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FAMILIES AND THE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF WAR:  
FROM PALESTINE TO NORTH AFRICA AND BACK AGAIN,  
1942–1944

**Abstract**

This paper looks at careers, families, and households as a means to explore the relationship between two forms of movement—physical and social. Privileging the account of a family over the more traditional androcentric historical narrative, it utilizes the correspondence of one Zionist-Yishuvi family, the Muchniks, during World War II. The analysis points to the Muchniks' adoption of a coherent family strategy, one that attempted to harness the extensive wartime profits that flowed to the Zionist Yishuv during this period to attain lasting upward mobility for the family.

By adopting a split household pattern, the article argues, the Muchnik family strategy consisted of two interdependent cogwheels of physical movement. In the first, Rosa and the children dissolved all semblance of a nuclear household and instead constantly moved between their extended family's farmsteads in the Zionist agricultural settlement of Nahalal. In the second, Pinchas was temporarily freed from the obligations of a family-man and joined the ranks of region-trotting Yishuvi men as a soldier in the British army. Together, these two cogwheels were supposed to empower the family's climb up the social ladder.



It is February 1944 and the military career of Pinchas Muchnik has come to a premature end. For the better part of the preceding two years, Muchnik—a private at the Solel Boneh Company in the British Army, officially known as the “Artisan Works Company, Royal Engineers 745”—trudged through boredom, depression, and separation from his family, as he and his comrades built roads, bridges, military installations, and land and sea infrastructures in and around Ismailia, Alexandria, Port Said, and Benghazi.<sup>1</sup> In late February 1944, mere weeks before his company were to join the Allied offensive in Italy, an unspecified illness strikes Pinchas. Learning from his doctors at the military hospital at Alexandria that he can expect to be dismissed soon,

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Pinchas attempts to negotiate a new contract with Solel Boneh. But all he receives is an offer that would allow his return to Palestine only if he forgoes the promotion he has been pining after and accepts that, even as a thirty-nine-year-old man, he will not be able to earn a salary that would support his family, at least for another few years.<sup>2</sup> His wife Rosa, physically drained from another long day's work on the family farm in Nahalal, presses her husband to forget about the money, accept the offer, and come home. While she is careful not to offend his pride—already bruised by his limited ability to support his family<sup>3</sup>—she is adamant he should accept any contract Solel Boneh offers that would permanently reunite them. “I have a lot to talk about with you but I don't have the will to do that right now[,] maybe you will come soon so I will talk to you about everything,” she writes, apologizes again for feeling too bad to write, and signs.<sup>4</sup>

The letter before us, and the correspondence it is part of, offers an intimate glimpse into the impact World War II had on one Jewish household in Palestine, and sheds light on the way a single family adapted to them. World War II in the Middle East, Cyrus Schayegh writes, was “not catastrophic”; spared from major fighting and administered by a British colonial government bent on averting humanitarian crises or political instability, the region saw large investments and policy initiatives designed to promote autarkization, industrialization, and development.<sup>5</sup> British investment, particularly in the oil sector and in military infrastructure, presented entrepreneurial actors throughout the region with opportunities to expand the reach of their businesses via transmandatory movement and exchange. The *Yishuv*—the Hebrew term designating the Zionist settler society in Palestine during the British mandatory era—profited more than any other group in the region from Britain's wartime economic measures. Shielded from competition, Yishuvi providers of goods and services, particularly those who were able to export to Syria and Lebanon, flourished.<sup>6</sup>

At the forefront of the *Yishuv*'s new regional vanguard stood Solel Boneh, a construction and infrastructure concern that operated under the umbrella of the *Yishuv*'s powerful Zionist-national labor union, the Histadrut. Solel Boneh was already the largest construction contractor in Palestine when the war broke out, but it was World War II that saw Solel Boneh rake in the kind of profits that transformed it into a one of the largest contractors in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> One can read how British geostrategic plans evolved during the war by tracing Solel Boneh's construction tenders for the British military, beginning in

Palestine and Egypt, and expanding to Libya and Tunisia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Cyprus.

But what could lower-echelon workers in Solel Boneh like Pinchas Muchnik do to capitalize on this wartime economic surge? The Muchnik family, I argue, forged a deliberate strategy which consisted of temporarily relying on its network of extended family and kin to produce an opportunity for Pinchas to gain a promotion in Solel Boneh, end his precarious employment, and secure a stable income that would set the family on a trajectory of upward mobility. In a Solel Boneh aflush with commissions for construction projects of unprecedented scale with short deadlines and not enough experienced foremen, a loyal company man—even one lacking in official qualifications like Pinchas Muchnik—might reasonably expect to get a chance to quickly move up the ranks. This family strategy, which hinged on making Pinchas an ever-present ‘can-do’ man in Solel Boneh’s wartime projects and therefore a viable candidate for promotion, can be conceptualized as two interlocking cogwheels, in which one cogwheel feeds off the energy produced by the other until an external energy source kicks in and jumpstarts both.

