# Social work, gender, and Jewish history as reflected in Siddy Wronsky's 1930's novel "Sand and Stars"

## A scientific framing

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### Introduction

Siddy Wronsky's manuscript, entitled *Sand and Stars*, was discovered in the Central Zionist Archives (CZA) in Jerusalem by Dr. Ayana Halpern while searching for materials for her PhD dissertation, *Female Social Workers in the Yishuv During the British Mandate: The Importance of Women and Forgotten Traditions in the Profession's History* (2018). Born in Germany, Wronsky (1883-1947) was a Jewish social worker and social work teacher in Berlin, Germany, where she had an extensive career in social services and the teaching of social work. Shortly after the Nazis rose to power in 1933, she decided to immigrate to Palestine. She was invited by Henrietta Szold – founder of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of the United States – to establish the first school of social services in Jerusalem, a school that would train workers for the social work department of the Jewish National Council in Palestine (Heitz-Rami 1993).

Whereas Wronsky wrote and published extensively in her professional field (Reinicke 2008), it was quite a surprise to discover a literary text in her estate, in light of the professional focus of her activities and her writings (Konrad 2022). To the best of our knowledge, to date the book – written sometime in the 1930s or early 40s – had not been published. This was therefore the first time it was documented and researched.

We found it necessary to document and analyze this manuscript in order to understand Wronsky's choice of this literary genre for expressing content and opinions that were important for promoting her ideological mission. In contrast with the rest of her academic-professional writing, she took upon herself a task that was not part of her core activities. Despite, or perhaps because of this, Wronsky allowed herself to express enthusiastic Zionist attitudes, to advocate for activism on behalf of the needy, and present this



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work as being highly significant in realizing Zionism and establishing a Jewish homeland in Eretz Israel (Wronsky 1944). Relatedly, she appears to have been trying to defend her personal choice to continue pursuing her social work activity, rather than adhere to the central ethos of pioneering through agricultural settlement and cultivation.

Her very act of writing the book portrays Siddy Wronsky in a slightly different light. Archival materials and personal testimonies indicate that she was usually seen as representative of German social work (Chayut 1957), hence patronizing, judgmental and not empathetic towards the clients (Rosenfeld 1995). But the book depicts a more complex character: a woman devoted to the Zionist national mission who expresses longing for the beauty of nature, who seems to long for romantic love and parenthood, and feels tremendous compassion for people. We may even be so bold as to describe her as a sentimental and vulnerable woman.

The importance of this book lies not only in shedding light on Wronsky's own beliefs and opinions, however, but also in mirroring early 20th-century social attitudes in relation to the Zionist ethos, the ambivalence towards social work at the time of its writing, and its contribution to the Zionist endeavor. On the one hand, the Yishuv (the Jewish community in pre-statehood Israel) leadership began to understand the need for organized and professional assistance for the needy early on; yet, on the other hand, they still tended to view professional assistance as philanthropy for "the weak" (the prevalent Hebrew term for "needy", at that time), an attitude that contradicted the pioneering ethos (Avnir; Gal 2019; Gal; Ajzenstadt 2015). Moreover, the novel also reflects the international influences which Wronsky brought to Palestine, with regard to feminism[1] and social work, especially German and German-Jewish social work, as represented by Alice Salomon (1872-1948) and other influential Jewish women in Germany at that time.

One such woman was Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936).[2] She was highly involved in welfare and feminism, established the Jewish Women's League (*Jüdischer Frauenbund*) in Germany and managed a home of young women who gave birth out of wedlock (Gillerman 2009; Naimark-Goldberg 2019; Konrad 2022). Pappenheim was a vocal anti-Zionist all her life. For

1 Especially Jewish-German feminism; see Gillerman (2009) and Reinicke (2008).

2 Pappenheim was Breuer's patient known in Freud's writings as Anna O. She returned to Germany, lived with her mother in Frankfurt and became involved in social welfare and feminist issues.



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example, she wrote a play called *Tragische Momente* (Tragic Moments), expressing her disbelief in immigration to Palestine as solution for the "Jewish problem" (Loentz 1999). We will address a possible dialogue between this play and Wronsky's novel in the Epilogue.

Note that Wronsky's writing sheds light not only on issues regarding social work within the Zionist movement but also on conflicts between Zionists and anti-Zionists in Germany. Thus, analyzing the novel with a view to the reciprocal relationship between its literary genre and the subject matter it raises can help us understand its unique contribution to several historiographical aspects: the Zionist movement in the Yishuv as well as conflicting ideologies in Germany; the development of the social work profession in Palestine; and the personal and professional character of Jewish social workers who immigrated from Germany to Palestine during the 1930s, and played a key role in building and shaping the social services in the nascent state, and their transnational knowledge and practice that was implemented in the Yishuv.

*Photo: Siddy Wronsky in 1946 (originator: unknown; source: Central Zionist Archives)*



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## *Siddy Wronsky: Background*

Siddy Wronsky (née Neufeld) embodies the strong link between social work in the Yishuv, the profession's German roots, and Zionist ideas, as she was a major activist both in the German welfare system and in Palestine (Halpern 2019). Born in Berlin, Wronsky grew up in a Jewish family of seven children; her father was of German descent while her mother was a so-called East European Jew ("*Ostjude*"). In 1908, Siddy Neufeld married Eugen Wronsky (1864-1929). The couple worked together (Reinicke 2008) and published an index book of welfare organizations (Zentrale für private Fürsorge 1910). She started her career as a special education teacher and later studied "social hygiene", which sought to fight poverty, crime and disease using preventive and social measures. By the 1930s, she administered the German Archive of Welfare Work (*Archiv für Wohlfahrtspflege*) and was a member of the German Union of Welfare Workers (*Deutscher Verband der Sozialbeamtinnen*) and the Central Welfare Bureau for German Jews (*Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der deutschen Juden*). She was also chief editor of the leading welfare journal and authored extensively for its German-Jewish counterpart (*Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wohlfahrtspflege* and *Jüdische Wohlfahrtspflege und Sozialpolitik*, respectively). She also taught in Alice Salomon's women's school for social work (*Soziale Frauenschule*, est. 1908) and in the Academy for Social and Pedagogical Women's Work (*Deutsche Akademie für soziale und pädagogische Frauenarbeit*, est. 1925). Last but not least, Wronsky chaired the League of Zionist Women in Germany (*Bund zionistischer Frauen Deutschlands*) and was active on behalf of East-European Jewish refugees (Heitz-Rami 1993). She was also highly active in a wide range of other social service organizations, including *Ahawah* (Love), a home for orphaned youth (Reinicke 2008). The novel's plot starts by describing the atmosphere in this home. Clearly, Wronsky regarded this home with high esteem.

When the Nazis took power in 1933, Wronsky was dismissed from the Archive. The following year, she immigrated to Palestine, intent on promoting social work in the Yishuv (Konrad 1993). In Jerusalem, she founded the first social work school in the country (Gal; Köngeter 2016), chaired the Center for Out-of-Home Care and the Social-Pedagogical Department of the Jewish National Council, and founded the Social Workers Union (Chayut 1957). Wronsky was intensely active in promoting social legislation and justice and in enhancing the profession's status, saying that "the public entrusts the social service and social workers with its most valuable asset,



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*Photo: The Ahawah Home in Berlin, Auguststraße, nowadays (originator; source: DZI)*

the 'person'" (quoted in Itzkovitz 1969, p. 21). She believed wholeheartedly that social work was essential for the creation of a national home for Jews in Palestine, as reflected in her essays: "The Social Idea in Herzl's Writings" (1944), "Social Therapy Methods in Eretz Israel" (1935), and "Social Investigation Methods on a Sociological Basis" (n.d., circa late 1930s).

However, Wronsky was also greatly influenced by Alice Salomon, whose school embodied a strong concept of social justice, opposing national, ethnic and class-based social inequalities, and trained many of the social workers who would later be active in the Yishuv. As a converted German Jew, Salomon avoided a moralistic attitude that blamed the poor, calling for empathy on the one hand and understanding of the structural causes of human misfortune on the other (Feustel 2006). She was a proponent of human rights and supported international knowledge sharing and greater authority for women in the profession (Kuhlmann 2003). Despite her deliberate interreligious approach, Salomon had a nuanced, yet powerful influence on the Zionist social workers who had immigrated to Palestine, especially Wronsky.

Apparently, Wronsky's professional development was typical of the German-Jewish social worker of her time. At the beginning of her career, she identified as a German and contributed greatly to the building of the German welfare state; whereas following her encounter and involvement with East European Jewish refugees in Berlin during World War I, she became an enthusiastic Zionist (Konrad 2022). In Palestine, however, her German



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identity was dominant, and she was considered a German foreigner within the Yishuv. Wronsky was dismissed due to her Jewishness in Germany, but later, in 1946 Palestine, was perceived by the Zionist administrators, mostly men, as an irrelevant representative of the old-fashioned German heritage of social work now outpaced by new US-American methods (more on that in the epilogue). In the meantime, she transformed her professional view: from cowriting "Social Therapy" with Salomon in 1926, an article where national affiliation had no place, to declaring a decade later that "social work must be evaluated as part of the work for the revival of the Jewish nation" (Wronsky 1936: 1).

*Photo: The Stolperstein for Siddy Wronsky in front of her former home at Barstraße 23, Berlin-Wilmersdorf (originator; source: DZI).*

*The Novel Discovered*

As mentioned above, second author Dr. Ayana Halpern discovered a novel in one of the files in Wronsky's personal collection in the process of searching the Central Zionist Archives (CZA) for materials relating to Siddy



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Wronsky for her dissertation.[3] Entitled *Sand and Stars*, the novel was found in three typewritten versions: in German, English and Hebrew.[4] In the German and Hebrew version, one can see the proofreading process and small handwritten additions. Based on a comparison with other handwritten documents and letters in this file, we may assume that this proofreading was done by Wronsky herself.[5] The book consists of 84 pages in Hebrew, 188 pages in German,[6] and 109 pages in English.[7] We do not know exactly when Wronsky began writing the book. We can assume that it was written after 1934, as one of the songs referred to was written only in 1934. We do know that she shared with great excitement about writing the novel and her intentions to publish it in both English and Hebrew with some of her family members (Wronsky 1943), and apparently there were rumors about its writing (Rosenfeld 1984).

In a letter found in the archive, dated 1942, Yossef Achai,[8] who translated the book from German into Hebrew, asked Wronsky to consider raising his fee because translating the book required more work than he had expected. He also wrote that it was difficult for him to know how and when he would be able to publish the book, "due to the war" (Achai 1942).

3 Central Zionist Archives, A149/10.

4 The German version was bound as a notebook, while the English and Hebrew versions were stapled and placed in cardboard files.

5 For example, on page 7 in the original Hebrew manuscript.

6 This page number does not correspond to the pagination of the original German manuscript, which ends in 188, because eight pages were subsequently inserted after page 89, numbered 89a-89h.

7 This also does not correspond to the pagination of the original English manuscript, which ends in 109. Pages 45-55 are missing from the page count. A comparison with the German original indicates that no text has been omitted at this point, but that two different versions of the translation have been merged.

8 Yossef Achai (Shuksteliski) (1889-1988) was a founder of the HeChalutz Zionist youth movement in Lithuania, educator, author, editor, translator, journalist and writer of children's poetry. He was one of the founders of kibbutz Netzer Sereni. He was very interested in the Bible and even taught Bible classes. For further information, see https://www.nli.org.il/he/discover/music/israeli-music.



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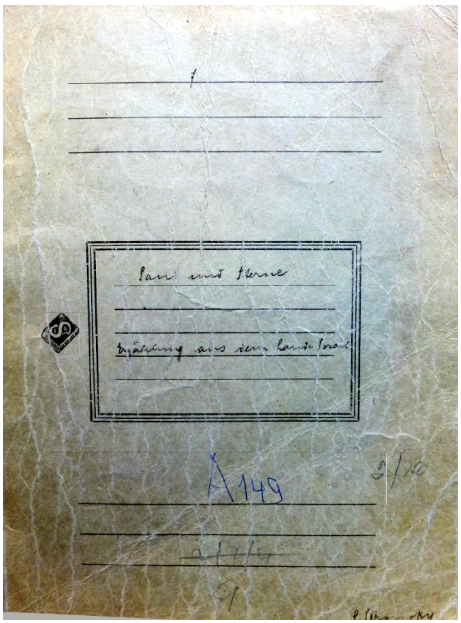


*Photo: The cover of the German Manuscript "Sand und Sterne" (originator; source: Central Zionist Archives)*

## Plot Summary

Siddy Wronsky's novel tells the story of four young Jewish men and women – David, Rachel, Reuben and Ruth – from undertaking to help abandoned Jewish children in an orphanage in Germany, through journeying to Palestine,[9] to the events that unfold there. The novel begins with an introduction about the Land of Israel, describing it as the Land of the Bible and Prophets, a source of inspiration for Jews for two thousand years. But now the place is barren and isolated, anticipating the return of the Jewish people from exile.

