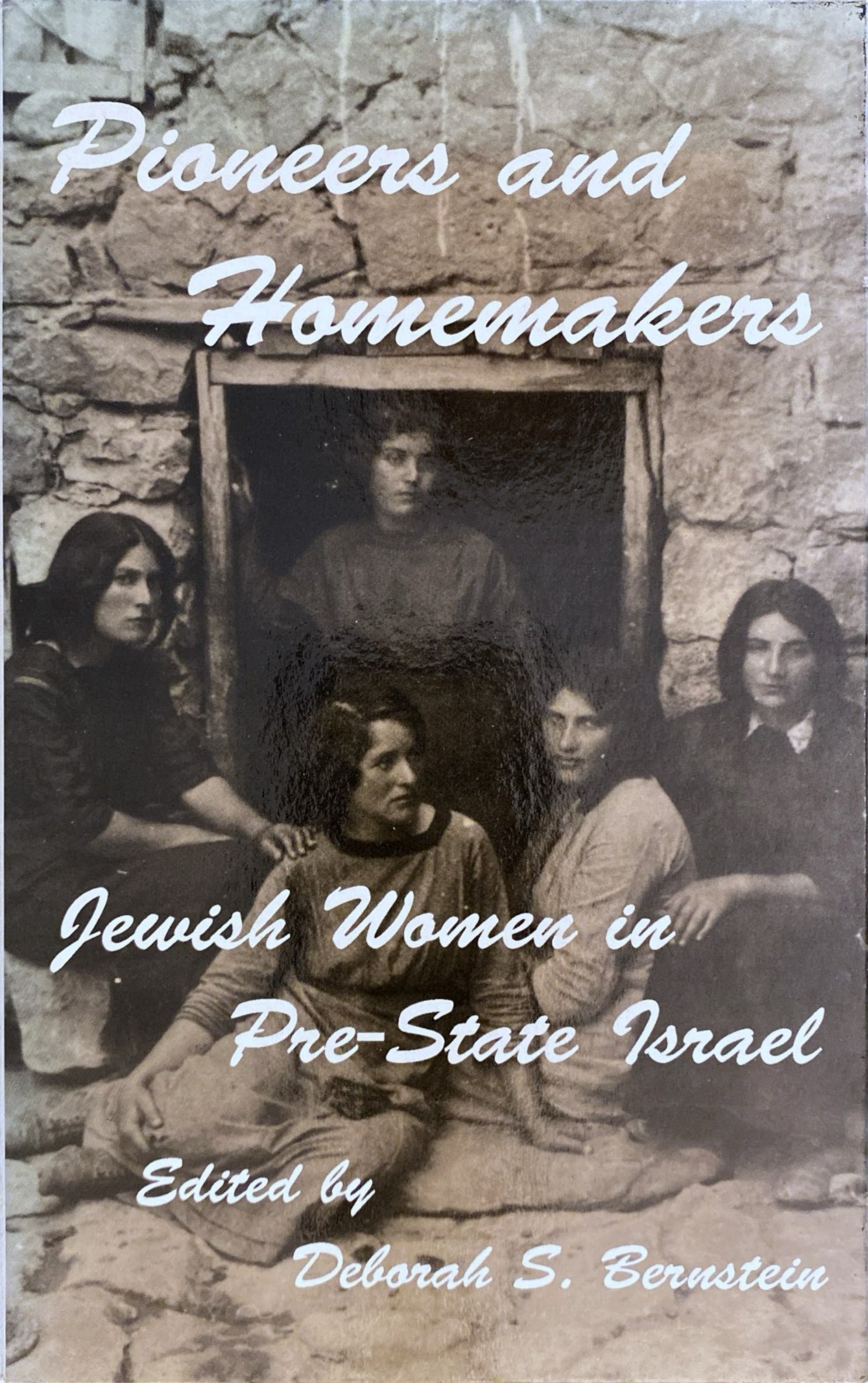
Pioneers and Homemakers



Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

Edited by

Deborah S. Bernstein

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Literature by Women of the First Aliyah: The Aspiration for Women's Renaissance in Eretz Israel

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The Woman's Voice in the First Aliyah

In any consideration of the literary works by the women of the First Aliyah (wave of immigration), we must, at the outset, try to clarify what women were like during that period. This clarification leads us to potential sources (historical records, memoirs, diaries, anniversary albums, and the like), but the account which emerges is an extremely limited one. Contrary to the wealth of material dealing with men's endeavors, the description of women's activities is merely incidental. This comes about not only because a man's place in the early pioneering effort—as settler, founder, and builder—was given greater emphasis but also because his position as head of the family gave him the responsibility for everything that befell the family; whatever it was, it happened in his name. This outlook stands out, for example, in the anniversary album of Zikhron Yaakov, by Aryeh Samsonov (1942). In his roster of names, "And These Were Our Pioneers", the writer classifies the early settlers according to descriptions of their various tasks and accomplishments, to wit: "Those who were first to settle the land", "Those who could not bear the burden of their mission", "Those who succeeded and were privileged to raise a generation of sons and builders". And yet, in all these lists, not even once do we find a woman's name—almost as though, among all those people, there had been no women at all and the achievement of settling the land had belonged only to the men.

On the other hand, even when these documents do offer us some historical or biographical information about a woman (Harizman, 1958; Smilansky, 1950), her voice does not come through to us; we do not sense her opinions, her thoughts, her emotional reac-

tions, and most important, her interpretation of that soul-stirring, historic event, the return to Zion. This lack, however, is complemented by the writings of the women themselves. Even though such works are few in number, and some were written at a later date (after the First Aliyah), it is they, nevertheless, which constitute the principal source for any inquiry into the essence of the First Aliyah woman; they alone can convey her voice most directly and most authentically (Luncz, 1919; Trager, 1923; Ben-Yehuda, 1940; Harari, 1947). Who was this woman, and how is she perceived in the historical setting of the period under discussion?

