

Arthur Ruppin and the Production
of Pre-Israeli Culture

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Giuseppe Veltri

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Arthur Ruppin and the Production of Pre-Israeli Culture

By
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Etan Bloom, January 2011.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the history of the Zionist cultural identity and repertoire and in particular the way they were evolved in Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century. Though it attempts to describe the social field as a whole it uses one particular individual – Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943) – to serve as a lens that enables us to present a complex cultural space and to explore questions regarding the ways individuals shaped and were shaped by culture.

The book describes and analyzes the perceptions and actions of the leading officials and agents of the *Palestine Office* (PO)¹ directed by Ruppin, and their impact on the culture planning of the Pre-Israeli² or Modern Hebrew social field. The first three chapters concentrate on the aspirations, ideas and images, i.e., the models of perception, of the heads of the PO with regard to the imagined Jewish or Hebrew culture in Palestine, while the last and longest chapter deals with questions regarding the practical ways in which these perceptions were *transferred*³ to the Modern Hebrew community of Palestine (known as the *New Yishuv*),⁴ and with the clarification of the strategies and culture planning that have led to its success.

¹ The *Palestine Office* was established in Jaffa in 1908 by Ruppin as the representative of the *World Zionist Organization* in Palestine. Over the decade, the PO was the central agency for Zionist settlement activities in Palestine, forming the core of the administrative institutions and activities of the *New Yishuv*. The PO was replaced in 1918 by several institutions, including the *Jewish Agency*, which functioned more or less as the government of the *New Yishuv*. In a smooth process during the years 1947–1948, the networks and institutions established by the PO and the JA came to be the formal institutions of the state of Israel.

² By *Pre-Israeli* I refer in this book to the culture created by the modern settlers of Palestine, between 1882 and 1948, who created a separate community which adopted Hebrew as its major language and modified the culture inherited from its ancestors for a large range of cultural components. As will be discussed in the following, the Pre-Israeli culture defined and perceived itself with regard to the Hebrews, and thus, it is equivalent in this book to the definition *Modern Hebrews*.

³ On the concept of *transfer* see: Even-Zohar, *Making of Culture Repertoire*, 373–381.

⁴ A Modern Hebrew concept designating most of the Jewish community in Palestine from the Second Aliyah period (1903–1914) until 1948 and the establishment of Israel (the word *Yishuv* is used for *settlement* [as verb and noun], as well as for *the people* of the settlement).

Ruppin's Activities: An Overview

Dr. Arthur Ruppin was sent to Palestine for the first time in 1907 by the heads of the *German [World] Zionist Organization* in order to make a pilot study of the possibilities for colonization. After a few months of extensive work he presented his report and a concrete operative plan. A few weeks later, he was appointed representative of the Zionist movement in Palestine and director of the *Palestine Office*, which he established, cautiously and discreetly, in a two-room apartment in Jaffa (1908).

Ruppin was, as the preceptor of the labor movement Berl Katznelson describes, the central “colonizer” of the new Zionist community.⁵ Between 1908 and 1942 there was hardly any large scale national undertaking in Palestine – economic, juridical, diplomatic or educational – in which Ruppin was not involved at the highest level of planning and direction. From the start, he worked to implement his vision and plan of creating a Modern Hebrew social field, in a model state.

Ruppin's most important and urgent responsibility and activity was to purchase land in Palestine and to establish on it Jewish settlements of every possible type. In the complex bureaucracy and political tensions of the fading Ottoman Empire that ruled Palestine, this was not an easy task. Ruppin's successful handling of this mission was due to his high skills as a professional lawyer⁶ and an experienced businessman. His activities paved the way for many others and made the purchasing of land accessible as never before.

A short time after his arrival in Palestine, he initiated the *Palestine Land Development Company* (PLDC),⁷ an institution that, together with the *Jewish National Fund* (JNF) (of which Ruppin was an important member), regulated the Zionists' land purchases.

It was Ruppin's land purchasing policy and practical ability that created the possibility for the first extensive land purchase in the Central Eastern and Western Jezreel Valley and the subsequent acquisitions in other parts of the Jezreel Valley, in Wadi Hawarith (now Emek Hefer) and the Haifa Bay area (now known as Emek Zebulun) and as far as

⁵ Katznelson B., *On Ruppin*, 30.

⁶ From 1902 until 1907 – the year he first came to Palestine – he practiced law as a *Referendar* (junior barrister), Assessor and then (German) State Prosecutor (Bertisch, *Political-Economic Philosophy*, 2).

⁷ The *Palestine Land Development Company* was established in 1909 by Ruppin and Otto Warburg as an instrument for the acquisition and development of land in Palestine.

the Beth-Shean Valley and the Hula Valley. Similarly, large contiguous areas of land were purchased under his close direction in Haifa (Carmel, Hadar Ha-Carmel, etc.), Tel Aviv (the first large scale acquisitions) and Jerusalem (Mount Scopus and barren lands belonging to the Greek Patriarchate which became King George Avenue, Rehavia, etc.). These purchases were made by various means, sometimes through companies specially established for the purpose, and all this was part of a consistent policy.⁸

Ruppin's abilities and achievements made him, within a short time, the movement's "primus inter pares" expert in all matters connected with Palestine,⁹ and led the Zionist Executive to call upon him to present and defend the settlement policy of the Zionist Organization at the various Commissions of Inquiry which were set up, seriatim, by the British, from the time of the Arab riots/rebellion of 1929 onwards. Consequently, the distribution of the population within the Jewish enclave and the frontiers of the Jewish state in the first Partition Proposal of the *Royal (Peel) Commission* in 1937 as well as the subsequent one of the *United Nations Special Commission in Palestine* just a decade later, in 1947, actually followed what Ruppin had prepared when he began his activities in Palestine, and which he re-drafted at several later stages of his career.¹⁰

At the beginning of the twenties, Ruppin established the *Workers' Bank* (Bank HaPoalim), and during the thirties, he was a dominant party in the negotiations which led to the *Transfer Agreement* signed with the Nazi regime, and then in its implementation. At the same time, he established the *Institute for Economic Research and Planning*, which created economic and demographic plans for the following decades of Jewish settlement, and included a compensation claim from Germany after the Second World War.

Ruppin sat on many forums and boards, many of which he himself had established. He was, for example, a member of the board of the *Workers' Bank* and of the board of *Mekorot* (the central water company), until his last days; in both of them he was the head of the directorate.¹¹ Among the many institutions he initiated or shaped were the previously

⁸ Bein, *The Man and his Work*, 136.

⁹ Penslar, *Technical Expertise*, 206.

¹⁰ Bein, *The Man and his Work*, 136.

¹¹ Goldstein, *Eschkol*, 219. Pinchas Rozen, whom Ruppin helped economically and professionally, was also on the board of *Mekorot* (*ibid.*, 265).