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Pros and Cons

The picture that emerges from this groundbreaking book is light-years away from the pioneering image of the Second Aliyah.

Zohar Shavit

"Imigrantim" ("Immigrants: Jewish Immigration to Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century") by Gur Alroey, Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 253 pages. NIS 104

Who were the pioneers of the Second Aliyah? Hayom, a Hebrew newspaper published in 1907, paints a gloomy picture of the newcomers who arrived in the second wave of mass immigration to Palestine in the early 20th century: "Immigration to Eretz Yisrael, which stopped shortly before the holidays, is now returning to its previous chaotic state: People are arriving without money, without job qualifications, without preparation, without knowledge - and above all, without love of the country. Poor refugees wander through Jaffa like shadows, roaming and cursing the day they were born, in the end opening little shops, nestled one beside the other, selling a few loaves of bread, a couple of bottles of wine, a few pounds of onions. Is it any wonder that this kind of immigration strikes no roots?" This description is light-years away from the conventional image of the Second Aliyah. The most visible members of this group - the ones with whom this wave of immigration are usually associated - not only felt that they were on a historical mission but that it was important to record their experiences and document every step of their heroic enterprise. Second Aliyah pioneers wrote many autobiographies and memoirs, and their view of history became dominant in the historiography of the Second Aliyah. But tens of thousands of other immigrants came to Palestine in those days, motivated by demographics (the growing birthrate among the Jews of Eastern Europe), politics (riots and pogroms), and, of course, economic opportunity. The majority were petty merchants, peddlers and tradesmen who hoped to find a better life for themselves and their families in Palestine. The experiences of these people, although numerically there were many more of them, have not been the subject of historical or sociological study. Gur Alroey is the first to give this large group its due, although one must note that in so doing, he actually underscores the endeavors of the ideological pioneers who were so few in number. Alroey's book was preceded by the groundbreaking research of Yosef Gorny on the immigrants of the Second Aliyah and the studies of Yehoshua Karniel on the scope of emigration from Palestine during the first two waves of aliyah. Gorny, however, based his findings on a census of the Second Aliyah immigrants, which took place in the late 1930s and early 1940s and counted a total of 937 immigrants. Alroey is the first to methodically study the entire body of tens of thousands of immigrants who reached Palestine during this period, drawing upon a wealth of firsthand contemporary sources. "Immigrants" is one of those rare, trailblazing studies that makes you wonder why no one ever thought to explore these matters before - all the more so because so much of the material is available locally, in the Central Zionist Archives and the Lavon Archives. It is the kind of study that does not even require a trip to Odessa or Trieste, although one does have to know how to pose intriguing questions and handle material that no one has touched before. Alroey has studied an impressive array of untapped source material: hundreds of immigrants' letters; the lists of statistics that newspapers of the period were so fond of publishing; records compiled by clerks at ports of entry and departure; articles in the Jewish press in Eastern Europe, which wrote almost obsessively about Jewish emigration from Europe; and most fascinating of all, the correspondence of potential immigrants with information offices. Beginning in 1904, offices of this kind sprang up along the routes frequented by the refugees, offering information about various resettlement opportunities. In 1905, the Odessa Committee established the first information office for those planning to leave for Palestine, and the following year, a branch for new arrivals was inaugurated in Jaffa, headed by Menachem Sheinkin. Other branches opened their doors in Istanbul and Beirut, which were transit points to Palestine. In 1908, another bureau was established in Jaffa under the auspices of the Palestine Office. The director was Arthur Ruppin. From the records of these offices, we learn about the questions the immigrants asked, their motives for immigrating, what their daily lives were like, the trials and tribulations of the journey to Palestine, their early days in the country, their adjustment problems and why some chose to go back. Pimps and con men Alroey distinguishes between those who immigrated to Palestine for ideological reasons and those who joined the large wave of emigration from Europe in 1904-1919, of which only a small part ended up in Palestine. During this period of mass exodus, 1.2 million Jewish refugees

headed for the United States. Along with the 1,000-2,000 idealistic young pioneers normally associated with the Second Aliyah, over 30,000 Jews left for Palestine, mainly from the ports of Odessa (22,953) and Trieste (10,000-11,000). The motives of these people were not ideological. According to Alroey, most of them were families with children - not young unmarried revolutionaries, as commonly believed. Nearly a quarter of them were free professionals, and at least a half never envisaged themselves as farmers in Palestine. Among them were also pimps and con men who took advantage of the refugees and cheated them out of their money. Some sold phony boat tickets, or persuaded the refugees to postpone their trip until their money ran out. Trafficking in women flourished and Jewish prostitutes plied their trade on the outskirts of Jaffa. In the Zeev Smilansky Archives, Alroey found a 1907 newspaper quote, excised from Smilansky's in-depth study of the pre-state Jewish community in Jaffa, describing this aspect of life: "Among the owners of the new hotels are some who have turned into pimps, procuring lewd services for their guests. Often, the 'goods' hail from the immigrant community. How sad and painful to think that a Jew has escaped from a land of murderers only to sell his daughters into harlotry. These prostitutes have become a disgrace to Jaffa." It was not these that the Zionist movement was trying to attract, but people of means. As Menachem Sheinkin and Arthur Ruppin, who ran the information offices, emphasized time and again, Palestine was not a haven for penniless families seeking to escape hardship in Eastern Europe. These families were advised to settle in the United States. Sheinkin angered the workers' groups with his insistence that the Zionist enterprise could never achieve its aims if Palestine took in refugees with health problems and no money. In keeping with this policy, he discouraged most of the applicants: 61 percent were advised not to come to Palestine while only 21 percent were encouraged to take this step. In other cases, the recommendation depended on various factors, primarily financial, or the person was advised to come alone at first, without his family.

