

THE VILLAGE TEACHER
and
RURAL RECONSTRUCTION IN PALESTINE

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I.

Introductory Statement

PALESTINE, like other neighboring countries of the Near East, is predominantly an agricultural country. By number, the fellah (farmer) forms the majority of the population, and by virtue of his occupation, in the absence of raw materials for industrial development, he becomes the main source of the economic life of the country. Yet the fellah in Palestine has always been, until recently, the subject of oppression, neglect, and ill treatment by his own countrymen and the old political regime. The feudal system played havoc in his life, the effendi class looked down upon him, the growing educated class neglected him, and the old Turkish regime was too corrupt to be concerned with such a vital problem. The policy of the government after the war and the outlook of the country in general as regards the fellah have been undergoing constant change along the right line. But the country is still far from reaching its goal in this respect. The fellah's average net income per year amounts to about eleven English pounds, and this amount has to feed, clothe, and shelter an average family of six persons for the year. He is heavily in debt, to the extent of being hopelessly bankrupt. His animals are weak and his agriculture simple and primitive. The appalling rate of 90-95% is the average trachoma incidence in villages. This is a good index of his poverty, ignorance, and unhygienic health habits. Another index is supplied by the infant death rate which averages about 25%. In notorious feuds and factions, he finds a form of recreation and through them, an outlet for his surplus energy. Long ago he lost his self-respect, and with scorn he refers to himself as "simply a fellah." Yet this same man possesses the excellent traits of hospitality, sociability, and intelligence. He has always shown himself willing to learn, provided he meets with the person who is genuinely interested in his welfare.

It was not long ago that the Government of Palestine began to

feel the gravity of the situation and the necessity of making a serious attempt at the reconstruction of village life. This reconstruction began simultaneously from different angles, through the different departments of the Government—Land Settlement, Agriculture, Health, and Education. National organizations, outside of Government circles, caught the new spirit also and began to do something for the Arab fellah, or at least, to demand from the Government that something should be done. The press of the country talks a lot nowadays about the fellah and sponsors his cause. However, it must be realized that a good deal of the credit for starting this rural reconstruction movement should go to the Department of Education, and especially to its present Director. Recently, the Director of Education has been vigorously upheld in his rural interests by the present High Commissioner, who has come to be known in the country as “the friend of the fellah.”

II.

How Rural Reconstruction Began at the Village School.

The first drive of the Education Department in its rural policy was for more village schools. If the life of the fellah was to be reconstructed, he must be first of all educated. This campaign went on rather rapidly during the past eight or ten years, until at present about 300 of the 750 Arab villages are provided with schools. Almost no schools existed in villages at the beginning of the British occupation. During the early part of this campaign the village school curriculum was influenced by two dominating factors — removal of illiteracy and the curriculum of the town school.

However, a few years ago, about 1927, an important fact about rural education was fully recognized and given due consideration. It was felt that the village school should not necessarily be subordinated to the town school, and that it should aim at something more than the removal of illiteracy. The rural community was recognized as a unit by itself (an important unit in such an agricultural country as Palestine) with its special problems and needs. It was essential, therefore, to have a type of education suited to the actual conditions of the rural community. A village school, with rural reconstruction as its ideal, was necessary. The school garden was chosen as a starting point in this new policy. A young

man from the country, with agricultural training, was appointed Supervisor of School Gardens, and a new campaign in rural education policy was begun—a school garden for every village. But the village teacher was not yet trained in agricultural work.

In 1930, the American Near East Foundation stepped in to coöperate with the Education Department in its new attempt. A scheme was adopted whereby a year of agricultural training was given annually to 15 village school teachers. A new section was added to the Government Agricultural School of Tulkarm for this purpose. The Government undertook to pay the salaries of the teachers while under training, and the Near East Foundation was responsible for the running expenses. With the installation of this scheme, rural reconstruction became the goal of the village school.

III.

The Village School Becomes a Recognized Center of Rural Reconstruction.

