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VIEW #4
"ALLAH AND THE MACHINES":
ON THE ELECTRIFICATION OF THE PROMISED LAND

Ita Heinze-Greenberg

Ex Oriente Lux

In 1923, two ships approached the Promised Land.

In the South Pacific, a luxury yacht sets sail westward. The owners are two fugitives from civilization—a German-American and an Austrian—who had spent twenty-one years in complete seclusion. Curiosity about the interim development of Europe is billowing their sails. It turns out that Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg don't have to steer their boat on to Trieste, Venice, or Marseille, but can lower the sails already in Haifa. The city displays itself as a magnificent crystallization of Western progress.

Moving in the opposite direction, setting sail out of Trieste, the *Semiramis* is headed toward the Levant. Despite the high-sounding name—reminiscent of the founder of Babylon—this was a common passenger and cargo steamer which operated in great numbers in the Mediterranean. Being the smallest and at the same time oldest boat in the fleet of the Lloyd-Triestino, it lived up to its name solely due to the linguistic babel prevailing on board. Dutch passenger Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld reported home:

I share my cabin with a Frenchman, an Englishman and a Syrian. How many languages are spoken here is something that cannot be determined. There are Germans, English, French, Russians, Swiss, Turks, Czechs, Italians, Palestinians, Americans and who knows what else. I even believe a Dutchman! And thus we all travel together across this great big sea.¹

The first impression of the two returnees to civilization is similarly cosmopolitan when they disembark in Haifa, which they find “thronged with people from all parts of the world. Brilliant Oriental robes mingled with the sober costumes of the Occident, but the latter predominated. There were many Chinese, Persians and Arabs in the

¹ Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld, Letter to his wife Ellen, on board the *Semiramis*, 25 February 1923,

Het Nieuwe Instituut (HNI), Rotterdam, Wijdeveld Archive (WIJD) 129.

streets, but the city itself seemed thoroughly European. One might easily imagine himself in some Italian port.”² Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg later enthusiastically learn that the country’s leading architect is from Vienna. With the help of a staff of one hundred young graduates from technical colleges in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, he has managed a successful know-how transfer to the east coast of the Mediterranean:³ Europe in Palestine!

Wijdeveld from Amsterdam did not share this enthusiasm. He left the ship in Alexandria together with his travel companions Erich and Luise Mendelsohn. Walking through the city, he sharply polemicized the Western influence on the Egyptian port metropolis: “European culture has swept away all old, great, unconscious beauty. The harbor buildings present themselves in a disgusting chaos of styles, testifying to a lack of style. Everything old is overgrown by the power of the cultureless whites.”⁴ His indignation reached its climax in Tel Aviv, where the trio continued to by train. Wijdeveld was not able to discover anything in this only fourteen-year-young city other than a despicable spawn of Western civilization. And yet, Wijdeveld sang ecstatic hymns about the neighboring ancient Arab Jaffa. He could not stop praising “the organic coalescence of walls and masses, of steps and stairs, of vaults and arches, of roofs and streets, of corners and points, of curves and entrances, of light and shadow.”⁵

Water Projections

Ships are vehicles of utopia; the wide sea is a projection surface for plans and mind games. Poetry and truth sometimes mingle like water and sky on the horizon. Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg are literary figures sent out by the father of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, on a ship’s voyage into the future. Wrapped in a programmatic novel, his visions for a Palestine built under Jewish control

² Theodor Herzl, *Old New Land*, trans. Lotta Levensohn (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997; originally published in German under *Altneuland* by Hermann Seemann Nachfolger, Leipzig, 1902), 68.

³ Herzl, *Old New Land*, 206.

⁴ Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld, Letter to his wife Ellen, from the train between the Suez Canal and Jaffa, 27 February 1923, HNI WIJD 129.

⁵ Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld, Letter to his wife Ellen, Nazareth, 8 March 1923, HNI WIJD 129.

in 1923 were based on economic, social, and technical knowledge, which at the time of the novel's publication in 1902 was considered state-of-the-art.

