

Wilhelma, Israel: An Interface of Israeli and German Settlement Histories

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Abstract

The article deals with two settlements, Wilhelma and Atarot, whose histories are connected: the settlers of Wilhelma were deported by the British Mandate authorities in 1948 and became refugees, and the settlers of Atarot had to leave their settlement as it fell in the same year and also became refugees. They were re-settled in Wilhelma as it was vacated by the British. The German settlers of Wilhelma were deported to Australia where they were naturalized, mostly in Melbourne and Sydney. The name Wilhelma was replaced with Bnei Atarot by the Jewish settlers from Old Atarot.

The article opens with an introduction describing the relations between Jews and Germans in Palestine from the beginning of the German settlement until the Germans were forced to leave the country. It follows with an encounter with the Luz family, in Bnei Atarot and their narrative of the events that led to the evacuation of Old Atarot in 1948; the acts of settlement in Old Atarot and Wilhelma; the impact of the 1948 War of Independence on both communities, the heavy fighting in Atarot and Neve Yaakov; what happened to the lands of Wilhelma; and other Jewish refugees who joined for the re-settlement of Wilhelma. The article ends with an epilog, surveying the events in Old Atarot, to the cemeteries of Wilhelma and Old Atarot, and the Luxemburg Agreement (1952) and its significance to both communities.

Introduction

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Introduction

2001. Israel, near Ben-Gurion airport. I am walking the old road, in Bnei Atarot, a small suburban community 15 km east of Tel Aviv. The old Eucalyptus trees planted along the narrow road, and the century-old houses next to that road conceal a historic affair relevant for Germans and Israelis alike: the drama of a small settlement named Wilhelma, a Christian-German colony founded 1902, that became the Jewish settlement of Bnei Atarot, in 1948.



Fig. 1. Main Street of Wilhelma, early 1910s, Yoel Amir postcard collection. The German title says “German Colony Wilhelma near Jaffa.”

Right ahead of me I notice an old man, walking slowly with a walking stick. I understand that he is a resident of the settlement, and stop to greet him and introduce myself. His name is Michah Luz, and as I assumed, he was among the first settlers in Bnei Atarot (sons of Atarot) and a veteran of the old settlement, Atarot, which is no more¹.

We talked a little about the tragic histories of Wilhelma and Atarot, and upon my request, met again that evening for more, this time in the presence of a video

¹ The most prominent member of the family was Shabtai Luzinski, a key activist in the “Illegal Immigration” (Aliya Bet) organization. Settled in Atarot (1923), died in Italy in January 1947, and buried in Atarot (1947). Biodata by Ruth Danon, December 20, 2022.

camera; we sat for hours in his house, him telling me in detail his account of the beginning of the settlement: how they lost their homes in Old Atarot and how Wilhelma, the German colony, became the Jewish *moshav*² of Bnei Atarot.



Fig. 2. Interview with Michah Luz, 2001. Sitting next to M. Luz is his sister Ruth. Michah and Ruth Luz, “Atarot and Wilhelma 1948,” interview (2000) by Danny Goldman, video, 1:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3BvviivaJo> (Bnei Atarot Archive) accessed May 14, 2024.

1902. Four years after the historic visit of Keiser Wilhelm II to the Holy Land, then under the Ottoman rule. At this point in time, there were already four German Templer settlements in the Holy Land:³ in Haifa (est. 1868); Jaffa (est. 1869); Sarona (now in Tel Aviv, est. 1871) and in Jerusalem (est. 1874). The small community of Germans in Palestine harvests the fruits of the imperial visit: The German government recognizes the pioneering enterprise of the settlement, and its alignment with Germany’s interests in the Middle East. Now the German

² Many thanks to all those who assisted in compiling this article: Mrs. Ruthy Danon, Abraham Tamir, Michael Luz, Ruth Luz, Mary Pfeffer and many others.

³ The Templers, German protestant settlers in the Holy Land, arrived in the Holy Land 1868, and established 7 colonies. Their enterprise ended on April 1948 when they were deported to Cyprus by the British Mandate authorities, and from there to Australia and Germany. Detailed history of the Templers in Paul Sauer, *The Holy Land Called*, trans. Henley G. (Melbourne: The Temple Society, 1991). Settlement history by Yossi Ben-Artzi, *From Germany to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi, 1996); Alex Carmel, “German Settlement in Palestine at the End of the Turkish Rule: The Political Problems, Local and International” (PhD diss., Hebrew University Jerusalem, 1970) [Heb.]; Eyal Jacob Eisler, “The American – German Colony in Jaffa and its’ Distinction within the Context of the Christian World in the Land of Israel by the End of the Ottoman Rule 1866- 1914” (M.A. thesis, Haifa University), 1993 [Heb.].

settlers can lean on their government for support, and are able to purchase farming land east of Jaffa, which they name Wilhelma-Hamidiya in honor of the king of Wuerttemberg (Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert; 1859-1941) and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918). Ten years later the Jewish community of Atarot was founded, by acquiring land near Kalandia (10 km north of Jerusalem); the first group of settlers came a year later. They dispersed due to difficulties during WWI; another group resettled in 1919 once the War was over.⁴ Atarot lasted a few months into the War of Independence and on May 14, 1948 (the day Israel's independence was declared) it fell and was evacuated just before the Arab forces raided the settlement, looting and destroying it.

It is worth mentioning that during WWI, Wilhelma was in the midst of fierce combat between the British and the Ottomans, as described by Binyamin Zeev Kedar:

During WWI, a German military hospital operated in the village (one of its patients was Rudolf Franz Höss, who was to become in Infamous *kommandant* of Auschwitz). [...] [Wilhelma was taken by the British in November 1917 D.G.]. The British deported the Germans to Egypt, but allowed their return after the war.⁵

It was in Wilhelma that the German and the Jewish histories will merge, 46 years later.

The Germans were pietists,⁶ mainly farmers and artisans from Württemberg, who came to settle the Holy Land, then a desolate part of the Ottoman Empire, in the mid-1860s, forming 7 prospering colonies, Wilhelma among them; the Jews of Atarot were settlers who bought land north of Jerusalem early in the 1920s (and earlier) and formed a *moshav*, a collective community they named Atarot.

⁴ Yossi Spanier, in cooperation with Ruth Danon, Shmuel Even-Or, Zvi & Hanna Tal., *The Garden of Fortitude: A Memorial to the Settlement North of Jerusalem* (leaflet in honor of 100 years for the Settlement of Atarot, 2012).