The Characterization of the Woman-Writer

The year 1882 marked a turning point in Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel (Palestine). Until that time, the link to Zion resulted in only scattered attempts at settlement, while from 1882 onward, these endeavors were carried out more regularly and more consistently. Despite financial difficulties, unfamiliarity with the country and a lack of agricultural know-how and training, Jewish colonies were being established one after the other (Rishon le'Tzion, Rosh Pina, Zikhron Yaakov), inaugurating the development of a new Jewish way of life. And in this ongoing pioneering venture, there is no question that women, too, were full partners. However, because the woman was still regarded in the traditional image of the help mate, her contribution to the settlement of the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in pre-state Palestine) was taken for granted and not considered anything out of the ordinary.

Another reason for this attitude was the fact that a woman's participation was often the result of having passively followed her husband and was not the product of her own initiative and comprehension.[1] It must be remembered that immigration to Eretz Israel was taking place in the context of a dramatic ideological nationalistic change. For all that, *Hibbat Zion* (Love of Zion) was a movement which had only a small following among the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe—a following composed mainly of males. Where women were concerned, the situation was quite different. In the second half of the nineteenth century, most Jewish women in Eastern European "*Shtetls*" continued to fill their traditional roles (caring for home and family, and helping out with livelihood when necessary), while communal and national issues were far removed from their daily concerns. An additional factor was the very minimal education they received (reading and writing Yiddish plus the

rudiments of arithmetic). This was of very little help to them in understanding the nationalist European state of mind and the Jewish idealists who were part of it, and who had been instrumental in creating this ideological Zionist movement. Therefore, it was not unusual that when a man who was a *Hovev Zion* (Lover of Zion) decided to realize his idealistic dream of Aliyah to Eretz Israel—leaving behind his well-ordered life and livelihood, and exchanging it for unknown surroundings in a distant and primitive country—his wife objected to his decision. Lacking in education and in ideological awareness, she simply could not understand what he wanted to do; if, in spite of it all, she did agree to follow her husband, it was often done out of submission and under constraint.[2]

Indeed, this involuntary Aliyah in her husband's footsteps often prompted outbursts of obstinacy and irascibility in the ordinary woman, especially in moments of crisis (see for example Trager, 1926). On the other hand, there were times when a reverse process was set in motion by crisis; when those very strains and stresses effected some sort of emotional transformation in a woman; from being stubborn and quarrelsome, she became dedicated to the country and its settlement.[3]

This dedication was expressed not only by the woman's work within the home and family, but also in the field and vineyard, where day in and day out, she had to cope with the hardship, the suffering, and the disillusionment that the new country offered. In the sort of life she led, the pioneering of a woman was no less daring than that of a man, especially when it took into account not only "woman's work" under extraordinary conditions (giving birth in the fields, caring for the sick without medical assistance, managing a household with only primitive equipment, and so on); but also what are usually considered male roles, or even confronting danger with great courage. Take, for example, Esther Greenstein. Unassisted, she forcibly removed an Arab bride's jewelry (as compensation for the damage done to her fields in Petah-Tikva by the wedding party), with the startled Arabs quickly arranging a "*sulha*" (a peace offering); or Ita Felman, who, after her husband's death, resolutely went on living with her children in their orange grove, working it and supporting her family therefrom; or Beila Eisenberg, who stationed the women of Rehovot around every unfinished new building, their aprons filled with stones, in order to prevent, with their very bodies, the razing of the building by the Turkish soldiers.

Nonetheless, despite these episodes of daring, women persisted

in viewing themselves as merely doing their duties. Although the move from the Diaspora to the Homeland signified a new way of life (working the land and self-defense), and a new outlook on life (the pride of being a free people), there had been no change in how society regarded the woman. She remained of marginal importance and little consequence, just as she had been in the Diaspora. Once again, women were denied their rights (such as voting or being elected); once again, they were kept behind the scenes (unable to voice opinions in public); once again, it was men who made the decisions about any and all matters (public or private). And yet, it was just these women—on the one hand, so capable and so giving; on the other, uneducated, unappreciated, and lacking self-awareness—who formed the background for the ongoing development of women's literature, within the general framework of the contemporaneous literature. How did this come about?

In seeking to establish certain characteristics shared by the women who produced that literature, we must first point out that they had the advantage of being educated far beyond the levels of the average Jewish woman of the time—an education which included secondary schooling, vocational training, and even university study.[4] A further accomplishment which set these women apart from the others of the First Aliyah,[5] was a familiarity with Hebrew subjects (language, Bible, literature, and so on), not to mention the intimate knowledge of the principles of Zionism. Moreover, their devotion to the Zionist ideal was not the emotional aftermath of coming to terms with the country (as often happened in the case of the average woman). On the contrary, that ideal had been an integral part of their family education and concern; their fathers or husbands had been among the vanguard of the Hibbat Zion movement (as leaders, thinkers or activists) both in Europe and in Eretz Israel.[6] What also characterized these women—in this instance, not under the influence of the home, but rather as result of their very own outlook and development—was their cognizance of their own worth and of the vital roles they played, not only as daughters or wives of important men, but as equal partners in the social experiment taking place in the new country. Thus, though they too were denied basic rights and a voice in decision-making they found their own non-establishment ways to become involved and to render assistance: Nehamah Pukhachewsky of Rishon le'Tzion organized a "Hospice for the Needy" to serve transients and indigent laborers, which eventually developed into a society providing help to the ill and the destitute; Ita Yellin, in

Jerusalem, found employment opportunities for poor young women and arranged suitable medical care for the mentally ill; and Hanna Luncz ran a soup kitchen for the needy during the First World War. And these same women, in addition to their other activities, were engaged in writing—writing which was, in itself, part of their communal involvement. It was but another way to make their mark, as women, on the life which was taking shape in the country; it was also a way to speak out for those women of the First Aliyah who lacked the understanding or the daring to lay claim to the recognition due them. Therefore, if the overall writing of the First Aliyah (both journalistic and literary) dealt chiefly with the new land, the new society, and the new man, there existed also this specific writing by women (both journalistic and literary) which raised and argued the case of the new woman, as well.