9 Note the different terms Wronsky uses to refer to this journey in the titles of Chapter 1. In the Hebrew version, the Hebrew terms *Alyah* (עליה) and *Biaa* (ביאה) are used to describe the immigration journey to Palestine, reflecting a Zionist affiliation and support for the political and spiritual purpose of having the Jews return to their homeland. In the English version, this journey is referred to as "leavetaking" and "homecoming". In the German version, the terms *Aufbruch* and *Ankunft* are used, which are less ideological in their connotations.



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The plot begins by describing an evening in the Gray[10] House, an orphanage in a "city in the north". Rachel is celebrating with the children their departure from the orphanage, prior to their journey to Palestine the following day.[11] Rachel herself is also supposed to travel to Palestine the next day in order to take part in the redemption of the nation. Wronsky goes on to describe the suffering the children have experienced before being admitted to the orphanage, and their hope of building a new life in Palestine.

Rachel has a boyfriend, David, a young and vigorous man, a branch of the ancient tree. His destiny is to bear the burden of carving out a new future for his people. Rachel stands beside him, a partner in his endeavors; so do his younger brother Reuben, and Ruth, Rachel's twin sister. The four of them will begin their journey the following day. Reuben is also depicted as a strong man, who knows what the future holds for him. He is certain that he is doing the right thing. His girlfriend, Ruth, is portrayed as being full of life, looking confidently into the future. Ruth is devoted to her work in the city with the working class.

In the evening the four of them wander around the city. They observe the decadent nightlife, and walk to the old Jewish cemetery. They declare that the stars shining over the grave of their mother will help them and guide them on their journey to their homeland. They believe wholeheartedly that they must cultivate the Land of Israel if they are to fulfill their mission. Only if they live and work on the land as in Biblical times will they have the strength to rebuild the nation.

That night an elderly rabbi conducts a Jewish wedding ceremony for Rachel and David at the cemetery gate. The next day, the two couples and a group of children start the journey. They pass through several places, including Italy. Then they set sail and the ship finally anchors in Haifa. On the ship, they encounter a man who believes that the Jews should remain in Europe to help create a better future for the world. Although he does not agree with them, he donates money to the pioneers in Palestine.

10 In the original English text, the spelling is not consistent. Both "Gray" and "Grey" appears alternately.

11 For further description of the preparations for the departure to Palestine in the original orphanage *Ahawah* in Berlin, see Bargur (2013).



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Upon disembarking, the four protagonists encounter Palestine's diverse population for the first time. Henrietta Szold waits at the port to greet the children, and her devotion to them is described in glowing terms.[12]

Ruth, Rachel's sister, and Reuben, David's brother, decide to follow a free lifestyle, committing to marry only after a year has passed. The four of them travel to the Galilee; from the car, they observe the countryside, the people living there, the small factories and stores. They go off to different places and Rachel ends up in Kibbutz Degania. There, she sees the children at school and she speaks to the teacher about the importance of educating about nature. They emphasize that the children must participate in activities to build up the nation.

The narrative continues with a chapter that describes "the Festival of the First Fruits". The author does not use the traditional religious term for the Jewish holiday, "Shavuot". The focus is on the secular significance of the holiday in respect of nature and agriculture.[13] The next chapter describes a young people's holiday celebration at the Ben Shemen Youth Village.[14] The author describes the positive energy the youth display towards the Land of Israel.

By the time the following chapter – "Redemption and the Holy City" – begins, a year has passed. David wants to take part in founding Hanita – a kibbutz on the northern border. He asks Rachel to join him, but she argues that the time has not come for her to follow him in building Hanita. She feels that she must return to the Jews suffering in Europe. David disapproves, stating that she is in the early stages of pregnancy. However, he understands that he cannot ask her to give up on her mission. They travel together to Tel Aviv, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, they meet friends who agree with Rachel and support her.

12 Henrietta Szold (1860-1945) is one of the founding mothers of Israeli social work. Szold was helped a great deal by Wronsky in setting up the training system and the services provided for various populations by the Social Work Department of the Jewish National Council. Historiographically, Wronsky has remained in Szold's shadow, without receiving widespread recognition (Halpern 2019).

13 Shavuot marks the day God gave the Torah to the Israelites, and also the first day of summer harvesting. The pioneers have tended to disregard the first meaning of the holiday. See more in https://blog.nli.org.il/en/shavuot/.

14 Ben Shemen was founded in 1927 by Siegfried Lehmann (1892-1958), an educator and important figure in Jewish social welfare in Berlin. He had helped Jewish children in Germany and Eastern Europe, and was later involved in education and pedagogy in the Yishuv.



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In the morning, they walk to the Old City of Jerusalem, encountering Arabs dressed in multicolored garb and Arab women effortlessly balancing baskets on their heads. They continue to the Jewish Quarter, which is small, crowded, and full of synagogues. It is Yom Kippur Eve. Men and women go to synagogue to pray. This, in essence, represents the world of the past, where people cling to their ancient customs.

Rachel and David meet Dalliah, who cares for the poor living in the Jewish Quarter. They recognize her from before, having met her in the "big city in the north". Despite the sacred day, Dalliah continues her work. She goes to visit old people confined to their beds who cannot go to pray in the synagogues. Dalliah takes Rachel and David along with her. They accompany her to a dark room where Yonah, a "madwoman"[15], lies on the floor because there is no room for her in the mental hospital. Her husband, children and mother all live in the same room. David and Rachel continue walking with Dalliah as she visits the poor, and are shocked by what they see. They are amazed to discover that these individuals belong to the same people and the same land they wish to redeem. David is angry at the neglect. Dalliah defends the poor people and argues that this is a poor community. The public institutions of the Yishuv demand that the leaders of the community allocate resources that they lack, and only if they can allocate the resources will the institutions help them. She believes this is unfair. Rachel states that a nation that seeks to build itself cannot neglect children and youth in such dreadful conditions.

Dalliah turns to them and says that now they understand why she cannot go to the Galilee and participate in building the Jewish homeland. Each year she manages to help a small number of children; her work and mission is here. It is here that she feels the heartbeat of the nation! When they were all still in "the big city up north", she focused her studies on how to help educate and nurture the children arriving in Palestine to live in the villages. Her destiny led her to the Old City to help the nation's future generation. She will face any obstacle until she is able to help her last charge out of these terrible conditions. David states that the mission is to create a special people out of all the tribes. Now he understands the decision of his girlfriend, Rachel, to return to the Diaspora, to take part in its suffering.

Rachel boards a ship in Haifa. She thinks about the suffering she will encounter in the future. She is aware that she will long for her friends and

15 p. 251 in the English version



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homeland. She journeys over land and sea, through Romania and Hungary, where she meets refugees on a ship that no country is willing to accept. Finally, in Greece, she boards a refugee ship of immigrants on their way to Israel. It is terribly crowded, sanitary conditions are poor, and food is scarce. Rachel begins to assist the doctor. She meets a young Jew named Maria (Miriam)[16], who is pregnant with the child of her non-Jewish boyfriend. She was forced to leave him when a racist ruler came to power and she was now afraid for his life. Rachel identifies with Miriam because she, too, is pregnant. She convinces Miriam of the importance of immigrating to the Land Israel, where one can live a free and independent life. The ship approaches the coast of Palestine and anchors far away from shore. The people on board are secretly taken from the ship by young and strong kibbutz members who then distribute them among the different kibbutzim.

Rachel swims ashore with her last bits of strength. Once she reaches land, she feels her strength drain away. But she cannot forget the needs of the refugees and shares information about each of them with a Zionist volunteer so that they receive the help they need. Then, Rachel and Miriam are sent to the town of Rehovot. Rachel refuses to go to the hospital.

The next chapter describes the settling of Hanita. David is the leader and his brother Reuben is part of the security force that accompanies the settlers. Ruth is a nurse. It is a special day in which they are fulfilling the dream of building the nation. A stranger arrives by car and informs David that Rachel is about to give birth, and that she asks him to come and take her and the newborn up north. David goes with him. They take the two women, along with a midwife, to Hanita. Rachel has a very difficult birth. Ruth is very fearful for Reuben's life, and that of her sister. Rachel dies after giving birth to a son. Rachel and David name him Yiffrach. In the very same moment, Arabs shoot Reuben. David opens his arms and holds his son. David and Ruth are stricken by grief. They understand that the dream of building a homeland for future generations will demand sacrifices. They feel that their pain will be eased if they continue building the homeland. They feel they must double their devotion. Suddenly there is the sound of a baby crying. The midwife places Yiffrach in the arms of Miriam, who has recovered. She nurses the two infants – Yiffrach (meaning "who will flourish") and her baby girl Yeshuva (feminine form of Yishuv).

16 Both names, Maria and Miriam, are mentioned on different pages in the Hebrew version, in the English version it is Maria, in the German version it is Marja.



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The final chapter is called "Sand and Stars". The narrative picks up four years into the future. David looks at the flourishing kibbutz and reflects on its amazing development. He observes the three children – Yiffrach, his and Rachel's son, Ruth and Reuben's son Gideon, and Miriam's daughter Yeshuva. They are the ones who will continue cultivating the land and fulfilling the dream.

## Analysis

The analysis in this paper is based mostly on the Hebrew and English versions but refers also to the differences between the three languages. Quotations are taken from the English version if not mentioned otherwise. The following analysis comprises five parts. First, we elaborate on the differences in language and linguistic style between the different versions. Next, we deal with content issues: general characterization of the writing; characters; dialogue; and landscape descriptions. Third, we describe several *central themes*: Helping the needy, heroism and sacrifice through the importance of the protagonist Rachel; interpersonal relationships; spiritual motherhood; and transnational transfer of social work and pedagogy from Germany. Fourth, we elaborate on attitudes, images and conflicts via the aspects of the Arab population; immigration to Palestine as a response to anti-Semitism; and nature. Finally, we analyze the songs and poems as a mean of highlighting ideas and the motto of the novel – the song "Sand and Stars".

### *Language Differences*

There are similarities between the Hebrew and the German versions, both using biblical and metaphorical language and terms. Especially in the Hebrew translation, biblical language is employed, as for example in the expression "lie in wait for them", which in the Hebrew version reads: "lemo arev".[17] This expression comes from the Book of Job (38:40) as a continuation of the previous verse, which asks how God provides prey for the lioness: "(39) Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lioness, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions (40) when they couch in their dens and

17 p. H-63 in the Hebrew version



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abide under cover to lie in wait…" In German, this reads as follows: "Wir müssen den Boden befreien in stündlichem Ringen mit den Kräften der Räuber, die im Hinterhalt lauern, um den Beginn unseres Mühens zu vernichten".[18] However, in the English translation the equivalent passage reads: "Everywhere among these rocks and bushes lurk enemies who are resolved to deter us from our undertaking".[19] Freely translated, this means: We must liberate the land in an ever-present struggle with the bandits who lie in ambush to destroy our work.

Although at this point the Hebrew translation seems to follow the German original, it is difficult to determine the extent to which biblical language is used deliberately in the German book. In the Hebrew version the translator writes, for example: "And David hath turned to his friends and hath said …".[20] However, in her original German, Wronsky does not use a biblical expression at this point: "Der junge David wandte sich an seine Freunde …".[21] This sentence was translated almost verbatim into English: "David turned to his friends saying …".[22]

Who, therefore, is responsible for using the biblical wording in the Hebrew version? As indicated in the abovementioned letter, it was the translator Yossef Achai who sensed a biblical influence in Wronsky's writing and tried to adapt the novel's language accordingly. He wrote to Siddy Wronsky asking for additional payment for the translation: "I have invested time in reading Biblical books so that my translation can be directed toward that style" (Achai 1942).