Dregs of society In his correspondence, Sheinkin expressed great concern that Palestine was being inundated by poor, uneducated Jews with no professional skills - the kind of people who stood no chance of becoming part of the productive work force and had no capital to invest. In a letter to Otto Warburg (circa 1908), he was critical of their conduct and appearance, and argued that they gave a bad name to the Jews: "I must tell you that this immigration lowers us in the eyes of the government and the local populace. They see poor, ragged, miserable people with tattered bundles, the dregs of society, who are unlikely to do the country any good (...) If there are never any wealthy, respectable, well-dressed, attractive people stepping ashore, the word 'Jew' will become synonymous for weak, inferior and low-class." The selective immigration policy of the information offices was not successful. Sick, impoverished Jews with no job training continued to arrive, choosing Palestine for a whole host of reasons: because they did not have enough money for a longer trip, or because they failed the medical screening and were not allowed to sail to America, or because they were sent back by another country, or simply because, contrary to the conventional image, Palestine was not always the worst choice. Surprising as it may sound, Alroey's comparison of living standards in Jaffa and New York shows that Jaffa actually came out ahead. Not only was the travel time shorter and the trip less expensive, but the housing in Palestine was better. In short, despite America's image as the "goldene medina," Palestine offered a higher standard of living. From Alroey's comparison of Europe and New York it transpires that for these penniless refugees, Jaffa was the better option in terms of housing and the cost of basic foodstuffs. Rent in Jaffa was much lower than in a Jewish neighborhood in Bialystok, where families often spent as much as 50 percent of their total earnings on housing. In Jaffa, rent was never more than 14 percent of the family income. Living conditions in Jaffa were much better than in New York, although rental costs were about the same. While neighborhoods like Neve Zedek and Neve Shalom were overcrowded and hygiene was primitive, the rooms were airy, light and relatively spacious, with high ceilings. Very few were basement apartments. In New York, by contrast, the apartments were tiny (about 10 square meters for 2 rooms and a kitchen), dark and airless, and until 1905, the toilets and water faucets were outside. Tenants sometimes had to walk down five to seven flights to reach them. Food was considerably cheaper in Palestine than in the United States, although the salaries in Palestine were lower. The trip to Jaffa was shorter and not as costly. Sometimes the father arrived first, and the wife and children joined him later. Imagine the mother, speaking only Yiddish, with very little money in her pocket, burdened with several children, some of them toddlers or infants, having to spend days or even weeks with them on a ship. The journey to Palestine was far less traumatic. On top of that, Palestine had a support system for the newcomers. There was someone to help them make the travel arrangements and settle in after their arrival. All this assistance, however, did not keep people from leaving the country. The departure rate was particularly high at the beginning of the Second Aliyah period, with 75 percent of all arrivals turning around and going back - i.e., three out of four. In the last three years, the rate was about 50 percent. Many of them were actually from the ideological pioneer group: the higher the expectations, the greater the disappointment. They came to Palestine eager and fired up, but hurried to leave when their dreams failed. In fact, those who did not choose Palestine for ideological reasons fared better. They did not feel let down and eventually found work and housing that insured them a better life than the one they had known in the Pale of Settlement. Parts of this book read like drama, breathtaking even, chronicling the life

story of tens of thousands of Jews who packed their bags and headed for Palestine. Thus one can only regret that the book is so poorly edited. There are many repetitions and typographical errors, and the decision to translate portions from the immigrants' letters into Hebrew without citing the original language was a serious mistake. Alroey notes that most of the letters were written in Yiddish and Hebrew, and a few in Russian and German. Some were dictated to a "schreiber," while others were written by the immigrants themselves. There is no question that much could be learned about the cultural profile of the writers from their level of literacy. By providing only a Hebrew translation, with no comment on the source language or the linguistic register, readers are denied this opportunity for delving deeper. The quotes from Agnon are no compensation, and altogether, Alroey's rather naive reading of literary texts and attempts at literary analysis are disappointing, considering the methodological sophistication he shows in other areas. In the final reckoning, of course, none of this detracts from the tremendous importance of this groundbreaking study, which is sure to become a handbook for anyone interested in the history of the Yishuv. Alroey was wise in choosing a subject that has been largely overlooked by other scholars of the period, who have focused on a select group of Second Aliyah pioneers. The outcome is a remarkable study that sheds new light on the immigrants and life in Palestine in those days. Alroey's work does not shatter the myth of the Second Aliyah. On the contrary, his account allows the importance of this small group of pioneers and their formative influence, to shine through all the more. For without this tiny cluster of 1,000-2,000 pioneers, which transformed immigration to Palestine into a national enterprise and paved the way for national renaissance, these immigrants would have remained an ethnic group at most, never becoming a sovereign nation. Nor would these lines, in a newspaper which has been on the newsstands since 1919, have seen the light of day.

Prof. Zohar Shavit is the author of "The Construction of Hebrew Culture in the Jewish Yishuv in Eretz Israel" published by the Israel Academy of Sciences and the Bialik Institute.

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