These works by female authors began to appear in the last decade of the nineteenth century, with the writings of Nehamah Pukhachewsky and Hemdah Ben-Yehuda, and were followed by those of Miriam Gissin, Miriam Pfefermeister, Yehudit Harari, Elishevea Bassewitz, Hannah Luncz, and Ita Yellin.[7] Even when they continued writing past the time of the First Aliyah (1882–1904), or only began to write after that date, it is that period which is the common point of departure (whether they arrived in the country at that time or had been born there), and which is central to their writing (elements of the First Aliyah dominate their themes). For that reason, they fit the title of our study—as women of the First Aliyah. Even though in some cases, the theme tended to fade somewhat with the passage of time, their esthetic and ideological outlook on life remained that of the First Aliyah (in contrast to the esthetic and ideological outlooks of later waves of immigration). It is important to note that the appearance of women's literature in Eretz Israel at that time was surprising not only by virtue of its being written at all, but also because of its extent and scope. Considering how the Jewish woman was perceived in the Diaspora, the very fact that women were writers, and particularly writers in the Hebrew language, was a rare achievement. It is true that in the history of Jewish women through the ages there have been, at various times, writers and even Torah scholars.[8] However, each of these had been an isolated occurrence, a random event, with no follow-through or continuity. This was not the case with women's literature during the First Aliyah. As part of a labile community of fifty to sixty thousand Jewish inhabitants, who were living under the most difficult conditions, in a social climate which

was neither open-minded nor encouraging on the subject of women, female writers appeared on the scene; and not only were there more writers as the years went by, but the work they produced did have continuity. From the time of the First Aliyah onward, women's literature in Hebrew was no longer a one-time affair; it continued to grow and develop, side-by-side with the growth and development of community life. While it underwent various metamorphoses and exhibited diverse manifestations, no longer was women's writing a sporadic and isolated event; it became part and parcel of a consistent literary corpus.

The Standpoint of Preaching in the Writings of Hemdah Ben-Yehuda

There were two areas of concern to the woman writers of the First Aliyah. One was the renewal of settlement in Eretz Israel and the second, the renaissance of women within the framework of that settlement life. In expressing the first concern, their writing concurred with all the clearly defined features which characterized the general literature of that wave of immigration,[9] regarding the second concern, however, a different picture emerges. Only in the literature by female writers was the dream of women's own renewal the recurrent theme. The male author also wrote about women as part of the new life and did this meaningfully and with feeling. However, the themes which interested him were either the conventional ones (the romantic tensions between man and woman, as in a love story—see Smilansky, 1934), or the ideological ones (woman as part of the overall social process of changing a community of settlers into a nation—see Barzilai, 1912; Jawitz, 1892). In either case, woman's aspirations were not to be found in what men were writing; in fact, they were not even part of the male consciousness. In our study, we shall focus upon this specific theme in women's literature: their aspirations for their own renaissance. In the works of First Aliyah women, these hopes were given expression via two different approaches: the standpoint of preaching and the standpoint of protest. In both cases, the result was a militant story, which demonstrated how the position of the woman settler was an inferior one; it was written, not only to illustrate the existence of such a condition, but also in the hopes of bringing about change. Thus, the militant story was meant to confront both the men of the community—who, as we have said, were not even

aware of the problem[10]—as well as the women who, as a result of their conservative upbringing, did not discern any bias against them, but actually considered their situation to be the natural state of affairs and opposed any attempts to alleviate it (Trager, 1926).[11]

We intend to examine the way both these positions were presented in the works of two of the leading women authors of the period, with Hemdah Ben-Yehuda representing the standpoint of preaching, and Nehamah Pukhachewsky, that of protest. In considering Ben-Yehuda's work, we see that first and foremost, she was appealing to women, in an attempt to set them free of the constraints of the past and open their eyes to the new options of the present. However, a careful study of her stories and articles shows that her conception of renaissance was more relevant to the advancement of the settlers' overall concerns than it was to those of the woman as such. In other words, in the unique historic event in which they were taking part, the point of departure on the subject of women was first of all a national one, and only on second thought, was it feminist. Some years later, in an article she wrote in 1919, Ben-Yehuda apologized for this stand and explained that it had been impossible in the earlier years to fight for the liberation of women, while the nation itself was still not free: "While our people is enslaved, shamed and persecuted throughout the world, suffering from the tyranny of foreign rulers even within its own land, how can we liberate our women?" Consequently, there was only one hope—both for the good of the Jewish people and the good of the woman—and that was the national one: "We tried then, to arouse in her the feeling of nationalism, knowing that when its time came, then her moment too would come" (Ben-Yehuda, 1919). If later on (1919), Ben-Yehuda struggled to liberate the woman from the social periphery and establish her as an equal ("Only to lift the woman out of her degraded condition, to protect her rights, to prepare her for life in the community, to make her aware that her rights are equal to those of men in the same society" (ibid.), at the earlier stage, she had struggled to liberate woman from the national periphery and spur her on to equal involvement in the pioneering endeavor. Therefore, in considering how the dream of women's renaissance was manifested in female writing at that time, we discover that in Ben-Yehuda's works, this dream was equivalent to the rebirth of the nation. How did she portray women in the light of this rebirth? In Ben-Yehuda's opinion, there were two possible ways for the woman in Eretz Israel to contribute to

