

Juliette Stern (1893-1963)

A Jewish Woman in Search of Her People

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Translated by June Graff (February 2014)²

Near Bet Shemesh, in the suburbs of Jerusalem, the forests planted by the JNF offer a haven of peace and recuperation to the walker. One of those forests of more than 11,000 trees strong carries the name of Juliette Stern.

Militant Zionist and feminist, before the war Juliette Stern took on important functions in the heart of the French Jewish community. She was the Secretary General of the French Federation of the WIZO (Jewish Zionist women's organization) born in 1935 out of the fusion of the Union of French Jewish Women for Palestine and the pro-Palestinian *Kadimah* circle that she created a year before. She also sat on the central commission of the *Keren Kayemet L'Israel* (Translator's note: known today as the Jewish National Fund. JNF will be used going forward). From 1935, Juliette Stern became secretary general of Youth Aliyah, work which was destined to help Jewish youth to escape Nazi Germany. During the war, she led the "5th direction" under the auspices of the UGIF (General Union of the Jews of France). This group was responsible for social welfare. Under cover of her official functions, she insured secretly that 1,000 children be saved. After the war, she continued her activities under the auspices of the WIZO of which she became the president. She died in Paris in 1963.



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<sup>1</sup> Originally appeared under the title "Juliette Stern: Portrait d'une femme juive à la reconte de son peuple" in *L'Arche*, No. 613, June 2009, pp. 70-74.

<sup>2</sup> {Translator's Note: the name "Palestine" indicates the area currently called Israel. "Palestinian" as an adjective refers to those who lived in that area. There is no connection here to the current Palestinian Authority}. JG

## THE ROAD TRAVELED

Born in 1893 to Dutch Jewish parents, Juliette Caroline Henriette Spanjaard belongs to the large assimilated Jewish Parisian Bourgeoisie. Her brother is close to the royalists and French Action, one of her sisters converted to Catholicism. “Young, non-believer, ignorant of all religion,” her vision of Judaism is resolutely Universalist.<sup>1</sup>



This emanates from a letter addressed to her parents in August 1914. Speaking of her first husband, Waldemar Hauer, born in France of German parents, she declares to her parents with ambiguity that “he is Jewish, therefore by definition international.”<sup>2</sup> Voluntarily conscripted to the Foreign Legion, Waldemar was killed in December 15 in Cernica (Serbia) during violent combat between the French and Bulgar soldiers in the Dardanelles. Widow at 22 years of age, mother of a little girl, Juliette remarried several years later to Robert Stern, a chemical engineer originally from Brno, Czechoslovakia and brother soldier to her first husband.

As a certified nurse of the Red Cross, Juliette got involved in social work soon after. Nevertheless, nothing seemed to destine this young woman who was brought up in an assimilated milieu to take such an active part in the Zionist movement in France. In an article with the eloquent title “Have I become Zionist? Yes!” Juliette tells how she came to meet her people. In it, she retraces the itinerary that led her from assimilation to Zionism or to “the modern form of Judaism.” To better show the breath of her road travelled, she accuses the contrast between two paintings. The first goes back to 1912: “A large recreation yard in a Parisian middle school. Everyone is playing Diabolo, the fashionable game. These youths are happy, laughing, and carefree.” The other, more up to date shows a youth “that has suffered profoundly”: the group of young German Jews that is waiting at the Lyon Station, on a rainy day of June 1935 for the train that will take to Marseille where it will embark for Palestine.

Wondering what happened during the 23 years that separated these 2 scenes, Juliette doesn’t just try to understand how “the non-believing girl” has become a “woman who has found in the revelation of Zionism, so much lively and real joy.” She tries to realize the changes of her generation, the one of the secular Jews who grew up in the carefree atmosphere of *La Belle Epoque* and who full of ideals of peace and brotherhood learned consecutive disillusionments in the first World War, the failure of the dream of “a European confederation, where each nation would have its place, its

right to life.” For her, as for a number of her contemporaries, the determining event was Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.

