



The Baron's Experiment

Baron Rothschild's clerks were furious when Ekron's Jewish farmers insisted on observing the Sabbatical year. Somehow the colony survived, thanks in part to its feeblest yet most determined member // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Mazkeret Batya

Baron Edmond de Rothschild's first colony in the land of Israel

A

well-tended corner of Eastern Europe, Belarus is famous in Hasidic lore for regions such as Minsk, Vitebsk, and Mohilev and cities such as Stolin, Kamyanyets, and Pinsk. Yet the obscure town of Pruzhany was closer to Lithuanian Jewish culture than to Hasidic. Its rabbis, known for their opposition to Hasidism, included Rabbi Eliyahu Feinstein, uncle of renowned halakhic

authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and progenitor of the famous Soloveitchik dynasty.

Near Pruzhany is little Ruzhany, which would doubtless have vanished from Zionist history had it not been the birthplace of former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir (Yezernitsky).

If all these places have made it into the annals, then why not Pavlovka, a tiny hamlet outside Ruzhany, where a fateful meeting took place at the end of 1882? A few dozen Jewish families had moved there to take up the czar's offer of exemption from military service if they could support themselves farming the rich local soil.

A Few Good Men

One winter Saturday night, a mysterious, unexpected guest took the podium in Pavlovka's small synagogue. Yehiel Brill introduced himself as a Hebrew journalist and fervent supporter of Jewish settlement in the land of Israel. Brill and another lover of Zion, Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, were seeking ten stalwart, observant Jewish farmers for a completely unprecedented enterprise: the establishment of an agricultural colony in Ottoman Palestine under the auspices of Baron

Edmond de Rothschild. The ten would have to leave their families behind for over a year, but the baron would fund the venture (including their travel expenses), and the land would be paid for by the French Alliance Israélite Universelle organization.

The assembled thought Brill was joking. Why would the baron risk his resources on ten unknown Belarussian farmers? Why should these men, of all people, spearhead the colonization movement that became the First Aliya? Nevertheless, everyone turned up the next day at the beadle's house to apply for the project – anything to get out of this godforsaken hole in Belarus.

Brill chose those with the strongest shoulders, the most calloused hands, and the brightest gleam in their eyes at the sound of the words "land of Israel." All ten hearty and enthusiastic recruits thanked him but refused to go anywhere without their good friend, weaver Chaim Moshe Press.

Brill politely protested that an agricultural colony didn't need Press' skills. The baron had agreed to support only ten farmers, the visitor added, plus their eleventh looked a bit feeble.

Press' countrymen retorted that



Having recently lost his beloved mother, Betty, Rothschild asked the colonists to rename their village Mazkeret Batya in her honor

he was the only literate man in the village, so without him they'd be unable to write to their families. And with him, if anyone died of malaria, they'd still have a prayer quorum of ten.

Yehiel Brill tried to object but was moved by Press' love of the land and eagerness to work it. So Brill informed the baron and Rabbi Mohilever of a change in plans.

Standing His Ground

Arriving in Ottoman Palestine, the farmers worked for a year at the Mikve Israel agricultural school (located on the coastal plain), then sought suitable land nearby. Unimpressed with the farmland in fledgling Rishon Zion, they headed south. Some fifteen kilometers later, they stopped beside some dark earth similar to the fertile soil of Belarus.

This land belonged to the Arabs of Aqir, a nearby village, who were happy to sell 2,600 dunams to Baron Rothschild. Meanwhile the delighted colonists settled temporarily in Aqir and, having carefully examined the furrows of their new soil, deemed it best suited to growing wheat.

On November 7, 1883, the farmers set to work plowing and seeding. So began the colony they named

Ekron, on the assumption that "Aqir" reflected the site's original, biblical designation.

When things were finally up and running, however, Chaim Moshe Press took sick. The doctor determined that Press had overexerted his delicate frame and had to return to Belarus post-haste. Barely breathing, the patient replied that he wasn't going anywhere. He likened Ekron to a barrel held together with hoops of steel – take one hoop away and the whole barrel falls apart.

