THE INDIVIDUAL IN HISTORY

Essays in Honor of Jehuda Reinharz

ChaeRan Y. Freeze, Sylvia Fuks Fried, and Eugene R. Sheppard, editors



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"The Wise Woman of Givat Brenner"

Jessie Sampter on Kibbutz, War, and Peace, 1934–1938

MEIR CHAZAN



Jessie Sampter came from New York to Palestine on September 22, 1919, and a few months later she decided to settle there. At first she lived in Jerusalem, and later in the town of Rehovot. In 1934 she moved to the nearby kibbutz, Givat Brenner. Sampter died on November 25, 1938, at the age of fifty-five. This essay deals with the last years of her life, when she was a member of the kibbutz, and it is based mainly on summaries of dozens of diverse articles, which she published in the newsletter of Givat Brenner.¹

In the gallery of women from the American Zionist movement who settled in Palestine, we can identify a few unique and extraordinary figures. Among them were Golda Meir, Henrietta Szold, and Irma Lindheim. Unlike them, throughout her life Sampter stayed away from organizational and political activity. Her influence on Zionist life and on the consolidation of kibbutz life in the 1930s was manifested mainly in the intellectual sphere.

Kibbutz Givat Brenner, named after the writer Yosef Haim Brenner, who was murdered in May 1921, was founded in 1928 and belonged to the Hakibbutz Hameuhad Movement. Six years later, in February 1934, the kibbutz started publishing a newsletter, which at first was posted every few days on the bulletin board in the common dining room, and later was distributed to the members. The need for the newsletter stemmed

from the accelerated expansion of the local population, a result of the Fifth Aliyah, which brought many new immigrants from Germany to the kibbutz. The newsletter had two purposes: first, to distribute to the members information about what was going on at Givat Brenner with regard to social, economic, educational, and cultural issues, in order to mediate between the collective administrative institutions and the regular members, and assist in exposing and correcting problems of everyday life. Second, it was to serve as an ideological and intellectual forum for the exchange of ideas and for presenting dilemmas that were on the public agenda—on the local level, on the movement-kibbutz level, and on the Yishuv-Zionist level (Yishuv—the Jewish population of Palestine before 1948). Thus the newsletter was meant to reinforce the bonds of human and social solidarity between Jews who identified with the realization of the socialist-Zionist vision, but who nevertheless had come from diverse backgrounds and from different countries in Europe.

In those very days when the newsletter of Givat Brenner began to appear, Sampter became a regular member of the kibbutz. She came to live there with her friend Leah Berlin, in order to establish on the kibbutz a vegetarian convalescent home, which was opened in 1935 and after she died was named "Beit Yesha" ("Jessie's Home"). Thirty years later in the gallery of extraordinary types, which characterized Givat Brenner from its inception, Eliezer Regev described Sampter as the most original.² When she arrived at Givat Brenner, she had already had a rich career in the area of educational-ideological writing about Zionist topics, both as part of her educational activity at the Hadassah Organization, under the guidance of Henrietta Szold, during World War I and following it, and as a gifted writer and poet, seeking to bring the events in Palestine to the attention of Jewish public opinion in the United States.³

Sampter was not a typical kibbutz member. Her experience of kibbutz life was mediated by her focus on the ideological discourse that was constantly bustling in it and random scholarly conversations she conducted with members who liked and appreciated her. But as a close friend of hers on Givat Brenner, Ruth Cohen, noted, "Jesse never knew kibbutz life in its entirety, in its simple reality. She was not really familiar with that hard life movement which turns quite a few among us into cogs in the machine." Through the thin veil of bitterness revealed in Cohen's grim description

of the reality of the kibbutz, we can discern Sampter's skill in weaving, out of the ideals and values as she conceived them, a sublime human fabric, which should guide the realization, "here, on the face of the earth" (in the words of the poet Rahel) of the kibbutz.

