



New Pots for Old

An item from the general store once occupying the site of Zikhron Yaakov's busy pedestrian market encapsulated the yawning culture gap between Baron Rothschild's clerks, the village's Jewish farmers, and the Arabs in nearby Ayn Ghazal // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



T

he piquant story of the first general store in the pioneering Jewish village of

Zikhron Yaakov appears among the yellowing pages of Gershon Gera's *Kol Ha-hat'halot* (All Beginnings [Maariv Press, 1984]), an iconic history of the early days of modern Jewish settlement in the land of Israel. One particular item figures entertainingly in a tale concerning the metamorphosis of a pot.

The Baron's Store

The store, generally known as the “depot” (with the accent on the “pot,” as in French), was opened by one of Baron Edmond de Rothschild's most senior clerks, Elie Scheid. Scheid had observed that the mostly Romanian immigrants living in the Baron's farming communities ogled the overpriced wares available in Haifa's German Colony. Realizing there was money to be made from the farmers' homesickness for European goods, he decided to make sure this profit stayed within the Baron's colonies rather than lining the pockets of the city's German Templar Christian community.

Shuttling between Jaffa and Paris, Scheid could easily stock up on luxuries to resell, letting

his depot customers feel – momentarily at least – like men of the world as opposed to hirelings eking out a living in the Middle East. He set up shop in the heart of Zikhron Yaakov, on the corner of two streets known today as Ha-nadiv (The Philanthropist [referring to Rothschild]) and Ha-meyasdim (The Founders). There the farmers could sell their produce while browsing the European merchandise.

As Scheid had no idea what exactly that merchandise should be, he consulted Zalman Samsonov, a local noted for his business acumen. Scheid sent him on a minor industrial espionage expedition to the Templar stores in Haifa to determine their fastest-moving items. The idea was to undersell the competition with identical offerings. So Samsonov turned up his collar and, incognito, snooped around all three emporia in the German Colony. At Templar Wagner's store, the spy happened upon a pile of chamber pots by the counter, and his choice was made.

Potty Praise

A hundred and twenty years ago, when Zikhron was young, not everyone had toilets. Any such facilities generally consisted of



a small outhouse shared by the neighbors. Visiting it in the dead of night was hardly an attractive proposition, especially in the rain. Imagine waking on a winter's night and weighing your urgent need against the prospect of squatting in a cold shack liable to fly away in the wind at a moment's notice. Furthermore, someone else might have already nabbed the hot seat, so you might have to wait on line, shivering and shifting uncomfortably. Against this backdrop, the idea of a chamber pot begins to look like genius.

In Yiddish, they called it a *nacht-top* (night pot). It was kept under the bed and used only in emergencies – after which, of course, it had to be emptied and cleaned the next morning. From childhood to old age, the *nacht-top* was everyone's intimate companion.

But let's get back to Samsonov.

On assignment in Haifa, he examined the pots at leisure, admiring their delicately ornamented enamel, and then casually inquired about the price. Wagner was asking five francs per pot – an absolute fortune. “It’s just a chamber pot!” Scheid’s undercover agent felt like shouting, but he merely nodded politely and cantered straight back to Zikhron.

No Pot of Gold

Thanks to Samsonov, Scheid left for Paris with a detailed list of Haifa’s most popular purchases. He soon returned laden with curtains, china, all manner of European delicacies and bric-à-brac, and above all, three thousand chamber pots made of the finest white decorated enamel. Scheid had paid just one franc apiece, and they were to sell for two.

The depot was enormously

Once a busy thoroughfare, today a tourist attraction. Zikhron Yaakov’s Hameyasdim Street
Photo: Israel Tourism

Inset: Not the pleasantest of characters, and a Don Juan to boot. The depot’s founder, Elie Scheid



By the By

- ▶ “Depot,” a French term, comes from the Latin verb *deponere*, meaning to place or set aside; hence the English word “deposit.”
- ▶ Elie Scheid controlled the finances of the Baron’s colonies in the Holy Land but used that position to pursue his own interests – professional *and* personal. The latter included extracting sexual favors from adolescent girls in the pioneer communities, promising them jobs in return. Dr. Hillel Jaffe of Zikhron Yaakov wrote:

Many gossiped about the most powerful of them all, about Scheid [...]; they said not only that he wasted money [...] but that he was suspected of ‘special relationships’ with those young women [...] after they’d been educated and inculcated with Paris culture pursuant to serving as headmistresses of the colonies’ schools. (Aviezer Chelouche, *Who Was That Apfelbaum?* [1999], p. 81 [Hebrew])

Though Scheid was dismissed along with the rest of Baron Rothschild’s clerks, his departure was apparently connected to complaints about his behavior. Aaron Aaronsohn, the famous naturalist and founder of the Nili spy ring, who lived most of his life in Zikhron, wrote to a friend that Scheid had fallen, never to rise again.



popular – the IKEA of its day – attracting Jews and Arabs alike. For the colonists, it was soon as indispensable as the synagogue and the clerks’ office opposite which it stood. Everything flew off the shelves – apart from the *nacht-top*. Years after their arrival, most were still in stock.