⁵ Binyamin Zeev Kedar, *The Changing Land between the Jordan and the Sea* (Israel: MOD and Yad Ben Zvi Press, 1999), 142-143.

⁶ A faction in Lutheranism emphasizing biblical doctrine with individual pious sentiment and living a vigorous Christian life.

Retrospect and Overview: Relations between Templers and Jews in the Holy Land 1868-1948

In the second half of the 19th century, two groups of immigrants to the Holy Land made a successful settlement attempt. The earlier group were the Templers, Germans who (in the late 1860s) emigrated from Germany, Switzerland, the United States, Russia and other places. The second group were Jews, with waves of immigration starting in the 1880s.⁷ The German (Templer) immigration preceded the Jewish immigration, however in smaller numbers. The first Templer colony (in Haifa) was founded in 1868, by a handful of Templer families, the forerunners for more German immigrants to the German settlements in the Holy Land. The first Jewish colony, Petakh Tikva was founded in 1878, also by a small group.

In that colony [Sarona] we sat, sipping beer, and after we have looked around and watched the houses and the fields, the beauty and the order, the serene and peaceful life in the colony, we thought: [...] if the Templer group, composed of average persons in education and property, and rich only in a deep drive to make the Holy Land settled as in old times[...] if they could find a way to establish this colony that [quality] is not to be found even in Germany, so should we[...] (Translation by the author).⁸

⁷ The first wave of Jewish immigration (first Aliya starting 1880s) was 25,000, of immigrants coming in from Europe, Russia and Yemen; then came a number of waves: second Aliya (1904-1914, 35,000), most of them left or deported by the Ottoman authorities during WWI; third Aliya (1918-1923, 37,000), these were mainly Jews from East Europe, Poland, Russia, Romania, and Lithuania; forth Aliya (1924-1929, 80,000) from East Europe and Middle-Eastern countries such as Yemen and Iraq; fifth Aliya (1930-1931 250,000) from East and Central Europe, Many from Germany. Last was the Aliya before and after WWII and shortly afterwards, also called Aliya Bet (illegal immigration) from Europe and north Africa. The Templers on the other hand numbered approx. 2200 in all colonies, between the two World Wars, at their peak presence in the Holy Land.

⁸ Translated from Old Hebrew by the author. Yehiel Bril, *Yesud Hama'ala* (Jerusalem: Magen 1883), 124.



Fig. 3. Yehiel Bril 1836-1886. A journalist and a public figure, among the founders of Hebrew journalism and the first Jewish colonies. Mazkeret Batya site, unknown date and photographer, public domain.

Bril (the author of the above), saw the German settlement as a model for Jews that were beginning to flow in. Many other leaders of *Shivat Zion* (return to Zion) Movement expressed the same idea, and even rented rooms (as Bril did) in Templer colonies in order to study closely how the Germans manage to establish such successful communities. Many even visited the founder of the Templer movement, Christoph Hoffmann in person, in order to learn from the Templers' experience.⁹

⁹ Alex Carmel, *The German Settlement in the Holy Land by the end of the Ottoman Era, its Political, Local and International Problems* (Haifa: Haifa University and the Gottlieb Schumacher Institute for research of the Christian World Activity in the Holy Land during the 19th Century, and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel [SPNI] 1990), 201.

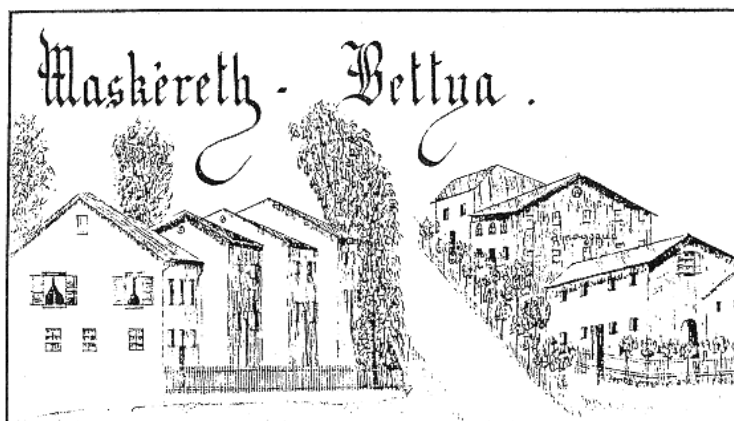


Fig. 4. The Jewish colony of Mazkeret Batya, drawing by Eliyahu Scheid, from his book *Memories of the travels in Eretz Israel and Syria, 1883-1899*, (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Institute, 1983).¹⁰

The Jews regarded the German Colonies as a benchmark for their own settlements. Hagai Binyamini, who lived near Waldheim and Bethlehem recalled his impressions of the German Colonies:

The farms were very orderly; stone walls, cleanliness, flowers, the yards were swept, everything built and neat. Our farms were sort of provisional: sheet metal, things tied up with wires, use of old metal pipes... theirs was everything built with cut stone, tiled courts, fodder pits... I understood from them the German order and efficiency. This gave some idea as to what German are capable of creating. People who can work so systematically with such means and dedication, no wonder that they almost conquered the world...¹¹

The Templers, for their part, welcomed the introduction of Jewish populace to the Holy Land, and were pleased to see Petakh Tikva (the first Jewish colony) established by Jewish settlers, regarding it as "a substantial step towards the

¹⁰ Bril was not only praising the German colonies, he actually implemented what he learned in Saron. In 1883 he (and others) founded one of the first Jewish colonies, Mazkeret Batya. The drawing by Scheid reflects the influence of Templers' architecture resembling the German houses of Saron.

¹¹ Nogah Binstock, *We Are not Like Them, the Taking over of the German Colonies*, video, 1989, for *Camera Obscura* project. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmMj3Oh9FjI> , (4:43), accessed December 12, 2023.

advancement of *Eretz Israel*,¹² and even leased farming land in Petakh Tikva from the Jewish settlers as they trusted and cooperated with them.¹³

The Jews that settled Petakh Tikva approached the Templer architect Theodor Sandel, a young architect and surveyor¹⁴. They needed planning for the colony, and Sandel delivered: he (along with the Templer surveyor Ernst Voigt) produced a master plan for the colony, which became the first Jewish colony in the Holy Land.

