



# **A Strange Death: A Story Originating in Espionage, Betrayal, and Vengeance in a Village in Old Palestine**

*Hillel Halkin*

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In 1917, the members of a spy ring who sought to assist the British in driving the Turks from Palestine were betrayed. Two were hanged; one, the iconically beautiful Sarah Aaronsohn, shot herself to escape torture and died a lingering death four days later. It was said that four of the women of the town of Zichron were seen laughing hysterically as the arrests of their neighbors were carried out. Each met a strange fate: one died prematurely, the second went mad, the third was an invalid and the fourth lived out her life in disrepute.

When Hillel Halkin read this story of the village that he lived in, it inspired him to begin a journey into the past. His friends and neighbors each offered a different version of the events of 1917, and Halkin discovered that each of them was in some way affected by the legendary fate of the spy ring. So he began to dig: into the stories, the artifacts and debris of the town, in which he found beguiling traces of events that had taken place half a century earlier. Most of all, Halkin listened to the village's storytellers, of whom none is more expansive than Yanko Epstein, who runs the town museum. Yet even Epstein, for all his love of a good yarn, proves to have a jaw like a steel trap when confronted with aspects of the ancient betrayal.

A journey into the place where history and legend overlap, a murder mystery, a lyrical evocation of the doomed attempt to build a Languedoc town on the Eastern Shores of the Mediterranean, a deft investigation into the betrayal of idealism — **A Strange Death** is all of these.

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