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ZIONISM

Nazi antisemitism appeared to her immediately as an absolutely unique phenomenon, different from the persecutions that marked the Jewish people’s history, even the pogroms perpetrated by Czarist Russia. This absolutely new type of hatred hit the German Jews indiscriminately, “the non-believer as the pious, the middle class as well as the student, the furrier as well as the great academics.” The tone with which Juliette evokes this significant and profound upset that the rise of Nazism caused to her existence in fact showed all the depth: “And I, French, who believed that I forgot my Jewish origin, I suffer with them, their wounds are mine. Judaism, in my eyes, will become alive again. To this large pained family, to this collective, I feel attached, by distant fibers that I thought were dead.”

Juliette’s identification with the Jewish people’s destiny led her to an unconditional support of Zionism in which she sees “the modern form of Judaism.” For her, “the land of Israel” isn’t only a refuge for the persecuted Jews, but a “Jewish national homeland,” the hope to see to fruition “a true fraternity, a true equality in the intensive and collective labor.” That to her is “the miracle of Palestine.”

Juliette wasn’t content to dream of the Promised Land. In a tone reminiscent of Albert Londres, author of the masterpiece *Le juif errant est arrivé* (translator’s note: *The Wandering Jew has Arrived*), she decides “one morning” to leave for Palestine and to go to see the reality. And like the great journalist, she entertains her readers by offering them an enthusiastic description of this “young and burning people” who are Kibbutzniks and workers, former merchants, teachers or lawyers devoting themselves to the necessary hard work of building a new society.

The love that the land of Israel inspired in Juliette was fully obvious as she describes cities in Palestine: Safed, Tiberias, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. She speaks with emotion of “Mount Zion” where the “Jewish University grows and dominates the spirituality of the entire Palestine.”³

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Henrietta Szold (1860-1945) founder of Youth Aliya which Juliette Stern first learned about during a trip to Germany.

Ardent supporter of Zionism, Juliette also is on the forefront of the fight for women's rights in the 1930's when the French didn't yet have the right to vote. When she returned to France she inquires as to what specifically Jewish women could contribute to Zionism. She is aware of the criticisms against WIZO accused of being only a patron-ladies society with only a pure philanthropic role.

For Juliette, it was not a matter of renouncing fundraising activity, totally necessary for supporting the works that the WIZO created in Palestine and to foster Youth Aliyah. She was named "steward" of the JNF. In the realm of *Kadimah*, she doesn't hesitate to organize dances, shows and charity auctions. That said, she is convinced that "Zionism requires not only giving material goods, but also the transformation of our intellectual life." While being militant activist Zionists, the WIZO or *Kadimah* members were, for the most part, ignorant of Judaism. Thanks to tight connections with the Israeli Scouts of France, *Kadimah* assumes little by little the look of a Jewish studies circle.

To see these Parisian Upper Middle class Jewish women following attentively lessons and lectures given by young Scout Chiefs was surely stupefying. It refutes the negative view of pre-War French Jewry as being supported by the assimilated, acculturated de-Judified. Published texts of that era in "*La Terre retrouvée*" (translator's note: *Rediscovered Land*), on the contrary, show a "Jewish resistance movement that is felt, even to various degrees, amongst all of the Jews of France." It places the origin of this phenomenon in the "disaster of German Jews." In this racial *antisemitism* by which, as Levinas writes in the same era, "Hitler remembered that we do not desert Judaism."⁴

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## THE WIFE AND CHILD

For Juliette, the Jewish woman should "create a field of Zionist activity that only belongs to herself." Strong in this conviction, she attends the World Congress of Women Zionists (WIZO) which is held in Zurich in July-August 1937. In her "Notes on the Congress" she mentions the presence of Jewish women who came from the four corners of the world, more than 137 delegates from 25 nations – "unified by the same idealism, by the same will to collaborate towards the same goal: The land of Israel." A fact illustrates the radical nature of the change in her conversion to

Zionism introduced in her vision of the world: from then on she prefers to couple “Land of Israel-Exile” in place of “Palestine-Diaspora.”