Another linguistic issue is the divergent use of terms in the different versions. For example, Wronsky avoids using the term "nation" in the German version – which is also present in the Hebrew translation – often using the terms *leom* and *leumi* (nation and national, respectively), along with the term *am*, which means people, and opts for the term *Volk* instead. Like this term, many others frequently used by Wronsky are rooted in the *völkisch* movements of the Weimar Republic and have been adopted by the Nazis, later. This includes the terms *Volksgenossen* (members of the people ("Volk")), *Scholle* (clod of earth) and *Heimatboden* (soil of

18 p. 173 in the German version
19 p. 264
20 p. H-27 in the Hebrew version, translated by the authors
21 p. 115 in the German version
22 p. 218



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the homeland)[23], and *Führer der neuen Volksbewegung* (leader of the new *völkisch* movement)[24]. In the English version, the direct translation of Volk ("people") is used, but this term does not have the same *völkisch* connotation as in German. Wronsky's choice of terms is not surprising due to the fact that Zionism among German Jews was influenced by contemporary German patriotism and European nationalism at that time, especially before the Holocaust became known in Palestine (Aberbach 2009). Additionally, Wronsky relied on a discourse common among social thinkers in 19th century Europe, who "created a biological vocabulary to address the nation's demographic, social and moral concerns" (Gillerman 2009, p. 1).

The three versions differ in two other respects. The English version is particularly distinct. First, it is much shorter, with some sentences even missing. For example, it lacks a significant paragraph present in the German and Hebrew versions, in which Rachel and David invoke a seemingly superhuman ability of Jewish women, the "Kraft der Überwindung"[25] ("power of overcoming"), that is necessary to enable the Jewish people to revive despite all suffering, and emphasizes the importance of Jewish women to the national project.

Second, the language in the English version is neutral and lacks the ideological and national pathos that characterizes the German and Hebrew versions. This raises the question of who translated the book into English and why the changes were made. Clearly, the German and Hebrew versions are more similar to one another. A close linguistic-historical analysis of the differences between the three versions of the novel would shed light on this and other questions, potentially identifying further connotation, such as with socialist movements, romantic affinity with nature reminiscent of the Weimar cultural-critical reform movement, and practices of the youth movements of that time.

### *Content Analysis*

The novel is built around the journey of the four protagonists from the Diaspora to the homeland. The plot includes real events such as the youth

23 pp. 85, 98 in the German version
24 p. 91 in the German version
25 p. 139 in the German version



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holiday in Ben Shemen,[26] and kibbutz celebrations for the Festival of the First Fruits. In addition to Ben Shemen, the book mentions real places, such as the Meir Shfeya Youth Village,[27] as well as real events, but the characters are the author's, as in the description of the establishment of Hanita.[28] The book also refers to real people, such as Henrietta Szold,[29] as well as characters who can be identified as real individuals despite their pseudonyms. This is the case with Dalliah, who can be identified as Zipporah Bloch.[30]

*Photo: Kibbutz Hanita in the Western Galilee 1938 (originator: Zoltan Kluger; Source: National Photo Collection of Israel, ID D13-041, CC 0)*

26 On Ben Shemen see https://shimur.org/sites/museatar-the-ben-shemen-youth-village/?lang=en.
27 p. H-33 in the Hebrew version
28 p. H-59 in the Hebrew version
29 p. H-25 in the Hebrew version
30 Based on a list of agencies and social workers in the end of the issue *Yediot Al Ha'Avodah HaSozialit Be'Eretz Israel*, June 1935.



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## The Characters' Description

The book's characters represent archetypes more than they do round characters with a range of emotions and dilemmas. Furthermore, with the exception of Rachel, the characters remain undeveloped (more on the figure Rachel below). The two women, Rachel and Ruth, are described as full of vitality, although there are several differences between them.

> Rachel was tall and slender. Her deep blue eyes glowed with the light of love; her black hair was piled high on her head like the crown of a queen. Her clinging gown of fine red cloth sawed gracefully from her hips as she walked; almost she might have been taken for the beautiful young matriarch whose name she bore.[31]

Rachel is upright and resilient – a pioneer. She is also beautiful, loving, very feminine and sensual, as was her Biblical namesake.[32]

David is Rachel's male companion on the one hand, and a young King David on the other. Along with his physical description, Wronsky immediately explains that this character belongs to a tired ancient race, but that he is also a modern offshoot, already playing a role in shaping the future of his people. We must also consider the expressions "destined" and "sublime future". "Destined" perhaps hints at a role that is beyond his own personal choice, moving the people to the future, which is not only normal but also the fulfillment of a "sublime future" dating back to Biblical times.

> David's slim figure moved with a free and supple stride, as befitted an energetic young scion of a weary and wandering race who was resolved to play his part in opening up a brighter future for his people.[33]

The two men, David and Reuben, represent the "New Jew",[34] the pioneer. They are physically strong, tall and upright, confident in their path and their faith. They see their mission clearly and are ready to fulfill it. We see this in the way that Wronsky describes Reuben and Ruth – Reuben as David's brother and Ruth as Rachel's twin sister.

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31 p. 188
32 p. 197
33 p. 197
34 An extreme example of the concept of the New Jew is found in the writings of Max Nordau (1849-1923), who emphasized strengthening the physical ability and shape of Jews as an important aspect in their Zionist mission.



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> Behind them, Reuben and Ruth walked with firm, rapid strides that betokened their confidence in the future and the harmony of their aims. Reuben's gait was marked by characteristic energy, as one who knew just what he wanted to do and rejoice in his ability to do it. Ruth, quick-moving and quick-thinking, was in complete accord with him in purpose and outlook. Her heavy golden plaits swung free in the night breeze, her merry grey eyes were fixed on far distances.[35]

The manner in which David and Ruth walk also reflect youthful vitality. David is described as a young man who is confident in his power to fulfill his mission. Ruth is described somewhat differently than Rachel: she is lighter and more cheerful. She too is very feminine, her body is also described in motion, and she too is prepared for the future and looks forward to it happily. Uprightness as a characteristic of the young Jewish pioneers reappears when the author describes Henrietta Szold:

> The children she was to mother were destined to live of sever toil; no hardship would be spared them. And because it was so she must rear them as upstanding men and women who would equal to the struggle that awaited them.[36]

Conversely, the Jews in the Old City of Jerusalem are described as wretched, ill, abandoned and neglected:

> On the floor Yonah, a madwoman who had been bound to her bed for seven years because there was no room for her in the asylum, tossed in pain. The hole in the rock that was her home also housed her old mother, her husband, several small children and her oldest boy, Saul, who had been able to find work as a porter in a hotel thanks to his knowledge of languages.[37]

The same holds for the Diasporic Jews, even in the "great city in the north":

> Among the passersby were many Jews whose shoulders were bowed under the burden of the tragic destiny of their race, stricken anew by a revival of anti-Semitism in its most virulent form.[38]

35 p. 197
36 p. 215
37 p. 251
38 p. 203



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The stereotypes in the characters' descriptions are also reflected in their secondary and background qualities. Miriam is a young Jewish woman who fell in love with a non-Jew, although one that is similar to the protagonists since he also suffers from the rise of a racist government. Dalliah is described as being infused with a sense of purpose, without hesitation and without doubts. These young people come to Palestine filled with fervor, and once they arrive, they are passionate about building the nation.

## Dialogue

As noted, the characters do not fully develop emotionally, except for Rachel, who is more rounded and complex, as described below. Similarly, the dialogues in the novel are based primarily on declarations, ideological assertions, and statements concerning the ideal future. For example,

> David turned to his friends saying, "We have met here this day to make a fresh beginning in our Land. Tomorrow we shall disperse and each of us will go to the scene of his labors; yet all of us feel that for us there can be no real separation. The Homeland encompasses us all, we are aware of its breath at every turn."[39]

The protagonists are highly motivated by their ideology. For them, there seems to be little difference between the personal, interpersonal and ideological. Their dialogues reflect this, as evident in another example:

> The sun sank slowly into the blue waves. The stars shone in the southern heavens with a brilliance our friends had never before seen. Rachel and David leaned over the ship's rail, gazing up into the radiant night skies. "There", cried Rachel, pointing to a southern constellation, "is the Archer, who points the way we must take. Following in the course fixed for him, he moves unerringly forward his goal. It is an omen for us: Having set out our predestined course, we shall proceed unerringly to our own goal."[40]

The situation described above can lend itself to a romantic interpretation. Instead, Wronsky decides to emphasize the ideological aspect.

The dialogues serve to voice attitudes, to reinforce the commitment to the cause. It seems that dealing with content relating to the national mission

39 p. 218
40 p. 210



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is an integral part of the protagonists' personal world. Even when the dialogue centers on emotional or interpersonal topics, it is also connected to the same ideological mission.

## Landscape: Eretz Israel versus the "City to the North"

The book includes numerous descriptions of the Land of Israel – its landscape, cities, kibbutzim and other settlements. The descriptions are alive, suffused with the enthusiasm surrounding the process of redeeming and developing it.

> Flower-decked tables were set out with the choicest produce of the land-pitchers of milk and jars of honey, great bowls of crimson tomatoes and tender green cucumbers, black olives and white leeks, grey bread and yellow butter, white eggs and golden oranges.[41]

The book includes many descriptions of things that are seen through the eyes of the main characters:

> As they walked down to the city, the sea was always before them. On the opposite shore lay the old Crusaders' town. Sailboats bobbed up and down on the surging breakers. On the eastern shore of the bay gleamed the vast silvery tanks to which oil was piped from the wail of the neighboring country.[42]

In contrast with the light blue color of the country, the descriptions of "the big city of the north" are filled with grey:

> The buses turned out of the gray street into a narrow thoroughfare through which slowly moved a stream of metropolitan traffic.[43]

Perhaps this reflects the experience of a woman coming from Europe where the light is much less bright. This may also signify the desire to break free of the crowded European city and into the bright sunshine of Palestine. This is reflected, for example, in the way the orphanage is referred to as "the Gray House".[44] We can see the contrast between "gray" and "blue" already at the beginning of the first chapter:

41 p. 216
42 p. 216
43 p. 203
44 p. 188



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> At long last, Rachel came downstairs to the assembly hall. The children looked up as she entered. So here she was, come to help them with decoration for the farewell celebration before she herself left them. And what a celebration it was going to be! [...] The next morning a group of boys and girls from the Gray House in the little street of the great stone metropolis would leave the northern realm for the land of their fathers, a little land that lay between three continents beside a blue sea.[45]

The greyness is present in the visions of the city to the north; for example, at the Jewish cemetery:

> [A]nd then led the way into the grove where the tombstones gleamed in the silvery air on the autumn night.[46]

Thus, from the author's perspective, there is a contrast between the land in the north and the sun-drenched Land of Israel to the south:

> But tomorrow she was to leave the Gray House with their older comrades for the sunny south land, for the Land of Israel, where she would work on the soil of her ancestors that it might be restored to its ancient fertility.[47]

There is a notable difference between the descriptions of the places visited by the protagonists in their travels within Palestine and descriptions of the city whose streets they wander before emigrating:

> The young people made their way through dark, dank lanes, past the huge and crowded tenements of the poor, past malodorous beer cellars and reeking brandy shops, where ancient gramophones creaked out raucous music from scratched records, and vulgar voices were raised high in bickering.[48]

Wronsky utilizes these descriptions to emphasize the contrasts between the realities of life in the "big city to the north" with that of the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel, which is coming back to life, is colorful, bathed in light and therefore, full of life that is valuable and significant. By comparison, the Diasporic "city of the north" is a "desert city",[49] and life

45 p. 188
46 p. 198
47 p. 188
48 p. 197
49 p. 197



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there is nihilistic, miserable, grey and even corrupt. This corresponds with the Zionist outlook regarding the perverseness of the city versus the purity of agriculture and settlement.

### *Central Themes*

Above, we have emphasized the linguistic and stylistic aspects of the novel. Through these, we can now begin to characterize Wronsky's objectives in writing the novel. We shall now focus on central themes that shed light the way Wronsky interweaves her ideologies, opinions, professional and personal choices.

#### Helping the Needy, Heroism and Sacrifice: Rachel

Rachel is the main protagonist. She is the only character in this novel who undergoes a major internal development and conflict, leading her to dramatic decisions. Rachel exemplifies the heroism and sacrifice that Wronsky attaches to helping the needy. For the author, this mission is as important to the success of Zionism as all the other pioneering achievements.