In the fall of 1931, the first fifteen teachers trained in agriculture were sent out to work in village schools. At that time the writer, as representative of the Near East Foundation, was asked to help in supervising the work of these teachers in their new field of activity. By the end of the year we could observe the following results: (1) The village school curriculum was so modified as to allow for a greater proportion of agricultural instruction. (2) Each of the fifteen teachers started a school garden and spent a good portion of the school day working in it with his students. (3) Some teachers were able to proceed with their school garden work so far as to demonstrate successfully to the fellah certain new agricultural practices. (4) Education Inspectors and other local Government officials began to show some interest in this new movement and offer some help. (5) The fellah, notwithstanding years of bitter experience, began to believe that at last somebody had become interested in his welfare and that there was some practical meaning in the village school.

The two or three years that followed were years of rapid progress for the scheme. The agricultural work of the teacher grew wider and became more adventurous. Further modification of the curriculum took place, so as to allow for more agricultural work in the school. The school garden, with its different vegetable

plots, fruit-tree nursery, bees, poultry, manure pit, etc., became an active center of demonstration for the Arab fellah. Two assistants to help the Supervisor of School Gardens were appointed, and officials of the Agricultural Department were, in many cases, ready to coöperate. But the rural reconstruction work of the village teacher did not stop at agricultural reform. Other phases of rural life were approached. There was village health with its desperate conditions. The work of the teacher in this field began with the extension of first aid and eye treatment to the school boys. Later, this was extended to the villagers under the supervision of the Medical Officer. Clean-up campaigns were organized by the teacher and his students, or scout troop, in the village, with a view to demonstrating village cleanliness in a practical way. Other public health projects such as boring latrines, disposal of manure, mosquito control, protection of water supply, etc., were encouraged and carried out in coöperation with the Health Department. Recreational activities were also included in the program of the village teacher. There was an attempt at organizing games, social evenings, and sports clubs for the village boys and youth. This has not been as successful as other phases of rural work, for the deep influence of recreation in the reconstruction of rural life is not yet fully understood. Perhaps the authorities will realize some day that the best way to deal with the notorious problem of feud and faction in the villages is to supply them with adequate recreational outlets for their surplus energy.

The question of the village library followed. It was felt that this was very much needed to supplement the work of the village school. A beginning had already been made by one Inspector of Education in his district, and a campaign was started by the Education Department whose aim was to have a library established in each village where there was a school. A good number of villages have such libraries now, and the scheme is in continuous progress. These libraries are of two kinds—circulating and permanent. The first is supposed to determine whether the village is ready for the second or not. In connection with the library, the village teacher found a chance of extending another piece of service to his village community—the organization of night classes for adults.

What has been just mentioned above, although not covering all the work done by the village teacher, gives us a fair idea of

how the village school has gradually developed into an active center of rural reconstruction. By the end of 1933, after three years of trial, this scheme of training of rural teachers in agriculture was permanently adopted by the Government and incorporated into their educational system. A new institution, under the name of "Rural Teachers Training Center," was organized and attached to the Government Agricultural School of Tulkarm. The students of the Center are selected from among the students of the Agricultural School. They receive one year's training in teaching at the Center after having had two year's training in agriculture at the Agricultural School. The present capacity of the Center is fifteen students. By the end of the present year, 1934-35, the country will have had over one hundred teachers trained in agriculture and appointed to village schools.

At the same time when the original scheme was made permanent, another supplementary scheme was introduced—a short course in village handicrafts for village teachers. This was put under the direction of the Supervisor of Technical Education, in order to supply the fellah with the essentials of simple, practical handicrafts.

The latest development in this rural reconstruction work was the introduction of the Model Village idea. Eight villages were chosen in different sections of the country to serve as Model Centers. The Government departments concerned with village life—Education, Health, Agriculture and Administration—and the village people themselves are coöperating and concentrating their effort in the village in such a way as to make of it a model for other villages to copy from. Not more than a beginning has been made along this line, but big results may be expected here, provided the different Government departments take the matter seriously and follow it up systematically.

Two more steps in their development next in store for the village school are the radio and the cinema. The first has already been started by the Government. A broadcasting station is under construction in Jerusalem, and within a few months the fellah of the country will be reached on the radio through receivers that will be placed in the village schools. The second, the movable cinema, has been on trial in villages, for over two years and its success is no longer doubted. The Department of Education is thinking now of a scheme whereby this form of visual education can be extended to the fellah through the village school.