

Fritz Frank, a Templar, Surveyor of the 'Arava Valley and Cucumber Grower in 'Ein Gedi, Israel

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While working on my PhD about the Ancient Irrigation Agriculture in the Oasis of 'Ein Gedi and some other oases around the Dead Sea (Hadas 2003), I looked for descriptions and photographs of 'Ein Gedi also at Fritz Frank's report about the 'Arava Valley (Frank 1934). Frank's report started with 'Ain Bokek Oasis, about 30km south of 'Ein Gedi, via 'Arava valley to the Coral Island, in Eilat Gulf, in the south. The survey took place in the winters of 1932 and 1933, and this was the first accurate survey undertaken in this region which included a detailed description, along with photographs and plans of each site. Earlier scholarly work in the region included the work by Jules de Bertou and Edward Robinson.

A short time before Frank conducted his survey, Masada was investigated by Schulten who implied that Frank lived in 'Ein Gedi at that time (Schulten 1933: 3). Surprisingly, Frank's report contained no information about 'Ein Gedi. Frank's survey included a detailed description of every site in the 'Arava, including 'Ein Bokek, but the omission of 'Ein Gedi, the large oasis with drinking water on the western shore of the Dead Sea – a place where he lived for a considerable time – seemed bizarre and inspired me to learn more about Fritz Frank.

Frank in 'Ein Gedi

'I was in 'Ein Gedi (*Ain Dschiddi*) during the years 1929–1932, and grew vegetables: tomatoes, eggplants and cucumbers; and also fruits: almonds and vines. Pests ate the ripened tomatoes, the eggplants were stolen and only cucumbers were sent to Jerusalem where I got a high price. In the second winter all my cultivations, 20 dunams, froze in one night by northern freezing wind. Against the Bedouins I could do nothing. So, I gave up and all my investment cost me 600 pound. I lived there two whole winters including the summer in between; during that period I was the only man there' (Frank, undated letter).

In a letter to me his daughter wrote: 'I do not know if the land in 'Ein Gedi belonged to my father or was leased by him' (Fondel 2003). She was also kind enough to send me a few copies of her father's photographs. Among these pictures only one was taken in 'Ein Gedi. This showed her father sitting in his vegetable garden wearing a hat (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Fritz Frank sitting in his vegetable garden in 'Ein Gedi

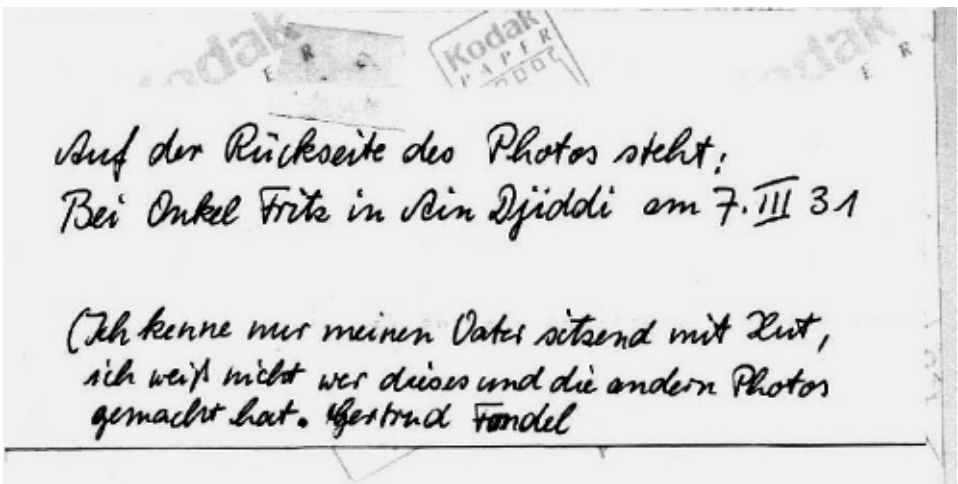


Fig. 2. Letter sent to the author from Gertrude Fondel (Frank's daughter) describing the photograph

While Frank was in 'Ein Gedi, he had a sailing boat with an engine, although he brought the cucumbers to Jerusalem by car, according to Frank's wife, Otilie (Frank 1971: 2). He was sometimes accompanied in this boat with Adolf Schulen, the investigator of Masada's siege system. In one instance, they sailed from the Jordan River estuary at the northern end of the Dead Sea to Masada, a journey which took more than eight hours (Schulden 1933: 5, 57).