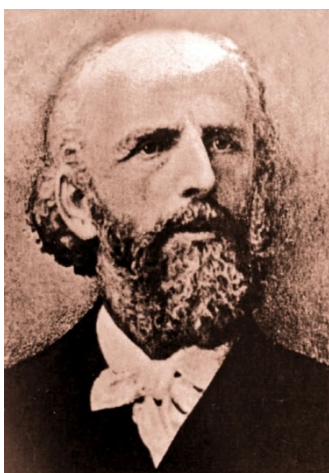


Fig. 5. Photo of Theodor Sandel, Tamar Yardeni collection and digitization.

A few years before Petakh Tikva, the Jewish entrepreneur Charles Netter founded the Jewish farming school in Mikveh Israel (near Jaffa). Netter approached Sandel for the layout of the institution. Sandel provided the planning and later designed

¹² Carmel, *The German Settlement in the Holy Land by the end of the Ottoman Era, its Political, Local and International Problems*, quoting the *Warte*, May 22, 1879, 7. The *Warte* was and still is the official platform of the Templer Movement. This is a newspaper in German, full name is *Die Warte des Tempels*.

¹³ Ibid., quoting a report from Sarona in the *Warte*, March 25, 1880.

¹⁴ Theodor Sandel (born 1845) studied in Stuttgart at the high technical school, arrived at the Holy Land by 1871, settled in the Templer colony of Jaffa, established an architectural practice, and designed Sarona as his first project. Moved to the Templer colony in Jerusalem in 1880, where he later became head of the colony. In Jerusalem he embarked on a number of projects for the Jewish community, such as the Sha'arei Zedek hospital, the Lemmel Jewish school, and other projects for the Ottoman authorities and the German Christian community. In 1898 Sandel was awarded the high title *Baurat* by the Kaiser, recognizing his skill and talent.

the local winery, (built 1887), one of the first modern wineries in the Holy Land.¹⁵ Sandel proceeded to design the winery of Sarona (1893), the third Templer colony, based on the experience he gathered in the Mikveh winery design. There is evidence that the design of Mikveh was advised by German settlers who had gathered a limited experience from their years of settlement prior to Mikveh, and were very pleased to see the new farming school being established there. Christoph Paulus, a Templer figure wrote (1870) about the economical benefits the Templers could gain from the Mikveh enterprise, and wished Karl Netter success in the endeavor.¹⁶



Fig. 6. Sandel's largest building project in the Holy Land, built for the Jewish community: Sha'arei Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem. Built in 1902, outside of the Old City. The building still stands. Private collection, photographer unknown, public domain. Data from: David Kroyanker, *Jerusalem: A Guide to Neighborhoods and Buildings, an Architectural View* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing Ltd., 1996), 96.

The two groups of settlers regarded themselves as “partners in fate.” Both were oppressed by the Ottomans, who ruled the Holy Land until 1918. The Ottomans preferred to keep the region unchanged, and therefore made life for outsiders very hard: land registry and ownership, construction of new structures, heavy taxation, and poor law enforcement. However, Jewish immigration intensified in the 1880s

¹⁵ Eisler, “The American – German Colony in Jaffa and its’ Distinction within the Context of the Christian World in the Land of Israel by the End of the Ottoman Rule 1866- 1914,” 49.

¹⁶ Naftali Thalmann, “Farming in the Templer Settlements and its Contribution to the Development of Agriculture in Eretz-Israel,” *Cathedra* 78 (December 1995): 65-81.

and more Jewish colonies were founded: Zichron Ya'akov, Rosh Pinna, and Rishon Lezion. The Templers, by now with four strong colonies (Haifa, Jaffa, Sarona and Jerusalem), were pleased with the establishment of new Jewish colonies; these contributed to the economy of the Templer settlements, bought German products sold at the Templer colonies, and Templer builders were involved in construction at the Jewish colonies.

The Germans and the Jewish settlers suffered equally from hostility coming from the Ottoman authorities and the local Arab residents of the Holy Land. The hostility from the Arabs was even worse, as it was accompanied by violence.¹⁷

The Germans were equally subject to crops theft and threats from their Arab neighbors. Alex Carmel estimated one third of the crops was stolen by Arabs.¹⁸ In general, the Germans were also concerned about the increasing hostility of their Arab neighbors. In Wilhelma, the German settlers suffered from theft and robbery, and at one point there was even a raid of armed Arabs from neighboring villages, into the heart of the colony (1909).

The great waves of Jewish immigration generated a competition between the Jews and the Germans. The Jews had already established more colonies (Yesud Hama'ala (1883), Ness Ziona (1883), Mazkeret Batya (1883) and Gedera (1884), and also expanded the Jewish presence in towns. From this point on, the relations between Jews and Germans begun to oscillate. The Germans in their colonies felt overwhelmed by the Jewish settlement; the result was German hostility toward the Jewish settlers, expressed in the hindrance of economical cooperation.

In 1890-1891, it became clear for the Templers, that it is more likely that the Jews will be taking over as the leading civilian factor in the Holy Land; however, the Germans accepted the idea that both communities are to live side by side for years to come. The German colonies were thriving and so were the Jewish colonies; as Jewish immigration dwindled, the rate of forming new colonies slowed down; and the Templer colonies were maintaining their superiority in terms of quality of life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Many other hostilities of the same nature are described in Yair Assiskowitz, *The Bitter and the Sweet* (Herzliya, Israel: Milo Publishers, 2000).

¹⁸ Carmel, *The German Settlement in the Holy Land by the end of the Ottoman Era, its Political, Local and International Problems*, 185, quoting the letter from Von Linker (head of the German military cabinet) to the head of the Admiralty in Berlin, Bonn Archive, file 140, volume 1.

¹⁹ *Warte*, March 1889, and July 1890, and November 1890.

By the end of the 1890s, there were in Palestine about 50,000 Jews compared to 1,500 Germans.²⁰ In 1897, the Zionist Movement led by Theodor Herzl,²¹ opened its first session in Basel. The Templers were unhappy with the development, as they realized that for the first time this was a political process, aimed at uniting all the small initiatives and would accelerate the Jewish settlement. This time it was clear that this was a significant international move managed professionally and charged with national aspiration. The establishment of the new Zionist bank was the last straw that made the Templers interpret the Zionist movement as aspiring to make the Holy Land the national home for the Jews, therefore regarding other populations as undesirable for a future Jewish majority.

