in the towns but in the Jewish colonies, too, was the voice of protest raised, and it was then but natural that the movement for the defence of Hebrew should spread to the schools of the *Hilfsverein*. The students of the more advanced institutions of this organisation, the Teachers' Seminary and the Commercial School, in Jerusalem, drew up a memorandum protesting against subjects being taught in German, which was not properly understood, and demanding that all subjects should be taught in Hebrew. The memorandum was presented to the Director, Mr. Cohn, who ignored it.

Alarmed at the unexpected development, Dr. Paul Nathan arrived in Palestine on November 25th, 1913, to study the situation. The teachers of the *Hilfsverein* institutions in Jerusalem, most of whom had lived many years in Palestine, submitted to him a memorandum demanding the introduction of Hebrew as the language of instruction for all scientific subjects, and pointing out the harm done to the children by their being taught in the German language, which was strange to them. Dr. Nathan, without vouchsafing any written reply, declared himself opposed to the teachers' demand.

The result was that, in Jerusalem, all the students of the Teachers' Seminary left, declaring that they would not return till Hebrew was made the language of instruction; whilst in Jaffa the pupils of the *Hilfsverein* school left and entered a new Hebrew School, which was immediately opened, and to which

all the teachers (except one) also went over. As the teachers of the *Hilfsverein* schools in Jerusalem received no reply, eighteen of them sent an ultimatum to Dr. Nathan, requesting a reply in four days, and announcing their resignation if their demand was refused, though declaring their willingness to serve another two months to allow time for the engagement of their successors.

Before the period of grace elapsed Dr. Nathan and Mr. Cohn began negotiations with those teachers who had not signed the memorandum, with a view to resuming work at the Seminary, and when the institution was reopened it was surrounded by a posse of police "for the purpose of protection." On the previous evening the Principal of the Seminary, Mr. David Yellin, received a letter from Dr. Nathan stating that the language question and the proffered resignation of the teachers would be decided at a meeting in Berlin, but that he meanwhile set them at liberty. The hour being late, Mr. Yellin was able to inform only Miss Pinczower, Principal of the Girls' School, and another teacher, and as nothing was explicitly said about the date of the termination of their services, the latter decided to resume their work the next day as usual.

Accordingly, on the following morning, December 10th, 1913, the teachers appeared in the school, but they had hardly begun their duties when Mr. Cohn, accompanied by the German Consul-General and several policemen, entered the building to drive

them out. No resistance was offered. The teachers calmly retired; and after the fears of the weeping children had been allayed, they, too, withdrew. Miss Pinczower, who had been Principal of the Girls' School for four and a half years, during which the number of children had increased from 180 to 450, immediately became the head of a new Hebrew Girls' School which was opened, and to which she was followed by 200 of her former pupils. This new school was established by the Teachers' Union, which, in concert with the teachers of the *Hilfsverein* schools, also founded a new Hebrew Teachers' Seminary.

As justification for the summary dismissal of the teachers Dr. Nathan alleged that Mr. Yellin had called upon the students of the highest class in the Seminary to go over to the new institution to be established. This allegation was utterly false. The dismissal of Mr. Yellin, after twenty-five years of self-sacrificing labours, simply because he was zealously devoted to the furtherance of Hebrew culture, was not only a disgraceful act in itself, but it was made doubly mortifying by the fact that his discharge was made known to his pupils before he himself was informed.

The result of the hostile attitude adopted by the *Hilfsverein* towards the use of Hebrew as the language of instruction was that six new institutions were opened, at which all subjects were taught in Hebrew, namely, a Hebrew Intermediate School at Haifa, a Boys' School at Jaffa, a Teachers' Seminary,

a Girls' School and a Boys' School in Jerusalem, as well as a Kindergarten Teachers' Course. Of the total number of 56 teachers in the schools of the *Hilfsverein*, 41 left to take up positions, and of the 1,115 pupils over one-half left to seek instruction, in these new Hebrew schools. These figures are a striking testimony to the spirit of idealism and self-sacrifice that animated both teachers and pupils in their zeal for the Jewish Renaissance. The Zionist Organisation at once stepped into the breach by furnishing moral and material support for the new schools, whilst the Palestinian population, teachers and pupils, subscribed for the maintenance of those students who cheerfully forfeited the *Hilfsverein* scholarships.

These singular and stirring events in the life of Palestinian Jewry had an immediate echo in all Jewish communities throughout the world and aroused a general feeling of sympathy and admiration for the protagonists of Hebraism, and a corresponding feeling of hostility towards the authors of this attempt at forcible Germanisation. The American members of the Board of Governors of the Haifa Technical Institute, at a meeting held on January 18th, 1914, adopted a resolution that Hebrew should be the predominant language as far as practicable, and that after not more than seven years instruction should be in Hebrew in all courses except where it could be shown that proper Hebrew instructors or text-books were lacking. In consequence of this American

resolution, and as the Russian members of the Board were also opposed to the original resolution, Herr Simon and Dr. Paul Nathan offered their resignations to the executive of the Board. They also ordered by cable the stoppage of work on the Technical Institute, with the result that 65 Jewish workmen were at once dismissed. Ultimately, however, a compromise was arrived at. "Achad-ha-Am," Dr. Levin, and Dr. Tschlenow rejoined the Board of Governors, and it was resolved that from the opening of the Institute physics and mathematics should be taught in Hebrew, and that at the end of the first four years other subjects also should be taught in this medium. This resolution still awaits fulfilment, for the outbreak of war has indefinitely postponed the opening of the Haifa Technical Institute.

This brief history merely shows that during the few years immediately preceding the war there was a change of policy on the part of the *Hilfsverein* in regard to the language of instruction in its Palestinian schools. But it does not reveal the cause of that change nor explain the hidden motives by which the directors of that organisation were animated. The only grounds upon which the latter defended the change were pedagogical arguments, and these were vigorously refuted by the teachers in the *Hilfsverein's* own schools, who were the best judges of the situation. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suppose that the change of policy was due to secret pressure exercised by the German Government with a view

to making the Jewish schools nurseries of Prussian *Kultur*. This sinister intention was ignominiously defeated through Palestinian Jewry rising to the defence of the Hebrew language as of its most holy possession.

And if the Jews of Palestine could display such zeal, courage, and self-sacrifice in a purely ideal cause, when they were still under the blasting rule of the Turk, with what passionate devotion will they not foster their national culture when they rejoice in the blessings of freedom !

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