In March 1934, while the ideological-political confrontation in the Yishuv between the Labor movement and the Revisionist movement over the hegemony in the Zionist movement intensified, following the murder of the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency, Haim Arlosoroff, Sampter wrote for the first time for the Givat Brenner newsletter. A few days earlier, the members of the kibbutz participated in a violent confrontation with the Revisionists, after a conflict about the allotment of working positions in a building in Rehovot. Contrary to the prevailing approach on her kibbutz, Sampter stood up and refused to back the supporters of the struggle between Jews and other Jews seeking to justify their ideological view. She determined that "from the murder of Abel (by Cain) until the murder of Arlosoroff, war between brothers had fed on defending prestige, self-righteousness and the pursuit of honor. But we are one, we are brothers. No one is guilty and no one is right. There is a past, there is a legacy, there is education and there are different conditions, and we should therefore be careful that our position is one of protecting life only." These words introduced a poem she wrote, entitled "War between Brothers": "I hit you my brother, with my hand, with my fist, I hit you my brother. / I killed you my brother, with my sword, with my gun, I killed you my brother. / Why did I kill my beloved brother? For what? For whom? / To protect another opinion, to show that I was right, I killed my own brother." 5 Eight months after it was published in the kibbutz newsletter, Sampter's poem also appeared in *Davar*, the newspaper of the Histadrut (Labor Federation). The opinion she expressed was adopted by the leaders of Mapai, David Ben-Gurion and Berl Katznelson (the editor of Davar), who tried to promote reaching an agreement with the Revisionist movement, despite the bitter opposition of a considerable number of the members of their own party.6

Sampter often expressed herself on the pages of the newsletter on prosaic matters, concerning everyday life on Givat Brenner. One of these opportunities presented itself following the theft of a lamp from the tent of a member of the kibbutz by three youngsters from the Hanoar Ha'oved

youth movement, who lived for a while on Givat Brenner. In the internal kibbutz jargon, such an act usually was referred to as "filching" and dismissed with a chuckle. On the pages of the newsletter, the victimized member reported that he had located his lamp in the closet in the tent of Hanoar Ha'oved group members, retrieved his stolen property, appropriated their lamp as a punishment, and handed it over to the central storehouse of the kibbutz. Through the newsletter, he demanded that the institutions of the kibbutz see to it that the offenders be punished, that the common tendency on the kibbutz to dismiss such cases with the lenient term "filching" be stopped, and that this behavior be severely reprimanded and clearly defined as "stealing." Sampter, in her didactic way, commented that in a socialist society it was not acceptable to call youngsters "thieves" only "because of minor filching." She preached that in a "free society" individuals had no right to look for missing items in the closets of others or to punish them at their own discretion. They always had the possibility and the right to summon those who they felt had wronged them to a public hearing. "Actions of filching," she clarified, were not an appropriate social-cultural phenomenon, and we should educate ourselves, including the youth, to avoid them. "But we cannot educate our members by curses and abuse, and not in this way will we show our ability to educate." After all, she concluded, "there was filching here before these youths came. Who instructed them in this craft?"7

Around that time, in the organ of the Hakibbutz Hameuhad movement, *Mibifnim*, Sampter protested the discrimination against members of the Hanoar Ha'oved movement, in comparison with the Jewish youths arriving in Palestine at that time from Germany, through Youth Aliyah. While the youths from Germany received financial support from the Jewish agency for their absorption on the kibbutz and had concrete buildings built for them with these funds, Sampter said sharply, the local youths absorbed on the kibbutz had to make do with temporary housing and live in tents or shacks. "The youths from Germany enjoy decent housing conditions, they are well-dressed, they work only five hours a day and study during the rest of the day." At the same time, the Jewish youths from Palestine lived in harsh housing conditions; in most cases, they had not brought adequate clothing with them from their parents' homes, because of their low standards of living; they worked for many

hours in the fields and workshops and had only a little time for studying. Where were the principles of equality that were the ideal in a socialist society? Sampter protested the discrimination against the youths from Palestine as "inappropriate phenomena, smacking of philanthropy." Although, she admitted, the youths coming from Germany did have to study the language, the local youths also needed a variety of studies in order to acquire minimal general knowledge, and the question, therefore, was: "Can we accept among us a reality of privileged youth, with special rights, next to disadvantaged youth? Is it possible to buy extra rights on the kibbutz with money?" Although the enterprise of Youth Aliyah, headed by her friend Henrietta Szold, was perceived at that time as one of the clear manifestations of solidarity in Jewish life, in light of the Nürenberg Laws and the harassment of the Jews in Germany by the Nazi regime, the American Sampter came out for the locally born youths and demanded, with the kind of audacity that deviated from what seemed reasonable and acceptable in public discourse: "Let us not complacently tolerate within our camp, the camp of the dreamers of equality, the insult inflicted on some of our children."8

