

The Fruits of the Family Tree

by Judith Amdur Adler and Sallyann Amdur Sack-Pikus

Most AVOTAYNU readers do not undertake genealogical research in hope of an inheritance, but we have heard of heir hunters and know that windfalls are possible. Those with a family story of land purchased in pre-State Israel, who plan to attend the IAJGS conference in Jerusalem in July 2015, may want to meet with Gil Cirkin while they are in Israel. Cirkin is a Givatayim lawyer who specializes in finding the heirs to abandoned or unclaimed property in Israel, helping them to establish their claim to the land and then selling it. Cirkin's fee is a percentage of the money realized from the sale of the land.

Over the years, Cirkin has scoured Israeli archives and registries for old records of land purchasers from the 1920s–

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1940s or of properties on which no taxes have been paid for a very long time. He has constructed a database of such names and properties, and with his associates spends much of his time locating the heirs. Although Cirkin finds most of his clients himself, he is willing to search his database for names supplied by AVOTAYNU readers who have reason to believe that a close relative may have purchased land in Palestine in the years between the two world wars. Interested parties may write to Cirkin at gil@hsclaw.co.il.

Not only is Cirkin willing to meet with potential heirs at the conference next summer, but for those not planning to come to Jerusalem, he also may be able to visit them at their homes in the United States and Europe where he goes on a monthly basis. Cirkin, who is fluent in English and French, explains with a chuckle, when he initially approaches people, many assume that he is part of the notorious Nigerian scams. "They know differently," he laughs, "when they hear my Israeli accent." He cautions, however, that many family stories turn out not to be true and he offers several examples.

Sometimes, however, as with Fred Adler, the family knew that grandmother Amalia Pressel Adler remembered as "an ardent Zionist," had purchased land in Hadera, Israel, in the 1930s before she and the extended family fled Belgium and The Netherlands for refuge in Argentina. Fred knew that his grandmother owned land in Israel and even had the copy of the deed to the land. His grandmother had died in Argentina without a will, however, and he had a living aunt, two siblings and several cousins, all of whom lived in Argentina. None seemed interested in pursuing ownership, believing that it was much too complicated and possibly much too costly. Trying to obtain a family consen-

sus seemed daunting for a busy physician, so Fred just did nothing. Even with gentle prodding from his enthusiastic sister-in-law (your AVOTAYNU editor), the task of hiring a lawyer, clearing title and gathering documents was too difficult, so the land just sat.

A family visit between sisters and their husbands changed all that when Fred and Judy learned about the website Geni.com from Sallyann. One day after entering his family information on Geni, Fred instantly had a direct connection to 1,200 Dutch family members. He also had an e-mail in his inbox from an associate of Gil Cirkin who asked if he was "the Fred Adler whose grandmother was Amalia Pressel Adler?" Feeling somewhat strange about responding, Fred did answer but asked, "Why do you want to know?"—a perfectly normal Jewish response. The answer he received was staggering. After convincing Fred by showing him a genealogy chart that he was a professional who knew of his family and of his grandmother's land purchase, Gil also told Fred where the land was located and what must be done to clear title and sell the property. Once Fred notified the other heirs; everyone was very excited to work with him and glad that Gil had found them. Suddenly, the task of acquiring legally stamped death certificates from Argentina became a task that could be accomplished, and the wheels for clearing title were set in motion.

According to Cirkin, once heirs to an undeveloped property have been found, he must engage in a two-step process. The first step is to open an estate in court for the deceased property owner and to petition for an Order of Inheritance declaring that the owner is deceased and that the following named individuals are the living heirs. The second step involves the land registry authorities and usually the Custodian General of the State of Israel, which manages more than 14,000 unclaimed properties (including monies). Oddly, although Amalia Pressel bought the property in 1938 and it has remained abandoned and unclaimed ever since, the Custodian General did not take management of her particular property.

