

An Early Letter from Jerusalem: Edith Gerson-Kiwi – Between Zionist Optimism and Erez-Israeli Reality



Edith Kiwi (1933) (author unknown)

Coming to Erez Israel

It is December 5, 1935, when a young woman from Berlin arrives in Mandatory Palestine. Equipped with an alert mind, a fair amount of ambition and astonishing energy, she has decided to turn her back on her homeland and build a new life in the 'Land of the Fathers'. It seems she takes great pleasure in what she finds: in a letter to her friend Eva¹, who is exiled in Amsterdam, she effusively describes the purifying and uplifting effect the country has upon her. *"There are also wonderful people here, the country embraces and nurtures them; for many of them it was a complete rebirth, I myself have gone through it in a very intense way. And then: all these young people, suntanned and strong, and a rhythm of work, freedom and hope that is inspiring and quite intoxicating,"* she reports, drawing on the arsenal of Zionist metaphors and images. For what is reproduced here is the Zionist vision of the 'new Jew' who leaves the Diaspora and puts down new roots in the soil of his or

her 'old-new' homeland: free from the pressures of the surrounding societies, physically and spiritually regenerated, productive and self-confident.

Jerusalem, den 29. 9. 36
Meine liebe Eva,
es ist nun fast ein Jahr
her, daß wir das letzte Mal voneinander
hören. Wieviel ist inzwischen geschehen.
Mein letzter Brief erreichte mich noch kurz
bevor ich nach Palästina abfuhr und so
konnte mich so betreten nach allem, was du
von dir und den beiden kleinen erzählt hast.
Habe auch Dank für die Zeitung an Gasthaus.
Beide habe ich die letzten Wochen ausruhen
können. Du schreibst vollkommen, daß W. die
Wochen ein ruhiger und mühsamer Mann
warstest in der Arbeit der jüdischen Kinos
palästina in Tel-Aviv. Ich habe ihn nach
unbedingten Aufsuchen nach Aufbruch, über
fast als meine Hilfe an Eva Salomon-
Hoffmann, die ihn persönlich kennt.
Die erste Zeit (so der: vorp. Jahre) lebte ich
in Tel-Aviv, und vom ersten Aufbruch
da ich die wunderbare Land betrat. Ich
alle Pumpschrit mit Geduld mit der letzten
Jahre wie Zucker ab. Gleich von Ort zu

Letter to Eva Newman, 1936 (first page). For the English translation of the complete text, see footnote²

The young woman and author of the letter is the German-Jewish musicologist Edith Gerson-Kiwi. She is remembered today as a pioneer of Israeli musicology, one who made lasting contributions to the institutionalization and thematic orientation of this discipline, and to its international interconnectedness between Israel and the wider world. Her letter of September 29, 1936, around which this blog article is centered, is only one of over 6,000 letters being catalogued as part of a research project at the European Center for Jewish Music (ECJM) in Hanover, Germany. They are part of the extensive Gerson-Kiwi Estate, the bulk of which is housed by the ECJM; a smaller number of documents can be found in Israel, among others at the National Library in Jerusalem. The letter presented here is the earliest letter known to us that this young woman wrote after her arrival in Palestine, and it deserves attention insofar as it is located, so to speak, at a neuralgic point: referring to the previous life she had to leave behind, while at the same time mapping out the horizons of her future life.

This would have been quite different had the historical ruptures and upheavals of the 20th century not driven her from Germany to the Orient.

From Berlin to Jerusalem

Edith Gerson-Kiwi is born in Berlin in 1908 into an assimilated Jewish family and enjoys a typical bourgeois upbringing. As a young girl, she attends a humanist *Gymnasium* (selective high school), and her evident musical talent is nurtured by piano and composition studies at the Stern'sche Konservatorium, a renowned music academy. After gaining her *Abitur* university entrance qualification, she reads musicology, minoring in philosophy and literary history, at the universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Leipzig. Under the tutelage of Willibald Gurlitt, Theodor Kroyer, and Heinrich Bessler, Gerson-Kiwi's studies focus on Early Music History. Her doctoral thesis is on a Renaissance topic: the history of the Italian canzonetta (*Liedmadrigal*) in the 16th century. Piano and harpsichord studies under Günther Ramin (in Leipzig) and Wanda Landowska (in Paris) complete her practical music education.