In the mid-1890s, the Zionist movement formed the Jewish National Fund, that immediately commenced purchasing land for further Jewish settlement. The Germans could not compete with this powerful instrument, Combined with increased Jewish immigration. Templer voices were now heard insisting that the German settlers need to be on watch not to lose the lead in export of Jaffa Oranges as they had lost the lead in viticulture.²²

In the years before WWI, it became clear that the Ottoman Empire was weakening, and its collapse was only a matter of time. The commander of the German fleet in the Mediterranean, wrote to his superiors:

[...]Zionism is about to achieve supremacy in the Holy Land - a fact that without doubt will contribute to spreading the German culture and enhance its economy. With the aid of the Jewish community in the Holy Land, Germany has a good measure to expand its interests in the Land. Moreover, the Jewish factor, who alongside Hebrew is proficient in German more than any other language, will be most willing to accept German political patronage (in the event of disintegration of the Ottoman Empire).²³

²⁰ *The Hebrew Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (Jerusalem: The Encyclopedia Publishing Corporation 1957), table 4, 674.

²¹ Theodor Herzl, a Jewish journalist (1860-1904), political activist who was the founder of modern political Zionism, seeking to establish a Jewish homeland.

²² *Warte* from January 1908.

²³ Report dated May 31, 1913, Berlin Archive, file 134, vol. 32.

Davis Trietsch, a German-Jewish politico and an activist in the Zionist movement, made an effort to persuade the German settlers in a shared interest between them and the Jewish settlers. In 1913, he published an article in the *Warte* for that purpose: Jewish presence in the Holy Land is gaining ground, and now consists of 100,000 souls, 70,000 of which are fluent in German. These Jews prefer German products and are the main body of consumers for the products of the German colonies. German settlers are consulting Jewish experts in forestry; there is cooperation in medicine, and civil cooperation between neighboring communities. Trietsch's ideas were echoed in the German press, which now advocated German support for the Jewish enterprise in the Holy Land, to secure Germany's interests there.

In the years between the two World Wars, and until the NS party in Germany assumed power, more positive relations developed between Jews and Germans. The Jewish settlers of Petakh Tikva and the German farmers of Sarona developed a proactive work relationship, as did the Jewish farmers of the Jezreel Valley with the Germans of Waldheim and Bethlehem.²⁴

In 1926, the *Warte* published an article regarding the relations with the Jewish community, quoted by Sauer (1991):

[...] It is our endeavor to live and work in harmony with the Jews, as far as it is at all possible for two different religious groups to do so. Basically, we have the same goal: namely the task of continuing development of the country [...] a fact which is ignored by those who describe us as anti-Semitic [...] in spite of our small number, our cultural and economic work has been of importance [...] our settlements and communities have considerably encouraged Jewish immigration and settlement, a fact which, in our opinion, ought to receive a little more official recognition on the part of the Jews [...] it is our conviction that physical and economic

²⁴ Jehuda Raab, *The First Furrow / Memoirs* (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1988), describes an on-going relationship between the Jews of Petakh Tikva and the Germans in Sarona; Meir Shalev, *Fontanel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002), 27, describes romantic ties between Jewish women and German men. According to Shalev (personal communication November 17, 2002) there were about 30 such couples, some eventually marrying the Jewish women and eventually deported with their German spouses to Australia.

development has to be supported by the proper recognition and observance of living together in the spirit of God.²⁵

Wilhelma was the first in the country to use reinforced concrete. It was introduced there by Daniel Lichtenstein, a Jew from the neighboring Petakh Tikva, who specialized in Portland Cement, and suggested its use in water tanks to a farmer of Wilhelma. Together they constructed an open concrete reservoir (1913), that lasted for many years.²⁶ Wilhelma also hosted a Jewish family, headed by a Jew who was a Kosher supervisor, in order to have the produce and dairy products accessible to the Kosher-keeping population.²⁷

The change came in the 1930s when the NS party in Germany took over. In January 1933 the NS party led by A. Hitler gained power. Many Germans in Palestine joined the Party supporting its racist policy. For most Templers in Palestine, however, it was not a positive development, a replacement of one government by another one, whose promises and vision were yet to be delivered. In Germany, by April 1933 the Reich had encouraged a boycott on Jewish businesses. The Templers in Palestine were not happy with the new situation, as they knew that the Jews in Palestine would do the same with German goods.

On the international level, Simon Stern (1986) wrote about the relations between Germans and Jews in the 1930s as heavily charged, the German Government refusing to sell German properties to Jews in Palestine and elsewhere to refugees from Germany:

Appeals of Jews to the German Government and to the German colonies in Palestine increased following the rise of the NS party in Germany. The Templers were not comfortable in Palestine, where the hostile Jewish community was growing fast. In 1935 a group of Templers organized in order to exchange property with Jewish property in Germany, and approached the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This appeal was

²⁵ Sauer, *The Holy Land Called*, 174.

²⁶ Shmuel Avizur, *Inventors and Adopters* (Tel Aviv & Jerusalem: Israel Museum and Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi, 1985), 174-178.

²⁷ Fredricke Imberger, *Recollections From my Life in Wilhelma* (Melbourne: self-published, 1961), 9.

rejected on grounds that reduction of German nationals in Palestine would meet the Jews' interests, and provoke the Arabs' hostility toward Germany. That position had been applied to other locations elsewhere. In 1936 the German Government notified its embassies that [...] "It is preferred that German nationals will keep on living in their locations and encourage German export with their trade." [...] the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs responded to an appeal by Germans to exchange property in Sarona, that this was a Zionist attempt to take Sarona without a substantial payment. It is clear from that response that the German authorities assumed already then, that Jewish property in Germany would be nationalized in any event, therefore did not constitute a "substantial payment (Translation by the author)."²⁸

Stern concluded the article saying that "[...] the German policy actually prevented saving the Jewish property in Germany, in many cases causing economical damage to German nationals in Palestine [...]" (Translation by the author).²⁹

During WWII when news came from Europe of the systematic genocide the Nazis perpetrating there, the Jewish community in Palestine disassociated itself from the ties with the German community. In 1946, the Jewish military organization *Palmach* assassinated Gotthilf Wagner, a prominent member of the Templer community and mayor of the Jaffa and Sarona Templer settlements who prevented the sale of Templer lands to Jews. The motive for the assassination was probably an attempt by Jewish leadership to take over German property and to create a situation of animosity toward the German community in Palestine. Two more Templer men were assassinated in the vicinity of Waldheim in the same year: Mitscherlich and Müller, on November 17th in Waldheim 1946.³⁰

²⁸ Translated by the author. Simon Stern, "The Selling of German Nationals' Land to Jews in Eretz-Israel in the 1930s," *Cathedra* 41 (October 1986): 200-205.

