

Introduction

The women's revolution was one of the quietest and most angst-stricken of the revolutionary processes experienced by Zionism and the Yishuv (Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine) during the first half of the twentieth century, but at the same time one of the most profound and lasting among them. Rachel Katznelson-Rubashov (Shazar), one of the most prominent women activists in the Workers Council and in the Labor Movement, declared in 1937: "The movement's special love for [the poet] Rachel rests, to a considerable degree, on the expression she gave to the woman's soul."¹ She was referring to the poet Rachel Bluwstein, who had written quite innocently, in 1926, "I have not sung to you, my land, / And haven't glorified your name / With heroic deeds, / With variety of battles." The valor of triumphant militarism was not among the ideals upheld by the women of the Labor Movement.²

At the same time, as noted by historian Muki Tzur, "Among Rachel's readers were those who viewed her as a sort of Marianne, the symbol of the French Revolution. It was specifically her modest poems that symbolized for many the revolution that they believed in, which could speak only humbly, for it was a revolution of doers."³ The poem "For My Land" is perhaps the most influential of Rachel's poems of this genre. It is revolutionary and militant in its human, poetic, unique, and quiet way. The path of these women doers, who sought to add the realm of security to the range of their activity in Zionist fulfillment, is the subject of this book.

A debate that received only minor attention in Israeli society, on the eve of the 62nd anniversary of the establishment of the State, was which event should stand at the center of the celebrations. The ministerial committee for ceremonies and symbols decided against highlighting the

100th anniversary of the Kibbutz movement; rather, the decision was made to mark 150 years since the birth of Theodor Herzl.⁴ At the first Zionist Congress in 1897, one of the representatives raised a question concerning the seventeen women participants (in contrast to 192 men): “Are the ladies entitled to vote, or not?” Herzl replied, “The ladies are, of course, most honored guests, but they do not participate in the vote.”⁵ In a speech he delivered in May 1899, Herzl asserted that “In Zionism, the women’s question has effectively been solved.”⁶ The fact that, starting from the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, women also participated as representatives with equal rights—a matter that “in other countries will remain just a dream for a long time,” as Herzl announced at the end of his last speech at the Zionist Congresses in 1903—was viewed by him as the solution to “the women’s question.” For him, this was one aspect of his aspiration to establish a modern, progressive Jewish society, and at the same time one way of building and nurturing support for Zionism among diverse Jewish circles.⁷ Although one might doubt the view that equal rights for women was merely the “external appearance of a liberal regime,” their integration into Zionist political life was gradual indeed, as testified by writer Sholem Aleichem, who attended the Eighth Zionist Congress in 1907: “They [the women] endow the Congress with special grace. It is a pity that none of them wishes to, or none is capable of, appearing on the stage.”⁸ The prosaic account of the goings-on in the corridors and hallways of the early Zionist Congresses revealed that “the first Congresses were attended by important householders, and thus the Congress became a fair for ‘matchmakers’; good girls seeking to marry doctors were invited here to ‘be seen.’”⁹

The year 2010 marked not only the 150th anniversary of the birth of Herzl, but also the 110th anniversary of the birth of someone less important by all accounts: Lilia Bassewitz. Her public career was based on an absolute denial of Herzl’s assertion that by the end of the nineteenth century, the “women’s question” had already been solved by Zionism. Bassewitz, along with several other women pioneers, devoted a considerable part of her public activity over the course of the first half of the twentieth century to dealing with the “women’s question” within the embryonic Jewish society in Palestine. These women proceeded from the same theoretical and political point of departure that had prompted Herzl’s unfounded declaration, as asserted quite forcefully by Hayuta Bussel, one of the founders of Degania Alef: “The problem of humanity cannot

be solved without addressing the problem of the Jews. The problem of the Jews cannot be solved without solving the issue of women.”¹⁰