Time and again Sampter extended the boundaries of public discourse and allowed herself to say outright what, presumably, others thought and believed but could not openly express, because of their social status or other personal and public commitments. This pattern was a common characteristic of her conduct in the various debates on the issues that were on the agenda in the last years of her life. Her choice to opine frequently on controversial topics, free from accepted conventions or struggles over ideological or political positions, influence, and prestige, gave her the status of an intellectual who sought to challenge the prevalent thinking and behavior. Sampter behaved in this way in a society in which collectivist thinking, perceived as desirable, dictated to a considerable extent what was worthy and correct to think, and set the limits of expression in the ideological arena. Sampter made good use of her status as a person who was accountable only to herself and to the truth in which she believed.

A year later Sampter returned to the issue of stealing in kibbutz society, this time in the context of the disappearance of various books, which belonged to her and had been placed on a bookcase in the hall of the guest house for the benefit of the guests. Among the missing books, in addition

to a volume of poetry by Rahel and issues of the journal Asia, was a collection of German poems, with an elegant, leather, gold-embossed binding, which she had received as a childhood present from one of her teachers. The book went missing and then suddenly reappeared, about half a year later, on the bookcase in the convalescent home. Sampter described her losses in the kibbutz newsletter and consoled herself with a socialist saying to the effect that "property is theft," noting that this referred to general property which was needed by others, and not to property someone was using. "Any speck of property which I don't need and others do is theft in my hands," she determined in this spirit, but, she warned, it was forbidden to touch what a person was using. How good it would be if the lost things were returned, Sampter wrote, but if that did not happen, "we would not consider such wantonness bad intention. We would make do with what is left and be sorry" that we couldn't leave all the books out for the benefit of everyone. "There is no reason for despair," she concluded. "After all, the person is more valuable to me than the book."9

On December 23, 1936, the five hundredth issue of the Givat Brenner newsletter appeared. Selecting Sampter to write the lead article of this festive issue testified to the kibbutz's high value of her opinions. At the beginning of her article, Sampter, who often used conversations with members whom she encountered at the guest house to express her opinions on kibbutz life, related a question by a veteran of the Labor movement, who had visited Givat Brenner: Why was the kibbutz investing so much effort and money to produce the newsletter? "As simple workers, fighting the tough war of survival," he argued, "you should not indulge in such luxuries. If you don't have butter for the bread, or a room to sleep in, why you need a daily newsletter?" We already have mentioned Sampter's sensitivity to the issue of the housing conditions of the youth movement members who were being educated on the kibbutz. Still, she rejected the complaint, saying that the newsletter "is more important for us than butter for the bread, or maybe even a room." And since Givat Brenner was growing exponentially, because of the absorption of the Fifth Aliyah from Central European countries, which within a short time turned it into a kibbutz numbering more than six hundred inhabitants, Sampter thought that the newsletter played a crucial role. It constituted "an adhesive for a new, weak society. Especially here, where difficult social problems inevitably arise, due to the

speedy absorption from different countries, the word that unites is necessary, and it touches every heart." She further attested that writing for the newsletter helped her improve and enhance her Hebrew.¹⁰

