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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Establishment of a Nursing School in Jerusalem by the American Zionist Medical Unit, 1918

Continuation or Revolution?

Although studies of the development of health services in Eretz Israel during the Mandate period are part of the general investigation of this period, they are in themselves a distinct field for research.¹ Only few studies have focused on the story of nursing in the development of health services;² the history of nursing in Israel has not drawn great interest even as part of the discussion on the development of professions, women's organizations, or the incorporation of women in the labor market during the Yishuv period, and not even as part of the historiography of the American Zionist women's project, "Hadassah."³

Those dealing with the history of nursing in Eretz Israel should base themselves on the foundations laid by contemporary American scholars, such as B. Melosh, S. Reverby, and P. A. and B. J. Kalisch, on the one hand, and the first Israelis who dealt with this topic, L. Zwanger and R. Adams-Stockler, on the other.⁴ Zwanger's study, published over thirty years ago, did not focus solely on the Hadassah School but dealt with the field of nursing education in Eretz Israel in general, and the time period she covered was quite broad: 1918 to 1965. Adams-Stockler discussed one aspect of activity, namely the field of public health nursing in the country, but she does address to a certain extent the training of nurses for field work in this specialty. These researchers did not have available all of the rich material that has been found in recent years in the archives of the Hadassah Medical Organization and the Hadassah Nursing School.⁵

This article is dedicated to Ms. Judith Steiner-Freud, former director of the Nursing School and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of Hadassah and the Hebrew University, for her contribution to the advancement of nursing in Israel in general and the study of the history of nursing in Eretz Israel in particular. All rights are retained by the author.

When reconstructing the history of nursing in Eretz Israel during the Mandate period, one must also include aspects deriving from the introduction of Western ideas, such as those relating to the place of women in the *Yishuv*, or the internalization of professional ideology.⁶

This article focuses on the beginning of nurses' training in the country, which was the main component of the struggle to attain professional recognition, in the American spirit, as reflected in the history of the School for Registered Nurses in Jerusalem, established by the Women's Zionist Organization of America, Hadassah. Specifically covered here are the early years of the school, from its founding in 1918 until the end of the term of office of Anna Kaplan, director of the school from 1920 to 1927.⁷

Professional Training of Women at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

In Eretz Israel at the start of the twentieth century, there were women, with a profession or occupation, whose training had been acquired in the country or elsewhere in three main ways: university studies, usually in Europe (physicians, for instance); training in high school, sometime with an additional period of studies (for example, kindergarten teachers), or by means of traditions handed down from one generation to another, as apprentices (like the local midwives).⁸

We have to differentiate between the training of women who had graduated high school or had a similar education, as was the case with the Hadassah Nursing School, and occupational training intended for young women studying in high schools. Girls with elementary school education were accepted to the Lewinsky Teachers Seminary (founded in 1913) or to the women's agricultural farm at Kinneret.⁹

Within the context of the characteristics of women's education in Eretz Israel, the director of the Hadassah Nursing School from 1934 to 1948, Shulamit Cantor, described the Hadassah project of founding a nursing school:

As the first professional school for women in Palestine, it aroused sensational interest. Professional education for women was an unheard of thing in that part of the world. For generations Eastern women had lived a sheltered and cloistered life; their area of movement was the home and the courtyard; they did not enter the trades or professions; they took no part whatever in the social, political, and economic life of the community. This condition had been ac-

cepted as natural for women from time immemorial. But the recognition that nurses constitute the backbone of medical service brought an ever-increasing pressure on Hadassah to train nurses.¹⁰

Training Women for Nursing Work at the Beginning of the Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, nursing was not recognized as a profession in Eretz Israel. The Ottoman government did not require women working in nursing to obtain a diploma, as was the case for physicians; the title “nurse,” “sister of mercy,” or “medic” was given to a woman who assisted a physician without her ever being asked how she been trained for the job or what made the license she was supposed to receive valid.