At that time (late 1920s and early 1930s) Frank was the only European to work on the agricultural renewal of 'Ein Gedi (Schulten 1933: 58). A few years later Frank was described by a German Nazi reporter as a man of medium height, with red cheeks, a white beard, tough worker's hands, a wrinkled brow with two clear blue eyes like a hunter, aged about 65 (*Der Fuhrer* 1938). Zeev Vilnai, a well known Jewish geographer, provided an additional description of Frank: 'Fritz Frank was known as a Jew hater, stayed away from them, and was interested that they should not arrive in the Dead Sea region and 'Ein Gedi. Frank was a simple man, agriculturer, used to go with two pistols and a dog, and worked with his Bedouin workers, growing tomatoes and cucumbers. He liked to wander and was suspected as a spy who collects information about the area, by photographing, collecting pottery shards, surveying and taking climate observations... the Bedouins refused to talk about him. He was a single man, walked in European dress' (Ben Ezer 2002: 340).

His life resume

Fritz (Friedrich) Frank was born in 1873 at Wilhelma, a Templers¹ colony in Palestine, to an honourable family (Ben Ezer 2002: 338), where he learned carpentry and masonry. In his 40s he tried to enlist in the German Army in the First World War, but was rejected because of his age, although he was later accepted for civilian missions, such as finding water sources in the Sinai desert for the planned attack on the Suez Canal (Kressenstein 1938).

The local Bedouins and the British did not ignore his long wanderings in Northern Sinai. Stories about him spread through the desert and he became known as a daring German spy who disguised himself as a British or Australian officer who crossed enemy lines, and there were some who nicknamed him 'The German Lawrence' (Krumholtz 1946: 93; Fig. 3). Even in the war summary, he was mentioned as a daring spy (Wavell 1928). Later on it was revealed that this daring figure was not his real persona, and in fact Colonel Meinertzhagen, General Allenby's intelligence officer, invented this portrayal of him. The colonel in fact painted this picture to raise the vigilance of the British troops (Cocker 1989: 101). Meinertzhagen succeeded also in deceiving the Turkish-German army about the point of Allenby's attack. In the event they concentrated near Gaza while Allenby attacked Beer-Sheva (Wavell 1928). It was clear that the Germans knew the truth about Frank, since von Kressenstein wrote in 1938, that Frank brought him good topographical data about the desert, but was never a spy (Kressenstein 1938). A detailed article published later also insisted that Frank was not a spy (Sheffy 1999).

After Jerusalem surrendered to Allenby in December 1917, Frank was in Jericho where he allegedly operated agents to collect information from Jerusalem (Frank 1955: 187), but there is no confirmation in the German Army archive of this activity (letter from the Bundesarchive in Berlin, 2002).

In September 1918, the Turkish Army retreated from Palestine and Frank arrived in Germany. After the war he was blocked from returning to Palestine because of a British intelligence veto. In 1927, after many petitions, he was granted permission from the High Commissioner to return to Palestine (Sheffy 1999: 137).



Fig. 3. Fritz Frank 'The German Lawrence' (centre) in the Sinai desert in the 1920s

The Wagner family from Jaffa gave him his first job, among other technical works, to plan and build a bridge east of Sarona (then a Templers colony in the area of modern Tel Aviv). He acquired bridge engineering skills during his stay in Germany in the 1920s (Frank 1960). His last job was the reinforcement of the roof of the Evangelic Institute in Augusta Victoria Compound on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, after an earthquake had damaged the building in 1927 (Frank 1971: 3). He was also involved with building the flour mills and railways stations in Semach and Haifa (Frank 1960).

Frank was about 60 when he surveyed the 'Arava valley. Professor Alt, Director of the Biblical Evangelic Institute, supported his research. Frank as a native,

engineer, hunter (Alt 1934: 193) and a man who had spent two years in the Sinai desert, was regarded as the best candidate for this job (Fig. 4).

Frank married Otilie in 1936 at the age of 62, and their daughter Gertrude was born in 1939. The family lived on the Mount of Olives until the Second World War, when he was exiled with other Germans to a camp of war internees on 3rd September 1939. A document of the Central Intelligence Department of the Palestine Police, dated 24th August 1948, records Frank's family as: 'Fritz Frank, German, born in 1873, engineer; Otilie Frank, German, born in 1898, housewife; and Gertrude Frank, born in 1939' (Ha-Hagana Archive, file 112/22).