At the start of the novel, Rachel is described as someone who is enthusiastic about immigration to Palestine, just like the other pioneers. However, after her first year in Palestine, during which she helps new immigrant children with their absorption, Rachel apparently makes an unusual decision: She resolves to give up on the heroic act of building Hanita – which represents the very essence of fulfillment through the construction of "tower and stockade" settlements. She rejects, at this point in time, a full family life with David in order to help her troubled Jewish brethren in the Diaspora. Rachel does not make this decision easily, but rather after great deliberation:

> "With all my heart, I welcome your decision", replied Rachel, leaning against her husband's shoulder, "for your choice is right and good. There, in our mountain nest, we shall achieve what we longed for when we were still in Exile, and what we have waited for so impatiently ever since setting foot in the Land. But you will not misunderstand me, my dearest, when I tell you that I shall not go up to Hanita with you […]. I have not reached this decision without a severe struggle with myself. I was indescribably happy when we came to the Land together, […] when I



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> was privileged to teach the children of pioneers on the shores of the magnificent lake [...]. There, for the first time, my longings were fully satisfied, for I saw that longings could be transformed into realities in the midst of our people on the Homeland soil. Yet - yet the time has not come for me to go up with you to Hanita.
> The time has not come because I cannot for a moment forget our brethren who have been suffering unspeakable torments since they were banished from their homes, and are trying desperately to reach the Homeland, which is their sole refuge. Ever since I first heard of their plight, their call has rung unceasingly in my ears. [...] If in the future I am to merge my life in the life of my people, if I am to rear my children in their midst, if I am to work shoulder to shoulder with you [...] to help win through to our national goal, I must go now to our suffering brethren in the Exile. I must pass through the crucible of suffering that I may be purified. [...] If I am to take part in shaping the new life of our people here, I must be with our brethren in their sorest trials [...] which have made us a race of wanderers without a country."[50]

As far as Rachel is concerned, her return to the Diaspora is not just a physical one, but also a return through identification and willingness to get close once again to the Diaspora Jew – who is not the proud and upright Zionist Jew. This is a spiritual effort demanding a tremendous concession. We might even say that she has chosen to abandon the building of heaven in favor of a return to hell:

> "But I do know that I must go to our people in their hour of sorest need, that with them I must feel the age-old tragedy of the Jew. I must be able to understand the frame of mind of the refugees who came to us on the 'hell ships' and share all their sufferings. I must seek out our people where the woes of the Exile mount to their highest pitch, so that I may understand both their weakness and their latent strength."[51]

David has a difficult time accepting Rachel's decision. From what he says, it appears that she is in the early stages of pregnancy, but he understands that he cannot prevent her from going back:

> "It is most difficult, my Rachel, for me to agree to this decision of yours and to part from you just at the moment we had planned to make our

50 p. 247
51 p. 247



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> new home together, just when our first child is growing under your heart. Yet your resolve is too lofty and your love for our people too deep for me to discuss you."[52]

Further strengthening her will to travel back to the Diaspora is a visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem where she draws strength from Rachel the Matriarch:

> "Let us go, also to Bethlehem, the birthplace of your namesake, King David, and pay our respects to the tomb of Mother Rachel. There I shall pray and there strength will be given to me to carry out my resolve."[53]

Dalliah is also an inspiration for Rachel. The encounter with Dalliah, who is unprepared to give up on her mission to save the children of the Old City in order to settle the Galilee, helps legitimize the importance of helping Jews who are not necessarily pioneers, "lowly" members of the Old Yishuv, religious immigrants, and those who have remained in the Diaspora.

The visit to the Jews in the Old City of Jerusalem only strengthens Rachel's resolve.[54] But Rachel does not deny the suffering that her journey will entail and she contemplates this as she boards the ship in Haifa.[55] She does not act out of the enthusiastic pathos that Wronsky uses to describe the journey of David, Reuben and Ruth. Nor is she emphatic and decisive like Dalliah, who is completely devoted to helping the poor in the Old City. She understands that she must try to connect with the Jews on the ships. Wronsky describes in detail Rachel's harrowing journey from Haifa, via Istanbul and Romania, to the Danube in Hungary, where she boards a wretched freighter with some 250 refugees who are completely alienated from the world, with no one willing to take them in. Wronsky gives a detailed account of Rachel's entire voyage. From this ship, she leaves for a boat with a small group of refugees who have been given British immigration certificates allowing them to enter Palestine, and then begins a long overland journey through Greece's rocky terrain to one of the port cities where an escort awaits them to take them to a ship sailing to Palestine. The conditions on board are harsh: Jews from different places speaking different languages are thrown together in very crowded spaces, with poor sanitation and scant food. Still, babies are being born and Rachel is recruited to

52 pp. 247f
53 p. 248
54 p. 253
55 p. 255



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assist the doctor. By writing detailed description of this physically and emotionally trying journey, Wronsky reinforces Rachel's heroic decision.

Rachel has a meaningful encounter with Maria (Miriam), a 17-year-old girl who ran away from Hungary after she became pregnant with her non-Jewish boyfriend. Their relationship endangered him in the wake of the rise of a racist government in his homeland. Rachel convinces Miriam to return to her people and her homeland – the Land of Israel. Note that this dialogue is among the only ones in the book that contains personal discourse, although it naturally also serves as a statement on the value of living in the homeland.

> "I shall help you," Rachel assured her. "You shall come with me. I too am soon to become a mother. My husband and I are settling on the land. Our life will be hard and we shall have no superfluities; but we shall have a roof over our heads, and land and farm implements will be given us by the Jewish funds. You will join our new settlement. We shall be there together when our hour comes."[56]

Indeed, later on there is something gentle in this feminine bonding:

> The girl's sad eyes sparkled with a gleam of hope as she laid her head wearily in Rachel's lap. A current of fresh life passed between the two young women who were bringing their children to be born in the Homeland.[57]

When the ship arrives at the shores of Palestine, the author adds to Rachel's heroism by presenting her as being among the last to go ashore: "It took all her energy, in her condition, to swim through the breakers and drag Maria along beside her".[58] Even then she does not forget her duty and gives Yocheved, the communal worker, information about each one of the refugees and how they should be helped.

Rachel completes a full circle. Her odyssey starts from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel, and then she returns to the Diaspora in order to bring her fellow Jews to the homeland. Her sacrifice is so great that she ultimately places her duty above her own personal needs, and even those of her unborn child. When the refugees reach Palestine, she is the last to disembark, swims to shore and collapses. Nevertheless, even though

56 p. 259
57 p. 259
58 p. 261



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she knows that David is busy with building Hanita, a task that must be completed within 24 hours,[59] and one both consider sacred, she does not give up on his presence at the birth of their child. In order to be with him she makes the strenuous trip to Hanita.

Rachel's sacrifice is heroic also because she loves children, is devoted to them and sensitive to their needs. We can see this, for example, in the way she leaves individual gifts for each child at the Gray House before leaving for Palestine.[60] Ultimately, and tragically, Rachel does not fulfill her own motherhood, a sacrifice further discussed in the section on spiritual motherhood. Like Rachel the Matriarch, who did not survive her journey and died while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, Wronsky's Rachel also died after giving birth to Yiffrach. As his name attests, Yiffrach symbolizes the promise for the successful flourishing of the Yishuv. That motif can be seen in the last chapter of the novel.

Rachel's story contains drama and conflict. There is a conflict between her loyalty to her partner and her loyalty to her people. This is related to a conflict of loyalties between the mission of building the nation and the mission of helping Jews in the Diaspora. The conflict between 'here' and 'there'; between the 'new world' and the 'old'; a place of 'building' and a place where destruction and annihilation are starting to take place. Moreover, Rachel – for whom motherhood is so important – endangers her unborn child during this journey. However, it is not just her own child that is placed in danger, rather it is the child that she shares with David, and another child to be added to the reborn Jewish people. Wronsky does not judge her for the fact that even while pregnant she decides to embark on such a difficult journey. Rachel's sacrifice is very meaningful to Wronsky. We shall discuss it in detail in the Epilogue.

## Relationships

The concept of relationships in the novel is not necessarily a conservative one. This is already apparent in the choice of how to refer to romantic partners. In the Hebrew translation, throughout the book, the partner is referred to as "companion" or "childhood friend" and not as "husband".

59 See https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_and_Stockade and https://www.historycentral.com/Israel/1938HomaUMigdal.html.

60 p. 189



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In the English version this is less pronounced but resembles the Hebrew version:[61]

> Rachel walked beside him at the head of the procession.[62]
> With his rhythmical tread mingled the swinging steps of his friend Rachel.[63]
> Under her crown of black hair, Rachel's gentle features were radiant with the light of devotion to the playfellow of her childhood, whom she took now for her wedded mate.[64]

The women's sexuality and sensuality are explicit. Moreover, in the book Wronsky deals with women's ability to pursue a free and independent life.

Thus, in their year of *hachshara* (group preparations for settlement), when Reuben is supposed to go to the Jezreel Valley and Ruth is expected to stay with the children in the children's home on Mt. Carmel, Reuben says that they will meet on holidays. Then Reuben adds,

> "I hope, when we two, united for life, shall take part in founding a settlement of our own, where we shall till the land and rear a new generation of Jewish children for the Homeland."[65]

Ruth is not afraid of this separation. On the contrary, she is grateful to Reuben for worrying about her and protecting her from the threat of "murderous bandits", and says that they can never be separated so long as they are alive, and that the *hachshara* year will strengthen the bond between them even if they do not work in the same area. She adds:

> "Yet dear Reuben, let us leave ourselves this year free to live as our own natures dictate without ties or promises, each of us going his own way. Then, later, we can decide whether it would indeed be well for us to unite our lives. Do let us have this year of freedom, dear Reuben!"[66]

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61 The term "husband" is not used in the Hebrew version. In the English translation this term is used in some places. The term for wife in the Hebrew version is *ra'aya*, which is much more poetic and has connotation of companionship.
62 p. 191
63 p. 197
64 p. 201
65 p. 221
66 p. 221



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Reuben agrees and emphasizes the value of a union based on freedom:

> "Be it as you wish, my Ruth! But I agree with a heavy heart. [...] But I know that our union will be all the more joyous if one day you hold out your hand to me of your own free will. Then we shall be bound all the more closely to one another, as we go up side by side to settle on our land in the mountains of Galilee. Peace with you, my Ruth, in the days of our separation at the beginning of our life in the Homeland!"[67]

With regard to Rachel and David, the picture is even more complicated. The elderly rabbi weds them in a religious ceremony at the gates of the Jewish cemetery "in the great city in the north".[68] At any event, when they reach Palestine, they are already legally married. Their relationship is empowered as they immigrate to Palestine. Thus, when the ship approaches the Haifa port,

> Hand in hand David and Rachel stood beside the ship's rail. Never had their love been so close, pure, and radiant as in the moments when they waited together for their first sight of the Homeland. David slid his arm softly around his wife's waist.[69]

However, upon their arrival, David proceeds to the settlement and Rachel remains with the children. Moreover, as we discussed above, one year later when David wants Rachel to come with him to establish Hanita, Rachel refuses and tells him that she intends to return to help her fellow Jews in the Diaspora. Although it is hard for David to accept this, particularly since she is already pregnant, he cannot stand in her way.

In both cases, the separation in Palestine partially derives from the *hachshara* process, where the men are sent to work in agriculture and the women work as teachers or caring for immigrant children. However, it is also an independent choice by the women: Ruth, because of her desire to live a free life, and Rachel because her sense of obligation overcomes her yearning to realize her relationship with David.

Given the physical aspect of their love, that is evident from the beginning of the novel, and given the fact that both women become pregnant, it appears that Wronsky does not hold conservative attitudes regarding

67 p. 221
68 p. 200. As further discussed below, it was customary to conduct the marriage ceremony for a pair of orphans in a cemetery in order to save the community from disaster.
69 p. 213



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sexual relations. Two values are more important to Wronsky than intimate relationships: freedom and realizing the mission to save the Jewish people so that the nation can return to its homeland. The combination of these two values can be found in Rachel's influence on Miriam. Rachel meets Miriam on the shaky immigrant boat. Miriam became pregnant following a relationship with a non-Jew. Wronsky does not judge Miriam for her relationship with a non-Jew, but Rachel suggests that she return to her people and immigrate to Palestine, since only there will she be able to live a free and independent life as a Jew.

Several other interpersonal relationships are described in the novel, either short- or long-term. It is clear, in any case, that significant as they might be, relationships are secondary to the protagonists' mission.