In the early years of the twentieth century—until the arrival of delegations from the Red Cross and from the American Zionist Federation and Hadassah in 1918—the physicians, among them Dr. A. Ticho and Dr. H. Kagan, trained the nurses themselves.¹¹ But a gap opened between the concept of training local women, from a low social class, and the carrying out of limited, defined activity that was vital for the operation of medical institutions at that time—and perceiving nursing as a profession.

A concept reflecting the professional vision, according to which the Nursing School was fashioned in its first years, was introduced into the country only with the arrival of the nurses belonging to the Hadassah unit. Training in nursing as a profession was intended for educated women, and the educational framework included acquiring knowledge and skills in a wide range of areas. This training was supposed to meet standards recognized by professional or government authorities and to equip the course graduates with a certificate.

This means that the founding of the Hadassah Nursing School in 1918, following the American model, was not the continuation of nurses’ training as it had been done until then in Eretz Israel (along the pattern of Dr. Helena Kagan, for example), but rather that this institution reflected a different, broad, revolutionary concept.

The Goals of the Hadassah Nursing School and the Ideas behind It

“The ‘Hadassah’ federation developed and coalesced into a Zionist-social feminist organization. What the active progressive American women strove

for in the city slums was what the 'Hadassah' women aspired to the *Yishuv* in Eretz Israel. They worked to have a healthy population that would be able to function properly on the personal and public level."¹² Progressive ideas stressed faith in the advancement of people and their environment, and science and education served as the main booster for achieving this. In actuality, the progressives called for improving efficiency in the managing of institutions and for strengthening the concept of professionalism.¹³

Ideas in health guidance were influenced, on the one hand, by the educational concepts that developed at that time in New York and, on the other, from movements such as the Antituberculosis League, headed by figures such as C. E. A. Winslow, that disseminated the idea of preventive medicine.¹⁴

The nurses in the American Zionist Medical Unit saw themselves as emissaries for the dissemination of Western culture in general and the message of nursing in particular. One must keep in mind that in those days there was in the West a comprehensive concept of mission for the advancement of non-developed colonies, and those delegations were part of the idea. This was the context of the ideology of the Hadassah Zionist Women's Organization, which the unit's nurses were intended to implement in Eretz Israel.¹⁵ Alice Seligsberg, one of the leaders of the medical unit until 1921, described the goals behind the establishment of the school as follows:

The Orient needs professionally trained nurses. . . . Why not train Palestinian girls to take over the work of the American nurses? . . . the inhabitants of this land . . . needed work above all else, and to open a new profession to the intelligent girls of the country, was to render a service thrice blessed. One more reason: to teach Palestinian girls to work and to become economically independent, was a means of elevating the position of women in the Orient.¹⁶

A pivotal role in the application of these ideas was played by Henrietta Szold.¹⁷

American Influences on the Development of the Nursing School

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, nursing began a struggle in the United States for the right to be recognized as a profession. Nursing leaders, such as Isabel Hampton-Robb, Isabel M. Stewart, Lavinia L. Dock, and Adelaide M. Nutting strove to turn nursing into a profession as other groups of workers had done in that period. Looking at the history of nursing, one

sees that in the United States it was in the middle of a lengthy, complicated transformation when nursing began to cross the borders into Eretz Israel, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The founding of the Nursing School was one of the first projects of American Jews in Eretz Israel, and an important one. The concept of nursing as understood by the founders of the school in Eretz Israel, such as Henrietta Szold, Alice Seligsberg, and its first directors, was influenced by the American reality.¹⁸ With the establishment of the school, American concepts were brought to the country from the field of medicine and medical administration, and they promoted the process of the shift from the idea of a hospital being a charitable community institution to an institute efficiently operated and guided by economic considerations.

Henrietta Szold, who spoke at the graduation party of the first class of the Nursing School at the end of 1921, called for the cultivating of professional education in Eretz Israel, because “expertise is the mother of mercy.”¹⁹

The school was managed in the American spirit. Just as in America, where a nursing school was directed by a committee composed of professional people above which was a committee of nonprofessional women involved in public works, so too in Eretz Israel it was run by the American nurses Anna Kaplan and Bertha Landsman above whom was a system of women engaged in public works whose base was in New York.²⁰ This latter body, which was responsible for the economic aspects of the school, constituted a bridge between the Hadassah nurse in Eretz Israel and the leaders, especially Isabel Steward, at the leading nursing center in the United States at that time — Columbia University in New York.