²⁹ Ibid. Translated by the author.

³⁰ In an interview I have conducted with Rafi Eitan on 4 April 2013, ex-Palmach officer Eitan described an instruction that was channeled down from Ben-Gurion, to "... kill Wagner and 2 or 3 more [Germans], so that they understand that whoever will be back [to Palestine] we the Haganah will kill him." According to Eitan, he was directly involved in this operation, assassination of Wagner and the two Germans (Mitscherlich and Müller) on November 17th in Waldheim 1946. On 1st December 2014, Eitan was interviewed by Channel 1 of Israeli Television (by Ben Shani), in which he described in detail the assassination of Mitscherlich and Müller.

April 1948: The British Mandate was still in effect in Palestine, and would expire on May 15th. But hostilities between Jews and Arabs were already in progress: street fighting in Haifa, and bitter fighting in the Jezreel Valley; in the fighting for control of the Valley, on April 17th Jewish militia took by force the two German colonies there, Waldheim and Bethlehem. During the operation two German civilians were killed, an event which compelled the British to take decisive action: they evacuated all Germans from Palestine within the next few days—by April 20th the Germans were shipped out to Cyprus (then a British Crown Colony) as refugees.³¹

The 1948 war profoundly changed the situation in Palestine: The Jewish population gained independence and control over much of the land west of the Jordan River, and the Germans in Palestine found themselves deported to other countries; in the harsh events of the war, both the German settlers of Wilhelma and the Jewish settlers of Atarot became refugees: Atarot settlers lost their homes as the settlement fell in the fierce fighting between Jews and Arabs and were ordered to evacuate (as a strategic decision) to Jerusalem. The Germans of Wilhelma were forced to leave their homes as the British initiated on April 1948 a deportation of all Germans from Palestine.

All the German settlements in Palestine (including Wilhelma) became ghost settlements, emptied of their original German settlers.

³¹ Detailed description of the events on April 17th 1948, the taking over of the German communities of Waldheim and Bethlehem, Paul Sauer, “The Loss of the Agricultural Settlements” in Sauer, *The Holy Land Called*, 267-270; and Danny Goldman, “Waldheim, April 1948: The Warriors’ Silence and the Courage of Frankness,” in *Exiled from the Holy Land, the Loss of the Templer Settlements in Palestine and Deportation to Australia 1941-1950*, eds. Horst Blaich (Victoria B.C. Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2009), 141-177.



Fig. 7. Deportation of Wilhelma residents, July 1941. The final deportation was on April 1948. Collection of Otto Löbert, Boronia, Australia.

Thus ended the 80 years of German presence in Palestine; they started their settlement project on 1868 and ended on 1948, the first successful Western settlement in the Holy Land since the Crusaders.

The Jews who settled Atarot near Jerusalem were also very successful. In 1912 a considerable tract of land was bought from Arabs, residents of Kalandia and Bir Naballah, by Jewish settlement organizations. More transactions continued in the following years,³² and by 1914, the land was already populated by a small Jewish group.

They marketed their produce in Jerusalem, and were growing steadily in spite of great difficulties. Then came WWI and the British takeover, things began to improve for the small cooperative community. It could develop free of the constraints imposed by the previous rulers, the Ottomans. New expertise began to emerge pertinent to modern agriculture: their development was guided by Yitzhak Wilkanski, an agronomist who knew the German farmers of Wilhelma, studied their methods and applied their experience to Jewish settlements, Atarot one of them. Wilkanski advocated “mixed farming” along with dairy farming and self-sustainability.³³

³² According to Eyal Zamir and Eyal Benvenisti, *The Legal Status of Lands Acquired by Israelis Before 1948 in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, and the Hay Elyachar House, 1993), 21, their research points out 1,222 dunams owned by KKL (JNF) plus 343 dunams owned privately by Jews. According to Yosef Weitz, *The Mountain* (Tel Aviv: KKL, 1944) the total was 1,417 dunams.

³³ In 1921 Yitzhak Wilkanski founded the Institute for Natural Sciences, the Agronomic Experimental Station, a first step in the advancement of Israeli agriculture. The research station managed by Wilkanski has paved the way to founding the faculty of agriculture and the Weizmann



Fig. 8. Yitzhak Wilkanski (front) and the High Commissioner to Palestine, Sir Arthur Grenfell Wauchope, 1935, unknown photographer, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

They changed the form of the community from a cooperative to *moshav-ovdim*³⁴ in 1923, and family-owned land allotments were reduced a number of times, due to expropriations made by the British Authorities for the purpose of establishing a small airport.³⁵

Atarot British Airport was used on May 14, 1948, by the entourage of the (British) High Commissioner to Palestine, one day before the British Mandate expired. The High Commissioner (Sir Alan Cunningham), left Jerusalem via the Airport, built by the British Authorities, and flew to Haifa. The local Arabs and the Jordanian Army were waiting for that moment: the invasion of Israel by Arab armies was about to begin, only hours after Israel declared independence. Now Atarot and

Institute in Rehovot, and making the town a center of scientific research. Wilkanski managed the station for 30 years.

³⁴ A cooperative agricultural community of individual farms; the *moshav-ovdim* operates as a cooperative economy framework. The family is an independent economical unit operating as part of mutual aid protocol. Every member family in the moshav is allocated a tract of land normally used by the members for farming.

³⁵ Yossi Spanier, *The Garden of Fortitude: A Memorial to the Settlement North of Jerusalem*; Ruth Danon, *Atarot: A First Moshav in the Judean Hills*, eds. Eli Schiller and Gabriel Barkai (Jerusalem: Ariel, 2007), 89.

Neve Yaakov were the only obstacle between the Jordanian army standing-by north of Atarot and Jerusalem.³⁶

In light of the looming Arab attack on Atarot, and probably because of the British had implored Atarot, Neve Yaakov and the Etzion Bloc to evacuate,³⁷ the settlers made a decision to evacuate all the children and the elderly (May 10), and made an attempt to take over the airport of Atarot. They waited until the British left the airfield, and took it (May 14), knowing that the Arabs intend to do the same, as they were massing up on the adjacent hills.³⁸

Much to their surprise, they received orders from the high command of the *Haganah* (May 14), saying that they need to evacuate Atarot and join the settlers of Neve Yaakov, in order to create a stronger defense force, with better chances of success there.