At home in Berlin at the grand piano, 1927 (author unknown)

One searches in vain for a Zionist socialization in this biography. The 'push factor' driving this young woman to the Orient is not the idealistic longing for the 'new Jew', but rather the increasing anti-Semitic pressure in Germany. The first thing to

fall victim to this is her relationship with her non-Jewish fiancé and fellow student Fritz Dietrich (1905–1945): while her parents, after initial hesitation, agree to the match, his parents do not accept her because of her Jewish identity. The year 1933 finally brings the decisive turning point: while defending her dissertation in Heidelberg on January 30, the day of the transfer of power to Hitler, she hears soldiers and students clashing in the street. The young musicologist no longer sees a future in Germany.

In the same year, after a short intermezzo in the form of a bookbinding apprenticeship in Heidelberg, she goes to Bologna to study palaeography and library science. Meanwhile, Fritz Dietrich gains clarity about his future aspirations, deciding in favour of an academic career in Germany and thus against a relationship with a Jewish woman. A single encounter is all that is needed to prompt Gerson-Kiwi to take a big step: she meets a group of young Zionists from Palestine in the university cafeteria in Bologna and makes a spur-of-the-moment decision to emigrate there. This appears to be a good move: to her, after all the problems of the past, the new homeland amounts to a revelation.

German-Jewish immigration

Very few Jewish immigrants from Germany who relocated to the Orient after 1933 were likely to feel at home, or even uplifted, upon their arrival there, given that they came as refugees rather than idealists.

The Zionist vision of building a Jewish home in Palestine had fallen on fertile ground, especially among the Jews of Eastern Europe. By contrast, the majority of German Jews preferred the path of social integration – up until 1933, that is. They considered themselves ‘German citizens of the Jewish faith,’ with membership in German culture having overridden their commitment to Judaism. Only a tiny minority belonged to the Zionist Federation, distrusted the German-Jewish symbiosis and considered a new way of life in the ‘Land of the Fathers’. Most of them were content to support Palestine from afar; the number of those who emigrated there before 1933 was scarcely more than 2,000.

With the transfer of power to Hitler, emigration increasingly became an option. The Fifth Aliyah alone brought between 50,000 and 90,000 German-speaking Jews to Palestine. There they met the Zionists from Eastern Europe, who had immigrated earlier and formed a social, economic and political elite. The new immigrants from Germany, often well-educated academics, had difficulty finding work, were confronted with social and economic decline and often lived in dire conditions. Erez Israel, which after centuries of lawlessness and exclusion represented a place of yearning and a Jewish home for the Eastern European Jews, was an exile for the assimilated German Jews, which they would have loved to exchange for their former homeland.

In comparison with these experiences, Edith Gerson-Kiwi’s encounter with her old-new homeland is thoroughly positive, all the more so since *“everything in my personal life suddenly became good once more”*: newly arrived in the country, she meets Kurt Gerson, an engineer and architect from Hamburg. Four months later, they get married. Gerson, having immigrated in 1932 for Zionist motives, works as a hydrologist for the prominent Jewish Agency – a ‘systemically relevant’

profession, as we would say today, in a dry and desert-rich country still in the process of being developed. A job, at any rate, which may have entailed certain privileges and security in this country with its harsh living conditions.



Just married: Edith Gerson-Kiwi and Kurt Gerson, 1936 (author unknown)

“A Prussian island in an Oriental sea”

“We live in a new garden suburb of Jerusalem that is populated by many German immigrants. [...] We have a charming attic apartment on top of a brand-new complex of houses – and a large terrace as well, from where there is an extensive view over the hill country of Judea with its fantastic colors [and] scenery.”