The newsletter was published more frequently in times of crisis, and such days were numerous in the months following the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in April 1936. Sampter was an arrant pacifist and even in the hard days of the Arab Revolt upheld the vision of a joint existence with the Arabs, like the best-known member of Givat Brenner, Enzo Sereni. After the first month of the hostilities, Sampter clarified, in the newsletter, that her opposition to war in all forms was still in force, and in 1918 she mentioned her objection to the Jewish Legion, even though "self-defense, protecting one's life from the attacker, is the first duty of human beings. Without it they cannot exist." Sampter shared with the new immigrants, who swelled the ranks in Givat Brenner and who were in the country only a few years or even months, her experiences and travails from the bloody incidents with the Arabs in the early 1920s and in 1929. She related how, during the riots in Jerusalem in April 1920, one of her friends asked her if she would not want to keep a revolver in her home, and in reply, she showed him a large kitchen knife, hidden in her room, for any eventuality. She recalled that during the riots, in August 1929, she lived with her young daughter in an isolated neighborhood in Tel Aviv, near Jaffa. A friend of hers, who lived nearby, walked every day to Tel Aviv to take part in guard duty. One evening, "he returned in horrible grief, threw his pistol down, and said he would never go back to this job." He then reported to her that in response to the murder of a Jewish youth, Jews broke into a home full of women and children in an Arab neighborhood, and "shot and killed! This disaster is more terrible than all the others! How could the Haganah defend such Jews! How could it be responsible for order if there's no discipline?" The lesson of these two anecdotes was, from Sampter's point of view, that the "Jewish defense" created in Palestine had to have unique qualities that combined the preservation of life and readiness for selfdefense with a morality of forbearance and restraint. In this respect, the kibbutz was for her also a shelter and refuge of sorts. "It is good to be at Givat Brenner on these hard days," she confessed, "rather than among the masses in the city. I fear only weakness and the possibility of an attempt for revenge. . . . It is good to stay in a home guarded by our watchmen." ¹¹

On August 17, Sampter finished an article bearing the self-explanatory title "Watchwoman," which later appeared in the us labor movement's monthly magazine Jewish Frontier. In light of the circumstances of August 1936, Sampter acknowledged the necessity for defense. In the article, she reviewed, extensively and with deep empathy, the history of the struggle of women to play an active role in the realization of Zionism. The article opened with a description of the efforts of Manya Shochat and her female comrades, whom Sampter described as "armed Amazons," endowed with a "quality as of bronze," to take an active part in defense during the time of the Hashomer organization (1909–1920), and it ended with a series of rhetorical questions that bothered women at that time: "Shall half of the community protect the other half? Shall half lie on the floor while the other half is facing the shots? What will our children say? What will our daughters say when they grow up and are differentiated from the little boys with whom until now they shared everything? Will a mother send her fifteen year old boy to go on guard while she hides in the concentration room?"12 Addressing her readers, especially the female ones, among the American Jews, the well-liked poet promised and pledged:

The pioneer Jewish woman must stand by her man at this hour in defense, and at a later hour attain in the work of cooperation and peaceful upbuilding. The little girls who came from Germany last year are already bronzed by the sun; they have the same color and speak the same Hebrew as the little girls born in Jerusalem or Warsaw. There stands one on the hillock, against the rising sun, a white kerchief on her head, wearing a deep blue sleeveless blouse, short black bloomers, over sandalled feet. She is brown and straight as a young tree, a lonely tree, standing guard on a hillock. The wind blows her brown curls and her hand shades her eyes against the rising sun.¹³

During 1936 and early 1937, Sampter continuously justified the policy of restraint. Tactical arguments from the military field were outside her range of expertise, and therefore she focused on raising practical reasons from the moral domain, trying to extract them from the abstract, theoretical sphere and endow them with a concrete dimension. In this context, she claimed that acts of retaliation "will reduce us to the same level as the base terrorists," and that such actions "will prove to the world at large that

we are also aggressors who deserve punishment." She sought to counter those who maintained that "we should educate ourselves to overcome our nausea regarding war" through lessons from history: "The goal of the French Revolution was to free human beings. It had wonderful slogans and enthusiastic fighters. Did it achieve its aim? It was also said about the World War [I] that it would bring an end to all wars. It was said that it would save democracy. But it brought the opposite, because love cannot come out of hate, or an improved society out of blood and fire. It is superstitious to believe that justice can grow out of killing, and that the benevolence of the next world can bloom out of the consuming fire. This is what the perpetrators of the Inquisition believed." ¹⁴ Sampter openly explained her reasons for taking the risk of being called naïve and out of touch with reality even at times of blood and fire, despair and hopelessness: "We should take pains to acquire wisdom, because we also have to educate others, younger than ourselves, and their future is in our hands." The educational calling was for her a sacred tenet and an independent goal, although she had never been a public leader, never worked as a teacher in Palestine, and never had a group of staunch, attentive adherents.