According to Goldberger, the orders they received were “[...] evacuate in daylight on the main road to Jerusalem on foot with the women and non-combatants in the middle [of the column leading the cows [from Atarot] as Jerusalem was in need of food. Effective immediately.”³⁹ They decided to disobey these orders as they understood that if they followed them, they would be slaughtered with the cows by the locals waiting for them on the main road.

Yossi Spanier (2012) describes the action taken by Atarot defenders once they received the retreat orders:

On their leaving [the settlement] they left all the lights on, mined some of the structures, sabotaged equipment and furniture and left once it was dark (on foot avoiding [Arab] villages) toward Neve Yaakov. The next day the Arabs shelled the Moshav with cannons. As they did not encounter any resistance, [by then the settlement was already empty at that point] they entered the Moshav, looting and ruining buildings. Atarot defenders

³⁶ See a discussion by Yitzhak Levy, Netanel Lorch, Uzi Narkiss and Yaacov Salman, “The Battle for Jerusalem, 1948,” *Cathedra* 44 (June 1987): 158-190 [Heb.].

³⁷ Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2010), 99. The British advised Arab villages to do the same between January and May 1948.

³⁸ The following events concerning the fighting in Atarot and Neve Yaakov were documented by Yossef Goldenberg, Avraham Timor, Zvi Tal, Pinhas Goldwasser and others and compiled by Ruth Danon, *Atarot: A First Moshav in the Judean Hills*, 175-190.

³⁹ Goldberger in Danon, *Atarot: A First Moshav in the Judean Hills*, 175.

saw from Neve Yaakov their homes and fruits of their hard labor being burnt but were compelled to prepare for securing the road to Jerusalem (Translation by the author).⁴⁰

They reached Neve Yaakov in four hours and were immediately integrated into the defense of the settlement. On the next day (May 16), heavy fighting erupted in Neve Yaakov. The defenders suffered 4 casualties.

That evening the defenders of Neve Yaakov gathered to assess the situation. It was bad: 4 dead and many wounded, their ammunition almost depleted, communication with the Command gone, as was the food. They decided on withdrawal toward Mount Scopus near Jerusalem. At 23:00 they buried their four dead combatants, destroyed part of the weapons and ammunition, and commenced their retreat toward Mount Scopus.⁴¹

The small column of settlers made its way in the wadi, led by the brothers Michah and Shaul Luz, who knew the terrain well. They carried the wounded on improvised stretchers; it was dawn when they reached Mount Scopus, not before Michah Luz was injured by a land mine. The two settlements were lost.

Below is Paul Sauer's (1991) account on the evacuation of the Templers from Palestine on April 1948:

The [Jewish] raid on Waldheim was the signal for the British to complete the evacuation of the perimeter settlements immediately and to take the [German] internees to safety.⁴² Convoys of trucks [...] transported the internees from Wilhelma as they had previously done in Waldheim. [...] the former inmates of the Wilhelma camp were taken to Jaffa [...] on 20th April 1948. [...] the 'Empire Comfort', a converted corvette, [...] awaited them there. The ship set course for Haifa. [...] where chaos reigned. There was constant shooting, bullets whizzed over the ship. [...] everyone was relieved when the ship finally left port around 5:00 p.m. Not long

⁴⁰ Translated by the author.

⁴¹ History Dept., *Chronicles of the War of Independence* (Tel Aviv: Ma'arakhot, 1978), 199.

⁴² The perimeter settlements were four: Sarona, Wilhelma, Waldheim and Betlehem; they were so called for the fence that surrounded the houses area. They were actually detention camps set by the British as the Templers were considered Enemy subjects even in 1948, 3 years after the War.

afterwards Jewish forces took the port. On the evening of the 22nd, [...] the 'Empire Comfort' anchored at the port of Famagusta, on the island of Cyprus.⁴³

Wilhelma became a ghost settlement.



Fig. 9. Templers disembarking from the "Empire comfort" at Famagusta Port, The Albert Blaich archive (Courtesy of Horst Blaich).

The survivors from Neve Yaakov marched 12 km in the dark until they reached the Hadassa hospital on Mount Scopus. The Haganah members on duty there detected them, hospitalized the wounded, gathered their weapons, a considerable addition to the local arsenal. They did a headcount and reached the same number as the headcount before leaving Neve Yaakov: 164 souls.⁴⁴

Most of the settlers left Mount Scopus shortly after arrival (May 18), while some remained and joined the defense of the mountain, while the wounded were still hospitalized in *Hadassah* hospital on site. During the second temporary truce (starting July 19, 1948), they were transferred to Jaffa, where they were housed

⁴³ Sauer, *The Holy Land Called*, 270.

⁴⁴ Account of Pinhas Goldwasser, IDF Archive 263 922/1975 as compiled by Danon, *Atarot: A First Moshav in the Judean Hills*, 190.

temporarily. They formed an organization and started negotiations with the settling bodies. One of the options was Wilhelma, which they willingly accepted.

More Jewish refugees joined the Atarot Re-settling Project on Wilhelma Lands: Be'erot Yitzhak, Nehalim, and She'ar Yashuv

She'ar Yashuv (est. Feb. 1940) was part of the "Usishkin Fortresses,"⁴⁵ and heavily bombarded by Syrian artillery in the 1948 War, to a degree that those remaining in the settlement made a decision to abandon it (late 1948) once the fighting subsided and the Armistice Agreements were still in negotiation. Part of the families of She'ar Yashuv (12 Families) were absorbed by Bnei Atarot and the rest were settled elsewhere. Minutes from the Bnei Atarot general meeting from November 1948 show a decision to accept the "12 candidates" as members.⁴⁶

Moshav Nehalim was established in the Northern Galilee (1943), also as part of the Usishkin Fortresses. Only a few years later, in the War of 1948, the Moshav suffered heavy damage. Women and children were evacuated to Haifa; as the devastation was beyond repair, the remaining members decided to abandon.⁴⁷ Once the War was over, the settling bodies suggested Wilhelma as an alternative settlement spot. They received a considerable tract of land, part of Wilhelma farming lands. They were joined by some of Neve Yaakov refugees. Today the lands of Old Nehalim are settled by Kibbutz Hagoshrim.