the advancement of the Yishuv. It could be: a) by helping to shape a better society; b) by augmenting the existing community and reducing the threat of its decline. As to the first, she agreed with her husband, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who maintained that in the last analysis, it is the women who build the nation; for it is they who raise and mold the next generation, having more say in this than the men do. Obviously, in the early stages this influence is decisive, because that is when the very foundations are being laid for a new nation and a new individual, when the influence of the woman could determine the make-up, not only of the next generation but of the entire nation-to-be. Here, E. Ben-Yehuda was stressing for example, the major role women could play in deciding the future of the Hebrew language in Eretz Israel (E. Ben-Yehuda, 1902). As the driving force in its revival and renewal, he maintained that the process of turning the passive, written tongue into a living, spoken one could be accelerated only if women would speak Hebrew, as a result of which the children would grow up with Hebrew as their natural language.[12] Thus Ben-Yehuda lauded woman's importance to the life of the nation; "It is they who are our true wealth . . . our everlasting capital . . . which will bear fruit and yield a steady profit, year after year, month after month, week after week and day after day" (ibid.). Based on these ideas, Hemdah Ben-Yehuda developed this theme, emphasizing her own conceptions and conclusions, to wit: if it is the woman who determines what the next generation will be like, thereby prescribing the quality of the future nation as a whole, then this responsibility requires her to raise her standards (not only in the matter of the Hebrew language, as maintained by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, but in other, all-encompassing areas of life). It is from this standpoint that H. Ben-Yehuda reached out to the ordinary woman, preaching and teaching about what sort of woman she must become, in order to build and mold a nation. This exhortation and edification was expressed both in her journalistic works (Ben-Yehuda, 1903b) and in her literary works; through the use of rhetoric in her journalistic writing and by exemplification in her literature.

In these examples, Ben-Yehuda devised a model woman, whose nationalism and education were her outstanding features. It is important to remember that to Ben-Yehuda, education was not merely the gathering of knowledge, but was primarily an outlook on life, progressive and conceptual (it is well known that the concepts which helped lay the foundations of Hibbat Zion were drawn from the philosophical outlines of the nineteenth century En-

Figure 4. Hemdah Ben-Yehuda (Central Zionist Archive).

lightment movement, among others). Naturally, Ben-Yehuda constructed a large number of her literary plots in line with these views, borrowing material from diverse aspects of women's lives in Eretz Israel. But the story lines always led towards one conclusion, the superiority of the educated woman, (ergo, the nationalistic one) both within the community and in her private life. Without any doubt, the stress laid on private lives and the presentation of education as advantageous to a woman, and an implicit guarantee of her personal success (which is Hemdah Ben-Yehuda's innovational addition to her husband's dicta) made her message more effective and enhanced her efforts to bring about change and progress for women through preaching and persuasion. A reader of her stories would quickly discover that an education is helpful in finding a suitable husband and assuring a happier married life; it even fosters profound romantic experiences. In her story "A New Dress" (1906), the Jerusalem doctor (who is going out with both Zila, the teacher, and Mira, the beauty) will choose the teacher, whose sparkling conversation captivates him more than any of the new dresses which beautiful Mira wears for his approval. In the story "Lulu" (1902), we meet a Yemenite woman, whose husband, a muleteer, has turned her out of their Jerusalem home. She runs off

to one of the villages where she builds her life anew; she works and studies and marries a pioneer; and the more he teaches her, the more meaningful and vital her life with him becomes. And in the story "Under the Almond Tree" (1903a), Rachel, who is devoted to learning, falls in love with Yaakov, the laborer-intellectual. Although Rachel is married, Ben-Yehuda does not depict their short-lived "sin" in a negative way, but paints the picture of a relationship which encompasses not only emotional enrichment but cultural enhancement, as well.

So much for the first possibility outlined earlier (the new woman—the nation-builder). As to the second possibility (the new woman—augmenter and strengthener of the existing society), it is natural that in the initial stages of settlement, the body of settlers, still unsure of its way in Eretz Israel, was far from being a nation; it was more of a scattered community threatened at all times by the twin dangers of people leaving the country and of no new immigration. Ben-Yehuda demonstrated that the new woman, with her intellectual-nationalistic qualities, could be a very influential factor in those circumstances, as well. By becoming involved and by identifying herself with national ideals, she would contribute to the process of setting down roots in the land, to say nothing of the demographic increase of the Yishuv. This was in stark contrast to the woman who lived in the country against her will (with no attachment to Eretz Israel and its future settlement, as seen above); who would only encourage desertion of the country and weaken what already existed.

In "The Farm of the Rekhabites" (1903c), this critical issue is stressed by two settlers—Harbin and Ephraim—who are looking for all possible ways to increase the Jewish population of Palestine (Govrin, 1989a). Ephraim's way is to take to the roads, seeking the lost Jewish tribe, the descendants of the Rekhabites, while Harbin makes his way to the Bedouin tents, trying to convert those nomads, not only into cultured people, but into Hebrews, as well. While the two men discuss and formulate their plans, it suddenly occurs to them that all of their efforts will come to naught if they do not find a solution to the problems of the women. In Harbin's view the delay in woman's renaissance in the country had not only hurt past pioneering efforts, but continued to corrode all that was good in it:

> While it has been a long time since I have discerned among the farmers any real fervor, sacrifice or even a strong willingness to

> suffer hardship . . . why, among the women, I found not even one out of a thousand! And if many of the true Lovers of Zion never came to settle in Eretz Israel, you can be sure the women had a hand in that. And more than a few of those who did come and then went back after a year or even six months 'were only following their wives' . . . What use is an idea, what good is a deed, if the woman is opposed to it? (ibid: 16).

On the face of it, this appears to be a strong case against women, but that is not really so. Later on in the story, the two friends engage in a mutual confession, speaking, as it were, in the name of the Jewish men of Palestine, taking responsibility for women's shameful situation:

> How can we expect anything of our women . . . if we do not dedicate ourselves to their education . . . and we cannot deny that in our villages, we have left the women completely alone. Which of us has ever taught his wife anything or even read to her! No wonder that by the time she is married a few years and has become the mother of two or three children, not only hasn't she made any progress . . . but she has turned into nothing but a servant, forgetting even what she knew before . . . Did we ever try to improve her situation? Did we arrange any sort of communal shelter for the children, where a mother could safely leave her child (in order) to attend meetings, to read, to listen, to speak, to develop, to learn? It is we, we who are to blame (ibid.: 21–23).

It should not be forgotten that in that era, such an admission of guilt could have been written only by a woman, because in the climate of the times, men felt no guilt whatsoever for women's lack of idealism. On the contrary, when a woman with nationalistic awareness tried to become involved and express her opinions publicly, she found herself muzzled by the men and even ridiculed (as described by Nehamah Pukhachewsky, below). The above mentioned confession, therefore, is not so much a realistic representation as a portrayal of the ideal so desired by the author herself.