In May 1938, while she was in and out of the hospital because of her frail medical condition, Sampter chose to discuss two of the most sensitive topics on the agenda of the kibbutz in the newsletter of Givat Brenner: the place of religion in the explicitly secular collective life and the unification of the kibbutz movements. From her point of view, the link between these issues stemmed from the following thesis: "I differentiate between religion and ideology, on the one hand, and faith and folk customs, on the other. The former are indications of petrifaction, while the latter are signs of life." On the basis of this critical distinction, Sampter called for the design of one Passover Haggadah, which would be read on all kibbutzim and give expression to the values of communality and equality. She urged the members of Givat Brenner not to shy away from holding public ceremonies to welcome the Sabbath, including customs such as lighting candles and singing traditional songs. For her, there was a basic difference between what "father had done" in the past "because of religion" (i.e., law), since "he was associated with a petrified ideology," and the free search for faith and folk customs, which could lead, out of choice rather than fear and coercion, to the adoption of nice customs that had been followed "in our parents' home." Sampter clarified that "when we choose the parts of the literary tradition which are suitable for us today, we should take great care not to introduce into our customs anything which contradicts our outlook." She emphasized, however, that any person who recognized the existence of "an occult life force, which is differently revealed to each one of us," recognized God too, and therefore she suggested: "Let us vote whether we should accept the God of Israel among us, into our society." ¹⁶

According to Sampter, the same basic principle that separated religion and ideology from belief and folk life applied to the unification of the three kibbutz movements: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, Hever Hakvutzot (Kvutza), and Hakibbutz Haartzi (Hashomer Hatzair). Those movements had developed separately and were grappling with the question of forming one organization despite their ideological differences. She thought that the differences between them were manifested in certain "charming words" versus other "charming words," while in everyday life there was much in common between the various movements.¹⁷ She expressed her opinion in an article that was first published in *Davar La'ole*, the section of the *Davar* newspaper geared to new immigrants, and later selected by Berl Katznelson to conclude the book he edited about the Kibbutz movement (note that the following is a direct quotation with the errors intact):

Something happened! There came immigrants; and we had no room, not in barracks nor tents. So what did we do? We saw it through: We emptied out the library, and made of it a dormitory. We formed a ring and sing and dance, because we welcomed immigrants, who fled to take their stand here in the Holy Land.

Where did this occur? In the *Kibbutz Hameuhad*, in the *Kvutza*, and in the *Shomer Hatzair*.

Something happened. Hundreds of chicks burst from the incubator; and we were in a fix, for their houses will not be finished till later. So what did we do? Our reading room new, and clean and fine, and spick and span, we cleared for them and there they ran. We formed a ring and dance and sing, in joy for what the seasons bring.

Where did this occur? In the *Kibbutz Hameuhad*, in the *Kvutza*, and in the *Shomer Hatzair*.

Something happened. A great storm mowed down the tents, es-

pecially those with holes and rents. So, what did we do? In the rooms for two, the man and wife made extra place, so girls soaked through could rest a space, a month or two till Winter's through. And we shiver and are glad for making good what was so bad!

Where did this occur? In the *Kibbutz Hameuhad*, in the *Kvutza*, and in the *Shomer Hatzair*.

Something happened. Oh, so sad! Death took from us a little lad; one of our flowers, a child of ours. What did we do? What could we do? We wept and wept and were not done; all of us, we wept as one. And then we gathered, sad and still, to bury him on the green hill, weeping still.

Where did this occur? In the *Kibbutz Hameuhad*, in the *Kvutza*, and in the *Shomer Hatzair*.

Something happened. Shots were poured, from ambush, on our men on guard. A comrade fell before our eyes, bathed in his blood, who shall not rise. What did we do? We saw it through. Silently we veiled his face; with broken hearts, we kept our place. We stood on guard and so shall stand till peace and freedom bless our land.

