

## World War I

*On a Saturday, August 1 1914, in the afternoon I bicycled from Asham to Seaford to bathe in the sea...I dived a long dive into the sea and came up against....a London policeman on two weeks holiday...[He] said to me almost casually...[that] although he had had only a few days of his holiday, he had that morning had a telegram recalling him to duty in London. "It's war' he said again dejectedly as we swam toward the beach;" otherwise they wouldn't have recalled me." That was how I first learned... that 19<sup>th</sup> century civilization was ending. Leonard Woolf Beginning Again*

During the years 1914-1918 the impact of the war on different members of the Bentwich family ranged from disaster to triumph.

Rumblings of war affected Nita and Michael in Zikhron Ya'akov even before the official declarations of war in Europe. Nita wrote on July 29, "We are without news. European ships have deserted us, and we are wondering what Europe is doing with itself and whether it is already blown up. Luckily the English Channel rather divides you from the explosion. Here money has stopped but paper money with good credit takes one along. A few Arabs have gone to mobilise [in the Turkish Army] and many others are in a state of thinking they may have to go. Horses have been taken for the army, and our poor old Mona among them."

Two weeks later Michael wrote: "The chief excitement is the absence of cash. There is a moratorium and the APC pays but a small part of the deposits; as all banks in Palestine. I have had to tell my workmen that in future they must work for credit. Fortunately my credit is good and I will give them paper, which will be accepted in payment at the shops here. The Ashkenazim and the Arabs of course accepted --they had to; indeed they are better off with me than elsewhere. But the finest thing was the two Yemenites. To them I said (in Hebrew) 'I have no money, like all the world. They answered "Good." When I said it was bad and that I worried about how the workers would find food, they said, "The Lord will give." And then went on to say they would work even without my notes, and they had a little corn which they would grind. All the world must submit, but they do it with such good grace and real trust in God."

In October Turkey entered the war on the side of Germany, and the Langes, with Budge who was staying with them, were deported to England

In June, 1914 Susannah was in Birchington at Carmelcourt taking care of "the innumerable nothingnesses that have to be done in getting a house like this ready for incoming tenants." She went "into each room, with a huge tray on which was arranged the workbasket,

## World War I

nails, hammer, cupboard paper, cord, brass and silver polishers, gas mantles, and the rest that is needed for last touches." She rented a house in Sussex for the family's summer holiday and invited several German friends from Breslau, as well as Lilian and Israel, visiting from America with their three children ( Herzl, born December 25 1906, Ben Zion, born July 4 1908, and Carmel, born on Thanksgiving Day 1910).

In July, the approach of war cast suspicion on the German visitors and on Israel Friedlander who spoke with a foreign accent. One night a light was inadvertently left burning after sunset (a violation of blackout on the coast). Soldiers appeared, searched the building, and questioned everyone. Susannah found the atmosphere of suspicion and malice hard to bear.

Stresses that had built up over years exploded. One Sunday Herbert Bentwich returned late and hungry from a game of golf to find the family assembled at the table, eating dinner. He was furious that they had not waited for him. He went up to Susannah and slapped her face. The shock of that slap stayed with Carmel. (age 14), for the rest of her life.

A few weeks later, back in London, Herbert came down on the morning of Yom Kippur, and told the family that Mother had been suffering from severe pain in her side all night. Doctors were consulted. They made recommendations; but they had no cure for Susannah's illness which they diagnosed as "pernicious anemia." In November Susannah went down down to Birchington with Dorothy, to rest. Margery wrote to her " Please don't work yourself out in the garden, and take Dr Worthington's advice when he tells you to give that arm a complete rest."

In December Michael and Nita arrived in England. Thinking, like everyone else, that the war could not last long, they intended to use their time in England for what would help back home in Zikhron. They took rooms in Cambridge; Michael read the Koran and attended lectures; Nita worked on the university farm and studied agriculture.