Because many people may have the same name, Cirkin's task at this step was to convince the government authorities that the individual whose heirs he represents was the true owner of the specific piece of property. As Cirkin (and the Custodian) has learned, more than one person might have a highly unusual name. He likes to cite as an example, the highly unusual name of a purchaser of an extremely valuable piece of land in the center of modern-day Tel Aviv. "You could build a skyscraper on it," he explains. For a short time some years ago, Cirkin believed that he had found the heir to one of the most famous pieces of unclaimed properties in Israel. The Custodian General who is responsible to manage this particular unclaimed property, however, explained that according to their information, the original purchaser of the valuable land had been a construc-

tion worker from Tel Aviv who subsequently fled from Palestine to Russia for obscure reasons—not Cirkin's client.

Once the Custodian General and the Land Registry are satisfied that the individuals Cirkin represents are the correct heirs to a specific parcel of land, the final step is negotiation with the tax authorities and settlement of unpaid back taxes. Then Cirkin puts the property up for sale and the heirs realize the gift left to them by an ancestor—in many cases an ancestor they have never known existed.

How and Why the Land Was Purchased

Almost from the beginning, a major goal of the Zionism Movement was to purchase land in Palestine as early as the times of the Ottoman Empire, a movement that only accelerated after the Balfour Declaration. Wealthy activist Zionists or just ideologically driven pioneers known as *Goalei Adamot* which in Hebrew means “buying land to make it owned by Jewish hands” such as Yehoshua Hankin and Arthur Ruppin formed large companies to buy land from Ottoman and Arab owners. Such was the case with Fred's grandmother who bought the land in the dunes of Hadera from the Palestine Land Development Corporation Limited, a Jewish colonizing company originally established by the renowned Arthur Ruppin and Yehoshua Hankin. Numerous streets and towns in Israel bear their names.

An effort was made to make the purchased land as contiguous as possible. The Palestine Land Development Company* from which Amalia Pressel Adler purchased her plot was one such company. These companies sent emissaries to the United States and Europe to recoup their investments by selling plots to individuals. Many Jews who supported Zionism bought land. It was seen as an integral part of the effort to reestablish the Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Sometimes the emissaries would go to meetings in synagogues, and one finds that all the land in a particular section or area was sold to individuals from a specific synagogue or

PALESTINE GOVERNMENT.					
DISTRICT <i>Nablus</i>		SUB-DISTRICT <i>Hajfa</i>		TOWN or VILLAGE <i>Hadera</i>	
BLOCK No. <i>10006</i>		MAP SHEET No.		Description of the Property <i>Land for building etc.</i>	
Name		Area		Date of Acquisition	
PARCEL No. <i>100</i>		Area <i>2 817</i>		Date of Acquisition	
Name of the Proprietor <i>A</i>		Category of Property <i>State</i>		Remarks	
Date of Acquisition <i>1. 11. 1908</i>		Status of Tenure		Remarks	
Name of the Proprietor <i>Amalia Pressel Adler</i>		Status of Tenure		Remarks	
PROPRIETORSHIP					
No. of Plot	Date of Acquisition	Status of Tenure	Proprietor	Share	Remarks
<i>100</i>	<i>1. 11. 1908</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Amalia Pressel Adler</i>	<i>1/100</i>	<i>Land for building etc.</i>
<i>101</i>	<i>1. 11. 1908</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Amalia Pressel Adler</i>	<i>1/100</i>	<i>Land for building etc.</i>
<i>102</i>	<i>1. 11. 1908</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Amalia Pressel Adler</i>	<i>1/100</i>	<i>Land for building etc.</i>

Register that shows the purchase of the land by author's great-grandmother, Amalia Pressel Adler

small location. In the case of Amalia Pressel Adler, much of the land surrounding her holding also was sold to Jews who were in the Belgian diamond business, as were Adler and her family.

Note

*The Palestine Land Development Company (PLDC) was established in 1908 by Arthur Ruppin, a German Jew, as a land-purchasing company for the World Zionist Organization. The PLDC used Jewish National Fund and private monies to purchase and populate tracts of land with Jewish immigrants. It acquired extensive holdings in northern Israel, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. (From answer.com)

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