⁴⁵ 1939-1944 a group of settlements in the northern part of the Galilee were established, among them She'ar Yashuv and Nehalim. They were called "Usishkin Fortresses" to honor the vision of their establishment by Menahem Usishkin, who headed the Jewish National Fund at the time.

⁴⁶ Collection of Ruth Danon, Bnei Atarot Archive, *Minutes from Benei A'ta'rot general meeting*, November 3, 1948.

⁴⁷ To their plight caused by the war, one must add also the hostile relations between them and the other Jewish settlement in their vicinity. See Zvi Galilee, "The First Evacuation of a Settlement by Jews," in *The Common Sense in the Madness* blog. Accessed December 17, 2022 <http://www.zeevgalili.com/2004/09/315>.

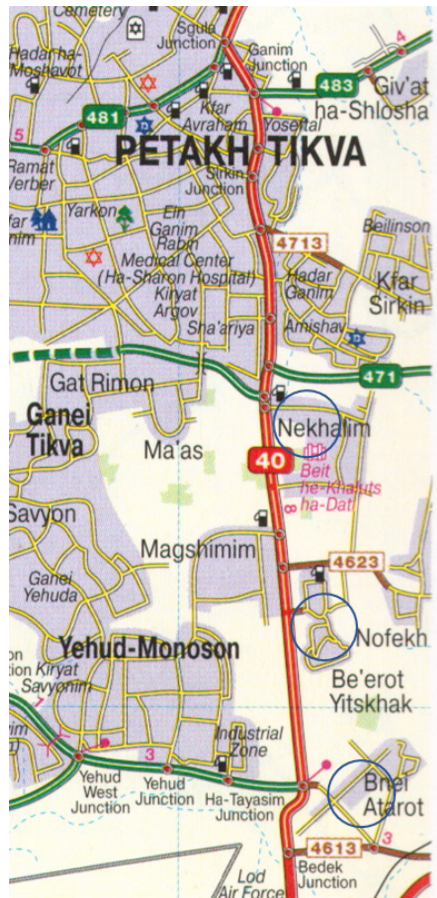


Fig. 10. Map of Bnei Atarot and vicinity (detail), *Road Atlas*, Mapa GIS Department (Elena Belinki Cartographic editor, 2006), 26. Road 40 is aligned South to North and east of it the three settlements: Bnei Atarot, Be'erot Yitzhak and Nekhalim. All are on Wilhelma Lands.

Be'erot Yitzhak was a kibbutz established in 1943 5 km southeast of Gaza. In May 1948 the Egyptian Army invaded the region, and its artillery and air force heavily bombarded the settlement. The settlement did not fall; the defenders pushed the Egyptian military away, with assistance from the *Negev* Brigade of IDF. However, the damage was very heavy, and, "[...] the defenders' losses were 17 dead, 15 wounded and heavy damage to the settlement."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ History Dept., *Chronicles of the War of Independence*, 277.



Fig. 11. The water tower of Be'erot Yitzhak after the Egyptian bombardment. Photo by the author, 2014. The structure still stands, as a memorial to the events in 1948 there.

The members debated whether to abandon or to rehabilitate the settlement, and finally decided on leaving. They were offered an alternative location on the farming lands of Wilhelma, built new houses and besides farming, they developed other sources of income. Nothing remained of the Kibbutz near Gaza, except for the water tower that still stands as a memorial to Old Be'erot Yitzhak. The land remained in Israeli hands since and are now cultivated by Kibbutz Alumim and Kibbutz Nahal-Oz.

The Templers of Wilhelma and all the others from the Templer Colonies still present in Palestine were evacuated to Cyprus, and arrived at the port of Famagusta on April 22nd. Richard Eppinger, one of the evacuees, described in detail what followed once they disembarked, and became detainees of the British on Cyprus soil.

We sighted Cyprus early in the morning on 22 April [...] Adjoining the old Byzantine fortress with its backdrop of ancient churches and chapels from the time of the Crusaders.

In a camp called 'Golden Sands' we found many small tents [...] to the right of the paved road stood large 'Indian tents' [...] this was the camp of the German POWs [who also erected the camp for the evacuees next door; author's note].⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Richard Otto Eppinger, "The Cyprus Group 1948-1949," in *Exiled from the Holy Land*, eds. Horst Blaich (Victoria B.C. Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2009), 65.



Fig. 12. Templer's refugee camp in Famagusta, The Albert Blaich Family Archive (Courtesy of Horst Blaich). In the background the larger tents of the German POW camp.

The Templers stayed in Cyprus until they left for Australia and Germany between 1948 and 1949. Arriving in Australia, they were immediately accommodated by the Temple Society of Australia in temporary housing. Sauer (1991) labeled it “[...] a remarkable organizational and especially human achievement which does the Templers in Australia much credit.”⁵⁰



Fig. 13. Camp 3 Tatura, Date and photographer unknown, *75 Years of Templers in Australia*, Doris Frank, Renate Weber editors, (Bentleigh, Vic.: Temple Society of Australia, 2016), 29.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Sauer, *The Holy Land Called*, 295.

⁵¹ The camp housed those Templers who were deported in 1941, and closed on Spring 1947. The Cyprus group was accommodated by the Templers who were released from Tatura in 1947, and others.

Conclusion

April 17th marks the end of the Templer presence in the Holy Land; and with it, 80 years of Templers - Jewish relations sharing the same piece of land. These relations knew many fluctuations and what started as a partnership and shared destiny ended up, following WWII with feelings of bitterness and anger of the Germans toward the British and the Jews in Palestine. The Germans lost everything they had, became refugees and started all over again in Australia and Germany. Israel was declared a State on May 1948, and two years later the Israeli Government issued the *German Assets Act* expropriating all secular German Property in Israel and nationalizing it. After long and exhausting negotiations between Israel, Germany and Australia (and representatives of the Templer community), the negotiating sides agreed on compensations for the Lost German property, paid to Australia and Germany proportionately according to the number of Templers in each of these countries.