In keeping with the maxim that to make money you need to already have some, the first stage of this strategy required an investment. The Muchnik family was able to offset the temporary loss of income represented by Pinchas’s absence from the farm by pooling the social and material resources at their disposal. To do so, they relied on three family farms in the agricultural settlement of Nahalal and the network of their extended family members who owned them—in a move that echoed Schayegh’s observation that material benefits generally flowed to those who had been strongest in 1939 on a microfamilial scale.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to stress that this was not a case where static women stayed home, freeing mobile men to hunt for opportunities. Instead, regular movement characterized both spheres, and mobility—both physical and socioeconomic—was simultaneously the means and the end. Rosa’s reliance on extended family members as part of the Muchniks’ extended household safety net strategy required her and her three young children to adapt to unprecedented patterns of daily movement, tying several households into a single formation of interdependence and support. What did it cost individual members of the family to keep this up? Did their wartime life represent a continuation with, or a break from, prior and subsequent patterns of living and working? And how did it influence power dynamics within

the family?

Two brief notes about the sources are in order before we proceed. First, we need to take into consideration that the medium we are using to glimpse this period in the Muchnik's family history—the letters between Pinchas and various members of his family—have probably only have been preserved due to the possibility to frame them as evidence of Pinchas's valiant involvement in World War II. In their strivings for upward social mobility many families have employed similar strategies to promote men's career goals, not least the Muchnik family itself. Indeed, although Pinchas Muchnik continued chasing down career threads and living largely apart from his family for the subsequent decade, no letters from that period remain.<sup>9</sup> What we have before us, in other words, is a broad social phenomenon that is not unique to the Yishuv, to wartime, or to the 1940s: namely, the household strategies that families adopt in order to align themselves with the constraints and sacrifices required by their male breadwinners' careers.

In choosing to focus on the unit of a single family's strategy, I reveal more than my own methodological penchant for microhistory. I also take advantage of a lucky finding preserved in the Muchniks' family archive, for which I am grateful. The sheer volume and apparent regularity of the Muchniks' wartime correspondence are testament to the reliability of the postal service operated by the British military from Egypt and across the Middle East. Interestingly, this official postal service was just one component in the traffic from Palestine to Egypt during the war. As a letter from 10 October 1942 suggests, Pinchas and his family had additional exchanges, some unbeknown to the British military system:

An extraordinary occasion, a miracle even, by chance I met Haya here in a town called Ismailia, and she is now going home, I will take advantage of the opportunity to write to you a few words, . . . only yesterday have I received the letter and the package you sent me with Yehoshua.<sup>10</sup>

Another passage from the same letter demonstrates how this "miracle" encounter with Haya in Ismailia or the package Rosa sent with Yehoshua ran parallel to the official military post service. Pinchas writes:

I must run now because Haya is in a hurry, Shalom Shalom to you all [and] in the letter you'll send in the post, don't[,] God forbid[,] mention you've sent me a letter and a package with Yehoshua and that you received a letter from me via Haya because it is strictly forbidden.<sup>11</sup>

In the 28 February 1944 letter I chose to reproduce here, Rosa names two men as people whom her husband might encounter in the major imperial hub of Alexandria: his younger brother, Avraham (b. 1918), who was also a soldier in the company (albeit possibly in a different regiment), and another man named Ezra, who, a third letter tells us, had once shared a barracks with Pinchas. This regular movement of soldiers between Palestine and Egypt included Pinchas, who spent several short visits home during his two years' service. Whatever brief respite these occasional visits home provided was temporary, however, and seems to have aggravated Pinchas and Rosa's general sense of loneliness and sacrifice. In a letter from 18 May 1943, for instance, Pinchas tells Rosa how

it's very difficult to get used again to the thought that to say something to you I need to write, because just now when I was at home and I wanted to say something to you it was enough that I call 'Rosa' and you would be at my side.<sup>12</sup>

Essential to our understanding of how the couple navigated the reality of separation in their daily lives is an appreciation that Rosa's burden of managing the farm and raising their three children was shared, not borne alone. Pinchas's parents also operated a farm in Nahalal, sharing it with his unmarried sister, Yonah, and appear to have established a joint household with Rosa and their grandchildren that spanned two farms and three generations of Muchniks. Rosa's brother, Munia, also lived nearby with his wife and his children, as did their elderly parents, demonstrating that the everyday network of support extended as deeply into Rosa's side of the family, the Artrechts, as it did into the Muchniks. A significant portion of the correspondence we have includes letters Pinchas received and sent to these members of the extended family. Pinchas and Rosa's older children Ben Zion (b. 1931) and Hadassah (b. 1935) are taught to read and write by their aunts and their older cousins, with their gradual

advancement proudly adorning the bottoms of letters from the adults or in independent pages added into envelopes. As was the case in most Zionist settlements in the Galilee, the Muchnik-Artrecht family network extended to the regional urban hub of Haifa, where Rosa's sister, Sonya, lived. But a hint of the lesser intensity of the Haifa connection relative to the Nahalal extended household lies in explicit mentions in Sonya's letters that "Rosa and the kids were here this week."<sup>13</sup>