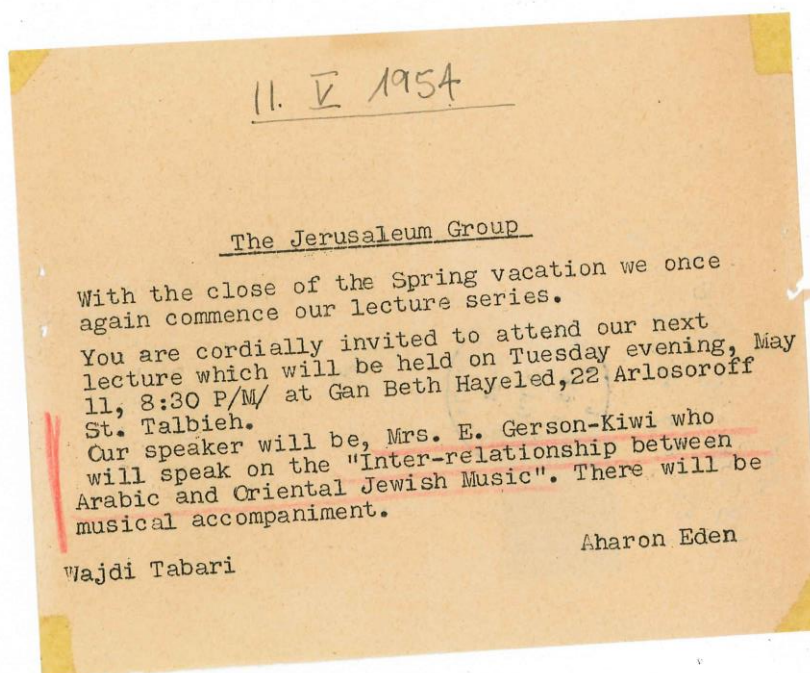
Whether the couple’s move into the respectable “apartment with a view” is due to Kurt Gerson’s position at the Jewish Agency can only be guessed at. The garden city is Rehavia, Jerusalem’s noble villa district, designed on the model of Berlin’s Grunewald, to which chroniclers such as Agnon and Amos Oz have created a literary monument. Built in the 1920s to plans by the German-Jewish architect Richard Kauffmann, this oasis on the outskirts of the city – it has now long since been swallowed up by the city center – soon became the preferred place of residence for educated people and intellectuals of the German cultural world: professors and staff of the still-young Hebrew University, writers and journalists, doctors, pharmacists and lawyers, cultural workers and civil servants. Quite a few of them have made their way from Berlin to Jerusalem, where this “Prussian island

in the Oriental sea” has become their home. Here they cultivate the German way of life and culture they are so strongly connected with and which is now coming to an end in Germany.



On the terrace of the apartment in Rehavia, 1936 (author unknown)

Furthermore, Rehavia is characterized by a climate of tolerance towards the Arab population of Palestine, resulting from the German-Jewish immigrants' own minority experience and the values of liberalism and universalism that Central European Jewry acquired with the emancipation. It is no coincidence that the *Brit Shalom* was founded in Rehavia: a short-lived peace alliance (1925–1933), which adopted a moderate position in the Jewish-Arab conflict, respected the Arabs and their territorial claims, and advocated a binational state solution. Edith Gerson-Kiwi shows solidarity with the Arabs throughout her life. As an “old pioneering champion of Jewish-Arab friendship, of peace, and, above all, of intellectual awakening” (letter to Hellmut Federhofer, June 29, 1973), she not only maintains memberships in institutions striving for dialogue and understanding, but also supports Arab musicians and music researchers and is committed to the dissemination of Arab music through research and teaching. And of course, this polyglot woman, who is already proficient in several European languages, learns the Arabic language and script.