Wijdeveld and the Mendelsohn couple are historical persons. They were welcomed in Trieste—according to well-documented evidence—by representatives of the Zionist organization and led on board the *Semiramis*.⁶ The initiator of their passage was the engineer Pinhas Rutenberg, who pursued the electrification of Palestine by using the capacities of first-rate architects from Europe. Even though the trio—in contrast to Herzl's protagonists—were enthusiastic about an unspoiled authentic “Orient,” the mission of their journey was to promote European technology transfer. Their client planned nothing less than the Industrial Revolution for a country which was still in an agrarian state. Rutenberg was considered a man of action with a turbulent past. Trained as a civil engineer with an expertise in hydraulic engineering, he gained much experience in industrial management as an executive in the huge Putilov ammunition factory in St. Petersburg. Before stepping onto the Zionist stage he took part in the 1905 Russian revolution, after which he went into exile in Italy. He returned to Russia in 1917 and again played a leading role in the revolutionary activities as a deputy-governor of Petrograd under the short-lived Kerensky regime of the Mensheviks. Upon its demise, Rutenberg was imprisoned by the Bolsheviks for several months. Following his release, he immigrated to Palestine—with the next revolution on his mind.⁷

Herzl had assigned the water management sector a leading role for the future development of the country. In his novel, he makes Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg understand that “the real founders of ‘Old New Land’ [...] were the hydraulic engineers. There was everything in having swamps drained, the arid tracts irrigated, and a system of power supply installed.”⁸ It is well known that Herzl drew on the expertise of specialists for his vision of the future: Franz Oppenheimer for the theoretical fundamentals of the cooperative

⁶ Wijdeveld, Letter to his wife Ellen, on board the *Semiramis*, 1923.

⁷ Biographical data on Pinhas Rutenberg drawn from Eli Shaltiel, *Pinhas Rutenberg 1879–1942: Life*

and *Times*, 2 vols (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990) [in Hebrew].

⁸ Herzl, *Old New Land*, 238.

system, Oskar Marmorek for urban planning and architectural topics, and Oskar's brother Alexander Marmorek for the medical care of *Altneuland's* new society. For irrigation issues he listened to Selig Soskin. Herzl gave them all roles in his novel using altered names. For the crucial topic of electricity generation from hydropower, he was advised by a fellow Zionist from the very start: electrical engineer Joseph Seidener. The director of a large Viennese company was already on the list of participants of the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, and the following year he was amongst a small group of confidants who accompanied Herzl on his first and only trip to Palestine. At the meeting with Wilhelm II in Jerusalem, Herzl succeeded in involving Seidener in the conversation. He later noted in his diary that the German Emperor had expressed a keen interest in his remarks on the exploitation of the Jordan water forces and the construction of dams.⁹ But this glimmer of hope did not turn into the longed-for glimmer of light. The monarch's patronage of the Zionist project ran counter to the concrete interests of German-Turkish policy.

Energy Flows

In Herzl's *Altneuland*, Seidener's plans are fully realized. Energy is ubiquitous, electricity is available in every corner of the country, and rail transport operates with electrically powered engines. Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg cross the Sea of Galilee on electric barques, and in Haifa they raise their eyes in astonishment as aerial tramways modeled on Barmen-Elberfeld prototypes glide overhead. When the first Christmas tree lit up with Edison bulbs causes a sensation in Manhattan at the end of the nineteenth century, Herzl is eager to outdo that effect in Haifa's streets every evening through multiple rows of illuminated trees. The palms that line the boulevards "served a double purpose. They gave shade by day, and at night shed light from electric lamps which hung from them like enormous glass fruits."¹⁰ The energy supply of *Altneuland* is provided by various electric companies, however, most of the power is drawn "from

⁹ Theodor Herzl, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, 7 vols, eds. Alex Bein et al (Berlin/Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen

Verlag, 1983–1996), vol. 2, 894, note 338; 690.