According to historian Billie Melman, the issue of women and their place in the history of Jewish settlement in Palestine “arouses discomfort.” The reasons for this discomfort arise, *inter alia*, from their marginality in the historical past of that period and their relegation to the outer periphery of its historiography.¹¹ Today, two decades after academic research in this area began to develop and diversify, it is still sometimes difficult to work out whether their marginality has been illuminated, in retrospect, with excessive emphasis, or the opposite—whether their centrality has been obscured because of emphases and academic preferences that are legitimate in and of themselves, but have led to a tendency that requires updating and correction. In light of this obscurity, it is necessary to establish, at the outset, that the direct contribution of women in the realm of defense and security, during the Yishuv period, was a minor one. At the same time, we might adopt the assertion by Yossi Ben-Artzi, meant more generally but applicable also to the discussion at hand, that although the women’s “participation” in security matters was minor, their contribution in the realm of “motivating, explanatory force” is vital to an understanding of defense activity in pre-State society.¹² Because of the centrality of the defense realm in the Jewish national life as consolidated in Palestine over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, this realm represents a fertile and multilayered source for the description, characterization, and analysis of the situation and status of women in Yishuv society. Moreover, the story that unfolds here presents and highlights, in various ways related directly or indirectly to security aspects, the processes of maturation and development undergone by Yishuv society, and especially by the Kibbutz movements, in the period between the Second Aliya (1904–1914) and the end of the Second World War.

The public debate that erupts in Israel from time to time concerning military service for women is, *inter alia*, a product of the flourishing field of gender studies. The debate encompasses a wide range of issues, from limitations on the positions open to women in the army, through women’s avoidance of army service, to the vulnerability of women within the framework of their military service.¹³ There are periodic outbursts surrounding ancillary issues. For example, in 2011, there were two heated public debates: one concerned the circumstances of the

promotion—for the first time—of a woman, Orna Barbivai, to the rank of major general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and her appointment on June 23 of that year as head of the army's Manpower Division. The other was related to the offense caused to religious soldiers by women soldiers singing at military ceremonies and events. The matter of women singing in the army in Israel, as noted by Hanna Naveh, is one of the conspicuous areas in which the battle for equality, citizenship, human rights, and other civil rights has been abandoned.¹⁴ The situation itself arises from two fundamental processes that occurred over the course of the twentieth century: the growth of manpower needs in large-scale wars, on the one hand, and the intensifying battle for equal rights and obligations for women in all aspects of public life, on the other.¹⁵ The main argument raised in discussions about women and the army in Israel is that the army amplifies gender differences that perpetuate the woman's status of "helpmate." In studies by such scholars as Dafna Izraeli, Nitza Berkowitz, and Orna Sasson-Levi, there is a marked tendency to focus on the Israeli military and social reality from the 1980s onward.¹⁶ The kibbutz, beyond its importance as a central focus of identification and as a significant emblem in the eyes of the pioneering generation, was chosen for the present study also because of the availability and accessibility of the primary materials from that period, allowing us to sketch the development of the struggle to integrate women into guard duties on the kibbutz, in contrast to their participation in guarding and defending other forms of settlement—the moshavim, colonies (*moshavot*), and towns. The scope of our discussion necessarily precludes attention to other relevant bodies, such as the Moshav Movement and the Religious Kibbutz Movement.¹⁷

While the contemporary reality of women in the Israeli military receives increasing academic attention, there is a great lacuna when it comes to systematic historical discussion of the events and processes that laid the foundations for the present situation.¹⁸ A review of women's attempts to integrate into the security realm during the period of Mandatory Palestine allows us to examine whether, and to what degree, there was a transformation of their self-image over the first half of the twentieth century, and how their aspirations were received and realized on the level of public life—of which security represents one element. The study of different issues arising from this historical question is conducted here without adopting the academic position maintaining that a sort of glass ceiling, based on traditional "laws of nature" that needed to be

shattered, blocked the way of women in kibbutz society and obstructed their activity within it. Our view is that this approach blurs a proper understanding of the circumstances of that period, with the backing of a gender-oriented discussion framework that obscures the historical perspective and sometimes leads to a deflection of the real dilemmas faced by that generation to the periphery.¹⁹ Although the fundamental thematic core of the present study is located in the sphere of security, the particular aspect that we examine is closely and comprehensively bound up with the social life of women on the kibbutz in the realms of work and public involvement. These three dimensions are almost inextricably interwoven, and this becomes immediately apparent in the various frameworks that we examine here. While the women's activity was conducted in areas perceived by male colleagues in the kibbutz (as well as in the broader Yishuv society) as marginal, it would be wrong to present it as a chronicle of ongoing failure. The focus and presentation here is true and faithful, because the debates over the place of women in the kibbutz led to processes that brought gradual progress, along with regressions, and produced achievements that were sometimes partial or wavering. At the same time, the general direction of our discussion is that analysis of the Jewish Women activity leads to the conclusion that these were gradual, hesitant processes of development, growth, and success.²⁰

As in other areas of Yishuv life, in the realm of security, the pioneers of collective settlement were creative, groundbreaking leaders. During the period of the Second Aliya, productive labor in general—and agriculture in particular—had been viewed as the most manifest and tangible realization of the idea of Jewish revival and the creation of the “new Jew.” During the second half of the 1930s, however, much of the emphasis in realizing this dream and its objectives was shifted to the realm of guard duty, defense, and the army.²¹ The manner in which women perceived the nature and aim of their ongoing struggle to participate in guard duty was, *inter alia*, an angry reaction to masculine perceptions of the relations between the sexes and objectives that were “proper” and “permitted” for women to set for themselves in their social and professional activity.