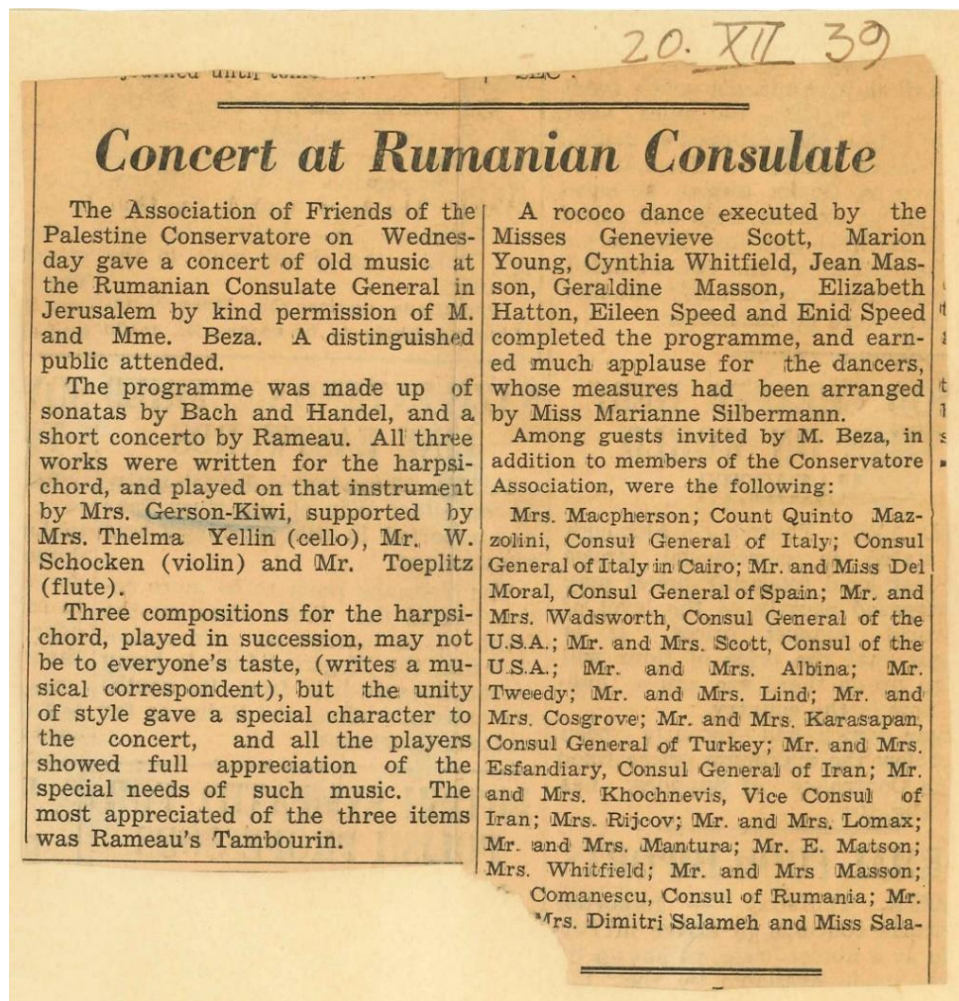


Notice announcing a 1954 lecture on Arabic and Jewish Oriental Music (author unknown)

New paths to a new future

Edith Gerson-Kiwi comes to Palestine at a time when the transformation of the country into a Jewish home is in full swing. However, the pressure to assimilate exerted by the Zionists is strong: they want the German immigrants to abandon the habitudes of the Diaspora Jews and become new Hebrews as quickly as possible. The clash between Western and Eastern European cultures is fierce; another factor is the unfamiliar culture of the Middle East. Many Germans succumb to the feeling of foreignness, cannot heed the demand for integration, and retreat into their inner circles. Gerson-Kiwi, by contrast, opens herself up to the wealth of new impressions, is inspired by the Zionist spirit of optimism and enchanted by the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Jerusalem: this "*ancient capital of the world*" with its "*Jews from all over the world, Persian, Bukharic, Yemeni, Moroccan, Samaritans, and others, representatives of all peoples, races, and religions*". After years of professional and personal hardship and disappointment, she discovers in Erez Israel new forms and ways of being Jewish.

It is virtually inevitable that, with the change in her living environment, her academic interests will also undergo reorientation. The academic discipline of musicology is still unknown in her new homeland, and her expertise in Early Music History will be useful only in practical and educational terms. It would hardly be possible to continue her research in a region without music libraries or connections to the international academic community.