## Spiritual Motherhood

As previously stated, the women in this book are described as strong and powerful. Nonetheless, their roles are still traditional albeit not necessarily familial. Female roles are harnessed to the good of the entire nation. An example is the statement made by the rabbi's son who hosts them in Italy:

> "Rachel and Ruth, too impressed him deeply [...] Yet I admit that it is only after meeting these two that I realize the true role of womanhood in the life of society and of the nation."[70]

This is evident primarily in the roles of the women caring for the children in the Gray House; for example:

> Their maternal love had endowed the children with strength for the pioneering tasks that await them in the Land of Israel.[71]
> Beracha knew and loved each and all of them and had brought them up carefully for pioneering in the Homeland.[72]

Later on, when describing Henrietta Szold, the "mother of the Yishuv",[73] who was waiting at the port for the children, Wronsky writes:

70 p. 207
71 p. 191
72 p. 192
73 Henrietta Szold never married and did not have children of her own.



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> The children she was to mother were destined to lives of severe toil; no hardships would be spared them. And because it was so, she must rear them as upstanding men and women who would be equal to the struggle that awaited them. In that moment she felt within her an upsurge of the primordial maternal strength that is given the women of Israel, the strength that enables them to clear all stumbling blocks from their path, the strength that shapes and forms all things. Overwhelmed by the weight of her responsibility, she closed her eyes and prayed silently: "Thou O Lord God of Israel, didst lay this task upon me. Give me of Thy strength that I may worthily perform it!"[74]

Women's role in educating and caring for the children is deemed essential because the children are the future of the nation. Rachel states this when she is exposed to the neglect of the Jewish children in the Old City:

> "How can a people which is beginning a new national life permit its young girls to be bound to dying old men? Why does it not care for and educate them as its most precious national asset?"[75]

Dalliah's immediate response emphasizes the connection between the professional, personal and maternal mission and the children's fate:

> "Now perhaps you will be able to understand", replied Dalliah sadly, "why I feel that I cannot accompany you to Hanita. I am attached to this place with every fiber of my being."[76]

She goes on to complain that the people of the Yishuv nurture flowers donated from Holland, but the children of the Old City are not nurtured so, but

> [...] are allowed to run wild in the streets instead of being turned loose in the fields and meadows to grow up strong and healthy in body and mind.[77]

Dalliah is disappointed. She also came from the great city in the north where she learned how to care for her people in order to live in the village and learn how to nurture and support the children. However, in the Old City she encounters a different reality. The public is indifferent to the

74 p. 215
75 p. 252
76 p. 252
77 p. 252



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children living there, which infuriates her. And since she is alone in this campaign, the mission of caring for these children falls to her. She feels satisfied in spite of the obstacles when she manages to enroll several children each year into the youth village at the foot of Mt. Carmel. Although her strength is dwindling, she is convinced that in "this war I am fighting for the treasure of our nation, for our children". She will not let go:

> "Here I shall stay, and here I shall work until the last child has been taken out of the stone caves, until the last boy has been taught a trade, until the last mother has been helped in her hour of sore need!"[78]

This would suggest that although Dalliah's mission is to help the weak and vulnerable in the Old City, she feels that saving children is of particular importance. The statement that emerges here is that just as one can cultivate the land and nurture the flower, in truly parallel fashion one must care for the children, young saplings who will grow to become the future generation of the nation. Hence, the utmost importance of the extended maternal role becomes evident.

Alongside this sentiment, Wronsky warns against a situation where there is no role for women in society. She places this message into the mouth of a young woman from Ben Shemen in a conversation that takes place after the youth present a play on the Biblical story of Rachel and Leah.

> "You are right, Reuben," interposed demure Deborah of Benshemen, "in demanding that each of us decide for himself what place he can best fill in the community. Yet the legend of Jacob's blessings does not convey, as far as I can see, any message to the women of Israel. On his deathbed the father allotted each of his sons a place in the community, but not a word did he say about the women of his family. And because he assigned no place in the community to his only daughter, Dinah,[79] a kindred people was massacred for his neglect. Yet the Bible tells us about many women who […] made a place for herself in the life of her people and served it well."[80]

Despite the fact that Deborah continues to describe the various strengths and actions of women in the Bible, and even though she speaks of the com-

78 p. 253

79 The biblical Dinah was raped by the leader of Shechem (Nablus), a gentile, and her brothers revenged it by killing all the city's male inhabitants (see Genesis 34).

80 p. 240



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mon objective of "working to build our land together with our brothers, to become one nation",[81] ultimately, she returns to the role of children's education:

> For we aim to become a united people and a united community, bringing new life into the community and bringing up our children to serve their people.[82]

It would seem, therefore, that Wronsky views women as a significant, but ultimately traditional force in the Zionist mission. Even when she describes the settling of Hanita, Ruth serves as a nurse, as in addition to childrearing, women's roles include helping the weak and needy.

It appears that Wronsky attributes to the women an interpersonal capacity for empathy. Rachel's way of helping her people in the Diaspora is to listen and participate in their suffering. This ability is suited to the traditional gender perception of women and supports their capability to fulfill their roles in the framework of the Zionist enterprise.

Wronsky's concept of motherhood can also be understood against the background of how motherhood was perceived among social workers in the Yishuv (Halpern 2019). On the one hand, efforts to fall into line with the Yishuv leadership compelled them to adopt the gender norms prevalent at that time (Melman 1997; Margalit-Stern 2006; Rosenberg-Friedman 2008). On the other hand, many educated women chose career over family life, particularly among the first generation of social workers (Walkowitz 1999). Was this free choice, or was this acceptance of the social order?

This can be seen as part of what was known as *geistige Mütterlichkeit* ("spiritual motherhood") in Germany, which praised the devotion to making an impact on society at the expense of biological motherhood (Maurer 2004). The designation of social work as a women's profession, however, turned out to be a trap. Women were defined by their role as passionate human beings and therefore excluded from other professions and from playing a decisive role as leaders in the emerging welfare state. Despite tremendous changes in gender relations, the ongoing male hegemony led Alice Salomon to establish the German Academy for Social and Pedagogical Women's Work in 1925, where Wronsky taught. This is considered, paradoxically, as breaking gender boundaries as well as aligning with patriarchal

81 p. 240
82 p. 240



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norms during that time and place, which did not allow women to have a career as well as a family.

In the 1920s, social work was already a well-developed profession in some Western countries. Special schools trained women to become social workers, mostly as part of the nation state's welfare system. These women identified themselves as part of the national establishment but were also affiliated with feminist movements. During this time, the concept of motherhood in relation to social work has fundamentally changed. The idea of women devoting their life – and not only their youth – to professional social work has been normalized. At the same time, the cultural value of biological motherhood increased again in the context of nationalist movements, forcing women back into traditional female roles. Thus, spiritual motherhood entailed many conflicts for women social workers at that time.

## Transnational Transfer of Social Work and Pedagogy from Germany

Beside Wronsky's focus on Zionism and social work, the novel also articulates the rich German and German-Jewish heritage that Wronsky and others brought with them to Palestine. Some studies (e.g. Gelber 1990; Golan 2002) underscore the dominance of the German social work tradition of the time in the Yishuv, as well as the influence of socialist attitudes from Eastern Europe on the Yishuv's social policy (Rosenfeld 1995). However, very few studies (Gal; Ajzenstadt 2015; Gal; Köngeter 2016) have critically examined the German influences on local practices, and the cultural, ethnic, and gender tensions involved. These studies argue that German-trained social workers in Palestine had a pedagogical-paternalistic approach and less of a case work orientation. However, in the novel Wronsky clearly reveals a humanistic approach, perhaps inspired by Alice Salomon. From early stages Wronsky advocated for "individualistic" approach to help: "a systematic provision of welfare a personal attention for a single individual in need supported by empathy and understanding".[83]

For example, there are several places where a psychoanalytic approach is practiced. The unique therapeutic approach of *Ahawah* Home and Siddy Wronsky's own professional approach were also inspired by contemporary psychoanalytic theories, especially that of Siegfried Bernfeld, who sought to create a feeling of home and family within the institute (Bargur 2013), as seen in the novel:

83 see Konrad (2022: 61)



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> The devoted committee of women who had sponsored the Gray House from its first day had done their utmost to equip the youthful vanguard of their people with the best of everything needful for their new life in the Land of Israel. For twelve years [...] these kindly women had dedicated themselves heart and soul to the welfare of their wards. When the children first came to them the horrors they had seen were still reflected in their eyes: brutal murders and the burning of houses that had robbed them of parents and homes. [...] Only very gradually, after the women had made them feel at home in the Gray House had the rigid barrier of the children's reserve been broken down.[84]

Additionally, Wronsky was preoccupied by ideas of social justice, also inspired by Salomon and other social work founders who viewed social work as a profession of both welfare and social critique. They committed themselves deeply to international collaboration and promoted the translation of several approaches and methods from US-based social work, driven mainly by several social reform movements (Wieler 2009; Feustel 2006; Schüler 2004). Framed by various approaches to social reform, a range of innovative theories, methods and practices of social work emerged, which were directly connected with the development of the profession and were adapted and further developed by pioneers of social work around the globe (Gal et al. 2021; Gross 2009; Kirk; Reid 2002; Harkavy; Puckett 1994).

In the German context, the Settlement House Movement and the Charity Organization Movement (COS) were most significant in influencing the development of casework and community work methods, together with various research approaches (Mazursky; Lau 2020). However, while Salomon, like the mainstream of bourgeois and feminist social reform protagonists, preferred to orient herself toward reform movements that promoted Western values, during the 1920s Wronsky began to increasingly incorporate approaches that aimed to form a tradition-based, modern Jewish identity, drawing on knowledge and practices from East European Jewry.[85] This included, for example, Wronsky's involvement in the Jewish settlement movement in Berlin, from which, under the leadership of Siegfried Lehmann, the Jewish *Volksheim* in Berlin's *Scheunenviertel* emerged (Haustein; Waller 2009).

84 p. 191

85 Wronsky was influenced by US-American streams of social work, according to Mary Richmond and the COS, as indicated by books found in her private library such as *The Art of Helping* (1930) by Ellen and Geer Windon (available from the authors).



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Additionally, social work in Germany advocated *Sozialpolitik*, the involvement of state institutions in the psychological, medical, and socioeconomic aspects of the community, instructing the individual how to lead a productive life for the sake of the collective (Crew 1998). Wronsky advocated "a synthesis of social politics and individual care" (1935, p. 1), stating that "existing and well-developed strengths could be lost or go awry due to negative influences in working conditions and a bad life" (ibid., p. 4).

Wronsky's political and economic perspective regarding the social work profession is well emphasized in the novel. First, when meeting the workers that Ruth treated in the Gray city, she shows empathy towards the working class:

> Silently Ruth bade farewell to the people in the crowded little flats whom she had visited so often as a welfare worker. Many a one there had she helped and comforted and encouraged in his hour of need.[86]

On her way to the Holy Land, Ruth meets a stranger on the ship who embodies the antithesis of her socialist approach and her aim of forming a new Jewish identity by adopting and transforming traditional Jewish values, as the Jewish *Volksheim* aimed.

> "What can a little group like yours," he asked, "without experience of work on the land and without backing from the great world of commerce and finance, expect to accomplish? […] Come with me, help me with my plans for exploiting the oil of Palestine for the whole world." […] Ruth shook her head gently, "I thank you, sir, for your good opinion of me; but you offer a kind of life I do not want. You believe that we should serve the interests of other nations for our own profit. Your plans embrace the whole world. But we […] mean to serve our own nation. […] Only by work on the land shall we be able to receive the ancient Jewish culture in a modern form."[87]

In that regard, a major conflict was also transferred from Germany: the duality rooted in Jewish welfare systems in Germany, where social workers were influenced by the *Sozialpolitik* idea, but vacillated between Salomon's pacifist-universal doctrine and the particular group interest of the Jews. For many, Hitler's rise to power put an end to that conflict as it highlighted the

86 p. 197
87 p. 209



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urgent need to help Jews above all, and to espouse Zionism as an escape from a continent that had turned its back on universalism (Halpern 2018).

This movement raised new conflicts and contradictions, however. In addition to the conflict already described between the progressive image of social workers developed in the former homeland and their perception as old-fashioned and hierarchy-driven in the new country, the contradictions of the transfer of methods and institutions of Western social work came to the fore. Thus, in the context of social work with so-called Oriental Jews as clients, processes of Othering emerged that were clearly rooted in the social workers' White and Western socialization (Schmitz et al. 2019). Although these are not directly evident in the novel, they are echoed in descriptions of the Arab population, which will be analyzed next.