¹⁰ Herzl, *Old New Land*, 61.

the brooks of the Hermon and the Lebanon, or from the Dead Sea Canal.”¹¹ Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg visit the two main facilities. The Dead Sea power station is spectacular: it is fed by water which was “led hither through tunnels from the Mediterranean, rushing down to the depths.” The Jordan power station also captivates with futuristic technology. Dr. Löwenberg “was especially taken with the central electric station near the administration building. Its walls were covered with buttons, numbers and little tables. It reminded [him] of a visit he had once paid to a telephone exchange.”¹²

Whether Rutenberg actually read *Altneuland* is uncertain, but he knew Herzl’s advisor for hydroelectric energy generation personally. Seidener, like himself, came from the Ukraine and they shared the same professional background and interests. The electrification of Palestine was the subject of their correspondence, and the twenty-three-page “Denkschrift zur Frage der Versorgung Palästinas mit elektrischer Kraft”¹³ [memorandum on the supply of electric power to Palestine], written by Seidener in 1919, was most certainly known to Rutenberg. Seidener’s meticulously elaborated electrification plan was mainly based on exploiting the water power of the Jordan River. It proposed the construction of three hydroelectric power plants along the river, together with two additional steam power stations. Seidener still developed the memorandum from Vienna. Due to the growing chances of its implementation, he emigrated to Palestine the following year. The electrification of the country was indeed to be realized shortly afterward, but without Seidener’s participation or credit.¹⁴ With Rutenberg a man had come onto the scene who, in addition to possessing a qualified technical engineering education, was able to demonstrate other qualities that were needed to realize such a project in such a complex political context: profound insights into the organizational structures of huge production facilities coupled with ingenious, and sometimes reckless, tactical and assertive powers.

¹¹ Herzl, *Old New Land*, 120.

¹² Herzl, *Old New Land*, 239.

¹³ Joseph Seidener, *Denkschrift zur Frage der Versorgung Palästinas mit elektrischer Kraft*, Wien, 1919, typescript, Central Zionist Archives A 112/11.

¹⁴ Interview by the author with Naftali Rostowsky, nephew of Joseph Seidener and later employee in Erich Mendelsohn’s Jerusalem office, Tel Aviv, March 1981.

With regard to the validity and recognition of the performance of others, he often showed—to put it mildly—little sensitivity. Rutenberg’s undoubtedly enormous achievements in terms of the country’s industrialization were based on the rigorous pursuit of his own interests in serving Zionism. He thus placed this big goal over the individual interests and efforts of other people whose achievements were nothing but useful means for him to actually accomplish his own goals and realize his own ambitious intentions. This also applied to the architects he hired.¹⁵

However, such experiences were far removed from the high spirits with which the passengers of the *Semiramis* dedicated themselves to the exploration of the country and the mission of their promising journey. Rutenberg had visited Mendelsohn in his Berlin office in late January 1923 in order to win him over for the planning of a dam, a power plant, and a settlement on the Jordan River, and some additional minor power stations. Apart from the prospect of a large commission in times of economic crisis and galloping inflation in Germany, Mendelsohn was attracted by the Zionist commitment because it was “a far-reaching project, on which the whole problem of the incipient Jewish state naturally hangs.”¹⁶ Mendelsohn had written all this to his Dutch architect friend Wijdeveld and concluded with the question of whether he also wanted to come along. Aside from tourist attractions, the travel program included first and foremost the inspection of the building sites for the future power plants.

“Allah and the Machines”

The importance of the Rutenberg project for the development of the country cannot be overestimated. With the expansion of electric power supply, the industrialization of Palestine was initiated

¹⁵ For further information, see also: Ita Heinze-Greenberg, Gilbert Herbert, and Silvina Sosnovsky, *In Search of Excellence: The Architecture and Building Projects of the Electric Industry in the Land of Israel 1921–1942* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2003); Gilbert Herbert, “Clash of Titans: Rutenberg, Mendelsohn, and the Problem of Client-Architect

Relationships,” in *The Collaborators: Interactions in the Architectural Design Process*, eds. Gilbert Herbert and Mark Donchin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 117–146.