The doctor didn't quite get the comparison, possibly because it was grunted in Russian between hacking coughs, but the determination burning in Press' feverish eyes did the trick, and he was allowed to stay put despite warnings that it would likely be the end of him. To everyone's surprise, he was soon back at work, humming softly as he plowed.

Bumper Crop

Not long afterward, the farmers were reunited with their families, and the colony began expanding between the plots of wheat bending in the wind.

Any hope of building permanent housing was shelved amid legal difficulties imposed by the

Historians debate whether the "eleventh man" added to Mazkeret Batya's founding fathers was Moshe Press or Pavlovka's heder teacher, Avraham Yaakov Gelman. The town synagogue, built in 1927 to replace the one erected by the original colonists

Photo: Uri Arel

Though the doctor insisted he should go back to Belarus if he wanted to survive, he outlived all the colony's other settlers. Chaim Moshe Press





By the By

- ▶ Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever died in 1898 and was buried in Bialystok, Poland, just two hours away from Pavlovka, Belarus. His headstone was destroyed during World War II, but in 1991 his remains were reburied in Mazkeret Batya beneath an exact replica. The town's small but well-organized museum commemorates his life's work.
- ▶ Betty Rothschild was a socialite much admired for her stunning beauty as well as a gifted pianist tutored by none other than Frédéric Chopin. A close friend of Napoleon III's wife, Empress Eugénie, Rothschild hosted recitals by Liszt and Paganini and readings by Balzac in her Paris salon. Betty Rothschild's luxurious lifestyle couldn't have been farther from the harsh conditions suffered by the colonists whose villages were named in her honor, Mazkeret Batya and Bat Shlomo. Yet the funds her son invested to perpetuate her memory allowed them to succeed.
- ▶ The first modern agricultural colonies in the land of Israel were founded in the autumn of 1882. That was 5643 on the Hebrew calendar, the first year in the biblical Sabbatical cycle, leaving six years before the Sabbatical year, in which the land of Israel must be left fallow. As 5649 approached, the farmers faced a severe dilemma: Should they risk letting all their toil go to rack and ruin, or desecrate the Jewish people's first Sabbatical year in the Holy Land in two millennia?

Rabbis such as Shmuel Mohilever and Zadoc Cahn, chief rabbi of Paris and adviser to Baron Rothschild, sought to preserve the colonies' achievements by relying on two leniencies: (1) As long as only a minority of Jews lived in the Holy Land, the laws of the Sabbatical year applied only by virtue of rabbinic ruling, and (2) land owned by non-Jews could be worked during the Sabbatical year, even by Jews. These rabbis therefore advised selling the farmers' fields to non-Jews for the year.

Jerusalem's traditional Orthodox community, however, guided by Rabbi Shmuel Salant, saw the Sabbatical year as a historic opportunity to renew Israel's covenant with the land. As such, the Sabbatical was to be observed to the letter.

The farmers of Ekron chose the latter course, believing that their devotion to God's law would ultimately strengthen their venture – and replenish the soil. Other colonies followed the directives of the baron and Mikve Israel, selling the land in name only and continuing their work.

- ▶ The full story of Mazkeret Batya and those who made it happen is vividly recounted in Sam Finkel's *Rebels in the Holy Land – Mazkeret Batya: An Early Battleground for the Soul of Israel* (Feldheim, 2012).

Ottoman authorities. Instead, the pioneers made do with four two-story industrial buildings constructed out of hewn sandstone and registered as cowsheds. There were actually cows on the ground floor, while the farmers huddled together upstairs, somehow surviving the stench.



They derisively termed their living quarters *kazarmes*, Russian slang for “barracks.”

In the fields, by contrast, the prospects were good. Aqir's land was indeed well-suited to wheat, and the harvest was so plentiful that jealous farmers came to marvel from near and far.