## *Attitudes, Images, and Conflicts*

### The Arab Population

In the introduction, when Wronsky describes the Land of Israel, it is "desolate", apparently empty, because it is empty of the Jewish people who were exiled.[88]

> Through long ages the land lay solitary and forsaken, arid and untilled, without orchards or cornlands. Not a sign of life was to be seen on its highways or in its habitations. Ever it waited in the solemn silence of its mountain tops, in the depth of its lakes, in the breadth of its plains. For the return of its own people, it waited, for the people that had been banished from its fields for two thousand years, exiled by force of its destiny, driven hither and thither over the face of the whole earth.[89]

However, in the opening chapter of the novel, where Wronsky describes the Land of Israel, except in connection with Jaffa, she does not relate to the fact that for two thousand years different groups from various nationalities lived in the land. Moreover, the characterization of the land as a "wilderness" is inconsistent with the reality of that period. Thus she

88 For a similar description of Palestine see the testimony of Maeir Karpf in Bargur (2013).

89 p. 185



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uncritically adopts the Zionist precept of "a land without a people – for a people without a land".[90]

The protagonists meet the diverse population of Palestine for the first time as they approach the Haifa port. They look out at Haifa and Acre, at the Arab houses; they also observe the faces of the people in Haifa, "Jewish and Arab faces". They also begin to see donkeys and camels.[91] But immediately afterward, Wronsky moves to a favorable description of Henrietta Szold who is waiting at the port for the immigrant children.[92]

After placing the children in the home on Mt. Carmel, the protagonists sit at night at the edge of the forest, "whence they could overlook the bay shore, which lay bare and deserted, awaiting the redemption by the work of eager hands".[93]

Afterwards, during their trip to the Galilee,

> The young couple rambled down through the Arab quarter with its closely barred houses and courtyards, from which men in flowing robes were starting out for their day's work. And now their way led through the old town with the picturesque Jewish and Arab markets where the bright fruits of the land were displayed, and then along the harbor road on which heavy lorries speeded to meet the incoming ships.[94]

While traveling in the Galilee, Wronsky describes the sights seen from the car. Besides Nazareth, no Arab villages are mentioned. Everything that is described from Haifa to Kibbutz Degania near the Sea of Galilee are Jewish settlements. However, when Rachel travels to visit her friend at the Meir Shfeya Youth Village, she nevertheless, sees "Arab shepherds leading their flocks to pasture and Arab peasants working in the fields".[95] But immediately in the next sentence, we read: "Merry youngsters from Meir Shefeye were on their way to the village on some errands of their town".[96] Again, it would seem that the author needs to immediately balance the sight of the Arabs with the sight of Jews.

90 A statement attributed to British Zionist Israel Zangwill.
91 p. 213
92 pp. 213-217
93 p. 218
94 p. 223
95 p. 227
96 p. 227



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Yet Wronsky tries to show that there is also hope for coexistence:

> The young people were ranged on the stone benches of the open-air theater beside teachers, laborers, officials, relatives, friends of Benshemen village, and guests from the neighboring Arab villages.[97]

At the Ben Shemen Youth Holiday, Yossef, the oldest pupil, delivers a speech and thanks the Arabs for participating in the celebrations:

> This afternoon we welcome Arab friends from neighboring villages, Persian and Yemenites, Russians and Poles, Norwegians and Swiss, Scots and Netherlanders.[98]

Note that in the Hebrew version, the end of the address emphasizes that the guest came to participate in the youth celebration in Ben Shemen, as a symbol of the youth being part of the nation. However, the English version ends in a universal message: "To all of them we extend our warmest thanks for having come to us to promote mutual understanding through the poetry of motion".[99]

On their way to Jerusalem, before Rachel sails back to the Diaspora, they take a bus in Tel Aviv, "the only Jewish city in the world".[100] But their way passes through Jaffa:

> [T]he bus wended its way, skirting the Arab city of Jaffa with its lovely minarets and great domed mosques. Between the two sister-cities no dividing line could be discerned. Beyond in the open country, the travelers passed Arab and Jewish orange groves behind prickly cactus hedges through which could be seen golden fruit hanging against a background of dark foliage.[101]

Here, as well, we see the description of the shared existence between Arabs and Jews side by side, to the extent that it is impossible to point out the boundary between the Jewish city and the Arab one, and between the Jewish orchards and Arab orchards. Later, Wronsky describes the Arabs that are seen along the way:

97 p. 237 (in the Hebrew version p. H-45).
98 p. 244
99 p. 244
100 p. 248
101 p. 248



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> All along the road, pedestrians were seen: Arabs in picturesque costumes striding along with free and dignified steps, peasant women bearing great trays of fruit on their heads: shepherds driving flocks of ship and goats before them.[102]

When they arrive at the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem, their impressions are as follows:

> Arab beggars lay on the ground whining for alms. Among the passersby were brisk Arab merchants in red turbans, Bedouin in white robes, rich peasants whose kuffiyes were bound around their heads with heavy golden cords, peasant women carrying great baskets and trays on their heads as they moved along with stately swaying gait.[103]

Later on, they

> walked on through the marketplace, where Arabs in bright cloaks led their heavily laden asses with loud shouts trough narrow lanes pervaded with the odor of fresh spices. In the immaculately clean shops, meat and bread, fruit and spices, clothing and shoes, rugs and jewelry were heaped up in lavish profusion to attract the passing multitude.[104]

The description of the Arab population is romantic and even Orientalist. It develops through several stages. In the introduction, as we have seen, Wronsky totally ignores them. Throughout the book they are depicted as part of the social and human fabric of the land. However, in the final chapters, they are described as enemies.

> "Everywhere among these rocks and bushes lurk enemies who are resolved to deter us from our undertaking. We shall have to struggle unremittingly with the bandits who lie in wait. From our watch-tower we shall have to be on the lookout night and day so that no harm may come to our children and our homesteads."[105]

They shoot at Reuben following his arrival in Hanita:

> Sudden shots broke the silence of the night. The new settlement was attacked at the very moment when its first children came into the world.

102 p. 248
103 p. 250
104 p. 250
105 p. 264



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> Ruth dwelt anxiously on Reuben, who was in charge of the defense. The shooting died down gradually and cries were heard in the distance. In that moment Ruth knew in her heart that the hardly won Homeland had taken a new sacrifice in the person of Reuben, the father of her unborn child.[106]

However, even at the end of the book, Wronsky leaves a small opening for the possibility of future coexistence. The last chapter describes a thriving Hanita after four years' time. David plows his field while, deep in thought, he recalls everything that has happened to him, to the other protagonists and to the kibbutz. The chapter includes descriptions of the agricultural, economic and cultural development of the Yishuv, along with recollections of people who have been killed by Arabs over the years. Nevertheless, Wronsky still believes in working together with the Arabs in the region. David reminiscences on the time that passed and remembers how, when they moved to their permanent housing, they met their Arab neighbors. He thinks of them not necessarily as enemies but rather as having similar hardships:

> It was there they had first met some of their Arab neighbors and the fact that both tilled the stony soil of the mountains had created ties of friendship between the neighbors.[107]

It appears that, if the introduction deals with the Land of Israel as a fantastic space completely devoid of non-Jews, when Wronsky is exposed to the reality of Palestine through the protagonists' eyes, she can no longer ignore the Arabs living there. Still, she describes them from a distance, in Orientalist, if not colonialist, terms. Regarding the nature of the relationship with them, we can see a movement between entertaining the possibility of living and perhaps even working together with them, and their description as cruel enemies who come to sabotage the settlement enterprise. It is not clear whether Wronsky comes to any decision between the two options. Perhaps, in light of her description of the encounter between Hanita's residents and their Arab neighbors, Wronsky finds it hard to abandon her aspiration for some possibility of a positive connection between the indigenous Arabs and the Jewish pioneers. Moreover, this ambivalence is related to Wronsky's professional activity, as together with being a devout Zionist, she was involved in an interreligious (Muslim, Christian and Jew-

106 p. 266
107 p. 271



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ish) committee on social affairs for the British Mandate government, as well as initiating professional trips to Egypt and Lebanon in order to learn from their social work schools there (Halpern 2019).

## Immigration to Palestine as a Response to Anti-Semitism

For Siddy Wronsky, immigration to Palestine by Zionist pioneers was aimed at redeeming the land from its desolation, but it also had another purpose: alleviating the suffering of Jews in the Diaspora, and in Europe during the 1930s in particular. This notion is reflected throughout the book. We will demonstrate it using the pivotal event of David and Rachel's wedding near the old Jewish cemetery in the "great city to the north", on the evening before they left for Palestine.

> Hand in hand they walked back through the aisles of the dead to the chapel, where candles had been lighted before the ark. There the aged rabbi awaited David and Rachel, that he might unite them for life on the eve of their departure for the Land of Israel. Ruth and Reuben held the wedding canopy aloft over the heads of the bridegroom and bride. Under her crown of black hair Rachel's gentle feature were radiant with the light of devotion to the playfellow of her childhood, whom she now took for her wedded mate. Taking her right hand in this, David placed the ring on her finger and recited the ancient, moving formula: "Behold, thou art consecrated to me by the low of Moses and Israel!" The venerable rabbi took the right hands of the bridal pair between his palms and gave them his blessing: "Give yourselves to one another, my children! Be fruitful, multiply, and rear a generation of free Jews in the Land of Israel!"[108]

Why did the rabbi hold the wedding ceremony in the cemetery? Why not in the Gray House? To answer that question, we need to address the Jewish tradition of marrying a couple of orphans at a cemetery, in order to fend off a plague. There is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that when a plague broke out in a city the community would wed a pair of orphans at the cemetery. This was an ancient Ashkenazi tradition and examples of this can be found in East European communities. In the book *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* [Treasury of Jewish Customs] by Avraham Eliezer Hirshowitz (1918), we find the following:

108 p. 201



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> When a plague reached a town, a chuppah [wedding] was made between a poor orphan groom and a poor orphan bride. In the courtyard of the dead, because it was a "segulah" [ritual remedy]. […] The mitzvah [commandment] of charity and marrying poor brides has the power of blessing with longevity […] by arranging the marriage of a poor orphan groom and a poor orphan bride, the public gain many mitzvahs, and all the city dwellers come to share the joy of the bride and groom, and thus they forget their troubles and griefs, which is a big danger in that time […] and the fear of death will no more face them (Hirshowitz 1917, p. 97). At the same ceremony they would bury holy books that had become worn out or damaged in the *geniza* (holy burial place of sacred books) in the cemetery.[109] [110]

Wronsky's narrative does not describe a physical epidemic. Nevertheless, a serious and terrible trouble threatened the Jewish community, that is, anti-Semitism that was growing with the rise of Nazism.

There is evidence that this custom was upheld during the Holocaust in the ghettos, for example, when typhus broke out.[111]

It would seem that Wronsky alludes to that custom, assuming that her readers are familiar with it. David and Rachel are both orphans. Holding the wedding near the cemetery suggests that it expresses the struggle with the catastrophe hovering over the Jewish people in exile. Moreover, their wedding is conducted right before immigrating to Palestine; in other words, not only is their marriage a key part of this struggle but so is their immigration. This way, Wronsky signals that young Jewish couples leaving the Diaspora to build the nation are central to combatting anti-Semitism. There is nothing left for the Jews to seek in the Diaspora, they have no future there. This is also demonstrated in the rabbi's blessing to David and Rachel.

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109 This ceremony was practiced even in 20th-century Tel Aviv. The Trumpeldor Cemetery, the oldest in Tel Aviv (est. 1902), was built in the wake of a cholera epidemic that had broken out in several cities in Palestine. As a remedy to stop the plague, torn parts of holy books were buried in a special grave and a marriage ceremony was held.

110 For more information, see https://www.Kadisha.org.

111 For more information, see https://www.anumuseum.org.il. We thank Prof. Eliyahu Schleifer for locating the sources of this custom, and Nitza Moorstein for finding the information on the Internet. At the same ceremony, parts of damaged holy books were buried. This ceremony was held for the last time in Żelechów, Poland, in the beginning of 1942, with the hope that a typhoid plague that had killed hundreds will stop. Members of the community led the couple to the *chuppah* in the cemetery, and music was played in the Ghetto.



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The question whether Jews have any future in Europe is echoed in an argument on the boat between the young immigrating couples and a Jew who believes that Jews should remain in Europe and contribute to the local economy and society.[112] As already mentioned, Bertha Pappenheim believed that Europe was the home for Jews even after the Nazis rose to power. As evident throughout the novel, Wronsky was strongly opposed to that. The ceremony in the grave yard has a symbolic meaning to Wronsky's belief regarding the terrible future that awaits the Jews in Europe.