Although she admits to “the great cultural work and practice that occur in Exile” Juliette doesn’t hide for an instant the true object of her interest: “nothing got me more excited than the debates on Palestine itself.” Indispensable for “helping the Palestinian woman and child,” raising funds is her main concern.

Nevertheless, the Jews of “Israel” should not be treated as helped as were formerly the members of the Jewish communities of Palestine who lived off the charity of their brothers in the Diaspora. For Juliette, financial support given by the WIZO is not an act of charity dictated by good feelings but a duty whose modalities must be defined by a charter. Better still it’s an “honor that Palestine bestows on us calling us to participate in her work of reconstruction and rebirth.

In the pre-war years, the Jewish inhabitants of Israel face serious social and economic problems aggravated by the insecure situation due to the incessant attacks by the Arab population. Juliette tells, in particular, of the “difficulties caused by the influx of refugees from the countryside,” and inversely those who are linked to the professional reconversion of young women newly arrived in the country and the constraints of “transforming themselves into citizens in climate-challenged conditions, physical challenges and products that are entirely new for them.” She also mentions the absence of social protections in a country where instruction is not obligatory and where no law regulates child labor.

But, never losing sight of practical problems, Juliette lets herself be guided by almost prophetic visions. Thus she concludes her “Notes on the Congress” wishing that these new emigrants “of totally different ethics, cultures and conditions” form a “singular and homogenous type, from which will emerge as one sole nation, one sole tradition.”

Belonging to the Zionist cause was not Juliette’s prerogative. It was also shared by other representatives of the Parisian Jewish bourgeoisie like Mrs. Louis Roubach, as well as other noble female figures like Denise Gamzon, wife of Robert Gamzon, National commissioner of the Israeli Scouts of France. Even though Juliette considered this number insufficient, the French Federation of the WIZO counted amongst its membership a thousand women.

Such a commitment was totally exceptional, as these compliments which were addressed to her after her visit to the annual auction of JNF in Antwerp in 1936 illustrate. “We, Antwerp Zionists, have always had a false idea of Paris. We thought

that there were no truly Zionist French Jews. Mrs. Stern was the living refutation of that prejudice. We are very happy to confess here our error.”

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RESCUE

At the time of her trip to Palestine, Juliette met Henrietta Szold⁵. An American with German Jewish origins, she financed, by the efforts of the women’s organization Hadassah, a network of medical services and teaching centers in Israel. At the request of the world Zionist Congress, Henrietta Szold created Youth Aliyah in 1933.

Collecting funds was indispensable for saving these young German Jews and settling them in Palestine. Juliette was attracted to the task and gathered under the auspices of *Kadimah*, a sum that permitted the establishment of a satellite of Youth Aliyah in Paris. The Secretary General of this office was Hannah Arendt, who fled Nazi Germany, already committed at that time, the reflections which became, after the war, her work on *Les origines du totalitarisme* (translator’s note: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*).

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From her years as a student, Hannah Arendt was close to Kurt Blumenfeld, President of the German Zionist Organization. The “illegal activities” which Blumenfeld put her in charge of caused her to be arrested in 1933 by the Gestapo. Once released, Arendt left Germany immediately and went to Prague, then to Paris. There she met Juliette Stern at the office of Youth Aliyah. The two women became friends and Hannah Arendt also travelled to Palestine in 1935, to accompany the young *olim* (new Jewish immigrants). Without sharing Juliette’s enthusiasm for Israel, she expressed the same attachment to its destiny “I know that every significant catastrophe in Israel would affect me more profoundly than anything else.”⁶

During the war Juliette was named member of the administrative council of the UGIF (General Union of Jews of France), an organization created in November 1941 by a decree of the Vichy government under the German authority. By substituting one single and

centralized organization for all of the diverse associations in the Jewish community, the Germans planned to pursue isolation of the Jews from French society, a prelude to their extermination.

