PERSPECTIVE

Centennial Anniversary of the Department of Ophthalmology of the Hadassah Medical Center, 1918–2018

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I N NOVEMBER 1909 HENRIETTA SZOLD, A JEWISH ZIONIST leader and educator, visited Jerusalem, at that time under the Ottoman Empire rule in Palestine. Ms Szold was overwhelmed by the scope of eye diseases she found, especially the discharge and the flies on the children's eyes caused by trachoma, and decided to bring medical personnel, doctors and nurses from her native America, to treat the diseases. These medical missions led eventually to the establishment of the Hadassah Women's Zionist Organization of America in February 1912 at New York City's Temple Emanu-El and the foundation of the Hadassah Medical Organization in Palestine, later Israel.[1,2]

The first Hadassah hospital was established in 1918, after the end of the First World War when Palestine, including Jerusalem, was already under the British Mandate. In June 1918, after obtaining authorization from the American and British governments, the American Zionist Medical Unit (AZMU) left from New York City aboard the S.S. Megantic, bound to Jerusalem via England and continental Europe. Their medical advisor was the ophthalmologist Dr Harry Friedenwald. On board of the S.S. Megantic was the ophthalmologist Dr Joseph Krimsky.[2]

On their way to Palestine, the AZMU mission presented their plans to Baron Edmond de Rothschild in Paris. The Baron agreed in principle that the Meyer de Rothschild Hospital in Jerusalem, established in the Jewish Quarter of the old city of Jerusalem in 1854 and moved outside of the city walls in 1888, would be given to Hadassah and renamed "Meyer de Rothschild–Hadassah Hospital." In the summer of 1918, considerable work was undertaken to bring the old Rothschild Hospital building located on the Street of the Prophets into usable condition. In October 1918, Major James de Rothschild formally signed papers that transferred the management of the Rothschild Hospital to the Americans and agreed to the renaming of the facility as the Rothschild Hadassah Hospital.[2]

The 90-bed Rothschild Hadassah Hospital included 5 medical departments: Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dermatology and Syphilology, and the Department of Ophthalmology, headed by its first director, Dr Joseph Krimsky.[1]

THE OTTOMAN PERIOD: UNTIL 1917

OPHTHALMOLOGY IN PALESTINE STARTED IN APRIL 1882 when Sultan Abdul Hamid II issued permission to the British to establish an eye hospital in Jerusalem. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem, which received the royal charter from Queen Victoria, had purchased a building along the road to Bethlehem and established the eye hospital, with Dr G.S. Waddell as the first ophthalmologist to practice in Palestine. The St. John Eye Hospital continued to operate (except for being closed in 1914-1918 by the Ottomans during the First World War) until 1948, the year of the Israeli War of Independence. It was re-established in 1960 and functions to this day in East Jerusalem, serving the Palestinian population of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.[2]

The first Jewish ophthalmologist in Palestine was the renowned Dr Moses Erlanger of Lucerne, Switzerland, who practiced in the Lemaan Zion Eye Hospital located outside the walls of the old city of Jerusalem during the years 1908-1910. This hospital closed for 2 years until the arrival of Dr Avraham Albert Ticho in June 1912.[2]

Dr Ticho was born in Moravia (today the Czech Republic) in 1883. He graduated from medical school at the University of Vienna in 1908 and did his 4-year ophthalmology training as an assistant to Professor Otto Bergmeister in Vienna. The German Jewish organization Lemaan Zion recruited him, and he served in this hospital until 1917. Dr Ticho devoted time to prevention and treatment of trachoma among kindergarteners and schoolchildren with the assistance, among others, of 2 Hadassah nurses (Figure 1). As an Austrian citizen, Ticho had to leave Jerusalem for Damascus in December 1917 together with the Austrian Army after the British Army conquered Jerusalem

FIGURE 1. Examining schoolchildren for trachoma in the early 20th century in Jerusalem.

in November 1917. He returned to Jerusalem only at the end of 1918.[2]

In 1912 another clinic was opened in Jerusalem by the American philanthropist Nathan Straus: the Jewish Health Bureau. Dr Ze'ev Brunn, the director of the new Health Bureau, hired Dr Aryeh Feigenbaum, who immigrated to Palestine in January 1913 and who was appointed the director of the Trachoma Division. Dr Feigenbaum was born in 1881 in Levov, Galicia, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today Ukraine). He also graduated from the University of Vienna and was trained in Berlin in 1911-1913 by the renowned ophthalmologist Professor Julius Hirschberg. Dr Feigenbaum established the Jewish Eye Hospital on Jaffa Road, outside the Jerusalem old city walls, and supervised the eye clinic of the Jewish Health Bureau in the old city. He also examined children in Jewish and Arab schools, fighting trachoma. Two ophthalmologists, Dr Aryeh Makler and Dr Miriam Neufach (the first female ophthalmologist in Palestine), worked with him. In December 1917, Dr Feigenbaum was arrested and exiled to Damascus. He managed to escape from jail, and in the spring of 1918, he returned to Jerusalem and reopened the Jewish Health Bureau's eye hospital.[2,3]

HADASSAH HOSPITAL EYE DEPARTMENT DURING THE BRITISH MANDATE: 1918-1948

THE YEAR 1918 MARKED A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN ophthalmology in Palestine, as the British took over after the end of the Ottoman rule and the end of the First World War. In this year, the St. John (British) eye hospital reopened its doors and the Department of Ophthalmology at the renovated Rothschild-Hadassah Hospital started functioning with its first director, the American ophthalmologist Dr Joseph Krimsky. Dr Ticho was invited to work for AZMU in the Rothschild-Hadassah Hospital, and he agreed to substitute for Dr Krimsky in the Eye Department when necessary, in his absence.[1,2]

When Krimsky's 1-year contract was approaching its end, Dr Ticho was a natural candidate to succeed Dr Krimsky as the full-time chairman of the Eye Department. In 1919 2 young ophthalmologists who trained in Russia, Dr Judith Kozlo and Dr Yaakov Cohen, arrived in Palestine, and after a temporary assignment in Jaffa, they were transferred to Jerusalem to work under Dr Ticho. The arrival of more ophthalmologists and the