Indeed, during the Holocaust, Jews were deported to concentration camps in front of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Berlin. Nowadays a monument is placed there in their memory.[113]

## Nature

The redemption of the Jewish people entails both returning to their ancient homeland and returning to life based in nature. Although Wronsky's descriptions of making the desert bloom include building cities, factories and commerce, great importance is attached to nature. As we have seen in the introduction, in Wronsky's eyes, prior to the return of the Jewish people to its land, it was like a wasteland, but when the journey back begins the descriptions of nature start to be infused with vitality. This is evident in her writing style as already analyzed. But substantially as well, nature is a major theme in the novel. We can find reference to the influence of nature on the protagonists' personal growth. David, for one, declares to his friends the night after their immigration:

> The Land of Israel is too beautiful not to intoxicate us continually with its loveliness, too much part of our being not to infuse with new strength into us.[114]

The description borders on the erotic: not only is the Land of Israel so beautiful that it is intoxicating, it will infuse the protagonists with new strength. Conversely, life in the Diaspora is portrayed as grey, as opposed to the light and azure of the homeland.

Descriptions of nature tend towards the pastoral (Hunt 1992), whether it is wild or cultivated, whether in an Arab or Jewish spatial context.

112 p. 208

113 For more information, see https://www.visitberlin.de/en/alter-judischer-friedhof-old-jewish-cemetery.

114 p. 218



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But nature's importance goes beyond beauty. Connecting with nature is essential for redeeming and cultivating the land, especially when educating children. This is apparent, for example, in the entire chapter devoted to the Festival of First Fruits, the holiday of Shavuot.

Moreover, the importance of nature in educating the future generation is discussed explicitly in the book, during Rachel's visit to Kibbutz Degania. Here she is amazed at the nature the children can see out of the school window, and tells the teacher:

> "Never before […] have I seen a school set in such magnificent natural surroundings. Reared in such an environment, a child cannot help readily absorbing all that is lofty and noble in his instruction."[115]

Then Rachel quotes at length from a booklet about the Kibbutz, concluding that:

> "I have always wished […] to come here and help to shape the characters of the children. I count myself most happy to have this task in your community."[116]

The teacher confirms her statement and explains that teaching in nature and about nature, is also valuable for opening up the child's soul to universal values as well as helping him understand his place in society and in redeeming the land.[117]

Wronsky devotes an entire subchapter to the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which is celebrated in midsummer. But Wronsky uses another term, "Festival of First Fruits" (*Bicurim*).[118] She prefers to use the term that is more connected to the agricultural aspect of this holiday. In the subchapter, Wronsky narrates enthusiastically how the offering of first fruits is celebrated, especially by children, in an elaborate ceremony that developed with the kibbutzim.[119] This subchapter reflects the sociopolitical campaign regarding this Jewish holiday that emerged in the Yishuv during the 1920s.[120]

115 p. 226
116 p. 226
117 p. 226
118 p. 230
119 For more information on the festival in the kibbutz, see https://en.idi.org.il/articles/6145.
120 For more information, see https://www.sefaria.org.il/sheets/217272?lang=he.



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To conclude, socialization of the new generation entails education regarding the importance of redeeming the land, working the soil, and enjoying nature, celebrating the offering of first fruits all combined. Such an education would not only contribute to building the country. It can build the personality of the young generation in the desired image of the pioneer.

### *Songs and Poems as Means of Highlighting Ideas*

The book is interwoven with songs and poems. The first song in the book is found on the Table of Contents (we will discuss this particular song in detail later when addressing the significance of the book's title). The songwriters' or poets' names are not mentioned. In the English version, some of the poets' names are mentioned.

### The Variety of Songs in the Novel

Wronsky quotes songs from a variety of sources:

*El Artzi (to my land):* Rachel writes a dedication in a book that she presents to one of the girls in the Gray House, about to immigrate to Palestine. She quotes from a poem by the poet Rachel[121] in which she writes about her deep commitment to plant and renew the soil near the Jordan River.[122]

*Anu Banu Artza:* While working in the Gray House, Rachel hums: "We have come to the Land / To build and to plant".[123] The English version is inaccurate. The second verse in the original Hebrew song should read: "To build [the land] and to build ourselves as well".[124] This emphasizes that building the homeland will help develop the personality of the New Jew, instead of the old diasporic Jew.

*Hatikvah:* David summons the children in the Gray House to the final meeting before the emigration:

> Suddenly the notes of the flute sounded the melody of "Hatikvah", the song of hope that had been accepted as the national hymn of the Jewish

121 Rachel Bluwstein.
122 p. 189
123 p. 190
124 For more information, see https://www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=717.



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> Renascence because it voiced the age-old longings of the people. At the summons light feet scudded down the stairs and along corridors, hastening from kitchen and dormitories, courtyard and the cellar.[125]

By including "Hatikvah" drawing the picture of the children and staff answering the call, Wronsky tells the reader that even though the children and the staff in the Gray House are still in the Diaspora, they belong to the Zionist movement and are acquainted with what would become the national anthem.

*Psalm 126:* This is included in the hymns sung on the Sabbath. They express the joy of the people who returned to the Land of Israel after the Diaspora in Babylon.[126] [127]

*Faust:* On their emigration journey, the train stops in the

> little city of Weimar, where Goethe had written his immortal 'Faust', in which he urged his fellowmen to return to the land […]. Ruth, who stood looking out of the window of the coach, turned to Haim, one of the young teachers from the Gray House. "How strange," she mused "that though it is a hundred and fifty years since the wise Goethe proclaimed that mankind could achieve true happiness only by tilling the soil, his teaching has not been taken to heart either by his own people or any other. Why has it been granted only to us, the smallest and most dispersed of the nations, to adopt his idea of a community united in fellowship by cultivation of the soil and liberating itself by so doing?"[128]

Then Wronsky quotes from Faust 512. She cites five more stanzas.[129] Goethe's verses serve as an inspiration to the group of friends about to immigrate to Palestine:

> Only a people that has undergone bondage and affliction like ours can strive for happiness Goethe described: liberation of humanity by going back to the land.[130]

125 p. 191
126 p. 195
127 For more information, see https://kurzlinks.de/57ur
128 p. 204
129 p. 204
130 p. 205



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*A freedom song:* Identified with the Swiss struggle for independence: "Rather Death than slavery!"[131]

*Song of the Valley:* David, who hears the son of Rabbi Julius declare his loyalty to the Italian people, responds by declaring his loyalty to the Land of Israel and to its poets:

> When he had finished his story, David took up his flute and played for Giulio the song of the Emek, the erstwhile swamp transformed by toil of the pioneers into fertile valleys and flourishing vineyards.[132] [133] [134]

It was written in 1934 as part of the soundtrack for the film *To the New Life*, produced by Margot Klaussner in conjunction with Keren Hayesod.[135]

*Children's song for the Festival of First Fruits:* Written by Levin Kipnis in 1929: "Our Baskets are on our Shoulders".[136] As already mentioned when analyzing nature in Zionist ideology, this festival had been highly significant. The song is still sung by children today.

*Ode to Joy:* In the last chapter, David reflects on how the kibbutz has developed and recalls how the first radio was received as a gift.[137] In the Hebrew version, a segment from Schiller's „Ode to Joy", from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, is quoted. In the English version, the stanza itself is not quoted; instead, the text reads as follows:

> And what a happy day that has been when the first wireless set had come as a gift from Jerusalem. No sooner had the strain of the Ninth Symphony died away than the comrades joyously chanted.[138]

David is the one who leads the singing, he starts playing the flute and the others join in.

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131 p. 206

132 The songs appear in the text on the right side of the page, and are presented here as they appear in the book. Those that Wronsky placed in the middle of the page are also presented here as they appear in the original.

133 p. 206

134 The song contains four stanzas with a refrain. The words of the third stanza are: Darkness is upon Mt. Gilboa / A horse gallops from shadow to shadow / An outcry is heard / Over the fields of the Jezre'el Valley / Who fired and who fell there / Between Beit Alpha and Nahalal.

135 For more information, see http://www.marclavry.org/2011/05/14/emek-shir-haemek-song-op-40/.

136 p. 232

137 p. H-63 in the Hebrew version

138 p. 270



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## The Motto: "Sand and Stars"

We will now discuss in detail the song "Sand and Stars", which is the motto of the novel. In the Hebrew version, on the Table of Contents page, Siddy Wronsky hints at the source of the book's name. At the end of the page, below the title of the last chapter, which is also called "Sand and Stars", several stanzas of a poem are quoted. In the English version, no quotation at all is included in the Table of Contents, but the poem is included in the book itself.

The title of the second subchapter of the first chapter is "Sand". This subchapter describes how the children and four protagonists spent the evening prior to immigration to Palestine. When the couples arrive at the cemetery, they see the stars and David plays a tune on the flute, apparently the Kaddish or *El Maleh Rachamim* memorial prayer, which is sung at funerals and memorial services.[139] "After the hymn for the dead, David played the song of 'Sand and Stars' by a modern Jewish poet."[140] This is followed by quoting the entire song:[141]

The moon shines bright,
The stars gleam white,
Night falls softly
On hill and dale

Before me lies open
The ancient Book
I read and read again
A thousand times o'er

How excellent, how sweet
The words of Holy writ!
"By Myself have I sworn it
O, my people!
Thou shalt be
As the stars of heaven
As the sand of the sea."

Lord of the Universe:
Of the words of thine oath

139 Can be found in the *siddur* (prayer book). In the novel it is mentioned on p. 200.
140 p. 189
141 p. 199



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Not one shall fail.
By thy holy will
All things are established, –
Each in its season
Each in its place.

That one already hath been fulfilled
Alas, of a certainty do I know:
We have become
As the sand of the sea –
Downtrodden under
Every man's heel!
God above, verily,
Like to sand and stones,
Are we dispersed and scattered,
Scorned and despised.

But the stars,
The bright, the gleaming stars,
The stars –
Where, O God, are the stars?

While Wronsky does not indicate who wrote the poem, our research indicates that the lines quoted are the opening stanzas of the Yiddish poem "Sand and Stars" by Shimon Frug, a Zionist poet active in Odessa at the turn of the century (1860-1919). It is a statement of defiance against God regarding the fate of the Jewish people. This defiance alludes to and diametrically contrasts with Genesis 22:17: "For surely I will bless you and surely I will multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven and the sand upon the seashore, and your children will inherit the gate of their enemies".

The poem depicts a Jew sitting outside at night, watching the moon and stars. He reads from the Bible about God's promise to Abraham, turns to God and says, every word of Your promises must be fulfilled, and indeed, one promise has already been fulfilled and the Jewish people is like "the sand on the shore", because like sand, we have become worthless and everyone tramples us, but what about the stars?

This poem was set to music by Frug's contemporary, Avraham Moshe Bernstein (1866-1932), who was a cantor in the Taharat Hakodesh Synagogue in Vilna, frequented by the adherents of the Haskalah, which would be the only one in the city to survive the Holocaust. With Bernstein's



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melody, the song became part of the folklore of the Zionist movement, but non-Zionist and even anti-Zionist Jews sang it as well.[142]

Note that in the Hebrew version, the first stanzas are placed in the table of content below the information regarding the final chapter, which describes an optimistic future for Hanita. The stanzas quoted in the table do not reflect the fervent defiance against God that is found in the rest of the poem. However, the theme of "Sand and Stars" is interweaved in the entire book.

In the evening before their departure to Palestine, the couples watch the stars and then David pays a meaningful tribute.[143] He takes a symbolic step in reconnecting his mother with the Land of Israel by taking some soil from around her grave (the custom is usually the opposite: taking a handful of dirt from the Land of Israel to bury in a grave in the Diaspora),[144] and saying the following oath-like words, as if symbolically rewriting the poem.

> David dug some of the earth and placed it in a small sotto sack […]. And in his thoughts David addressed his dead mother: "This is our last visit to your grave mother dear! But our farewell does not signify a parting. Rather is it a sacred bond, a pledge for the future. This earth we take from your grave will not be scattered like the sand of the seashore. When we plough the soil of our Homeland, we shall scatter this earth from your grave in the furrows that it may mingle with our ancestral earth. No longer shall we wander aimlessly from land to land. All the toil and care you lavished on us will yield rich harvests in the fields of Eretz Israel!".
>
> David lifted up his eyes from the grave to the heavens. "These stars, mother, that circle over your grave, will light us on our way to the Homeland. Under the southern skies, these same stars will show us the course we must steer, the work we must do, the plans we must make for our lives. Now that we are about to set out for the Land of Israel, they assure us that never again shall we be hunted from pillar to post. These very stars, mother, that shine down upon your grave here, will light us in our new life over there."[145]

142 We are grateful to musicologist Prof. Eliyahu Schleifer for information about the song. As a cantor, Prof. Schleifer has sung this song on various opportunities.