Susannah's bedroom in 21 Cavendish Road overlooked a training ground that had been installed on the practice grounds of Lord's Cricket Club. Bugle calls of Reveille in the morning and Last Post at night punctuated every day. A beloved nephew died after a few day's illness.

Looking ahead to Jose's Bar Mitzvah Susannah wrote: "We must try and make it as happy as possible. After all, it is only once in a lifetime, and one must put aside sorrow for the day." Of the day itself she wrote to Lilian, Jose "looked like an angel at the desk and his voice was certainly like one."

## World War I

Hebe (age 20) noted in her diary: "We forgot the War. The atmosphere was all serene and calm. What a jolly dinner party it was, -- even the speeches were interesting. In the play at the end of the day. Margery took the part of Cookie --what good fun it was-- what rare good fun."

After the Bar-Mitzvah Susannah gave up. Doctors who predicted she would live for months, reduced their estimate to weeks, and then to days. Even then she urged her children to continue practicing, however imperfectly. Carmel wrote: "the Arabesque of Debussy that I was then learning is better held in memory than anything I have learnt since, because its every phrase was studied so that Mother's rest would not be disturbed."

Susannah died on the second day of Shevuos, May 19, 1915.

When Susannah was gone, the family looked to Nita for counsel and support. Michael was sympathetic and helpful to the family, but insisted that Nita continue with her land course. He kept her from being totally immersed in family affairs. She herself believed that, in the face of loss and uncertainty "one must live in the enjoyment and appreciation of the present, and then the future will somehow be solved....I cannot philosophize, partly because life seems to be made up so much of truths which are contradictory, and if made to harmonize do not remain so true."

In the summer of 1915, as the war and their stay in England dragged on, Nita and Michael went on preparing themselves for the life in Zikhron that they intended to return to. Michael continued his studies of Arabic, and Nita continued to study agriculture at Reading College. She wrote a vivid, detailed account of day to day life in Palestine for the school magazine of her old school, South Hampstead High School. In 1916 Nita and Michael traveled across the Atlantic, braving submarines, to be with Lilian for a few weeks.

On their return, Nita and Michael went to work on a farm in Suffolk. Farm labor was hard. After four days of struggling to keep up with the threshing machine, Nita wrote home proudly that she and Michael had earned 10s 10d, "the first money either of us has ever earned in our lives, so its very precious and it was got with the sweat of our brows." She described their daily program: "At 5.45 a.m. the alarm goes off; Michael gets up. I stay in bed generally till about 6.10 and enjoy the loveliest 20 minutes of the day. 6:45 a.m. Breakfast. 7:15 a.m. We go to work. 7.30- Work without interval. 12 Lunch. We come home ravenous and generally have bread and butter and cheese or fried eggs or a milk soup if I feel energetic." In the afternoon they

## World War I

worked in shifts, generally Nita from 1 to 3, and Michael from 3 to 5. They had a supper of meat and vegetables at 5:45, and after washing up and preparing for the next day's dinner and breakfast. 9..00 p.m. Hot water bottles and bed." In Nita's eyes "all the un-necessaries of civilisation" were absent and the life agreed with her "A-1 plus. I don't think I have looked so fit."

Michael loved to see how happy she was, how completely she identified herself with the work, finding a soul in every cow in her charge. He encouraged her, gave her direction and the companionship she needed. His presence kept her steady. But he felt, being a civilian in war time, unmanly, diminished. He thought it wrong to accept the benefits of citizenship and not be ready to make the sacrifice of life for them in time of war. In June he went up to London to consult with a friend, and signed on as a private. He returned to the farm without his beard. Nita wrote: "I have a new husband, I don't know whether to laugh or cry and I end generally by laughing, but feeling very cryey inside. I am sure if I had met him in the streets and he had not spoken, I should not have recognized him."

For Michael, army service was a disastrous, humiliating experience. He was 44, compared to his fellow soldiers who were in their twenties, and he found himself a fish in a desert. He had no skills in the ordinary work required. He hated violence. He could not digest the unkosher meat. He was seriously upset by the "filthy language" in the camp. After six months he collapsed with a variety of physical ailments, and was in hospital for some weeks. There he underwent surgery, possibly for a hernia.