Where did this occur? In the *Kibbutz Hameuhad*, in the *Kvutza*, and in the *Shomer Hatzair*. ¹⁸

It took the leaders and members of the kibbutz movements sixty-one years, during which time the kibbutz suffered countless travails and sustained a dramatic attrition in its status and in that of the values it represented and symbolized in Israeli society, to adopt the spirit of Sampter's insights and wisdom.

The same basic qualities of Sampter's personality and worldview—innocence, rejection of helplessness, a sense of mission, optimism, and the
awareness that taking a stand in the public sphere was pointless unless it
was accompanied by a personal commitment—also appeared in her last
poem published during her lifetime in September 1938, in the thousandth
issue of the Givat Brenner newsletter. Entitled "Le'an?" ("Where to?"), a
word that was repeated throughout the poem, she poignantly related the
fate of the Jews, condemned by their Jewishness, in Europe of those days:

"Away, Jew, away! Hit the road, do not stay! Aliens have no business here!" Where to?

"Hell, inferno — that's your place! Don't defile the superior race! From Berlin to devil's care!" Where to?

In Switzerland we will find shelter.
There we can rest till things get better.
"These are our mountains! Who is there?"
Where to?

In Italy we will abide.
"For Jews entry is denied!
Strangers are not welcome here!"
Where to?

"To the sea, to the abyss!
But in Rome there is no place!
Do not plead, since we don't care!"
Where to?

To America we'll flee,
To shelter in the land of the free.
"We have no room!" Yes, even there.
Where to?

To the river, to the sea! There's no place for us to be! Balak here and Haman there . . . Where to?

To our land, to our nest. With our brothers we'll find rest. But it's closed and there's no key For the refugee.

"Nonetheless, there is a choice. We'll open the gates and raise our voice!" Who is singing for me there? Where to?

"Listen, brothers, thus we say: We'll not retreat, here we shall stay. From Beer Sheba to Dan, it is clear — We are here." 19

In this poem, published about two-and-a-half months before her death, Sampter reflected on the plight of the Jews and offered what she viewed as the only solution—the realization of Zionism in Palestine. We can understand what the word "realization" symbolized for her from her attempt to explain why the daily newsletter of Givat Brenner was so meager and prosaic. Her answer was that the newsletter also was a kind of "realization." The descendant of the most prosperous Jewish Diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century glorified, on the pages of the newsletter of Givat Brenner, what had been perceived in the labor settlement movement as the key for understanding the message of Zionism for Jewish life.

I have long ago come to believe that each people, like each person, has its own unique qualities. The People of Israel has been endowed with the quality of realization. Not realism, mind you, but the realization of thought in action. The history of our persistence as a living people, and that of our religion, which realized in everyday life, minute by minute, the thoughts and belief of our people, attests to the ongoing realization of unifying spirit and action. We are faithful children of our ancestors when we realize our faith in the life of a collective society. To realize a desire in sublime moments is a splendid and wonderful thing, but to do it every day, in cold and heat, in times of enthusiasm and in times of despair, is, sometimes, boring and prosaic.²⁰

No wonder that in the eulogy dedicated to her upon her death Sampter was called "the wise woman of Givat Brenner." ²¹

NOTES

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Feminist in American Zionism" (master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, 1995); Rebecca Boim Wolf, "Jessie Sampter School of Zionism," in *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education, 1910–1965*, HBI Series on Jewish Women, ed. Carol K. Ingall (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 46–62.

- 2. Eliezer Regev, "Haesha halevana," in *Beit Yesha: 30 shanah* (Givat Brenner, 1965), 1.
- 3. See, for example, Jessie E. Sampter, *A Course in Zionism* (New York: Federation of American Zionists, 1915); Jessie E. Sampter, *Around the Year in Rhymes for the Jewish Child* (New York, 1920); Jessie E. Sampter, *The Emek* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1927).
- 4. Ruth Cohen, "Yesha Sampter," in *Yesha Sampter: leyom hashloshim* (Kibbutz Givat Brenner, 1939), 31.
 - 5. Yesha [Sampter], "Milkhmet ahim," Alon Givat Brenner, March 23, 1934.
 - 6. Yesha [Sampter], "Milkhmet ahim," Davar, November 16, 1934.
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