From reviewing source material, we learn that the leaders of the Hadassah women’s organization believed that the idea of nursing as a profession comprised a number of components: the need for lengthy training and the acquisition of skills and knowledge for the purpose of efficient activity (and they strove to design these elements according to the best of American standards); selection of the cream of the *Yishuv* women; recognition of the importance of nursing’s contribution to society and to the nation; awarding a relatively high status in society to nursing, derived from its close association with medicine and teaching and from the elitist conception of the nursing school as part of the Hadassah institutions; opening the way for achieving economic independence for women in the profession; and stressing the need for special professional language.

The American characterization of the concept of nursing stands out in light of comparison to the European idea. The struggle of the American

nurses for recognition of their occupation as a profession preceded that of their European counterparts, and this also stressed the difference between the doctors: In Eretz Israel, there prevailed among the physicians of European origin a conservative notion that considered a nurse as a physician's helper, in contrast to the way their American colleague in the country regarded the essence of nursing.

One of the main topics to which American influence was applied was standardization of the curriculum in nursing education.²¹ It also may be that Anna Kaplan brought with her to the school the concept of the curriculum that she had studied at the Lebanon Hospital Nursing School in New York.²² Training in practical work was carried out by the American registered nurses.

Yet, despite the aspiration to design the school after the American model, the fields of study at the beginning were dictated by the needs of the moment, which were taking care of cleanliness and sanitation, and the typical nurses' duties: distributing medicines and bandaging. The type of lessons taught fit the initial activity of the medical unit, which dealt with treating infectious diseases and epidemics, and only later came the introduction of comprehensive health services.

In 1920, British military rule ended in Eretz Israel and was replaced by a civilian government. At the end of 1921, the Twelfth Zionist Congress, held in Carlsbad, decided to turn the medical unit into "an independent medical organization that will function autonomously in the country and will be directly subordinate to 'Hadassah' which is in America." We may presume that this change in the concept of the unit influenced the school in general and the design of its set curricula in particular.²³

For 1925, a reform was instituted in the curriculum. Hadassah Schedrovitzky-Sapir, a member of the first graduating class and Kaplan's intended successor, returned from studying at Columbia University in New York and the curriculum of the National League of Nursing Education was implemented.²⁴

One of the important elements of change was the incorporation into the curriculum of a course in public health and in midwifery; another aspect of the influence of the spirit of professionalism was the process of academization that gradually had been realized in the United States from the beginning of the century; in Eretz Israel the idea was mentioned as early as the 1920s, but owing to the lack of a university it was held off until 1927, two years after the founding of the Hebrew University.²⁵ Anna Kaplan then presented a detailed proposal for a four-year curriculum that would be integrated with

studies at the Hebrew University. The program was discussed, but postponed to a later date.

An additional expression of Americanization is seen in Anna Kaplan's application to Henrietta Szold and the Hadassah women in New York concerning the need for the translation of manuals, such as the book by A. C. Maxwell and A. E. Pope that dealt with the principles of nursing, or for sending additional nursing books from the United States.²⁶ The issue of further nurses' training, mainly in the United States but also in Britain, in the fields of administration, teaching, and public health, received great attention from the Hadassah women in New York as well as from directors in Eretz Israel, with the aim of fostering the concept of nursing as a profession.