He found it a relief to be free to read and think and not to have "nominal and ridiculous duties which still occupy time and irritate by their uselessness." He thought about religious practice. "I have seen a Mohammedan prostrate himself in Hyde Park, but I have never been quite clear how far one should lay tefillin in public. I did so in hospital for several days, but I felt so uncomfortable that I could not think properly of my prayers, and resolved to drop it. Nobody had said a word except when one of the nurses enquired what I was doing with my hat and my neighbour answered that I was a Jew and saying my prayers. The first day I omitted to put my hat on in the morning at the usual time, my neighbour, thinking I was not strong enough to fetch it down (it was the morning after the operation) said, "Shall I get you down your cap to say your prayers?" I took it as a sign and continued to lay tefillin and now have more concentration on prayer again."

## World War I

Once released from the hospital, Michael was stationed in Winchester, where he served out the rest of his enlistment. Nita took rooms nearby. While they were there, she made their rooms a home. A letter written years later by a fellow soldier sheds light on a corner of their life during those months. "It was the privilege, and a highly valued one, of a few Jewish soldiers, at that time stationed in Winchester, to know Mrs. Lange during the time that she was there, together with Mr. Lange, who though over military age, was voluntarily serving with the Middlesex Regiment. It was a source of great comfort to us to be able to look to her as a friend in those days, and to be invited to spend our Friday evenings under her hospitable roof was a joy indeed."



**Nita as a farmworker, 1917**

## World War I

The war that drove the Langes back to England gave Norman a road to Palestine. In September 1915 he married Helen Franklin, ( known in the family as "Mamie"). They had known each other for several years, and they shared ideals of social justice. Hellenism, the book that Norman published in 1919 is dedicated to "My wife Helen, who represents for me the perfect union of Hebraism and Hellenism."

Herbert Bentwich must have been pleased with the match; the Franklins were a well-established Anglo-Jewish family. The Bentwich sisters admired Mamie's good looks and her energy. When the engagement was announced, in April 1915 Susannah was ill; it would be interesting to know what she thought.

After the wedding Norman and Mamie went out to Cairo together, and she worked there as confidential secretary in the Ministry of Finance. At the end of 1915, the British Army, preparing to launch an attack on the Ottoman Empire, needed officers who could speak Arabic and who could learn quickly to deal with camels and with Egyptian and Sudanese camelmen. Norman applied for and received a commission as second lieutenant in the Camel Transport Corps. Mamie stayed in Cairo for some months, and then returned home to London where she worked as a forewoman in the munitions factory at Woolwich Arsenal. She was indignant at the treatment of the workers and tried to form a trade union. The authorities frowned on those activities, so she left that service to become an organizer of the Girl's Land Army in the Home Counties.

Norman was delighted to be on his way to Palestine, and his enthusiasm comes through in his description of the camel corps. The corps was a new formation, designed to be first line transport for the troops along the Suez Canal and in the Sinai and western deserts of Egypt, where motors and horses were of little use. The camelmen as well as the camels were drawn from Egypt, and the corps comprised 30,000 camels divided into fifteen companies, each with 2000 camels and 1000 men. Norman was posted first to a camel camp at Ain-al-Shems (Eye of the Sun), a few miles outside Cairo. From the outset he enjoyed the biblical associations. Close to the camp an obelisk marked the site of Heliopolis (the City of the Sun), and of On, the city of Joseph.

The officers were instructed in the elements of the care of camels, and, what was more difficult, in the management of the drivers, who had been recruited from the villages of Upper

## World War I

and Lower Egypt by methods like those of the English press gangs in the Napoleonic wars. To make the service more attractive, its period was limited to six months. The men were given the opportunity of re-engaging, but the call of the village, *balad* -the word from which came "blighty"- was often too strong. The non-commissioned officers came largely from the Australian and New Zealand Anzac Divisions.