In summing up the way Hemdah Ben-Yehuda created her literature, we find that in her stories about women, we must distinguish between two different genres: the militant-story and the local-color-story. The latter is a realistic, mimetic narrative, which aims at giving the reader (especially the one in the Diaspora) a close look at a gallery of Palestinian Jewish women of many different types: those from the "old" and "new" Yishuv, of Western and Oriental origin, from villages and cities, and so on (Ben-Yehuda, 1900, 1910, 1940a, 1940b). When we consider the militant-story, a

different picture emerges. Since, as noted earlier, it is a story written for the purpose of exhortation and its main thrust is didactic, it does not necessarily present reality as it is, but rather suggests what it should be and occasionally even invents it. This method of writing often aroused criticism which attacked Ben-Yehuda's work as misleading. It was felt that while she ostensibly dealt with the existing reality of Eretz Israel, for all practical purposes, she was portraying it in a non-realistic way, to the point where it could be taken as a myth. It should be added, however, the Ben-Yehuda's militant-story is a myth only in retrospect, for that was certainly not her original intention. What she wanted was to recount the romantic Zionist dream, which she herself was living in her daily life. In other words, the militant-story is actually the way Ben-Yehuda applied her yearning and her dreams to the living reality, seeing in it not only the day-to-day hardships and suffering but also the immediate realization of the dream; not only the ordinary woman who is, but also the longed for new woman-to-be.

The Standpoint of Protest in the Stories of Nehamah Pukhachewsky

As mentioned above, the literature of the women of the First *Aliyah* was written not only from the standpoint of preaching, but from the standpoint of protest as well, and it is the latter which is represented by the writing of Nehamah Pukhachewsky. As soon as she arrived in the country (1889), Pukhachewsky began dedicating herself to the renaissance of women in settlement life; not satisfied with merely raising the issue in writing, she also strove to carry it out in actual practice (Govrin, 1989). And yet, there appears to be a dichotomy between her public struggle and her literary offerings. Publicly, she was forceful and firm, supplying answers and suggesting solutions; in her literature, she was perplexed and pensive, only raising questions which had confronted her. Furthermore, in her writing, as opposed to her public efforts, she was very restrained, the protest of her characters compressed into a somewhat sad and hopeless internal dialogue which had difficulty in breaking through to the outside.

The main body of Pukhachewsky's work has been gathered into two collections of stories: "In the New Judea" (1911) and "Life in the Village" (1930); in both of these, the reader encounters a wide assortment of women (farmers, laborers, domestic workers,

kibbutz members). In the first collection, however, the stories deal mainly with women in the Oriental Jewish milieu (notably, those of the Yemenite community). If we question why this was so, we must turn for an answer to the ingathering of the Jews in Eretz Israel from both the East and the West. The literature of the First Aliyah (written, for the most part, by Jews of European descent) evinced considerable curiosity about the Oriental Jew. This resulted in more and more literary works which tried to fathom the nature of this unfamiliar Jew from the East—his life, his ways, and his customs. Pukhachewsky's interest focused on the Yemenite women in particular, not only because she knew them at close hand,[13] but even more, because both as a woman and as a product of Western civilization, she was deeply troubled by their community's marital customs. She could not understand how there could still be a group, part of modern settlement life, that allowed a man to take a second wife in addition to his first (particularly when she was going through some sort of crisis: mourning a child, unable to have children, becoming ill). In her first collection of stories, Pukhachewsky condemned this practice, emphasizing that such a woman was a victim not only of the man who considered her an object to be used for his family needs, but also of the Yemenite community which gave its approval to this practice. The female character as victim is presented on two levels: the plot level and the typological level. On the plot level, the development focuses on one specific incident, through which a male-female relationship is revealed, detailing the injustice done to the woman by the man. This incident is given two interpretations: that of the omniscient narrator and that of the dazed woman, who is helplessly drawn into an argument with herself. By moving backward in time through the chain of events and returning once more to the starting point in the present, her ruminations disclose an entire chapter in her life (Berlovitz, 1980: 138–141).

On the second level, Pukhachewsky makes a typological comparison of the Yemenite woman and her husband. In this contrastive confrontation, the character of the victim, despite her misery and misfortune, is shown to be superior; the author has endowed her with such traits that add quality to her persona, and only serve to detract from the character of the man in her life. These traits are especially evident in her amiable demeanor, which enables her to deal with both the Yemenite and the Ashkenazi environments. It is even more emphasized vis-à-vis the latter, for although that environment is incomprehensible to her (and at times, even hos-

tile) she exhibits not only interest but a great deal of receptiveness toward it. Take, for example, Rumah ("Rumah") who is stirred by the musical sounds of the piano; or Aphiya ("Aphiya's Tragedy"), who asks her employer to teach her the aleph-bet, the Hebrew alphabet, although her husband has forbidden it; or Adayah ("After the Wedding"), who persuades her husband to try to save his life with an operation, even though the modern medical treatment is threatening and frightening to her. But the Yemenite man is different. Despite his position of authority and centrality in his native community, he seems to be wary of the Ashkenazi Jews around him and shies away from them. As portrayed by Pukhachewsky, he closes himself into the four corners of his home, rejecting any technological or cultural advances as heresies, holding on stubbornly to his old ways (among them his total domination in the matter of draconian conjugal laws). To be sure, against this oppressive domination, with all its painful and insulting implications, the Yemenite woman success in maintaining her proud bearing and this, Pukhachewsky believes, comes from her unique ability to make the best of things. As manifested in these stories, this ability does not derive from submission or weakness, but from an overwhelming vitality, which is the sum total of her affinity and love for nature and mankind. In spite of the despair that suffuses her (like Adayah whose husband deserts her because she is barren) or the loss she had suffered (like Aphiya, whose husband observes the Sabbath laws so scrupulously that he forbids her to call a doctor, after which she has a stillborn baby), in the end, she not only survives her crisis, but finds her consolation in it. Adayah recovers her strength for her husband's visits three times a week; Aphiya conquers her sorrow through the love she feels for the farmer's child she takes care of; and even Rumah, with all the bitterness she feels towards her late husband (who before dying, had imperiously commanded her to follow after him to the "eternal rest"), is able, on her deathbed, to find final consolation in the vineyards and fields that she glimpses through her window.

