

Trooper Idriess, of the 5th Australian Light Horse: His Impressions of the Yishuv in Eretz Yisroel, 1917

From his book "The Desert Column", chapter 50, which is based on the personal diary he kept throughout his time in the army, both at Gallipoli and then in the Middle Eastern campaign.

Idriess witnessed the crucial battle that liberated Beersheba (though his regiment, the 5th, did not take part in the charge), and describes later stages of the campaign, up as far as Jaffa, where he received the wound that made him unfit for any further service (hence he was not present to witness and describe the liberation of Jerusalem).

What is clear from his account is the respect and liking he feels for the Jews of the yishuv; and he offers a pretty astute assessment of their situation when under Ottoman Muslim rule.

"I think this is the 17th (December 1917). Yesterday we rode by numbers of vividly pretty little red-roofed towns. The inhabitants are very fair-skinned, mostly Jews. They are by far the most cleanly people we have yet met. They are very hospitable although they do charge us a hefty price for brown bread, honey, and tobacco.

'Lots of them have had a hard time from the Turks.'

And that is putting it mildly. I understand – from Andrew Bostom and from NER's own 'Hugh Fitzgerald' – that in Adolf Boehm's history of the Zionist movement, he depicts in detail the way that the Young Turkish leader and Army Commander, Ahmet Cemal (Djemal), reduced the Jewish population of Ottoman Palestine by deportation and massacres, wiping out entire

families of Jewish nationalist leaders. Hugh quotes Boehm's sobering conclusion: **"If Palestine had not been freed by the English at the end of 1917, the Jewish Yishuv (settlement) would have been exterminated by Djemal.** By the war's end it was reduced to 55,000 souls, that is, half of the pre-war population." – CM

"They (that is, the Jews of 'Palestine' in 1917 – CM) seem to live between two devils, the Turk and the Arab.

Between two Muslim devils: the Turkish Muslim and the Arab Muslim. – CM

'Apparently the Turk prevents the Arab from massacring them outright, because the Jews are a very handy people to squeeze taxes from..'

*Thus in three sentences this ordinary Aussie Light Horse trooper captures the precarious situation of Jewish dhimmis in the land of Israel under the Ottoman Muslim empire. And of course, as pointed out in the passage from Boehm already mentioned above, such limited and self-interested 'protection-for-payola' as the Turkish Muslims **had** given, had been very much withdrawn by 1917, as the Jews of the yishuv were more and more perceived by those Muslims to be insufficiently submissive.* – CM

'Distantly we see the city roofs of "Jaffa the beautiful" – very pretty in its hills and trees and orchards, even at this distance... Some of our boys got wine yesterday from the inhabitants of the little town near by, and things are bit lively. I think the town is Richon [Rishon].

'Yesterday we rode through the place along a narrow road, the inhabitants in such queer garments lining the roads and shady lanes to stare at these brown sleeveless soldiers.

"We must have seemed queer fighting-men to them, for they stared as if they had expected to see supermen, not rough-clad

Australians.

“I don’t think that they could realize that we actually were the men who had driven back their taskmaster of centuries.”

“They seem also to be on the verge of something they cannot believe, cannot understand; they tremble when they whisper of Jerusalem.

“It appears there is some prophecy, centuries old, that one day Jerusalem will fall, and will be taken from the Turk or from whatever infidel (*in this context, Idriess’s usage of the term ‘infidel’ seems to imply ‘non-Jew’ – CM*) holds it.”

Remember: Idriess wrote this in his diary in 1917, prior to the liberation of Jerusalem; and the book “The Desert Column” was first published in 1932, during the period of the Mandate, but before the restoration of the modern Jewish State of Israel. – CM

“We passed a quaint little building with “Hotel” prominently on a signboard, and other signs in Greek. A fair Hebe was leaning over the verandah, with bared arms and a winning smile. She had won, too, for the place was full of officers of the forces taking occupation; others seemed to be arriving per horse and lorry every minute.

“These towns (*that is: Jewish, and also Christian? – CM*) have plenty of flocks, plenty of wine, plenty of bread; the people are clean and civilized. We are coming into orchard towns now. The green oranges have given the whole regiment the tummy-ache...

“...A beautiful period of our ride was after crossing the Wadi Hanein. We rode through tall mimosa hedges, in perfumed bloom, into the colony of Nachalat (the heritage of Reuben).

Observe that ordinary Trooper Idriess, probably with a bit of help from the historically-informed army chaplains – some of

whom were very keen archaeologists – is well up on the Biblical history and geography of the Holy Land. – CM

“Crowds of white men, women and children flocked the scented roads, shouting, “Shallome! Shallome! Shallome!”.”

One fully understands that rapturous welcome, here recorded by Idriess, when one reflects, in light of Boehm’s observations previously mentioned, that the swift advance of the Australians and the English had, very probably, averted a Muslim mass-murder and/ or expulsion of all 55,000 Jews that at that time remained in eretz Yisroel (some 55,000 of the pre-war population, 110 000 in 1914, having already been either expelled or killed).

I will add, furthermore, that Idriess like many other of the ordinary Australian soldiers who took part in the Mideast campaign, whilst warming to the Jews of the Yishuv, sensibly disliked and distrusted the local Muslims, especially the local Arab Muslims. Speaking from much bitter experience in Egypt, Sinai, the Negev and ‘Palestine’, Idriess calls the Bedouin “the ghouls of the battlefield”, referring to their habit of sneaking in to slit the throats of wounded men – whether Allied, German or Turk – after a battle, in order to rob those that they murdered; and their habit also of digging up the recently-buried dead – again, whether Allied, German or Turk – in order to strip the body of any possessions, and leave it lying like carrion. He has no illusions either about their reliability as “allies”; he refers to them – the Bedouin Arab Muslims – as “the Turk’s best spies”. No T E Lawrence, he! It is clear too from certain passages in “The Desert Column” that Idriess and his fellow Aussie soldiers were baffled and indeed disgusted by the English fascination with and kid-glove treatment of the dangerous and infinitely-duplicitous Muslim Arabs.