The role of the UGIF became the subject of lively debates.⁷ For historians, there is a “black legend” and a “pink legend” of the UGIF. It would be more correct to speak of a “vast gray zone where there were a small number of traitors, but also a few heroes and maybe even some heroines.”⁸ Juliette was one of those heroines. Responsible for the social service assistance of the UGIF, she understood from December 1941 the need to “place the children not just for vacation but to hide them!”⁹ Under the guise of its functions, she saw to the rescue of children who were left alone after their parents were arrested.¹⁰

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## GOLDA MEIR

Thus, the official Service 42 that she led at the UGIF was doubled as the secret Service 42B. Her action intensified after the round-up of Vel d’Hiv on July 16, 1942, when the Gestapo handed over to her service hundreds of children. Aware of the danger of uniting them in centers where it would be easy later to arrest them, she worked for their dispersion and placement with welcoming families. Together with networks of Jewish resistance, she allowed these children who were lodged in the UGIF center to be “kidnapped” so that they could be sheltered in the countryside.

Her activity finally drew the attention of the Nazis and their collaborators. In April-May of 1943, Joseph Antignac, director of the Darquier de Pellepoix office, chief of the General Commission for Jewish questions addressed reports to the SS. They cite “services of secret placement with false civil papers” functioning in the UGIF. “Mrs. Stern” and the Service 42B are implicated. July 31, 1943 Juliette escaped from the round up that included the arrest of about 20 people who worked for Service 42.

**THERE WERE A SMALL NUMBER OF TRAITORS, BUT ALSO A FEW HEROES AND MAYBE EVEN SOME HEROINES. JULIETTE WAS ONE OF THOSE HEROINES.**

At the time of Liberation, Juliette actively saw to the reunion of Jewish children hidden with families and Christian institutions during the war. Situated in Cailly-sur-Eure (Upper Normandy) one of these welcoming sites later was named “Maison Juliette.”

In 1948, she became President of the WIZO and thereby the Vice President of the Zionist Federation of France. She travelled to Israel and met Golda Meir and David Ben-Gurion there. She directed the WIZO until her death in Paris in 1963.<sup>11</sup>

With the help of other courageous women, Juliette saved more than a thousand children. Many years later, one of these children paid her a tribute.<sup>12</sup> “To the memory of Juliette Stern who, during the night which covered Europe between 1939

and 1945, saved the lives of hundreds of children. She saved one amongst them; he remembers.”

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Notes

¹ See his self-portrait in his article, “Suis-je devenue sioniste? Oui!” (“Have I become a Zionist? Yes!”) *La Terre Retrouvée* (25 June 1935), excerpts of which we include here.

² It is, in fact, Mt. Scopus.

³ We warmly thank Francis Hoffman, grandson of Juliette Stern, who gave us access to her letters.

⁴ “L’Inspiration religieuse de l’Alliance,” (1935) in *Emmanuel Levinas, Cahiers de l’Herne*, Paris, 1991, p. 146.

⁵ See the biography of Hannah Arendt by E. Young-Breuhl, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1999, pp. 177-180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁷ Michel Lafitte, *Un engrenage fatal. L’UGIF face aux réalités de la Shoah 1941-1944* (*A Deadly Spiral. The UGIF Face the Realities of the Shoah 1941-1944*), Paris, Liana Levi, 2003, and Lucien Lazar, *La Résistance Juive. Un combat pour la survie* (*The Jewish Resistance: A Fight for Survival*), Paris, Nadir, 2001, pp. 35-39.

⁸ View the preface to Pierre Vidal-Naquet in the book by Lafitte, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

⁹ Comments made during the meeting of 1 December 1941 in the location of the OSE and reported by Eva Averbough in her *Carnets d’une assistante sociale sous l’occupation allemande* (*Books of a Social Worker under the German Occupation*).

¹⁰ See the notice of L. Lazar in *Organisation juive de combat. France 1940-1945* (*Jewish Combat Organization, France 1940-1945*), Autrement, Paris, 2006, pp. 469-470.

¹¹ We thank Paul Denekamp for his information on the activities of J. Stern after the war.

¹² Dedication of Georges Hansel in his book *Explorations talmudiques* (*Talmudic Explorations*), Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998.