Norman enjoyed watching and listening the camelmen, who at night would sing and tell stories for hours at a time, improvising romances and rhymes. He would peep into their tents and see the assembly sitting bolt upright, in rapt attention to the romancer who spun a topical tale or satire. Outside, the patrol that guarded the camel lines would shout every few minutes their moving *Wahid* (One), proclaiming the faith of Islam. The camelmen gambled ferociously with their pay. But when some headmen returned from a holiday in their village, having engaged for another term, they brought shrouds that had been donated by the retiring men of the company for any drivers who might die on the service. They solemnly constituted the shrouds as a *Wakf* (charitable endowment), and made Norman the Trustee of the Wakf. To Norman the years in the Camel Corps were a Pilgrim's Progress, bringing him closer to the Promised Land. He felt that he was "going up, like our forefathers, to the Land of Israel. On the stony, sandy way I was attended by the vision of a Palestine redeemed."

By December 9, 1917 the Camel Corps, following the army, had arrived at the approaches to Jerusalem. Norman, marching his 2000 camels (contrary to regulations), down the metalled road that was reserved for motor transport, saw that they were blocking the way of a car. He wrote: "In the previous convoy heavy rain had made the tracks a death trap for slithering camels, and I had lost a score of animals and several men. I explained my transgression to the unrecognized general whose car was held up by the oncoming of the endless line. He ordered his car off the road to make way for them, walked with me and pumped me about the organization of the Camel Corps." When Norman arrived at the camp, he learned that the anonymous general was Sir Edmund Allenby, Commander in Chief of the British forces in Egypt and Palestine. (77Yrs p49)

Two weeks later, arriving in Jerusalem, Norman found that the city had lost half its inhabitants through disease and exile. Winter storms had left the city miserable and muddy; many people were being fed by the military authority; the shops were empty. There were no law

## World War I

courts and no lawyers, but morale was high. Allenby's entrance into the city had lifted all hearts. Jews were full of a sense of salvation. Lord Milner wrote, "the people have not, like the Egyptians had time to forget all the atrocities to which our coming has put an end."

In the spring of 1918 nearly two hundred Jewish officers and men celebrated the Seder together in Jerusalem in the palatial house of a Bukharan Jew. The next day, after service at the Western Wall, Norman led men of the parade into the area of the Haram, the site of the Temple of Solomon. There they were inspired by a vision of peace between the communities. "In those days while Indian Muslims guarded the sanctuary, Jews, Christians, and Moslems, whether soldiers or civilians were happy together."

A few weeks later, as Norman (by then Major Bentwich) was leading three camel companies towards Jericho, he was told to report to the General in charge of Administration of Occupied Territory. He wrote home: "He said they wanted me to be a combination of Procureur General and Appellate Judge in the courts which are to be set up; and would I see at once Orme Clark who is the Judicial Adviser....They are I believe to ask for my transfer at once....The idea of having to think again is almost appalling, but I suppose I will get used to law after a bit as I have got used to camels." At Jericho Norman handed over the convoy to his successor. A week later he was "in Jerusalem and at a post which I did not dream to hold for many years." War had brought him to his goal. His elation was both personal, and part of widespread Zionist confidence built on the Balfour Declaration of 1917 with its promise of a "Homeland for the Jews."

In those happy hours Weizmann, then Chief of the Zionist Commission, approached General Allenby for permission to lay foundation stones for the Hebrew University on the Gray Hill Estate on Mt Scopus - land that the Zionists had bought in 1916 while the Turks were still in possession of Palestine. At first Allenby was taken aback. At that point, May 18, 1918, the War was not over; in fact the Germans were almost at the gates of Paris. He said, "We may be rolled back any minute! Why start now something you may never be able to finish?" Weizmann answered: "This will be a great act of faith -- faith in the victory that is bound to come, and faith in the future of Palestine. I can think of no better symbol of faith than the founding of the Hebrew University, under your auspices, and in this hour." Allenby was impressed, and permission was given.

