
Dubious Agent is the hectic life story of Sami Hochberg, an early Zionist activist who was born in Bessarabia in 1869, became a part of the Hovavei Zion movement, and emigrated to Ottoman Palestine in 1889. In the early parts of the book Yigal Sarna provides a detailed account of Sami Hochberg’s life, during which he took part in the purchase of land in Palestine as a Zionist land dealer, settled his family there, and then moved to Mikveh Israel, leaving his mother, father and brothers entrapped in the colony he had helped establish in Wadi Hanin. Sarna then describes the longer and rather hectic part of Hochberg’s life during which he moved to a small town in Iran where he established an Alliance school that eventually failed, and then reestablished himself in Istanbul right after the Young Turk Revolution as the editor of two papers owned by Herzlian Zionists: Le Jeune Turc and Hamevasser. He lived in the Ottoman capital until his intriguing death during the First World War. In fact, what drove Sarna to come up with an elaborate bibliography of Hochberg was a family intrigue. Hochberg’s son was also the first spouse of Igal Sarna’s mother, who exposed the author to several family mysteries and put him on the road to writing this book. However, beyond merely providing a bibliographic work subtitled with the names of the places Sami Hochberg lived in, the author also talks about his own travels between Jaffa, Paris, Istanbul, Berlin, Cairo, and Beirut, visiting archives, talking to people, and trying to uncover traces of Sami Hochberg.

Hochberg’s story begins in 1889, when he set foot in Jaffa, a modest port of Ottoman Palestine, as a member of the Zionist group BILU, mostly composed of Jewish youth searching for a way out of the Russian pogroms. As he disembarked from the Russian ship, he met his Zionist comrades from his earlier life in the Russian Empire and found himself not in the middle of a land of milk and honey but in a land that was rather uncultivated and swampy. They were surrounded not so much by a hostile Arab population as by the all-consuming disputes between Jews of different factions. At certain points Sarna builds a critical narrative on the early Zionist colonization efforts. He acutely describes the disappointment of the Russian Zionist youth when they arrived in Ottoman Palestine and ended up in a tense Jewish atmosphere where the religious Jews of the Old Yishuv and those living in the colonies of Baron Edmond de Rothschild were facing off and young Russian Zionists ended up in destitute. Young Sami found himself in an atmosphere of the “rush for land” in Palestine as he slowly turned into a land dealer and an agent of the Zionist colonization efforts with funds arriving from Russia. He also urged his religious father in Bessarabia, who was a skillful farmer, to come to Palestine with the family wealth and establish a big farm in Wadi Hanin. However, the vineyard in Wadi Hanin would eat up the family wealth and Sami Hochberg would leave Palestine for Iran with the guilt of having brought the family to an undesirable end, leaving his old father entrapped on an uncultivable piece of land.

The narrative is knitted around the evasive personality of Sami, which reaches its peak with the family tragedy he causes in Palestine, and according to Sarna, leaves its mark on the life of Sami forever. It was not an easy transition to work for the Alliance Israélite Universelle when one came from an activist background. First his move to Mikveh Israel as an Alliance teacher and then to Iran as part of the same institution promoting the integration of the Jews into their home countries, which stands at the radical opposite of Zionism, might have meant a break with Sami’s own past. Yigal Sarna demonstrates that it did not. Sami Hochberg worked for Alli-
dance for more than a decade and then moved to Istanbul around the time of the Young Turk Revolution. We cannot know for sure how Sami ended up in Istanbul. Sarna embeds Sami’s story into meticulous historicity yet there are holes in the narrative due to the lack of documents from the periods when Sami moved around.

Istanbul appears as the true place where Sami Hochberg found not only numerous connections but also a place for himself in the Zionist milieu, albeit not in the high echelons of the Herzlian circle. He was rather in the secondary ranks as someone who deals with matters practical yet requiring diplomatic skills, and yet he was part of the Zionist triumvirate in Istanbul together with Victor Jacobson and Vladimir Jabotinsky, and the editor of two newspapers: Le Jeune Turc and Hamevasser. The latter was published in Hebrew and probably had a limited circulation. Still the reason behind Sarna’s disregard of the Hebrew paper is not clear. He rather chooses to tell the story of Sami in the Ottoman capital through the French paper, Le Jeune Turc, which was originally founded by Ebuzziya Tevfik and purchased with the help of the Russian Zionists from him and Celal Nuri. Yet the latter remained the manager and a shareholder. Yigal Sarna expounds on how Sami uncovered his true skills in building a newspaper that would help the cause and was able to do business in the media by bribing editors and occasionally stirring up discussions on the front pages.

Istanbul is indeed the city that helped Sami rise and shine but also brought an end to his story. World War I almost spelled the end of Zionist efforts in Istanbul as much as that of the Ottoman Empire. In the vagueness of what he did in the city at the beginning of the war, Sami once tried to travel to Romania through Hungary, got arrested in Brasov, and got deported to Istanbul. That incident, as Sarna puts it, led to his disclosure as an agent working for the German embassy in Bucharest and brought his end when he was poisoned while dining at a restaurant in Istanbul by an unknown agent. Hochberg’s story ends at a time when the porous borders between empires were coming to a close and the rigidities of nation-states loomed large on the horizon.

It might sound like a book stuffed with the political history happening around one man. Yet probably the most captivating aspect of the book is the author’s unceasing interest in Sami’s family tragedies. After all, Yigal Sarna is after an answer to the question of who killed Sami. Sami’s wife Roza and children Theodor and Emil rarely met him after his arrival in Istanbul. Ever since the author’s mother told her son that she had earlier been wrongly accused of poisoning her first husband, Emil, by the very wife of Sami, Roza, it had turned into a family mystery. However, he could find neither the person who poisoned him nor where he is buried. While there are gaps at the beginning and at the end, the reader is never left alone with the story of Sami Hochberg. Sarna rather blends Sami’s life story with the biography of the book and allows the reader to figure how the work came into being through the alleys of several cities and archives. Despite the parts that remains blank due to the lack of leads in the archives and documents, the author fills them in with a diligent literariness by taking the reader into the rooms he visited and showing them objects of all sorts.

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