It is apparent, that by using this method of typological comparison, Pukhachewsky, out of the affinity she felt for the Yemenite women, wanted to be the voice for their muteness. She believed that after the radical changes they had undergone, coming from the old-world of Yemen to the new-world of Eretz Israel, these women were just beginning to understand that the way they were treated by men was not a feature of sacred tradition, but rather an expression of degradation and discrimination. On the

other hand, believing that they still lacked the tools with which to explain this to the outside world (and possibly even to themselves), Pukhachewsky took upon herself the task of crying out their silent protest; in this manner, she could bring to bear all her reservations and grievances about discrimination against women simply because they were women.

We have already mentioned that the representation of woman's plight in the first group of stories pertained solely to the ethnic situation of the Yemenite women. It was only in 1923, more than ten years later (Pukhachewsky, 1923), that a parallel interpretation evolved, portraying the relationships between men and women settlers of Eastern European descent; most of the stories in the second collection (1930) were devoted to the Ashkenazi woman. As we shall see, her predicament is shown to be even more problematic and more entangled than those of her Yemenite counterpart. In retrospect, another question arises: why did Pukhachewsky put off frank discussion about the Ashkenazi woman until the 1920s? Had she been afraid, before that time, to reveal that the European Jewish man, for all his learning and progressive Western culture, had, where women were concerned, remained backward and inflexible? Was she ashamed to admit that though he had no trace of primitive tradition (as the Yemenite man did), it was precisely his civilized ways which helped him to oppress the woman with even greater sophistication? Either way, there is no doubt that Pukhachewsky had difficulty in facing up to that relationship, relevant to her own set of people. No longer the protester from the outside, being deeply involved, she had to wage her battles from within. How did Pukhachewsky register her protest in these stories?

Readers of the second collection get to know a female protagonist who is head and shoulders above any of the ordinary women we have previously described. Here is an intellectual and knowledgeable woman, skilled in one of many diverse fields (either professionally trained or self-taught) who has given up or reduced her activities in her chosen vocation in order to devote herself to a life of housework and farming (out of a profound belief in nationalism and in the dignity of labor). Such a woman is Sarah Zarhi (in "Sarah Zarhi"), who gives up a pedagogical career; such is Zehava Steinberg (in "The Farm"), who allows herself the luxury of reading Ibsen only when she is ill. And yet, in spite of her high standards and ideals, the man with whom she shares her life (be it husband, brother, brother-in-law) has no consideration for her and

takes advantage of her, harshly and offensively; he does not appreciate her efforts and always finds fault with what she does: "'Naturally it isn't done right,' he answered in a rage . . . 'women's work is always like that!'" ("Sarah Zarhi," in Pukhachewsky, 1930: 101); "Look . . . and heap abuse upon women and the way they do things, spoiling and ruining everything" ("The Farm," ibid.:164); ". . . looks at the garden and says with faint ridicule: 'woman's work!'" ("Loneliness", ibid.:197).

It is no surprise, therefore, that the heroine of Pukhachewsky's stories is a bewildered woman. She cannot understand why she is treated the way she is—on the personal as well as the social level—for after all, she, unlike the ordinary woman, well knew that joining her man in coming to the country meant the promise of a whole new life. On the other hand, she makes no attempt to resolve this misunderstanding frankly and as an equal. Quite the contrary. We meet a woman who, for all her education and intelligence, has a very poor self-image. In that respect, she is portrayed much the same as her Yemenite "sister"—submissive and mute; in dealing with a man, she not only ignores his coarse behavior but even tries to pacify him, to lay the blame upon herself and to justify his cruel disparagement of her (Sarah Zarhi excuses her husband because he is ill; Zipporah Drori excuses her brother because he is an orphan). But to her great astonishment, the more forgiving she is, the more aggressive he becomes, and the more his aggression grows, so does her bewilderment; her entire life is confounded. In her predicament, she tries to explain to herself (unlike the Yemenite woman who lacked the ability to do this) exactly what man's role is, in a male-female relationship; she seeks the answers, not only from her own experiences, but from those of her beloved literary heroines (in the works of Maupassant, Balzac, Chekhov, and others). However, although she finds more and more examples, the solutions are still beyond her reach, and like Sarah Zarhi she is left troubled and perplexed:

> How will this all end? . . . It is not the hardship of a life of toil which leads to failure, because she is willing to make do with very little and ungrudgingly accepts whatever comes her way. There is only one thing she cannot overcome: the treatment of women—Slave and Woman, it is all one and the same. Except that the slave has found some liberators, while woman has found none. Woman, woman! What a shameful name to bear . . . for what purpose did nature endow her with this quality of submitting to a

Figure 5. Nehamah Pukhachewsky (Central Zionist Archive).

fate more bitter than gall? Why must she hang her head and bear her burden in silence? (ibid.: 97,116).

Indeed, one of the basic questions asked over and again by Pukhachewsky's heroine (sometimes of herself, sometimes of other women) is: Why is woman so passive? Why doesn't she rebel against men? In a conversation Zarhi has with her neighbor, Mrs. Dolitzky, a stormy discussion on the subject ensues. At its conclusion, however, they are left, once again, without any solution; with more doubt than certainty.:

'in my opinion, woman herself is to blame for her troubles. She would be able to improve her life, if she only knew how to go about it. For example? . . . First of all, we must unite and devise a specific plan for improving our lives. Those emancipationists, who

> keep themselves outside of family life, will never succeed; it is only the married women who will. They are the ones who must and if they want to, they will also be able to force their husbands to acknowledge that a woman too is a human being; this will erase the stigma of slavery which she bears . . .'
>
> 'Not true' . . . replies Sarah, 'it is precisely the married woman who is not able to fight back; her love and devotion prevent her from showing any opposition . . . We need unity, you say? Why, there are women from forty different countries already joined together to defend their rights, but with very poor results. Who knows which generation will one day achieve liberation?' (ibid.: 109).

