**Sarah Aaronsohn – Student Information Sheet**

Sarah Aaronsohn was born on January 5, 1890, in the agricultural colony (*moshav*) of Zikhron Ya’akov on Mount Carmel, the fifth of six children and older daughter of Efraim Fischel (1849-1939) and Malka (née Glatzano) of Baku, Romania.

Her father, a prosperous grain-merchant, fell under the influence of *Hovevei Zion*, joining its first group of settlers together with his family, setting out from Galatz in Romania in 1882 to purchase and inhabit lands in Arab Zemerin and found the new colony of Zikhron. The Aaronsohns became one of the colony’s most prominent families, not least because of the career and reputation of Aaron (1876-1919), Sarah’s eldest brother and mentor, a world-famous agronomist and botanist.

Sarah and her siblings belonged to and characterized the second generation of the First Aliyah (1881-1904), the native-born and Hebrew speaking youth in agricultural settlements (*moshavot*) based on privately owned property and organized around a family economy. The native generation fashioned themselves as a new “Hebrew” elite, establishing a plethora of youth organizations aimed at the revival of Hebrew and of a national culture, as well as clandestine semi-military organizations whose aim was the defense of Jewish property and honor, notably the *Gideonim* (after the biblical Gideon), founded in Zikhron in 1913 by Sarah’s brother Alexander (1888-1948).

January 5, 1890 is the birthdate of Sarah Aaronsohn, one of the heads of a Jewish spy ring that supplied intelligence to British forces in the Middle East during [World War I](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.633738). Aaronsohn entered the Zionist group in large part for her heroic death, caused by a gunshot wound she inflicted upon herself so that she would not reveal details about her comrades in the Nili organization.

Though she had limited formal education, the independent-minded Sarah studied languages on her own, and was proficient if not fluent in Hebrew, Turkish, English and Arabic, among other languages. She also assisted her brother Aaron in his agricultural research.

Another colleague of Aaron Aaronsohn’s was Avshalom Feinberg, who some historians assume was an early paramour of Sarah’s. In any case, later Feinberg became romantically involved with Sarah’s younger sister Rivka. Custom would not permit Feinberg and Rivka to marry so long as her older sister was single, which may be why Sarah became engaged in 1914 to a man she had never met, Chaim Abraham, a Bulgarian-born Jewish businessman living in Constantinople. After a wedding in Zichron, Sarah and Chaim moved back to Turkey, but they were not well-suited, and quickly divorced. In the summer of 1915, she returned overland to Palestine, in a trip that exposed her to some of the atrocities that the Armenians of Anatolia were undergoing at the hands of the Ottoman forces.

Aaron had also heard blood-curdling accounts about the Turks’ treatment of the Armenians, and he and Sarah became convinced that the Jews in Palestine would eventually suffer a similar fate. So, after a brief period of cooperation with the Turks, he decided to offer active assistance to the British.

When World War I began, [Palestine was still under the rule of the fading Ottoman empire](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.601598). Opinions varied among the Jewish settlers as to whether their cause would be better off with an Allied victory, meaning that the United Kingdom would likely occupy the country, or with an Axis win, in which case Turkish rule would presumably continue. David Ben-Gurion, for example, was studying law in Constantinople (later Istanbul) in 1914, and for the first two years of war, he and most of his labor-Zionist comrades supported the Turks.

The 40-person spy network that Sarah and Aaron set up in Palestine and Lebanon was called Nili, an acronym for the Hebrew *Netzakh Yisrael Lo Yishaker* (“the Eternity of Israel [meaning, God] does not deceive,” from 1 Samuel 15:29).

By 1917, Sarah was running the operation on her own, as Aaron was regularly traveling, and Avshalom had disappeared during a mission to Cairo (his remains were found in the Sinai desert only after 1967).

In October 1917, after capturing a carrier pigeon sent by Sarah and decoding its message, the Turks surrounded Zichron Yaakov and made a number of arrests, including of Sarah. Over a period of four days, she was tortured, but apparently did not crack.

Shortly before sending her on to Damascus for additional interrogation, her captors sent her home to clean up. She took advantage of a moment of being unwatched to take a hidden gun and shoot herself in the mouth.