143 p. 199

144 See, e.g., Patai, Raphael & Bar-Itzhak, Haya (eds.) (2013): Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions. New York: Routledge.

145 p. 201



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The immigration stands for the beginning of God fulfilling his promise. The nation will no longer wander like the sand, and the stars are like a lighthouse whose beacon lights the way.

The themes of "Sand and Stars" are repeated throughout the novel. Stanzas from the poem are repeated in Chapter 2, "Homeland", in subchapter 1, entitled "Stars". After they brought the immigrant children to the orphanage in Haifa, Rachel and David, Ruth and Reuben, were sitting one evening on Mt. Carmel leaning on one another, and David sang the song. Wronsky again quotes from the poem.[146]

Then, when Rachel began her journey back to the Diaspora, "the ship sailed out into the dark night whose gloom was pierced only here and there by a rare star".[147] And when David recalled the first *Seder* (Passover Eve meal), he remembered how they sang the ancient songs under the "starlit night".[148]

Thus, it appears that Wronsky refers to the poem "Sand and Stars" throughout the novel. The Diaspora is the "sand" while returning to Eretz Israel is the way to overturn the disappointment and defiance against God, and to prove that it is possible to act in a way that proves that God's promise is indeed, being fulfilled.

Recall that Wronsky was a woman of faith. Perhaps this search for an answer to the inconsistency between God's promise and the harsh reality of Jews in the Diaspora was an issue that Wronsky wrestled with. In any case, the poem "Sand and Stars" makes Wronsky's choice of the book's title, as well as the names of some of its chapters, more understandable.

To conclude, the inclusion of German poems in the book, such as the quotation from "Faust" and from "Ode to Joy", resonates with the experience of many of the German-Jewish immigrants in the Yishuv who, on the one hand, were deeply rooted in their German identity but, on the other, sought to integrate into the new Hebrew culture and the Zionist idea. Wronsky is a classic example of this dual ambivalent identity, as elaborated in the Epilogue. Moreover, it seems that the songs included in the novel serve a dual purpose. They are both a channel for highlighting the message that Wronsky wants to emphasize, and a venue for emotional expression, which the verbal dialogues do not articulate as effectively.

146 p. 220
147 p. 255
148 p. 271



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## Epilogue: Multifaceted Identities – Yekke, Social Worker, Novelist

*Yekke*[149]

In 1933, a wave of German and Austrian Jews began seeking refuge in Palestine. Among the first refugees were longtime Zionists, as well as Jews who did not identify themselves as such. At that period many of them were able to continue their professional career in Palestine. The plight of these Jews became particularly evident after the 1935 legislation of the Nurnberg laws, followed by the *Anschluss* and the November Pogrom (*Kristallnacht*) in 1938. As the years went by, families and individuals arrived with fewer resources and greater personal distress (Gelber 1990).

Nevertheless, on the whole, the immigrants from Germany and Austria had a much higher socioeconomic status than the Jews who had arrived in Palestine from Eastern Europe. They were also better educated. Moreover, unlike most of the East-European Jews who did not continue embracing the cultures of their countries of origin, many of the German-speaking Jews in Palestine remained faithful to German culture. This included fondness of classical music, literature, manners, strict education, well-organized daily schedules, etc. Above all, they admired the German language and went on using it. Some were critical of what they regarded as the local "Levantine" culture, or the *Ostjude* culture of the *shtetl* (the Yiddish term for small Jewish towns in Eastern Europe).

Many of the Zionists among them were particularly disappointed upon arrival. The reality in Palestine did not resemble the romantic-Orientalist image they had had in mind. Therefore, they were ambivalent regarding the culture that started emerging in the Yishuv, and the Yishuv was ambivalent towards them. They considered themselves a cultural elite while people in the Yishuv regarded them as condescending and unwilling to adopt Hebrew, especially at a time when the German language was rejected due to the Nazi regime. While the Yishuv leadership understood their plight, much of the local Jews were less empathetic and did not regard them as "real" refugees.

149 A somewhat derogatory nickname given to the German Jews in the Yishuv.



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### *The Ultimate Yekke Social Worker*

Wronsky was part of the *Yekke* milieu. On the one hand, she was appreciated for her professional knowledge, which led Henrietta Szold to trust her with the mission of establishing the Social Service School and heading the Social Pedagogy Department of the National Council, but on the other hand, she was looked upon with criticism even within the *Yekke* community. She was regarded as a woman who embodied, in an extreme fashion, the stereotype of the German Jew: rigid, patronizing and strict.

Her difficulty learning Hebrew did not help either. Sylva Gelber (1989, p. 56), a student in the first cohort of the Social Service School wrote in her memoir:

> It was a fortunate arrangement: none of us could follow what Wronsky was trying to say, since she insisted of speaking in Hebrew, a language that she was only then beginning to learn. We soon began to notice with the greatest glee, Wronsky's very special talent to malapropism. She would consistently mix up one Hebrew word for another which to her ears sounded the same. Even I, with my still elementary grasp of the language could appreciate her boners.

Unlike the typical *Yekke*, Wronsky insisted on becoming proficient in Hebrew, but it only led to problems and even ridicule. However, there was also a great admiration for her efforts, as mentioned by former student Miriam Itzkovitz (1969, p. 20):

> To learn the language she would wake up early at 4 or 5 am. When speaking and writing in German one could immediately see her enormous literary and rhetorical talent. Her difficulties with Hebrew caused her great suffering.

So, it seems that Wronsky suffered from a growing, intertwined stigma. She became more and more stigmatized in the leadership of the Yishuv, the social services leadership, and the *Yekke* milieu itself.

### *Novelist*

What led Siddy Wronsky to write literature? We have no answer to this question. She did a great deal of professional writing as part of her work



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as a social work educator,[150] but writing a novel was not part of her public documented image. In the negative atmosphere that surrounded Wronsky, it is not surprising that although there were rumors that she had written a novel, few believed it. There is only one reference to a rumor regarding Wronsky writing a novel, and the tone of this reference is skeptical (Rosenfeld 1984). Therefore, there is something heartrending about Wronsky's attempt to write a novel, since her perception as inflexible and strict was inconsistent with the common image of a novelist.

This is well echoed in Itzkovitz's (1969, p. 21) previously mentioned eulogy:

> Siddy Wronsky was soaked in a sea of loneliness [...] at work, in society and in her private life. There was something depressing and tragic in her loneliness. Conversely, maybe this loneliness pushed her to a constant expansion of her activity and creativity and fertilized her literacy imagination. Most great authors were, in fact, lonely people.

Wronsky was not the only German woman welfare leader, Jewish or not, who wrote literature. Recha Freier, the founder of the Youth Alyah, also wrote poetry.[151] Indeed, Xenia Boe (2010) argued that literary treatment of women's concerns was a widely used means of setting and disseminating the themes of the women's movement. This led to numerous poems and stories printed in the first years of the German women's movement by the journal *Die Frau* (1893-1944). Boe argued that these texts represented the moderate attitudes of women engaged in the bourgeois women's movement and these contributions were intended, among other things, to prevent anti-feminist positions.

Among the leaders of women's movements and Jewish welfare organizations, Bertha Pappenheim's writings are of special interest. She wrote feminist and literary texts, including poetry, short stories and a play called *Tragische Momente* (1912; Naimark-Goldberg 2019). The plot describes a family who suffered a terrible trauma in a pogrom in Eastern Europe. A family member was raped savagely and died; others were murdered. The protagonist retaliated and killed the murderer. He was subsequently hunted

150 Reinicke (2008) mentioned that as part of her career from 1925-1933, she was co-publisher and responsible editor of the journal *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wohlfahrtspflege*. The work begun by Wronsky is continued today in the journal *Soziale Arbeit* of the German Central Institute for Social Issues (DZI) in Berlin.

151 For further reading see: Freier, Recha (1976): Auf der Treppe. Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag.



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by the police. Together with his wife and son, they fled to Frankfurt, where they did not fare much better. They were bullied by an *Ostjude* pimp who threatened to hand them over to the local police, if they would not agree that the wife would be a prostitute in the pimp's bar. Therefore, they urgently escaped to Palestine, where they managed to live off the land. They sent their son to France to study agronomy. To his father's dismay, he came back only to inform them that he and his future wife intended to live in Europe, because they missed German culture and could not envision life in an agricultural settlement in Palestine. Heartbroken, his father committed suicide.

Pappenheim was anti-Zionist (Konrad 2022; Loentz 2007). The play regards immigration to Palestine very unfavorably. It is pessimistic about the ability to build a future life there that would last more than one generation. Pappenheim insisted that immigrating to Palestine was wrong. She thought that German Jews would miss the rich culture in Germany and could not reconstruct it in Palestine. She also held the opinion that Zionism would only contribute to anti-Semitism, and criticized the Zionist movement as oppressing women. Additionally, she objected to Zionist educational ideologies of out-of-home placement of children, as practiced in the kibbutzim or the Youth Alyah (Naimark-Goldberg 2019).

Although we do not have direct reference to that effect, Wronsky was probably familiar with the play, as she was well acquainted with Pappenheim through their involvement in welfare. By 1924 the emphasis on centralization of private welfare gave birth to the German League of Private Welfare (*Deutsche Liga der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege*). The offices of this umbrella organization were located in the German Archive of Welfare Work (*Archiv für Wohlfahrtspflege*) and it was chaired by Wronsky. The Central Welfare Bureau of German Jews (*Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der deutschen Juden*) participated in the League (Konrad 2022). Pappenheim strongly advocated for centralization of Jewish welfare and had been instrumental in establishing this organization in 1917.

Wronsky was a member of the Jewish Women's League established by Pappenheim, and headed its Berlin branch. In 1920, however, probably after her encounter with east European Jewish refugees which impacted her dramatically, she decided to found a separate organization: the League of Zionist Women in Germany (*Bund Zionistischer Frauen in Deutschland*). This split was strong evidence of the conflict between Wronsky's support for Zionism and Pappenheim's anti-Zionism, with Wronsky arguing that the Zionist movement was better suited to the needs of modern Jewish wo-



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men than the Women's League (Konrad 2022). Wronsky, as it seems, was influenced by the post war atmosphere in Weimar republic which included also hope by many reforms and feminist to reimagine and reconstruct society, and in particular – the German Jewish community (Gillerman 2009).

At times, Wronsky and Pappenheim shared ideas regarding professionalization of social work. Later they were in conflict regarding several important issues: professional social work versus the value of voluntarism; separating children from their parents; Zionist treatment of women in the Yishuv; and the future of the Zionistic endeavor (Loentz 1999). Thus, while Pappenheim's play is pessimistic, Wronsky's novel is optimistic. It is as if Wronsky's novel is a mirror image of Pappenheim's play, as if Wronsky argues with Pappenheim's criticism using the same venue of literary expression.

While these aspects may have contributed to Wronsky's motivation to write a novel, it seems that her main motivation was her strong drive to demonstrate the value of social work as a tool for achieving the aims of the Zionist movement. Through the novel, it is evident how much Wronsky admires the pioneers who cultivate the land, and build new settlements while risking their lives. At the same time, it is evident that Wronsky wants to legitimize social work as no less important. Moreover, it seems she needs to legitimize her personal choice to continue being active in the social service domain instead of settling the land.

Yet, side by side with the main ideological aspects of the novel, Wronsky also appears to long for an independent life alongside an empowering relationship, perhaps even for motherhood. She expresses excitement and exhilaration in the face of nature, in the face of construction and renewal. Thus, despite the fact the book presents ideas with pathos, at times even in flowery language, it still contains a human authenticity that is both vulnerable and sensitive.

Perhaps Wronsky felt that her personal, emotional and ideological choice to emphasize the importance of helping the needy as a pioneering mission could be better expressed through a story, where she could express conflicting emotions, personal dilemmas and deeply felt personal sacrifices. Beneath the image that was familiar to those around her, there must have lay hidden the soul of a woman with a dream. The novel *Sand and Stars* opens a window unto this soul. And although she had to highlight the Zionist mission that was so dear to her in order to legitimize her writing,



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beyond the sands of the national and social messages, we can also discern a small, personal star.

What would have happened had her book been published? On the one hand, it was aligned with the Zionist spirit of the times. But Wronsky's writing style was no longer relevant even when it was written, and could have been criticized mercilessly. However, reading the novel provides today's readers with an in-depths perspective on social work, gender and Zionism at the time of writing, and calls for further research.

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