At this point, it should be mentioned that Pukhachewsky's doubts about the renaissance of women in Eretz Israel—as both a nationalistic and a feminist act—only serve to emphasize how naive was Ben-Yehuda's grasp of this complex issue. For while Ben-Yehuda believed that the solution lay in a woman's acquisition of an education and in her nationalistic involvement, Pukhachewsky clearly felt otherwise. It was not enough for a woman to be educated and open to new ideas; neither of these had succeeded up to then in freeing the woman or society from the fixed image of her—as inferior and secondary to the male. So with all woman's awareness (as depicted by Pukhachewsky) of the prejudice against her, of feminist action throughout the world, of the need to find her own *modus vivendi*, she still lacked the temerity and daring to go against the traditional conventions which she grew up with; to stand erect and proud, like the new woman she so aspires to be. This was the source of her feeling that she was trapped between her weaknesses and her wishes, and this, too, was the source of the self-reproach which undermined all her confidence in her own worth: "I stayed by the window, torturing and berating myself . . . I alone am to blame . . . it is I who am wicked and evil . . . what an insignificant creature I am" (ibid.:161–3).

This feeling of nullity became even more acute when evoked on public occasions. Somehow, in her private life, the woman could attribute her insignificance to certain personal stipulations between herself and the male, but it was in the public domain that she revealed the prevailing legality of these stipulations, which was: she was rejected by men for the simple reason that she was a woman. Here is what Zipporah Drori, a farmer, writes in her diary:

> Many of the leading figures of our settlement assembled for a general meeting and I decided to go to the meeting place. The people's

> representatives were gathered to discuss a burning issue and to pass judgment on it . . . I became very stimulated by the discussion and put my name on the list to reply, but when my turn came, they would not allow me to speak. Their reason was that I was only a guest at the meeting and not an official participant. Grievously offended, I wondered: have I no status whatever in this group into which I force my way and demand the right to discuss its issues? Cannot a poor, wretched soul like me contribute anything to this 'complicate mechanism' that is 'the settlement of our land'? Yet, on the other hand . . . a woman has no rights whatsoever, so by what authority does she push herself into the group to express her opinion? That is nothing but impudence on her part! A woman's place is in the kitchen, behind the stove and not among the chosen delegates of the people! (ibid.:185–86).

And it was upon this point that the main thrust of Pukhachewsky's protest was based—a protest that condemned the new male not only because he dominated and exploited the woman in their private lives, but even more, because he undermined her every attempt to free herself of the conventions of the past, to improve her status and assure her equal rights—for these, after all, were the declared principles of the national revival. Thus, in summarizing the militant-story as Pukhachewsky wrote it, we may generalize and say that if in her earlier works, the target of her protest was the Yemenite male, and in the later ones, the Ashkenazi male—for all intents and purposes, the depiction of the man was the same in both cases. In other words: the harsh treatment of women was neither an ethnic nor a cultural issue, but rather an essentially existential one. No matter what she was (primitive or enlightened, ignorant or knowledgeable) and no matter what the surrounding society was (conservative or liberal, backward or progressive), a woman was always rejected and deemed inadequate and insignificant.

We cannot ignore the fact that the later stories were increasingly concerned with this pessimistic conclusion. While in the earlier tales, Pukhachewsky believed that the problem was a purely social one and that the right kind of social struggle would bring about the desired results, in the later stories, this positive outlook became moderated. It was here, as we pointed out earlier, that Pukhachewsky's writing can be seen as divorced from life. In her real world, she continued to fight for the woman of the Yishuv on any terms, while in her literature, woman's plight remained a matter of existential introspection—as if only by a miracle of sorts was

there any hope of bringing about the longed-for changes. As Zarhi expressed it: "Will there ever be a change for the better? And nature—which creates for every living creature some sort of protection against its attackers—will it some day give woman too the means of defending her honor? Or will her life always be a groping in the dark, with no exit?" (ibid.:103).

Conclusion

This article sets out to show how the aspirations of the First Aliyah women (for renaissance, for rights, and for equality) can be perceived through their literary works. It must be emphasized that to date, there has been no thorough or comprehensive study of this literature—neither from the ideological or esthetic point of view nor from the standpoint of content.

This omission can be attributed to two factors:

A. Feminist criticism, as part of general literary research, is still far from prevalent in Israel, and since this body of work has been explored for the most part by feminist critics (that is, has been reread in line with woman's parameters), it has not aroused the interest of scholars—not the females among them, and certainly not the males.

B. It has been accepted as fact by historical research that the first women to take a stand for equal right in Eretz Israel were the pioneering socialist-Zionists. According to this contention, it was only with the start of the socialist-Zionist immigration (in the Second Aliyah: 1904–1919) that the subject of women and their status was raised, and it was only then that the "working" woman, (as opposed to the "farming" woman) began to consider the issue, from its social as well as its publicistic and literary aspects (see Bernstein, 1987).

Additionally we hope with this article to accomplish the following:

A. To recommend that this neglected literature be reconsidered, based on rereading according to feminist criticism;

B. To counter the historical convention which regards the women of the Second Aliyah as the trailblazers. It is true that if we consider their actual deeds and achievements, they made far more progress than that of the First Aliyah predecessors. However, if we consider the concept per se, the dream of woman's renaissance in Eretz Israel, and the first halting steps in that direction, these as

indicated above, had existed even earlier, during the time of the First Aliyah. In other words, what I have tried to demonstrate through their literature is that the feminist awareness of those pioneering First Aliyah women was the direct outcome, not of socialist ideologies, but of Zionist ideologies. For it was national regeneration, along with migration from an old country to a new land, which awakened these women (or some of them, at any rate) to the opportunities for women's regeneration. And if at first they were willing to follow the male lead, devoting most of their energies to the realization of the collective Zionist dream (see above, Ben-Yehuda, 1919[14]), they gradually became aware of their own particular problems and increasingly felt the need to give expression to the aspirations for their own renaissance.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that to the women of both the First and Second Aliyah, their part in the feminist struggle (be it shared hopes or active participation) was linked first and foremost to some other ideological struggle. This situation is far from unique and is a recurrent theme in almost all the chronicles of women's striving for liberation. It almost seems as if women, lacking self-confidence and feeling on the sidelines of society, are afraid to acknowledge that they too are an "oppressed minority", and it is only as a result of their involvement in other revolutionary struggles that they gather the courage to wage their personal battles. Thus were the first suffragists in the United States spurred on in the 1880s by the social and economic changes; thus, the women active in the Populist and Socialist movements in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century demanded rights of their own, and thus too, the Jewish women in Palestine sought to achieve their own liberation along with the rebirth of Zionism taking place at that time.