¹⁶ Erich Mendelsohn, Letter to Hendricus Th. Wijdeveld, Berlin, 2 February 1923, Kunstbibliothek Berlin, Mendelsohn Archive KB B IV 7.2.

and the foundations for the transformation of a hitherto artisanal-agricultural society into an industrialized country were laid. It was a preprogrammed fact that this would be accompanied by a gradual change and partial destruction of the Orient. However, the harshest criticism of the 'Jewish' project came not, as one might suspect, from the long-established Arab population, but from members of the British Mandate government. Although Whitechapel had granted the concession to Rutenberg, the entire electrification project was assessed with extreme skepticism in Jerusalem.

When Ronald Storrs took up his post as Governor of Jerusalem after the British conquest of the city in 1917, he is reported to have responded to the plans of his Ottoman predecessor, to lay a tramline through the Old City, by saying "Only over my dead body!"¹⁷ His reaction, which led to the annulment of the rail project, was not based solely on personal liking or disliking but corresponded to the colonial attitude of British politics. The mandate over Palestine, which Britain took on de facto after the victory over the Turks and which was officially ratified by the League of Nations in 1922, was based on a "doctrine of trusteeship," which was committed to administering for the benefit of the local population. The guiding principle according to which all official acts, especially architectural and urban planning, were aligned can be summed up by the formula "in the spirit of the place." With a paternalistic stance, the British decided against a Europeanization of the country in favor of preserving the traditional image of the picturesque "Orient." Despite all true fascination and serious engagement with the Orient, this attitude led to a policy of "development of underdevelopment."¹⁸ Edward Said was later to speak of the 'orientalization' of the Orient by the imperialistic Occident. He harshly criticized the fact that the Orient was confined to the image of the primal, pre-industrial, and mysteriously exotic East, and that it was not granted development or progress.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ron Fuchs and Gilbert Herbert, "A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem: British Architecture in Mandate-Era Palestine," in *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (Westport, CT/London: Praeger, 2001), 87.

¹⁸ Fuchs and Herbert, "A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem: British Architecture in Mandate-Era Palestine," 85.

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London/Henley: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1978).

Storrs's Jerusalem advisor on urban, architectural, and artistic issues was Charles Robert Ashbee, the doyen of the British Arts and Crafts movement. During his four years in Jerusalem, from 1918 to the beginning of 1923, he was particularly involved in the preservation and reconstruction of historical buildings and ensembles in the Old City. In addition, he drew up an inventory of the regional handicrafts as a basis for the sensible establishment and expansion of the country "for the benefit of the local population."²⁰ While at home in England, Ashbee's resistance to the advancing industrialization sometimes resembled a struggle against windmills; he had withdrawn from the front line. His new field of operation in Palestine offered him exactly what he had always dreamed of: an agrarian, pre-industrialized country the construction and development of which might still avoid the mistakes of industrialization.

Wijdeveld and the Mendelsohns missed Ashbee in Jerusalem by only a few weeks. His tirades against the buildings erected in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Old City of Jerusalem were as passionate as Wijdeveld's complaints about Tel Aviv: "[...] we notice how the ancient Jerusalem is all but obliterated; we see the once golden dome no longer, we see a bastard Florence, a bastard Nuremberg, a bastard Moscow, an imitation Lourdes, a Bavarian suburb and an imitation Oxford."²¹ For Ashbee, the evils of European influence lay mainly in commercialization and industrialization. The "corrosive influences of mechanical power"²² had sat opposite him on August 26, 1922, embodied in the very same Pinhas Rutenberg. Ashbee had quickly steered the conversation toward his favorite topic—mechanization and industrialization. In Ashbee's personal records, this reads—not without a certain admiration for Rutenberg—as follows:

²⁰ Fuchs and Herbert, "A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem: British Architecture in Mandate-Era Palestine," 88. See also: Inbal Ben-Ascher Gitler, "C.R. Ashbee's Jerusalem Years: Arts and Crafts, Orientalism and British Regionalism," *ASSAPH: Studies in Art History* 5 (2000), 29–52.