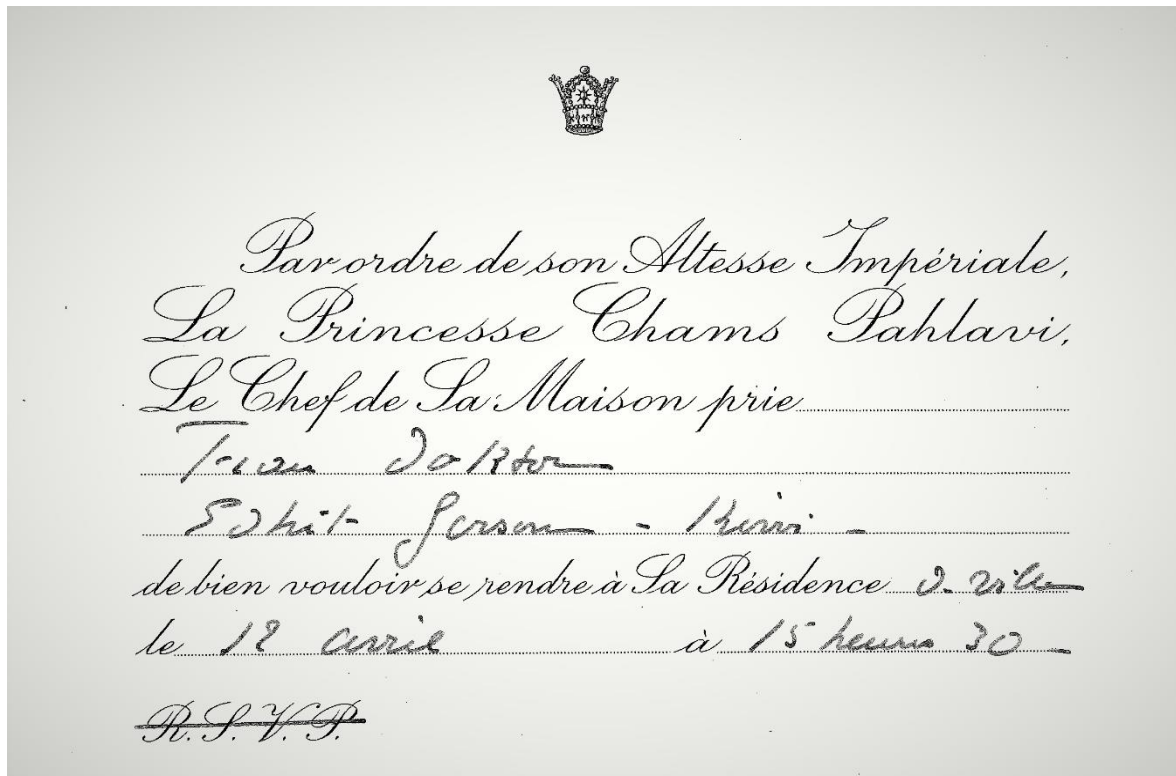


Newspaper report on a concert of early music at the Romanian Consulate Jerusalem, December 20, 1939 (author unknown)

Once again, she is fortunate in that she has a pivotal encounter: shortly after her arrival in Palestine, she meets Robert Lachmann (1892–1939) of the Berlin School of Comparative Musicology who also emigrated to Palestine in 1935, and joins him as his assistant. Lachmann, who has been tasked with the establishment of a phonogram archive for Oriental music in Jerusalem, introduces music historian Gerson-Kiwi to Middle Eastern musical cultures. At the same time, she rediscovers Judaism: the writings of Gershom Scholem bring her, an assimilated Jewish woman of Berlin's educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*), closer to a Judaism in its deeper, mystical form that transcends enlightened, rational thinking, "in a time when I was rather in controversy with the principles of our Jewish religion" (letter to Chanah Milner, June 20, 1972).

She finds and appreciates this mystical form of faith and thought adopted by her new neighbours, the Oriental Jews. Tirelessly, she devotes herself to documenting, researching and popularizing their "melodic treasure trove" that is in danger of being lost in the modern melting pot that is Erez Israel. In addition, other musical cultures of the Middle East are attracting her interest – Arabs, Druze, and Oriental Christians. She will make around 10,000 sound recordings during her lifetime, documenting the polyphonic soundscape of the forming state of Israel. Edith

Gerson-Kiwi the 'Renaissance person' is turning into a connoisseur of the music of the Orient. This change in her field of research interest reflects that in German-Jewish history.



Invitation to the residence of Shams Pahlavi, the Shah's sister, on the occasion of the IFMC conference (International Folk Musik Council) *Preservation of the Traditional Forms of Classical and Popular Music in the Countries of the East and West* in Tehran, April 6-12, 1961

At the same time she is, with her new Orientalism, appropriating the new territory; she is, so to speak, rooting herself in it and aligning herself, consciously or otherwise, with Zionist ideals. Having as they do a musical culture that Gerson-Kiwi endows with the aura of antiquity and authenticity, the Oriental Jews make the span of Jewish history – and the place of the Jews in the Middle East – both audible and tangible. They were credited with embodying ancient Hebrew traditions that, with the founding of the State of Israel, became emblems of a narrative that is based in the past and bestows meaning on the present: “It gave us an undeniable proof that we belong here in Israel” (interview with Pamela Kidron, ‘Making Musical History’, in *Jerusalem Post Entertainment Magazine*, April 21, 1989, p. 3).

However, Gerson-Kiwi does not restrict her focus to Oriental Jews: she advances further east, penetrating into Asia to China and Japan, coming back to Erez Israel – and back to her spiritual and cultural home, to Europe.

Jewish Europeanness

In the 19th century, against the background of the Enlightenment and the laws of emancipation, Europe had opened up to the Jews a new sense of belonging that meant more than a bond with territory and nation. Jewish tradition and European modernity formed the cornerstones between which they had to realign their identity and their way of life. Moreover, for the Jews, Europe became a new cultural reference space for intellectual, literary, and artistic negotiations. Nonetheless, in view of its increasing disintegration, Europe proved to be a utopia for the Jews: it was as a democratically constituted cosmopolitan confederation of states that it disintegrated, and thus it failed as a Jewish way of thinking and living. New orientations were the result, such as a turning to neo-orthodoxy, to Eastern European Jewry, to the Orient or, as the politically most sustainable solution, to Zionism. The National Socialist perversion of a Germanized Europe put an end to the interaction between a Judaism undergoing renewal on the one hand, and the cultural space of Europe on the other.