Notes

1. The sources also mention a number of converse examples, like that of Golda Miloslawsky, whose husband did not want to immigrate to Palestine—only in 1885, after he had died, did she take her children and settle in Wadi Hanin; or the case of Batya Makov, who left her husband and came to Rehovot with her children in 1890.

2. Aliyah during this period was, in the main, the immigration of families. This was not the case in the Second and Third Aliyah, for example, when the immigrants were mostly young unmarried men and women. The

women therefore, were not followers but had come to Palestine of their own volition.

3. A case in hand is the story of Feiga Lehrer, who immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1883 with obvious dissatisfaction. Settled in an abandoned and desolate farm in Wadi Hanin, she and her husband went through terrible suffering and loss (the death of two of their children) as well as great financial distress. But it was this suffering that bound Feiga to the country; when her husband wanted to sell part of their land in order to alleviate their hard-pressed condition and bring additional settlers to the area, it was she who opposed his plans "because she had already come to love her land" (Smilansky, 1943).

4. N. Pukhachewsky had graduated from a Russian Gymnasium; H. Ben-Yehuda had been a student of chemistry in Moscow; Miriam Gissin, Miriam Pfefermeister, and Elisheva Bassewitz were teachers; Yehudit Harari had been trained in educational science in France and Switzerland; Hannah Trager was a professional nurse; and Hannah Luncz had done editing and printing. In addition to these writers, there were other educated women in the early settlements. This was especially evident in the colonies (Rishon le'Tzion, Rehovot, Gedera) whose founders had come from Russia, were less orthodox, and were intellectuals and professionals (in contrast to those who had emigrated from Poland and Lithuania).

5. The average woman of the First Aliyah was from Eastern Europe although there were, of course, women from other parts of the world. Besides the dominant European Aliyah, there was also immigration from Yemen, not to mention the women who were native to Eretz Israel: members of both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities of the "Old Yishuv".

6. H. Trager—the daughter of Zerach Barnett (one of the founders of Petah-Tikva and Neveh-Shalom); I. Yellin—the daughter of Y. M. Pines (active in Hovevei Zion and a prominent member of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel); H. Ben-Yehuda—the wife of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (the father of modern Hebrew and a leading member of the Yishuv; N. Pukhachewsky—the wife of M. Z. Pukhachewsky (one of the first agricultural instructors); M. Pfefermeister—the wife of Yeshayahu Peres (a leader of the Yishuv in Jerusalem); and H. Luncz—the daughter of A. M. Luncz, the noted scholar who did pioneering research in Eretz Israel studies.

7. N. Pukhachewsky (1869–1934) and H. Ben-Yehuda (1873–1951) were the principal writers among First Aliyah women; M. Gissin and M. Pfefermeistr wrote children's stories; E. Bassewitz (1855–1932) reported from the Galilee (mainly from Metullah); I. Yellin (1868–1943) wrote a two-volume autobiography; H. Trager (1870–1943) composed memoirs, stories and articles (in English); Yehudit Harari (1886–1979) wrote short

stories; an autobiography, and a popular history of the Jewish woman from Genesis till the present, and H. Luncz (1892–1987) wrote short stories and a biography of her father.

8. There were women who taught the Talmud, like Rashi's three daughters (twelfth century); Hava Bachrach (sixteenth century) was noted for her learned commentaries; and Beila Horowitz (seventeenth century) composed a book of prayers for women (Tehinnot). Among the women of culture writing in the nineteenth century were the Hebrew poet Rachel Morpurgo (Italy), the author Grace Aguilar (England); and Emma Lazarus (United States), poet and translator.

9. The literature of the First Aliyah, including what women wrote, was characterized by: a) informative-explanatory works (to motivate more people into participating in the pioneering enterprise in Eretz Israel); b) impressionistic-romantic works (to describe the attitudes and experiences of the new life in the promised land).

10. In 1903, representatives of all factions within the Yishuv convened in Zikhron Yaakov in order to establish, for the first time, some sort of autonomous Jewish governing body in Palestine. Among other things, there was a suggestion to give women the vote, but this was rejected by a decisive majority (Kaniel, 1987:203). It was only after the First World War that the feminist struggle gained momentum both among workers' parties and the general public that some of the colonies allowed women to participate in the local elections; and that, in Rishon le'Tzion, Nehamah Pukhachewsky was elected, by a large majority, to the village council (Idelovitch, 1941:522).

11. In her memoir "Votes for Women", Trager (1923:133–35) describes an incident which took place in Petah-Tikva in 1886, when young women fought to get the vote and their own mothers came out against them.

12. During the First Aliyah, Hebrew was not yet spoken in Eretz Israel.

13. The first Yemenite families reached Rishon le'Tzion (where Pukhachewsky lived) in 1909. She helped them in acclimating themselves to the place, offering a great deal of care and assistance especially to the women. A street was later named for her in the Yemenite neighborhood.

14. In this article Ben-Yehuda confessed that fifteen years ago (1904), she met in Paris one of the leaders of the movement for women's rights—Dr. Keta Schürmacher. Dr. Schürmacher asked her to establish a branch of the movement in Jerusalem and to include in its activities Moslem and Christian women. Ben-Yehuda turned it down, saying that the Jewish women in Eretz-Israel had to help first their own people, and then care about women's rights.

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(All items are in Hebrew)

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