In the end, to make space in the storeroom, they were offered at cost – one franc each. Even at that price, the Jewish population wasn’t interested, but word of the sale soon spread through the Arab villages of the Galilee and Samaria, and overnight the chamber pots were gone.

The Fast of Nacht-top

Years passed, and Baron Rothschild decided he could do without his administrators in the Holy Land, including Scheid. The colonists threw him a farewell party, as did the sheikh of Ayn Ghazal, Zikhron’s Arab neighbor. Scheid had helped the village with various technological issues,

mostly to improve relations between Jews and Arabs in the Carmel region and avoid the anti-Jewish violence occurring elsewhere. But the Arab villagers considered him their savior. Though Scheid tried to wriggle out of their hospitality, claiming he wouldn’t eat anything nonkosher, the sheikh promptly brought a sheep to Zikhron’s Jewish butcher for slaughter.

Fresh out of excuses, Scheid rode to Ayn Ghazal with an escort from Zikhron Yaakov, and everyone gathered around the festive table. The guests almost gagged at the sight of the delicacies spread before them: everything was served in the enamel chamber pots they’d sold the Arabs all those years ago! These distinctive “dishes” proved once again that cultural differences can result in extremely entertaining clashes between civilizations.

For Scheid and his friends, however, the situation was far from



Chamber pots or serving dishes?

Photo: Getty Images

Facing page: Relations between Zikhron and the surrounding Arab villages continued throughout the British Mandate. Prominent Zikhron residents visiting their neighbors in Subrin, 1940

Photo: Zoltan Kluger, Israel Government Press Office

entertaining. Silence fell, as none of them touched the food. Things became extremely tense, for if the guests didn't eat, their hosts would be deeply offended, especially after they'd bothered with kosher "catering." But who could dine from a chamber pot?

Turning paler by the minute, Scheid scrambled for a solution, until eventually someone at the end of the table cleared his throat. It was Reb Avrum, one of the elder colonists, who rose to his feet. Unfortunately, he announced, they'd forgotten that it was a Jewish fast day.

Astounded, the sheikh insisted on knowing the nature of this abstinence, for the "great fast" – Yom Kippur – had been much earlier. All eyes turned to Reb Avrum, wondering how he'd get out of this one, but he simply invoked a "minor fast day."

Once again the sheikh asked what this fast commemorated, and Reb Avrum amazed all present – including himself – by proclaiming

unblinkingly that it was in memory of the prophet Nacht-top, may Allah have mercy on his soul.

Tensions eased, the sheikh turned back to the feast, and Jewish-Arab coexistence was assured, at least for a while.

Though Ayn Ghazal was destroyed in Israel's War of Independence, to be replaced by nearby Ein Ayala, Zikhron Yaakov's former depot still stands. Only now it's part of the downtown pedestrian shopping area, providing rather different goods. So on your next visit to this former Rothschild colony, bow your head in memory of the prophet Nacht-top, who, in an emergency, saved the day. ■



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Baronita

27 Ha-nadiv Street
Kosher, meat, (04) 611-3047

16 Ha-meyasdim

16 Ha-meyasdim Street
Kosher, meat, (04) 858-0555

Dona Gracia

58 Ha-meyasdim Street
Mehadrin Kosher, dairy
(04) 639-9003



Don't Miss

Aaronsohn House – Nili Museum

40 Ha-meyasdim Street
Open Sun.–Thurs., 9 am–4 pm,
Fri., 9 am–noon
Entrance fee, (04) 639-0120

First Aliya Museum

2 Ha-nadiv Street
Open Mon.–Thurs., 9 am–4 pm,
Fri., 9 am–2 pm
Entrance fee, (04) 629-4777

Ohel Yaakov Synagogue

Built in 1886
19 Ha-nadiv Street
Open during prayer services
or by appointment
054-646-4692 (Yehuda)