In her new homeland, Edith Gerson-Kiwi reconnects with the cultural space of Europe. She builds bridges to Europe that connect people, countries, musical cultures: Israelis with Germans, Jews with Christians, East with West. She recognizes the East in the West and seeks to introduce the West to the East. She brings Asia and Europe together and imagines the historiosophical narrative of a pan-Asian cultural community in which Europe is the receiving part, nourished by the wellsprings of the Orient. Among them, the Oriental Jews take precedence: not only do they form the cement between the heterogeneous Jewish strata in Israel, but they also assume the father role vis-à-vis the Christian traditions. In addition, she intensively engages with the broad spectrum of Arab music.

Many letters testify to her longing for a new Europe, a counter-image to the old Europe before 1945, which was shattered by nationalisms. Gerson-Kiwi's 'new Europe' is a Europe with a window to the Orient: "Now I have been back from Freiburg for over a month and am still completely satiated with the warm welcome and enthusiastic cooperation of students and young lecturers", she reports, returning from a semester as a visiting scholar at her former alma mater Freiburg. "It was the first time that a window was opened to the East, to Asia in general, to the music of ancient Israel, of medieval Arabia – and the amazement was great" (letter to Karl Vötterle, August 17, 1968). The "window to the East", a recurring theme in her letters, becomes a cipher for a new understanding of the world after the war, based on values such as pluralism and tolerance, and thus at the same time perpetuating the legacy of the emancipated Jews of Central Europe. "The young generation in East and West must get to know each other, this is the only hope for a future peace, or so it seems to me" (letter to Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, December 16, 1967). "Europeanization", as she calls it, the introduction of the Orient to Europe and vice versa in research, teaching and personal encounter, becomes her mission.



Poster announcing Edith Gerson-Kiwi's lecture on Asian, African and South American music during her semester as visiting lecturer in Freiburg in 1968

Conflicting reality

From the very beginning, there has also been a downside to this new life in Erez Israel. Edith Gerson-Kiwi's description of the advantages of her living situation in Rehavia transitions into acknowledgement of a bitter reality: *"We live here in a quiet and secluded environment; that's ideal for us, and it's also a consequence of the unrest. It's precisely here in and around Jerusalem that the contrasts are particularly stark, because everyone lives cheek by jowl. Almost every night there are gunshots in our area; during the day there are only a few streets in the Jewish 'centre' where you can move freely, and for more than five months now a curfew has kept everyone at home from 6.30 in the evening. Overall, this is a severe shock and the first big challenge to be faced. But we all believe that we will meet this challenge, because we know what we are fighting for and how much blood has already been shed in this cause."*

The trigger for the Arab Revolt (April 1936–1939) is the mass influx of Jews after 1933, when the insurgents demand that the British Mandate government stop Jewish immigration, prohibit the transfer of Arab land to the Jews, and establish a national government. However, this is impossible for the British, to whom the League of Nations gave the mandate for Palestine after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and thus the promotion of a "Jewish home", as the Balfour Declaration of 1917 had promised the Jews. The Palestinian Arabs initially react with a general strike affecting trade and commerce. A series of acts of violence