A concrete expression of the founding of an American school in Eretz Israel was its registration in the 1920s in the State of New York as one of the recognized schools for training nurses.²⁷ The registration was intended to enable graduates to be examined there so they could obtain a certificate as a registered nurse in New York, which was among the most developed states in the United States in the field of nursing.²⁸

The Perception of Nursing as a Profession in the Field of Public Health

The subject of public health was a central component in student training at the Eretz Israel nursing school in light of Hadassah's goals and the local needs. In the United States, the perception of nursing as a profession, in its broadest sense, is expressed mainly in the field of public health.²⁹ In the 1920s, this field blossomed and attained a status full of potential relative to other nursing fields; because of the remarkable independence of the women working in it, the field served as a model in the struggle for attaining the status of a profession. The leading activity in public health was conducted in New York, at the Henry Street Settlement, founded by the Jewish nurse Lillian Wald in 1891.³⁰ Evidence of Wald's involvement in Hadassah resides in the fact that at the "Medical Advisory Board," founded in 1916 in New York to "plan and oversee" the emergency campaign for sending the medical unit to Palestine (under the sponsorship of Henrietta Szold) included, among others, Lillian Wald.³¹

The first nurses to arrive in Eretz Israel were American women influenced by the image of the independent woman, unencumbered with family, equipped with a profession and a universalistic, humanistic approach, a

woman who conquers areas that had not been treated properly, mainly in the field of public health.³²

An example of the influence of the professional approach of the Henry Street Settlement was the re-organization of the work of the midwives, led by Bertha Landsman, at the end of 1925.³³

American Influences in a Context of British Rule

Britain is, to a great extent, the cradle of modern nursing, thanks to the work of Florence Nightingale, who founded the first independent school for training nurses in London. The model of Nightingale's school became well established and was long-lived in England, the United States, and other countries to which its students came.

In England, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, the nurses fought for the registration of nursing and its being anchored in the law.³⁴

In 1919, Parliament passed the Nursing Law, and the General Nursing Council for England and Wales was founded to implement the law.³⁵ In 1948, when the National Health Law was ratified, most of the authorities of the General Nursing Council were transferred to the Health Ministry.

Like American nursing at the beginning of the Mandate period in Eretz Israel, nursing in Britain was deep in the middle of institutionalization. The regulations that the British authority in Eretz Israel imposed were influenced by the arrangements for licensing registered nurses in Britain, which were based on the program of minimal training that was provided at most of the nursing schools in Britain. In this context, the directors of the Hadassah Nursing School took care to institute a maximal curriculum in the spirit of the reform of nursing education in America.

Training of Nurses in Eretz Israel

The British administration, in contrast to its Ottoman predecessor, strove to institute in various areas of life orderly frameworks, laws, and procedures that could be supervised. In the field of health, the British government in 1918, and later in 1922, published the public health regulations, in which there was a section "Licenses for Medical Personnel and Others."³⁶ In this section, nurses were not included except for midwives, which led to the conclusion that it was permissible to work in nursing even without presenting a

certificate, that is, without minimal training. Only on 26 February 1923 were the first government regulations for the training of nurses published, and then anyone who claimed she was a registered nurse was required to present a certificate issued by the British government.³⁷ From then on, the Nursing School took it upon itself to comply with a number of regulations applicable to the following areas: recognition of the hospital in which school was located as a learning center; registration of students and entrance requirements; a curriculum and a minimal period of study; examinations; and languages of study. These regulations were renewed in 1925, 1942, and 1946, and they became void upon the end of the British Mandate in 1948.³⁸

Summary

In the area of the professional education of women in Eretz Israel after World War I, the founding of the first postsecondary occupational school for women stands out, and it is none other than the Hadassah training school for registered nurses in Jerusalem, founded toward the close of 1918.

The concept of the nursing school in its early years was characterized by an America tinge against the background of the needs of the time and place, while maintaining the obligatory supervisory framework of the British authorities; this framework was influenced by the development of nursing in Britain in those days. The Zionist Organization of America and the Hadassah women, and foremost Henrietta Szold, were motivated by an ideology based on concepts of social feminism, Zionism and professionalism, and the colonial idea of the development of backward areas in the spirit of contemporary America. As part of this ideology, nursing was brought to Eretz Israel as a revolution in the area of nurses' training in the nature of the profession. The registered nurse was an educated woman who had been trained, in an educational framework, for a wide range of roles in the field of health services in contrast to the previous period, over whose occupational training there had been no supervision, when she had been trained by doctors to perform simple, limited tasks.

The professional vision lost some of its power toward the end of the 1920s in Eretz Israel, but the struggle to improve it continues to this day.