## World War I

In June General Allenby suggested to Weizmann that he attempt to approach the Emir Faisal for at least a tentative agreement on the Zionist program. Faisal ibn Husain (1885-1933) was the third son of Husain ibn Ali (sherif of Mecca and senior member of the family of the prophet). Born in the Hejaz, his first years were spent in the desert, learning desert life. In 1891 the family moved to Constantinople, where Faisal grew up, studied, learned politics and Western ways. In 1913, after a stay in Mecca, he returned to Constantinople as a member of the Turkish parliament. In Syria, in 1915 Faisal came in contact with Arab secret societies, and was horrified by Turkish anti-Arab atrocities. He joined with his father in the Arab Revolt, which was assisted by the British, and he commanded forces in the desert campaign in the Hejaz under the high command of General Allenby.

Weizmann, taking Allenby's suggestion as a sign that he wanted to pave the way for future good relations between the Jews and the Arab world, journeyed for ten hot days, by train and ship and car to Faisal's headquarters. There, as Weizmann tells it:

I explained to him the mission on which I had come to Palestine, our desire to do everything in our power to allay Arab fears and susceptibilities, and our hope that he would lend us his powerful moral support. I stressed the fact that there was a great deal of room in the country if intensive development were applied, and that the lot of the Arabs would be greatly improved by our work there. With all this I found the Emir in full agreement. . . . Time was to prove that the Emir was in earnest when he said that he was eager to see the Jews and Arabs working in harmony in the Peace Conference that was to come and that in his view the destiny of the two peoples was linked with the Middle East and must depend on the good will of the Great Powers.

In the event, the Great Powers' support of Faisal had mixed effects. (After two years in which he was a King, ruling from Damascus, Faisal was thrown out by the French; he was then elected King of Iraq, a British mandate, and succeeded, before his death, in getting the League of Nations to admit Iraq as an independent nation.) Nevertheless Weizmann remained convinced, to the end of his life that his conversation with Faisal was as significant a step as laying foundation stones for the Hebrew University. He believed that "the ultimate identity of Arab and Jewish interests is a fundamental reality," and would someday be recognized as such.

The foundation stones for the Hebrew University were set on July 24, 1918. Everyone that mattered in Jerusalem, military and civil, including General Allenby with his staff and the heads of all the churches, all Jaffa that could walk or scrounge a drive up to Jerusalem, detachments from the Jewish "colonies" and a Jewish deputation from Egypt flocked up the hill

## World War I

different classes and communities, including the Christian and the Moslem. Weizmann made the only speech, proclaiming that learning was the Jewish dreadnought and that in the University the wandering soul of Israel would reach its haven ( 77p54-55). Seven years later, at the opening of the University Mrs Weizmann, sitting next to Lord Allenby at dinner, was moved to ask him "Did you think my husband completely harebrained when he asked your permission to lay the foundation stones in 1918?" He replied, "When I think back to that day --as I often do-- I come to the conclusion that that short ceremony inspired my army and gave it confidence in the future."



**Planning the Hebrew University (1919?)**

**l-r** Norman Bentwich, Judah Magnes, Menachem Mendel Ussisskin, Chaim Nachman Bialik

## World War I

During the war, while Norman prospered, and Michael suffered, the non-combattant members of the family were also variously affected. Naomi was a conscientious objector, preparing for her Moral Science Tripos at Newnham College in Cambridge. She passed the Tripos in June 1917. Hebe, at Girton college in Cambridge, lived out four years during which her fiancée, Eugen Mayer, served in the German army. Budge took some training as a nurse, and worked in hospitals. Carmel, at South Hampstead High School until 1917, was sporadically part of the Land Army, helping to gather in the harvest. Jose was a schoolboy at Winchester, enrolled in a corps that was getting military training. When Naomi seemed about to persuade him to assume the role of conscientious objector, Margery reproved her missionary efforts saying "It would be unhealthy almost in a boy of his age to think of things in your way....All a boy of his age [he was fourteen] has to do is to be straight and honest in his everyday life and in what he is called upon to do. A parent has the right to impose his standard of ethics on his son up to a certain age, and if non-combatancy were part of Father's, as Sabbath observance is, he could insist on Jose leaving the corps. But this is not the case. Jose must rely on himself alone, and I have great doubts that his convictions are strong and well formed enough for him to be able to face an examination by Gow or any other master. You will say it is courage he lacks, but it isn't that. He hasn't that strength of conviction which alone gives courage. I think it is neither right nor wise of you to put pressure on the boy."