Despite this extensive support—comprising of day-to-day socialization of the children, pooled labor and finances, and shared daily consumption—Pinchas's absence still meant that Rosa shouldered a considerable burden which, understandably, caused tensions. For nearly all of their two-year-long correspondence, both spouses routinely shared their frustrations and difficulties, sometimes in acerbic tones, but Pinchas kept evoking his role in the struggle against Hitler and Rosa never challenged him. This pattern of complaining without questioning aptly demonstrates what gender historian Elisabeth Joris called the "feminization of responsibility" over the family, in which women were made responsible for ever more aspects of family life, while men retreat from the family and increasingly reflect their lives as having being lived in the context of the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> In his letters home, Pinchas often complained of the loneliness, boredom, and solitude he endured before speaking of his sacrifice (and perhaps, by muted extension, hers as well) as worthy because it was done in service of "a great cause"—the defeat of Nazi Germany and victory in the war. Symbolically preserving his role as father and head of household even in his prolonged absence, we see how Pinchas wielded the war as an excuse and justification for his absence in his letters to his family. "Inactivity makes my difficult life even worse," a despondent Pinchas writes to his kids from his sick bed in Alexandria on 14 February 1944,

since I cannot be with you. My sorrow is double because I cannot attend Ben Zion's Bar Mitzvah. . . . And if fate be so cruel and I am unable to make it on the appointed time, may your joy be doubled, for I am participating in the Great Struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Another letter shows Pinchas playacting the head of the family and the household even in his absence, telling his wife to be strong ("You are so weak and therefore you miss me so . . . but . . . what is required now

is a supreme effort and perhaps this will be the last," he writes), and pledging "what little help I can" by writing his father and asking him to expedite the hiring of a hired hand to help Rosa.<sup>16</sup>

Rosa's attitude seems to have turned increasingly rebellious against this situation as time passed on. Her letters to Pinchas, similar to those from other members of the family, reported on the work on the family farm and on the kids' wellbeing. For Rosa, it was the combination of the two that was most chafing.

You write why I work so much when we have three kids at home. . . . With me [there is] the house[,] the farm—and kids. Pinchas I never thought it would be so hard. . . . The hay hasn't been made and we already need to sow potatoes. . . . [Ben] Zion is helping really nicely but he doesn't want to study and I am so sorry about that but I have nothing to do[.] Yehoudit [Shvat (b. 1930)—Rosa's niece] tries to teach him but he doesn't want.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the letters written during the summer of 1943, the 28 February letter replicated below is written in a moment where her husband was contemplating a decision that would impact both their futures, and Rosa's resolute tone represents a watershed moment in the couple's relationship. In demanding that Pinchas make his staying in Palestine a condition for signing a new contract with Solel Boneh, and insisting that "we'll manage" even with a "salary for one of lads," Rosa was communicating to her husband that he needed to recognize that their arrangement was not going to be extended, that a promotion and its attendant increase in material stability was not forthcoming after all, and he should respect her insistence that it was time to return home.

When Pinchas returns home in March 1944, as his comrades set sail from Port Said to Italy, he finds his wife exhausted, hardened, but also perfectly capable of managing without him, thanks to the aid of their extended family. Ironically, but perhaps unsurprisingly, she continued do just that. In the decade to come, another war would be fought, this time in Palestine—the 1948 war. In its aftermath, as the State of Israel sought to repopulate the territories it cleansed of Palestinians with hundreds of thousands of Oriental Jews, Pinchas would reinvent himself as a specialist in the establishment and management of agricultural settlements. Once more, Rosa Muchnik remained in Nahalal as her husband chased opportunity far away and reveled in his service of causes great and noble.



PRIMARY SOURCE

Rosa to Pinchas, 28 February 1944. Private collection. (Translated by David Motzafi-Haller)

Sunday

28.II.44

Shalom Pinchas my dear!

