

## “How to cook in Palestine?”

Guidebooks for German-Jewish Homemakers in Palestine (1936-1940)

Viola Rautenberg-Alianov

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*„It is the housewife who is responsible for the happiness of the family. Her work is today harder than ever before - but also today there is no task that is more fulfilling for a woman than to be the lady of the house. The **Encyclopedia of the Household** aims to assist her in doing so as a loyal assistant. (...) All the advice and information that the lady of the house might need she can find here. “*

Encyclopedia of the Household in Erez Israel, Tel Aviv 1939

### 1. Introduction

Providing the relocated German-Jewish homemaker with *all the advice she might need* was a more than ambitious aim given the tremendous changes the immigrants had to face in Palestine. As a result of the rise of National Socialism some 50 000 German Jews fled Germany to Palestine in the 1930s. As they were coming from one of the most modern countries in the world it was quite a shock for them to arrive in Palestine: Here they had to deal with a middle-eastern climate, an underdeveloped economy, the Hebrew language, and the Jewish-Arab conflict. Matters were complicated further by the fact that the new immigrants constituted the most bourgeois immigration wave that entered Palestine by then. They mainly belonged to the urban educated Middle-class, were assimilated to German culture and weren't Zionists. These features weren't welcomed by the Jewish community in Palestine (*Yishuv*), which suspected the newcomers of harming their socialist achievements.

Even though perceived as “the capitalist immigration wave”, most of the immigrants experienced a severe social decline in Palestine. This affected the homemakers among them in a special way: Firstly, they had to adjust homemaking to the difficult conditions in Palestine (unknown food, backward technical equipment - no refrigerators, dangerous and hard to use camping cookers instead of stoves- crowded housing, with several families in one flat). Secondly, they had to perform these tasks on their own, without household aids that were common in the middle-class families in Germany. Many women literally didn't know how to cook or clean when they arrived in Palestine. And thirdly, as many men became unemployed or didn't find a regular

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income, homemakers took up employment in addition to homemaking. Because of the challenging situation, there was a strong need for orientation among the housewives. Therefore, Guidebooks customized for German-speaking homemakers became an important tool.

*In this paper I will elaborate on the kind of knowledge that these guidebooks transferred: What norms were homemakers confronted with in Palestine and how were these norms gendered? How was the social change due to the immigration addressed in these books? I will attend to these questions by looking at the two main publications written for German –Jewish homemakers in Palestine. These two guidebooks follow different orientations: one is a Zionist and the other a commercial approach.*

### 2. Guidebooks

#### a)

Erna Meyer’s “How to cook in Palestine” was published in 1936 in Tel Aviv on behalf of the WIZO (Women’s International Zionist Organization) in German, Hebrew and English. Its author, Erna Meyer was a well-known expert on domestic economy and the rationalization of the homework in Germany before she immigrated to Palestine in 1933. Her cooking-book was obtainable at WIZO- offices, in bookstores and grocery shops. It includes recipes, instructions for the use of cooking equipment as well as general articles on cooking and health. Even though published in three languages it was mainly targeting the immigrants from Germany. Its ideological premise is expressed in the first paragraph of its introduction:

*“The time has come that we housewives must take an attempt, with more energy than before, to free our kitchen from its Galuth- traditions. (...) We should wholeheartedly adjust ourselves to healthy Palestine cooking.”*

Erna Meyer: How to cook in Palestine? Tel Aviv 1937, p.7.

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Meyers claim is in line with the Zionist absorption policy: Adapting to Palestine by giving up the “Galut attitude”, meaning the bourgeois way of living, working, dressing, thinking - and cooking. The housewives are constructed as one group with one kitchen and one goal: freeing the kitchen from obsolete customs and consciously adjusting to “healthy Palestine” cooking. Only then would they be able to become entrenched in their new homeland Palestine. The newly immigrated homemakers are allotted a seemingly important role in the nation-building project through politicizing the very “private” practices of consuming and cooking. While Meyer is monopolizing them for Zionist ideology, she also unifies them as one group that is supposed to collectively fulfill the tasks of transition and hence, seemingly, overcomes the isolation of each housewife.

Meyer is prompting her readers to acquaint themselves with “healthy Palestine cooking”. This should be adjusted to the climate and most importantly should exclusively include local products produced by Jewish agriculture in Palestine.

According to Meyer, the use of local products was not only an obligation in order to support the national economy but also due to its superiority in terms of health. Butter for example, an important ingredient in German cooking but at that time only available as import from foreign countries, is disqualified while the advantages of olive oil are celebrated at length. Meyer states, that rejecting “healthy Palestine cooking” would not only harm the health of the individual but of the *Yishuv* altogether.

Not only health and Zionism seem to be equivalents but also rationalization and Zionism. Throughout the book, both in texts and illustrations, the housewife is urged to work as professionally and efficiently as possible, saving time, strength and health. Erna Meyer was convinced that in Palestine the rationalization of the housework was an even more needed approach than in Germany, as the homemakers were forced to work here under worse technical and climatic conditions.