Two years later, he was described as an old man, water technician and father of a child, but his name was not included among the Germans that were members of the Nazi party (Ha-Hagana Archive, file 112/23, 17th July 1947). In 1948, all German citizens were forced to leave the country for Cyprus. Shortly after, the Franks moved to Germany where Fritz Frank died on the 8th September 1968, aged 95.

During his research of the 'Arava Frank he also worked with Professor Beno Rothenberg, who also investigated the copper mines north of Eilat, in the 'Arava Valley. In the 1960s they met in Germany, to exchange opinions and information about their research in 'Arava. Frank also told Rothenberg that in 1948, the Jews confiscated all of his papers which survived from the 'Arava survey (Beno Rothenberg (Pers. comm. 9th May 2002). Later, after Frank's death, Otilie sent some of Frank's pictures to Rothenberg (Fig. 5).

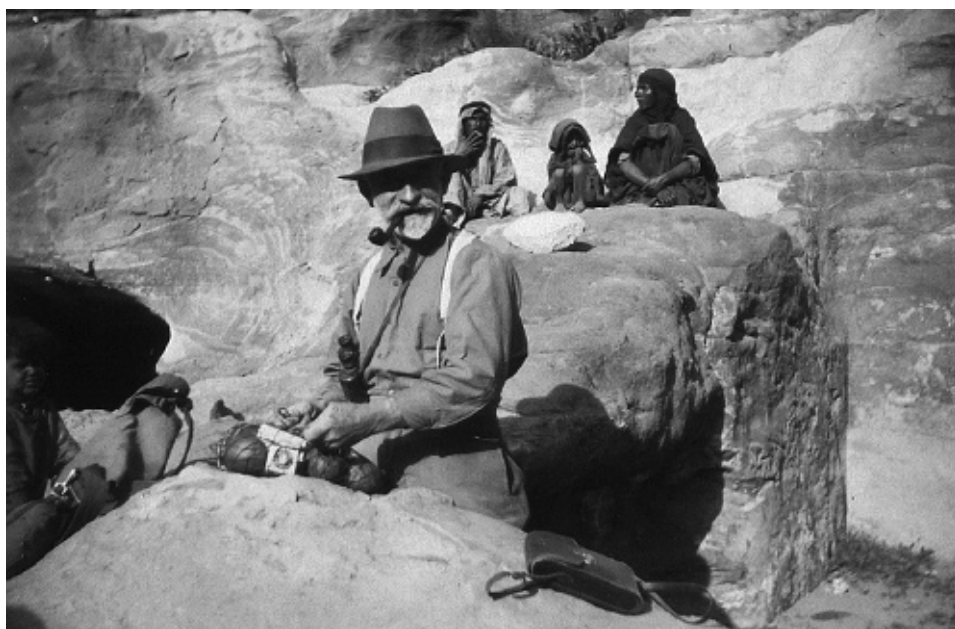


Fig. 4. Fritz Frank surveying in the 'Arava Valley in 1934



Fig. 5. Fritz Frank with his wife Otilie shortly after their marriage in 1936



Fig. 6. The Oasis of 'Ein Gedi photographed by Fritz Frank from his boat in the Dead Sea

One question still remains: where are Frank's confiscated documents? I think that among his papers were reports, photographs, and plans of 'Ein Gedi in the 1930s. This conclusion is derived from Frank's description of the 'Arava report where, among other photographs one shows 'Ein Gedi from the Dead Sea. This photograph was probably taken from Frank's boat (Fig. 6).

Dr Gideon Hadas lives in 'Ein Gedi.

This article would not have been written without the help of many whom I would like to thank: Miss Gertrude Fondel, Frank's daughter; Andreas Pfeffer, Berlin; Brigitte Kneher, Tempelgesellschaft arciv, Stuttgart; Professor Beno Ruthenberg, Tel Aviv; Ha-Hagana Archive, Tel Aviv; Yoske Erel, 'Ein Gedi; and Gundi Shachal, 'Ein Gedi.

Notes

1 A religious sect of farmers from southern Germany that were persecuted there by the State and Church, and immigrated to Palestine in the second half of the 19th century. They brought with them new agricultural methods and tools.

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