I received today a letter from you, and I see from the letter that you are in a bad mood. How can I help you I'm always ready. First of all[,] your writing to me that you can get a transfer to the A'retz [לארץ] only question being the money I think you have nothing to even think about. In truth and apologies to Solel Boneh it's a salary for one of the lads but that's not important we'll manage[.] If you'll be in the A'retz [בארץ] it's very important for me and for you too[.] Only one thing I don't understand[:] from where are you sure that you will always be here and if after a while they will transfer you away from the A'retz[?] and who knows with what people you'll have to be[?] Here you already got to know the company and that is such an important thing. Abraham already left the A'retz yesterday[,] perhaps you'll see him. He's going to you that's what people here say and maybe further. Pinchas[,] think carefully about this only pay no attention to the question of the money that there is nothing to discuss. Ezra is departing already today maybe you will see him and then he will send you our greetings. I want to know what's up with you and when you'll know already from the Hospital. In the last two days I feel so bad I caught a serious cold. Generally[,] I am so tired from work and from the serious pains I have. I have much to talk to you about, but I don't have the will right now maybe you will come soon so I'll talk to you about everything . . . Pinchas if you get a new contract then write immediately. Otherwise[,] there's nothing new in the farm [משק] everything's okay, the kids are fine too, Nehama'le is blooming like a flower. Now there's much work, a little hoeing and a little sowing and also vegetation for the cows. I've



got to finish because I feel so bad that I've no strength to sit and write to you a lot many kisses!

[on bottom left margins:] I bid you good night yours strongly love Rosa.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more on the involvement of the Zionist Yishuv in the British Army via the Royal Engineers Company 745, see Judith Reifen-Ronen, "Sipura Shel Plugat 'Solel Boneh' 745: HaPluga HaIvrit HaRishona BaTzava HaBriti" [The Story of the 'Solel Boneh' Company 745: The First Hebrew Company in the British Army], *Alei Zayit veKherev* 14 (Special issue: "The Palestine Police": Studies in the History of the Police in the era of the British Mandate) (2014): 271-302.

<sup>2</sup> According to Reifen-Ronen, soldiers at the Solel Boneh company were paid 33 percent less than white-British soldiers. These salaries were established in a bargain that the Zionist leaders had made with the British army when the company was established, during which they had initially rejected what they called an "insulting" offer – that their men be paid "Indian salaries" equivalent to 50 percent of the salaries white-British soldiers received. The 66 percent salary rates they eventually agreed on were called "Maltese Salaries," an interesting mid-stratum in the imperial racial/paygrade hierarchies that Homi Bhabha might have called "not quite/not white." Reifen-Ronen, "Sipura Shel Plugat 'Solel Boneh' 745," 275-76; Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Anne Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press), 152-59.

<sup>3</sup> In his study of the rank-and-file members of the Histadrut, Matan Brood points out that the responsibility to provide for wife and children within dominant gender ideals of masculinity within the "nuclear family" was a defining normative expectation for married men with children. The Histadrut's internal justice system, the *mishpat haverim* (comrade's court), even enforced that dominant model of feminine dependency and male supremacy by prosecuting men who were unable or unwilling to provide for their wives and children. Matan Brood, "Masculinities and Family Life Among Urban Members of the Zionist Labor Movement in Mandate Palestine" (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2018), 86-116.

<sup>4</sup> Rosa to Pinchas, 28 February 1944, private collection.

<sup>5</sup> Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 272–73, 309.

<sup>6</sup> Significant to the surge in exports from Palestine to Syria and Lebanon was the revision, in 1939, of the Franco-British regional trade agreement of 1929. Schayegh, *The Middle East*, 297, 313.

<sup>7</sup> Exactly how much profit was made is subject to debate. One executive, Hillel Dan, estimated their proceeds from projects in Palestine between 1939 and 1945 at 25–30 million British pounds, equivalent to 1.15 and 1.38 billion pounds today. Eliyahu Biletzky, Solel Boneh's officially commissioned historian, estimates the numbers at roughly half that amount. Hillel Dan, *On the Unpaved Road* (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1963), 165; Eliyahu Biletzky, *Solel Boneh: 1924–1974* (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1974), 241.

<sup>8</sup> Schayegh, *The Middle East*, 312.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Pinchas Muchnik's career, see David Motzafi-Haller, "Colonizing the Israeli Negev: Mediators in Yeruham, 1951–1965" (master's thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2017), 65–81.

<sup>10</sup> Pinchas to Rosa, 10 October 1942, private collection.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pinchas to Rosa, 18 May 1943, private collection.

<sup>13</sup> Sonya to Pinchas, 4 June 1943, private collection.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Joris, "Kinship and Gender: Property, Enterprise and Politics," in *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Developments (1300–1900)*, eds. David Warren Sabean, Simon Teuscher, and Jon Mathieu (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 231–57.

<sup>15</sup> Pinchas to Ben Tzion, Hadassah and Nehama, 14 February 1944, private collection.

<sup>16</sup> Pinchas to Rosa, 17 July 1943, private collection.

<sup>17</sup> Rosa to Pinchas, 23 August 1943, private collection.