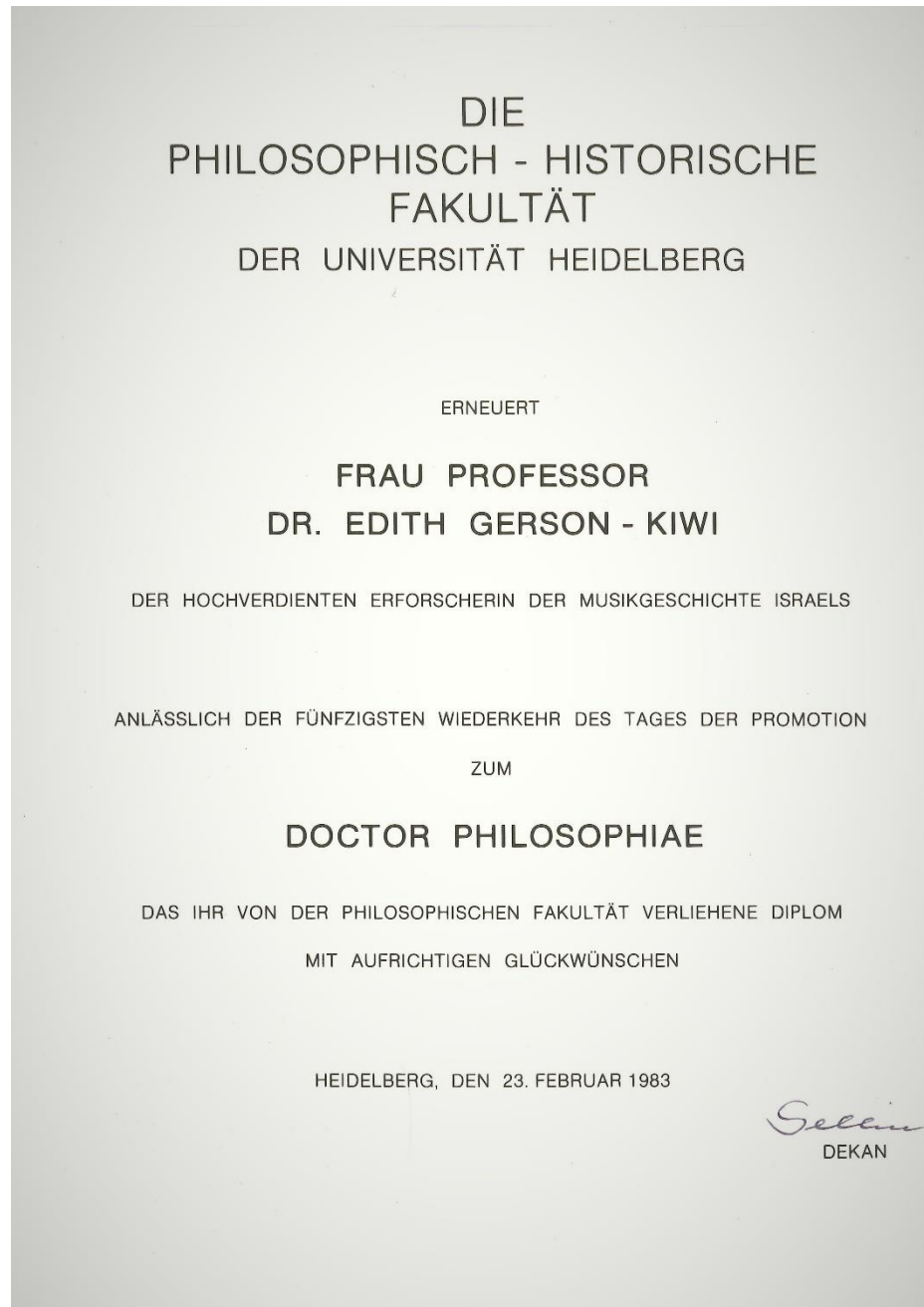
against the British and Jews follows, until the mandate government finally puts down the revolt with military force. Originally a local conflict between Arabs and Zionists in Palestine, it quickly exerts a pull on the entire Arab world and Zionism worldwide. Numerous letters written by Gerson-Kiwi tell of how attacks and wars overshadow and restrict her life and work. "It is indeed a bad fate of ours, always to be after or before a war", she laments to a colleague in New York (letter to Grace Spofford, January 20, 1970). The Middle East conflict determines Israeli reality to this very day.

"A new generation demands different ways of ordering things"

Eva, the friend in exile in Amsterdam, had once passed on Edith Gerson-Kiwi's letter from 1936 to a mutual friend from childhood days in Berlin. Decades later, she received it back from her and returned it to its author. She may have sensed its documentary value which, in its juxtaposition of a hopeful look ahead to the future and an illusion-free reality, prefigures the following decades of her friend's life and work in Israel.

From a professional point of view, Gerson-Kiwi's path from Berlin to Erez Israel was highly successful. Her focal shift towards the music of the Orient and its oral traditions, albeit due to the circumstances of exile, brought her international recognition. Her historiosophical construct of an Oriental-Jewish-dominated, pan-Asian cultural community found its forum not only in the Zionist-dominated society of her new homeland, but also in post-war Europe – especially in Germany, which endeavoured to create for itself a new and 'clean' modern-European image, demonstrating efforts in relation to denationalization and a new understanding with the Jews. The will to engage in dialogue after 1945 was apparent in no small measure within the research community, and in both academic and non-academic circles, Gerson-Kiwi's notion of the bridges between East and West was gladly accepted. This was evidenced by the numerous invitations she received to give lectures, seminars and radio broadcasts, to hold executive memberships or contribute to publications, and with which she represented her country on the international stage, effectively acting as an ambassador of Israel with German-European roots. Her commitment was also recognized in Israel: in 1968, she was appointed professor at Tel Aviv University, and in 1970 she was awarded the Joel Engel Prize of the city of Tel Aviv.