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According to Meyer’s agenda housewives were divided into two groups: While the good housewife is thoughtful, independently thinking and a rationalizing follower of “healthy Palestine cooking”, learning Hebrew eagerly and an active Zionist, the bad housewife is thoughtless, mechanically imitating what she is told and hence causing unnecessary work, and indifferent to Zionism. And yet the latter is not excluded from the collective but educated to improve herself and hence to become a worthy homemaker. The thoughtless homemaker therefore is not an identity but a state that can be overcome through conscious efforts.

b)

The **Encyclopedia of the Household in Eretz Israel** was published in German and Hebrew by the advertising company of the German entrepreneur Ludwig Goldschmidt- Sahavy, who came to Palestine in 1935. It was handed out for free in 4 volumes between 1939 and 1940 to customers of grocery stores. As opposed to Meyer this was a company’s commercial initiative and not the publication of a political institution of the *Yishuv*.

The declared intention of the Encyclopedia is to assist the women of the German Immigration with homemaking in Palestine. Hundreds of entries from A to Z deal with such subjects as cooking, cleaning, beauty, health, education, marriage, and etiquette. The undeclared and yet blatant intention is the advertising of all kinds of Palestinian products, companies and shops through the Encyclopedia. It is composed of 3 elements: the entries, the advertisements that are clearly marked through design and those which appear within the entries. The different entries don’t necessarily correspond regarding their ideological positions. For example, one entry deals with olive oil and its advantages over butter, while another entry praises Butter as one of the healthiest products available.

A remarkable feature of the Encyclopedia is the fact that – despite its name – through large parts nothing indicates that this knowledge is to be used in Palestine and not in Europe; even the preface doesn’t mention Palestine at all. Only the advertisements clearly link the publication with

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Palestine as they use addresses in Tel Aviv and Hebrew names. Throughout the book, advice can be found regarding evening dresses, cocktails, food and etiquette that probably express the memories and fantasies of the bourgeois life lived back in Germany better than the actual conditions in Palestine that were restricted by the proletarianization of the immigrants. On the one hand, this can be read as the unwillingness or the lack of necessity to deal with Palestine. In Tel Aviv, the biggest German-Jewish Diaspora in the country, where the book was mainly distributed, the mass immigration originated its own subculture by 1939. Therefore, the use of local food or mastering of Hebrew might not have been deemed necessary by the Encyclopedia. On the other hand, this can be understood as the conservative desire of the immigrants, after a traumatic emigration to a foreign country with strict ideological demands, to keep the home as the one place in which nothing has changed. Hence - and as against the demands of the Yishuv - the homemakers were encouraged to preserve the continuity of the German-Jewish Diaspora in Palestine.

The noticeable amount of instructions for cleaning all kinds of impurities to maintain a thorough domestic hygiene can be read not only as the virtual protection of the health and cleanliness as such, but also as the figurative attempt to keep the Levant out of the living room. In other words the homemakers were entrusted with shielding the home and thus their realm from the negative features associated with Palestine (chaos, dirt, and illnesses).

Regardless of this rather conservative approach, the Encyclopedia also includes entries that acknowledge and even encourage social change in the immigrant community, for instance the obtaining of driving licenses for women. And also in the quotation from the beginning, taken from the preface of the book, the publisher constructs homemaking as the most desirable task for women but neither as a natural ability of women nor a task for **all** women.

### 3 Discussion

In the two guidebooks that I discussed today homemaking is highly charged with meaning. In both cases, the instructions for the homemaker are engendered by the encounter with Palestine.

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Depending on the approval or rejection of Zionist ideology and its demands, contrary directives are constructed for homemaking.

Erna Meyer’s “How to cook in Palestine?” clearly reflects the Zionist ideology dominant in the *Yishuv* and its rigid demands for adaptation and absorption. She tries to convince the German-Jewish homemakers to adapt to this Zionist form of homemaking by holding out the prospect to become fully integrated and valuable members of the *Yishuv* society: The kitchen is constructed as a place of change and new identity.

While Meyer advertises new homemaking in the new country, the Encyclopedia for the Household in Eretz Israel, published within in the German-Jewish Diaspora, represents notions that were brought from Germany to Palestine. The Encyclopedia is not demanding any ideological contribution to the nation-building project as it is indifferent towards Zionism and addresses the homemakers mainly as consumers that can choose whatever pleases them from its offers. At the same time, it demands the homemakers to be responsible for the “happiness of the family” and instructs them through its advice to preserve the lost world in Palestine: The kitchen is constructed as a place of memory.

The two Guidebooks reflect different norms for homemaking and the homemakers that were valid at the same time in different sectors of *Yishuv* society in the 1930s and 1940s. The contrary demands of the absorbing society on the one hand and the immigrating group on the other hand, created a blatant tension and made the answer to the question “How to cook in Palestine” fraught with meaning.