²¹ Charles Robert Ashbee, *Report on the Arts and Crafts of Jerusalem and District*, 1918, quoted in Fuchs and Herbert, "A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem: British Architecture in Mandate-Era Palestine," 88.

²² Charles Robert Ashbee, *A Palestine Notebook 1918–1923* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1923), 252.

If I believed in the capacity of the Russian Jew to carry a great scheme consistently through I should believe in Rutenberg. He is a powerful face, a face with fury in it, a touch of Beethoven, with the cynicism of Mephisto. Mephisto is always a bit operative. We plunged right into his great scheme. No, he had not got his money yet, but he would get it. That I believe, because he is a conjurer. And then having got it what would he do with it? “Create power, of course.” “And having established your power, what are you going to do with it?” “Supply it to those who want it.” “Electric light for government officials? A somewhat limited market.” “And factories.” “Factories for what?” “Oh, all sorts of things.” “So you really think you are going to make an industrial country out of Palestine?”²³

Ashbee himself did not stop at the question, but dedicated a chapter to the answer in his *Palestine Notebook* under the wonderful title “Allah and the Machines.” The final word on the issue is handed over to his fictional interlocutor, Shaikh Isma’il: “The future of the West may lie with the machines, but it will not be the future of Palestine.”²⁴

“Too European”

Herzl could not foresee the British engagement in Palestine but he gave the Arab side a voice which is contrary to Ashbee’s view: In Haifa, Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg meet Reschid Bey, “a handsome man of thirty-five [...]. He wore dark European clothing and the red fez. His salute to them was the Oriental gesture which signifies lifting and kissing the dust.” The gesture was followed by a greeting in perfect German with a “slight northern accent.” Herzl’s astonished protagonists are enlightened: “He studied in Berlin. [...] His father was among the first to understand the beneficent character of the Jewish immigration, and enriched himself, because he kept pace with our economic progress.”²⁵

²³ Ashbee, *A Palestine Notebook 1918–1923*, 211f.

²⁵ Herzl, *Old New Land*, 68–69.

²⁴ Ashbee, *A Palestine Notebook 1918–1923*, 257.

Mendelsohn and Wijdeveld's journey to the Orient ended with an extended stay in Palestine of five to six days. Under Rutenberg's massive pressure, designs for the power stations in Haifa and Naharayim had to be produced on site, that is, directly in his Tel Aviv office. The latter remained a rough sketch, quickly thrown onto paper. For the Haifa power station, Mendelsohn produced a complete set of construction drawings in cooperation with Wijdeveld. The design is the result of productive German-Dutch relations in its practical as well as formal aspects. The stylistic influences of De Stijl and the Amsterdam School on Mendelsohn's contemporary works in Germany—Meyer-Kaufmann-Textilwerke, Seidenhaus Weichmann, and Villa Sternefeld—were further developed here in direct dialogue with his Dutch colleague. In addition, the project is the outcome of what the eye and spirit had received in the weeks between Trieste and Jerusalem. It is a condensation of the Mediterranean voyage which seeks to dissolve the ambivalence between 'oriental romanticism' and 'occidental progress' in a purified synthesis of local traditions and Western European avant-garde. Rutenberg withdrew from the contract with Mendelsohn and involved several other architects. The final plans were drawn and executed by his own building office. Rutenberg justified his decision by quoting the British authorities who had apparently rejected Mendelsohn's draft as being "too European."²⁶

Epilogue

On their way back to Europe, the Mendelsohns and Wijdeveld made a touristic stopover in Egypt. On the 21st of March they celebrated Erich Mendelsohn's birthday in the garden of the Luxor Hotel, built in 1877 by John Mason Cook (the son and business partner of British tourism pioneer Thomas Cook) on the banks of the Nile in the immediate vicinity of the temple complex. The palm trees under which Mendelsohn blew out the thirty-six candles on