However, not all the hopes of the early years were fulfilled. The visions of a better social order and peaceful coexistence with the Arab neighbours turned out to be illusions. Political tensions, economic shortages and inner-Jewish conflicts, Arab uprisings and wars dominated everyday life. While the 1956/57 Suez Crisis (with Israel's conquest of the Sinai) and the 1967 Six-Day War (with the reconquest of Jerusalem's Old City) brought new, fascinating and promising worlds to light for music orientalist Gerson-Kiwi, later catastrophes such as the Yom Kippur War (1973), the Lebanon War (1982) and finally the Intifada (from 1987 onwards) created only horror, helplessness and resignation. "We still live here in western Rehavia in our peaceful surroundings, but the gates of hell have suddenly been



Renewed doctoral degree from the University of Heidelberg, 1983, 50 years after Edith Gerson-Kiwi earned her PhD

opened, and the killing is taking on new and ever worse forms every day. [...] No peace treaty will restore things to how they were" (letter to unknown correspondent, July 10, 1989).

In addition, she increasingly realized that her life's work – the collecting, preserving and spreading of the endangered Jewish Oriental traditions – had become a thing of the past, that it could not withstand the dawning future. "A new generation" no longer wanted to know anything about her ideals, but "demands different ways of ordering things" (letter to Hanoch Avenary, September 26, 1989). She expressed disappointment: "Obviously, in living for the moment I have missed

something and not caught the march-like beat of the younger generation. The themes that interest us are no longer lively enough to make the youth sit up and take notice: they can easily do without the notation of non-diatonic songs, whose arrangement has cost us many days and nights [...]. Nobody asks about authenticity anymore [...]. Something has gone wrong with the 'sowing process' that should reap a treasure trove of melodies, and this hinders our view of the real problems, of those wretched songs sung by house servants, songs whose great age – two thousand years – covers over the social gap" (letter to Hanoach Avenary, March 31, 1989). Her generation, she felt, marked the end of an era: "A radical fault line has formed between the generations; the last Europeans will die out with us" (letter to Nicole and Günter Birkner, December 1976).

Edith Gerson-Kiwi died in Jerusalem in 1992. Fifty years after her immigration, her episteme, born of the never-ending tension between exile and Europe, already belonged to a bygone age.

Regina Randhofer, Hanover/Germany

¹ The friend is Eva Neumann, or Newman (after her immigration to the United States), née Feilchenfeld, a former classmate.

² The letter is transcribed below (an English translation of the original German):

Jerusalem, September 29, 1936

My dear Eva,

It's been almost a year since we last heard from each other. So much has happened in the meantime. Your last letter reached me shortly before I left for Palestine and I was so happy to hear all about you and the two little children. I'm also grateful for the instructions to Vardimon – unfortunately I have not been able to make use of them so far. You may know that Vardimon has now become a rich and powerful man, owner of the largest movie theater in Tel Aviv. Since I had not met him even after going there several times, I asked Eva Salomon-Süßmann to give him my regards as she knows him personally.

Initially (starting in December last year) I lived in Tel Aviv, and from the first moment when I entered this wonderful country, all the dullness and dejection of the last few years fell away like autumn leaves. From the very first moment I had work, and everything one did was for the good and furthered what was right. A thousand times I've thought about you and how much you belong here. There are also wonderful people here, the country embraces and nurtures them; for many of them it was a complete rebirth, I myself have gone through it in a very intense way. And then: all these young people, suntanned and strong, and a rhythm of work, freedom and hope, that is inspiring and quite intoxicating. And the strange thing was that everything in my personal life suddenly became good once more, and a great miracle happened: once again I met a person to whom I could unreservedly say "Yes". I had just started working then – it was in February – at the University Archive for Oriental Music in Jerusalem, and was living with Eva Held's mother. I got to know her lodger of long standing, an engineer and architect from Hamburg, and we clicked straight away, so there seemed an inevitability about our being man and wife after only one month. Now half a year has passed and hopefully in a few months you will hear from me again.

We live in a new garden suburb of Jerusalem that is populated by many German immigrants. You know - this Jerusalem [has] a completely different atmosphere, it is indeed the age-old capital of the world. Jews from all over the world, Persian, Bukharian, Yemenite, Moroccan, Samaritans and others, representatives of all peoples, races and religions. And then this enchanting landscape. We have a charming attic apartment on top of a brand new complex of houses – and a large terrace as well, from where there is an extensive view over the hill country of Judea with its fantastic colorful scenery.

We live here in a quiet and secluded environment; that's ideal for us, and it is also a consequence of the unrest. It is precisely here in and around Jerusalem that the contrasts are particularly stark, because everyone lives cheek by jowl. Almost every night there are gunshots in our area; during the day there are only a few streets in the Jewish 'city center' where you can move freely, and for more than five months now a curfew has kept everyone at home from 6.30 in the evening. Overall, this is a severe shock and the first big challenge to be faced. But we all believe that we will meet this challenge, because we know what we are fighting for and how much blood has already been shed in this cause.