Though they worked as hard as they could, the eleven Belarussians couldn't farm the entire area purchased for them. Luckily, the Ottoman officials relaxed some regulations, allowing the cows to be moved out of the *kazarmes'* lower floors, which made room for more manpower. Additional accommodations were quickly built among the fields, and soon each family had a *kazarme* to itself.

Legendary Romanian agriculturalist and entrepreneur Mordechai Niemann settled in Ekron, resulting in an influx of working-class families from Romania. With both groups working together, the next harvest broke all records. When Baron Edmond de Rothschild made his first-ever trip to the Holy Land, in May 1887, he was overwhelmed by the success of the experiment initiated that cold evening in Belarus.

The baron's tour of Ekron was a production on the scale of a Eurovision finale. Every



Mazkeret Batya at the end of the 19th century

minute was planned months in advance, including fireworks and a magnificent reception celebrating the dedication of a Torah scroll in honor of the occasion.

Having lost his beloved mother, Betty, a few months previously, Rothschild asked the colonists to rename their village Mazkeret Batya (Remembrance of Batya) in her honor. They readily obliged, and their benefactor immediately reciprocated by purchasing another two thousand dunams of equally fertile land in the area.

By 1888, Mazkeret Batya was the only more or less self-sufficient colony in the Holy Land. Then came the Sabbatical year.

In God We Trust

According to the Hebrew calendar, the year 5649 (1889) was to be a “Sabbath for the land,” as the Bible calls it. Mazkeret Batya’s devout farmers insisted on letting their fields lie fallow, refusing even to lease them to local Arabs temporarily, as other young colonies did. Ignoring Rabbi Mohilever’s entreaties, they explained to a fuming Baron Edmond that it hadn’t been easy to observe Jewish law in Belorussia either, and they hadn’t come all the way to the land of Israel to be told how to behave.

Threatening to expel anyone who refused to work, the baron cut off all funding of the colony’s public services. One by one, the doctor, the pharmacist, the shokhet, and even the schoolteachers

disappeared. Yet the Sabbatical rebellion continued until the very last day of 5649. The fields were dry, the children were hungry, and everyone was irritable.

As the year drew to a close, however, the baron’s personnel ended their boycott – on condition that the two and a half families who’d led the insurrection leave. Mazkeret Batya was back on track.

Though the next few years were not without adventure – including more dustups with the baron’s bureaucracy, trouble with the Ottoman authorities, clashes with Arab thieves from Aqir, and drought – the colony never faltered. It expanded to include olive and citrus groves and even vineyards, and the settlers finally breathed easy after Aqir was conquered in Israel’s War of Independence.

Last Laugh

Only one of the original eleven pioneers lived to see the state established, and that was Chaim Moshe Press. Press had the last laugh, living to the ripe old age of a hundred and one, surrounded by a host of descendants, and lucid to the end. One of the town’s main streets is named for him.

Mazkeret Batya retains many other remnants of the good old days, such as the baron’s clerks’ house from 1885 (today a museum), four *kazarmes*, and an Antilles well that’s still working after over a hundred thirty years. □

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Rona Café BaKibbutz

Kibbutz Kvutzat Shiller
Kosher, dairy, (08) 937-2694

Shvilim

Tel Shahr
Kosher, dairy, (077) 360-9060

Picanto Asian Bar

9 Ha-shotrim Street
Mazkeret Batya
Kosher, meat, (08) 995-6565



Don't Miss

Eran Shamir Village Museum

40 Rothschild Street
Mazkeret Batya
(08) 934-9525
Entrance fee

Rabbi Mohilever Museum

1 Rabbi Mohilever Street
Mazkeret Batya
(08) 934-0034
By appointment only, entrance fee

Herzl House and Efraim Chizik Memorial

Hulda Forest, outside
Kibbutz Mishmar David
Free entry



Tamar Hayardeni

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