²⁶ Erich Mendelsohn, "Own Work," lecture in Liverpool (1933) and Cambridge (1934), typescript, Kunstbibliothek Berlin, Mendelsohn Archive KB B

IV 1. See also: Ita Heinze-Greenberg, *Europa in Palästina: Die Architekten des zionistischen Projekts 1902 bis 1923* (Zürich: gta Verlag, 2011), 217.

a cake served by Sudanese waiters had already provided shade for the great writer of fiction Karl May on his journey through Upper Egypt twenty-four years earlier.²⁷

27 Luise Mendelsohn, *My Life in a Changing World*, San Francisco without year, 131, unpublished manuscript, author's collection. For details on the his-

tory of the Hotel Luxor, see: Elaine Denby, *Grand Hotels: Reality and Illusion* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 194.

Table of Events

- 1897 First Zionist Congress in Basel organized by Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) with hydraulic engineer Joseph Seidener (1860–1942) among the participants
- 1898 Journey of Herzl to Palestine; Seidener is one of the five Zionist delegates; presentation of his electrification program to the German Emperor Wilhelm II in Jerusalem
- 1902 Publication of Herzl’s novel *Altneuland* [Old New Land], a utopian prospect imagining a Palestine under Jewish control in the year 1923
- 1905/1917 Pinhas Rutenberg (1879–1942) plays important roles in both Russian revolutions
- 1918 Victory of Britain over Turkish arms; Charles Robert Ashbee (1863–1942) becomes Artistic Advisor to the Governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs
- 1919 Rutenberg immigrates to Palestine; publication of Seidener’s “Denkschrift zur Frage der Versorgung Palästinas mit elektrischer Kraft” [memorandum on the supply of electric power to Palestine]; registration of Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953) in the list of engineers willing to immigrate to Palestine issued by the Zionist Organization
- 1920 Seidener immigrates to Palestine
- 1921 [September 21] Award of a seventy-year concession to Rutenberg by the British government to exploit the waters of the Jordan and Yarmuk Rivers
- 1922 Building of the first diesel power station in Tel Aviv starts
[August 22] Meeting between Rutenberg and Ashbee in Jerusalem
- 1923 [Beginning of the year] Ashbee leaves Jerusalem and returns to England
[Late January] Meeting of Rutenberg with

- Mendelsohn in Berlin: assignment to design a dam and a power plant with a settlement next to the Jordan River as well as several additional power stations
- [February 16] Decisive financial support of the Rutenberg scheme through a 5,000,000 US dollar donation by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild
- [February 21–March 21] Journey of Erich Mendelsohn to Palestine, accompanied by his wife Luise and the Dutch architect Hendricus Th. Wijdeveld (1885–1987); drawings for a power station in Haifa, first visionary sketch of a Jordan power plant by Mendelsohn;
- [March 29] Foundation of the Palestine Electric Corporation (P.E.C.) by Rutenberg
- [Spring] Fictional arrival of Mr. Kingscourt and Dr. Löwenberg to *Altneuland*
- [June 23] Power station in Tel Aviv (design by Josef Berlin) goes online; publication of Ashbee's *Palestine Notebook*
- 1925 [June 25] Opening of diesel engine power stations in Haifa (final design by the P.E.C. building office) and Tiberias (final design by Alexander Baerwald);
- 1927 Beginning of ground work in Naharayim; design of power plant by Benjamin Orell (1892–1969)
- 1932 Completion of construction work at the hydro-electric power plant in Naharayim
- 1933 [June 6] Festive opening of the Naharayim power plant in the presence of Rutenberg, King Abdallah of Transjordan, and the British High Commissioner, Sir Arthur Wauchope
- 1948 [May 15] Seizure of Naharayim power plant by Iraqi forces followed by the opening of the dams by Israeli forces to prevent Iraqi tanks from crossing the Jordan River