As support for this general statement, we examine the struggle of the women of Ein Harod—including Eva Tabenkin, Shulamit Zhernovskaya, and Lilia Bassewitz—for the right to participate in guard duty, with an amplification (through various public forums) of their involvement in molding communal life on their kibbutz and within Hakibbutz Hameuhad (the United Kibbutz Movement).²² While their success was temporary, it

did entail a breakthrough—mainly symbolic—in the development of the overt and self-aware aspiration on the part of Jewish women during the Yishuv period for active participation in defense and guard duty. These women perceived this aim as a central component of a more comprehensive view of the woman as an equal when it came to obligations, but also in the rewards of building the Jewish national home. From the perspective of kibbutz women, their struggle in the security arena was an integral part of their more general struggle, starting from the early days of Degania, for the right to be considered equals in practice, and not just in theory.²³ From the impression that arises from developments in the security sphere (as well as in research on, for example, the Women Workers Council), it seems that we need to review the idea that the pinnacle of the feminist struggle during the Yishuv period came with the struggle for the right of women to vote for the Assembly of Representatives (*asefat ha-nivharim*),²⁴ despite its symbolic importance. Ultimately, this was an institution with fairly limited concrete influence in pre-State society. The struggle of the women of Ein Harod was a link in the chain of efforts by Jewish women during the nation-building period to integrate themselves in the molding of the national character of the new Jewish society, including the “new Jewish woman,”²⁵ that was being created in Palestine. Previous chapters in this struggle, in the realm of security, had included the demand to include women within Hashomer, and in the demand by women led by Rachel Yanait (Ben-Zvi) for inclusion among those enlisting for the Jewish Legion during the First World War. Later chapters during the pre-State period included women volunteering to serve in the British army during the Second World War and in the Palmach.²⁶ The credit for the first systematic historiographic descriptions of some of the security-related issues reviewed here goes to Shlomit Blum, Shulamit Reinharz, Uri Brenner, and Yaakov Goldstein, and, of course, the various genres of documentary literature, including memoirs of the veterans of the Hashomer organization.²⁷

The story presented here sketches a historical process at the center of which stands the kibbutz. The Socialist-Zionist Kibbutz camp was the leader, the backbone, the metaphorical standard-bearer and—more importantly—the real political factor in the full realization of the constructivist vision and path that had been created and nurtured in the school of the Labor movement in Palestine. Indeed, in some important respects, the kibbutz was the very foundation for the establishment of the State of Israel. Although both the historical narrative and academic interest

in recent years have shown great indulgence—sometimes as a deliberate provocation, usually well deserved—toward other feminine elements within Yishuv society,²⁸ it seems that the possibility of illuminating significant aspects of the period in question through a study of the history of the kibbutz represents a most valuable creative and analytic source.

The description of the battle waged by the women to take on roles in the realm of security proceeds hand in hand with the intermittent manner in which it was conducted. Elisheva (Eltka) Spektrovsky (Haimowitz), a member of Kibbutz Dafna and active in security matters, who later served in the 6th Company of the Palmach, has ably depicted the ebb and flow of this motif, which is interwoven throughout the years relevant to our discussion: “My conscience troubles me slightly when we come to make our demands. For us [women] there are periods of ups and downs. We suddenly wake up with demands, and then afterwards there’s silence.”²⁹ Our discussion also includes, in varying degrees, other aspects pertaining to the situation and status of women in Yishuv society in general, and in kibbutz society in particular, with an emphasis on their struggle for representation in the public arena. To define and illustrate the boundaries of this arena, we are guided by the words of Hayuta Bussel at the Fourth Conference of Women Workers, in January, 1932:

By the word “public life” we mean not only high politics; in a collective (*kevutzah*) everything must be clarified amongst a circle that is broader than that of the family. Lately there have been many meetings in Degania, and almost all of them have pertained to matters which, in one’s private life, are sorted out around the table, at mealtimes, or during work, between worker and co-worker: questions concerning the alfalfa, the bananas, the budget, and so on. In a collective that’s impossible. And if a female member isn’t sufficiently active in these questions, it’s clear that community life is defective. Because if a female member doesn’t take part in the deliberations, the decision will be made at her expense—to plant or not to plant, or how to live during the next budgetary year. If the female members don’t take an active part, in life, they harm themselves as well as the *kevutzah* as a whole.³⁰

Academic discussion of the issues related to military service for women in Israel is continuously expanding, and this is reflected, inter alia, in the

historical and sociological dimensions that come to be included within it. For instance, in her study of the process by which the woman's image in the Palmach was molded, Yonit Efron highlighted the revolutionary and traditional forces whose contradictory influence limited the ability of women members to break the boundaries of gender separation.³¹ In other historical contexts of military service at the start of the twenty-first century, Orna Sasson-Levi has examined how the encounter between masculinity and gender that takes place in the army creates norms and identities that preserve and entrench traditional processes of stratification, while at the same time contributing to the remolding of the seemingly fixed images of women and men in society. She argues, in *Zehuyot be-Madim* (Identities in Uniform), that the exclusion of women from combat positions creates structural and cultural differences that help to replicate the inequality between the sexes that prevails in civilian society.³² In contrast to these scholars and the discussion of the diverse issues related to the enlistment of women for service in various armies in the twentieth century, in all their varying emancipatory, feminist, and patriotic dimensions—especially during the World Wars³³—the discussion here focuses on the women's demand to defend their homes, in the narrowest sense of the word. Not their private homes, but rather the collective, socialist, pioneering home, which was perceived as a central element in an all-encompassing theoretical, social, and political ideology.

A common trend in gender research analyzes, from different perspectives, the reasons why women who fulfill military roles do not share status and recognition equal to those awarded to men, despite the fact that they serve militaristic needs that aid in the structuring of a masculine, belligerent society. The emphasis in our discussion is on the repeated demands by women to participate actively in security tasks. The women we discuss were not pushed into service as available and cheap manpower whose abiding passivity facilitated their control and exploitation in conformance with patriarchal codes. The idea of gender equality in the area of guard duty was not a goal that the women of the kibbutz movements yearned for. They did not perceive the equality that they sought as a station on the way to establishing an ethos of "a nation in uniform." Their overt and covert hopes to enjoy the prestigious dividends to be gained from the establishment of this ethos were, for them, merely an adornment for their original aim—to feel a partnership in advancing the national goals of the Yishuv as a whole in Palestine.³⁴ The sort of equality that they sought was an inclusive one, ready to

place its faith in women as potential partners in bearing the security burden, just as they were partners in other aspects of collective life. The tension between rights and obligations played a central role in the discourse surrounding guard duty in Ein Harod in 1936, but the dilemma presented by the realization of these rights and obligations did not push them to gender obstinacy for its own sake. Even when it seemed that their personal, aggressive battles might overstep the mark, they adhered to their main objective—which, in the circumstances of Ein Harod at that time, meant recognition in principle of the right to participate in guard duty, with a slow, gradual, and hesitating implementation of that right, which they regarded also as an obligation, in reality.

Interestingly, the first casualty of fighting in the new Jewish community in Palestine—and, as such, in the history of the realization of Zionism—was a woman. Her name, Rachel Hadad Halevy, is the first to appear on the list of casualties maintained by the Ministry of Defense. She died on April 2, 1886, following a clash that had taken place on March 29 between residents of the Bedouin village of Yahudia, belonging to the Abu Kishak tribe, and the residents of the Petah Tikva colony following a dispute over grazing land and territory. Rachel was struck by the Arabs and died a few days later.³⁵ No less surprising, the first bloody incident heralding the outbreak of the War of Independence occurred on November 30, 1947, in the form of a shooting attack carried out by the same Bedouin tribe. In an attack on the bus in which she was traveling from Hadera to Jerusalem, Nechama (Netka) Zeltovsky-Hacohen was killed, becoming the first Jewish casualty of the War of Independence. Nechama was the daughter-in-law of Mordechai Ben-Hillel Hacohen, whose niece was the most senior woman fighter in the Haganah—Rosa Cohen (mother of Yitzhak Rabin). She worked as a lab assistant at the Hadassah hospital and had been active in the Haganah since 1927.³⁶ It was in between the story of Rachel and that of Nechama that our story took place.