With the signing of the Armistice Agreement between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan on April 1949, the Old Atarot settlement and airstrip became Jordanian territory. The Jordanians expanded the airstrip area onto the lands of Old Atarot—an empty area containing but ruins of the settlement. As the new construction also covered the Jewish cemetery, the Jordanian authorities removed the headstones and human remains of those buried there and dumped them some distance away.⁵²

Old Atarot came back under Israeli control in June 1967 (the Six Day War). Members of the old settlement started a search on premises for graves and other remnants. On June 1969, after a long inquiry, the search team from Bnei Atarot discovered the human remains. Michah Luz, active in the recovery team, told *Maariv* (Israeli newspaper) that the cemetery contained, in addition to other graves, six graves of Haganah members: 5 that fell in the riots of 1936-39 and one of Shabtai Luzinski, from Old Atarot, a Jewish “illegal immigration” activist, who

⁵² Hagai Hoberman, “The Airport of Atarot – chronicles of an Israeli Airport,” in *Shomron and Binyamin vol. 2, research in Historical Geography*, eds. Zeev Erlich (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1991) 126-133. The article was re-published in *Marqī'a Shhaqim*, Aviation History in Israel, November 2021.

died in Europe and laid to rest in Atarot. Luzinski was Michah Luz's father.⁵³ Veterans of Atarot later decided to leave them were found, put a marker on the spot, and had the IDF chief Rabbi, general Goren, sanctify the location, as among the 18 bodies were 5 Haganah members. The location was declared a military mass grave.⁵⁴ The four Jewish combatants who were killed during fighting in 1948 and temporarily buried in Neve Yaakov were laid to rest in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl, Jerusalem, in 1949, following the armistice agreement between Israel and Jordan (same year).⁵⁵



Fig. 14. “Guardians of the Place” memorial in Old Atarot, Photo by Ori, *Ma’a’leh Hayezirah*, 2011. Leah Golowizki⁵⁶ wrote the opening text on the memorial: “Guardians of the Place / Only you remained watching and guarding / On the soil that was cleared of rocks with your hands / That you bettered with your sweat and blood.” (Translation by the author). The rest of the text tells the story of the recovery of the remains, the last battle of Neve Yaakov and establishing the memory of the pioneers and 42 combatants that fell in the “Atarot Bloc” and in defense of Jerusalem.

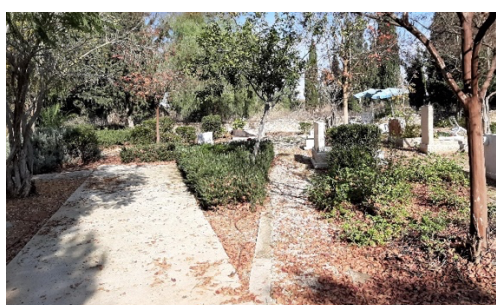
⁵³ Mordechai Elkan, “18 Bodies Were Found That Were Originally from the Cemetery of Atarot,” *Ma’ariv*, June 16, 1969, 8.

⁵⁴ Ruth Danon, mail message to author, January 2023.

⁵⁵ Spanier et al, *Gan Hagvura: in Memory of the Settlement North of Jerusalem*, (Atarot: the Association for Atarot Legacy, 2012).

⁵⁶ Leah Golowizki (1895-1978), one of the settlers of Old Atarot, whose husband was killed in the riots of 1936. She was evacuated from Old Atarot April 1948 and settled in Nahalal. Biodata from *Zemereshet* <https://www.zemereshet.co.il/m/artist.asp?id=3497>, accessed January 22, 2023.

Next to the cemetery of Bnei Atarot there is a walled empty lot that used to be the German cemetery of Wilhelma. That cemetery was vacated of headstones and human remains and re-interred at the Templer Cemetery in Jerusalem. Currently in Bnei Atarot, formerly Wilhelma, there are two cemeteries, the German one empty.



Figs. 15 and 16. Wall of the German cemetery as seen from the Jewish cemetery of Bnei Atarot. Right: relics of the entrance to the German empty cemetery. Images by the author, January 2023.

On Sep. 10, 1952, the Governments of Israel and Western Germany signed an agreement (also known as the Luxemburg Agreement), concerning reparations to the State of Israel against Jewish property and the heavy burden of absorbing Jewish refugees. Germany Paid the State of Israel over the years (1953-1965) about 3 billion DM.

An integral part of that agreement dealt with compensating Germany for German Secular Property in Israel. Israel agreed (in a number of documents attached to the main reparations agreement) to pay Germany for the Templers' lost Property in Israel.

Only in July 1962 Germany and Israel reached an agreement under the mediation of Prof. Sørensen, an agreed upon Danish mediator. Yossi Katz detailed the

financial terms: “The amount of compensation that Sørensen ruled was 54 million DM, equal to 4.82 million British pounds”; Rutland (2005) mentions 6,057,885 Pound Sterling as the “final package.”⁵⁷

And some post-memory views: In the 1970s, Israeli scholars begun to publish researches regarding the history of the Templers’ settlement in the Holy Land. The reason was a realization that the history of the Templer settlement was, and still is, an important part of the Settlement History of the Jewish colonies. The Templer phenomenon was significantly influential for Jewish settlement, architecture, agriculture, and many other aspects. Carmel concluded his book with the note that,

[...] no doubt that the pioneering enterprise of the Templers and their success actually encouraged the “Return to Zion” Movement of Jews by proving that European settlement of the Holy Land is possible. That way, the Jews learned willingly from the earlier experience of the Templers, who were close to them culturally and in mentality, and for that reason the Templer settlement served as a primary subject especially for the Jews.⁵⁸

With this realization came respect for remnants left in Israel by the Templers, primarily the buildings. Israeli architects and scholars developed ties with Templers in Germany and Australia, which turned into long lasting friendships. When the question of preserving the Templer colonies came up, the history-minded Templers in Australia and Germany willingly cooperated with Israeli individuals and official bodies active in preserving the Templers’ heritage in Israel. The Templers archives in Germany and Australia were opened for study as were family archives. Groups of Tempelrs visit Israel on a regular basis, to show respect for the Templers cemeteries, help maintaining them, and visiting the old colonies

⁵⁷ Yossi Katz, “Who owns the German Colonies? German Assets Law and Compensation of the Templers for Their Property in Israel,” in *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* (Studies in Israeli and modern Jewish society) 17 (2007): 431-464; Suzan Rutland, “Buying out of the Matter: Australia’s Role in Restitution for Templer Property in Israel,” *Journal of Israeli History* 24, no. 1 (March 2005): 135-154.

⁵⁸ Translated by the author. Carmel, *The German Settlement in the Holy Land by the end of the Ottoman Era, its Political, Local and International Problems*, 228.

and the houses their forebears built with so much optimism, faith and hope, mirrored by the Jewish settlers in the Holy Land.

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Keywords: Israel, Palestine, British Mandate, 1948 War, Templers, Settlement History, Wilhelma, Atarot, Neve Yaakov

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