Margery had some violin engagements in England and played for the troops in France, but engagements to play were few, and money was needed at home. She looked for work in the War Office. After some hesitation she applied for a job as translator of German and was hired. In January, 1917 she wrote to Naomi, "Dr K (Koteliansky) gives me some very interesting work occasionally. He thinks I am getting on alright." A month later she wrote again: "Just a line for Shabbos. Morris Simon is much more Kosher than I, he leaves at five and walks all the way to Harlesden, while I am here still at six [after the sun had set]." When she returned to London she went to the office to tell them she was not coming back: "They were awfully warm and kind and seemed very sorry that I wasn't coming back. But in my heart of hearts I know I oughtn't to, and only hope I shall have strength and resolution enough not to go down that path again."

Thelma went on with her career as a cellist. In September 1914, studying cello in Paris, she tried to find consolation in music, although, she wrote, "Music brings tears to my eyes, and the gayest tune somehow dies off into a minor tone. In fact nothing seems to be real except the

## World War I

war.” Susannah lived long enough to know that Thelma was the child who would fulfill her own passion for music. She saw that Thelma had “the greatest determination and willpower of all the children. She has it in her to conquer. The moment she handles the cello she is part of it, all concentration.”

When Susannah died, Thelma took as her mission to fulfill her mother’s dream. Beginning July 17, 1915, she spent ten weeks in Paris, in the face of wartime conditions, studying with Andre Hekking, a great teacher of cello. There she practiced 6-8 hours a day to achieve ease and freedom of playing. It was a happy and productive time for her. She kept a diary that records every lesson and encounter but makes almost no mention of the war. On July 18: “I am sure I could not have done better; he goes for the fundamentals so much more than Casals ever did, and has a master’s knowledge of how to express his meaning shortly and exactly.” On August 27 she recorded, “Some very good work, -my daily remark.” In September she noted proudly: “Hekking to his son, ‘Il n’y a pas un autre comme celle la -pas un autre je te dis.’ [There is none like her I tell you, not one].” Her last diary entry in Paris reads: “These two months have been a landmark in my life; and now, fixed and confident as I am, I wasn’t to go straight ahead, not looking to the right or left, but always making for the good --my rightful position in the musical world. I will stick to my cello and to my Shabat too.

Returning to England Thelma entered London’s musical world. In November she gave her first public recital at the Grafton Galleries. Critics of the leading daily and weekly newspapers called her “a player of exceptional power,” with a “rare musical outlook,” and “the precious quality of individuality which will carry her far.” Thelma herself wrote to Hebe : “Somehow I knew it was going to be alright in spite of occasional fits of nerves, one very bad just as I had to go on. But you can’t think how lovely it was to feel the strength I had gained out of my work for the concert, and that is, after all, the main thing about a recital.” She played trios with Myra Hess, piano, and Jelly d’Aranyi, violin, in privileged drawing rooms. She played with Myra and Margery in the South Place Institute. She went with a group of musicians to France to play for the soldiers, stipulating not to play on the Sabbath.

The peak of Thelma’s and Margery’s concerts in the war years came” on a Friday in August in 1918 when they played Brahms’ Double Concerto for Violin and Cello at the “Proms.” The concerts began at 7:30 p.m. and ended while it was still light. But the sun was about to set, and they had to walk home –lest they break the Sabbath.