

PREFACE

*“Land, Land!—This is the secret to the solution of the Jewish question.”*

Nathan Birnbaum, “Die Nationale Wiedergeburt des jüdischen Volkes in seinem Lande” (1893)

For generations, Jews and Christians, authors and adventurers, politicians and revolutionaries all sought a territorial solution to the problem of Jewish homelessness. Their searches for a homeland took them beyond the borders of the biblical land of Israel and across the globe to every continent except Antarctica. I have followed in their footsteps to examine first-hand the precise locations of each of these lost visions of Jewish autonomy. Today this little-known history has led me to Angola’s second-largest city, Huambo.

It’s early morning and the cool air carries the scent of smoke from hundreds of open-air fires. Potholes that could twist a car’s axle crater the city streets. Open sewers edge the sidewalks. The façades of most buildings are pocked with bullet holes from Angola’s decades-long civil war. Some structures reveal the tell-tale scars of mortar shells: twisted rebar snaking from jagged gashes in concrete walls. A boy, probably not more than ten years old, raises his deformed arms up to me from the pavement. Where his hands should be I see only knuckled humps of scaly-shiny skin. Probably leprosy. You can’t travel far in this country without seeing someone on crutches, a pant leg hanging limply beneath the knee. There are millions of land mines buried beneath the country’s soil, but leprosy is a new horror to behold. I recoil. So too does my close friend, Michael Kollins. In addition to taking many of the photographs for this book, Mike has tirelessly helped me track down archival sources

and once, during a research trip in South America, he came to my rescue after a wild dog sunk its teeth into my leg and pulled me to the ground. “Why are we in Angola again?” he asks.

We’re here because a century ago a scientific expedition arrived in the frontier outpost of Huambo to determine whether this region of the Benguela Plateau could be developed into a Jewish state. Angola’s master at the time, Portugal, had provisionally approved the plan. The colonial press supported the project. So too did several important Jewish leaders. Yet Angola forever remained a paper state.

Between roughly 1820 and 1948, intellectuals advanced numerous proposals aimed at carving out Jewish territories in remote and often hostile locations. The would-be founding fathers of these imaginary Zions dispatched survey teams to far-flung locales and filed reports on the states they planned to establish. Instead of exporting Jaffa oranges, citizens of these unrealized Israels might have shipped pineapples from the Amazon Basin, stalked lions in East Africa, or hunted whales off the Tasmanian coast. Rather than sweltering under the Mediterranean sun, they might have endured tropical downpours in Madagascar, or felt the chill of the Angolan highlands. The Jewish state might even have been one of the United States.

This book tells the true stories of these fantastic Jewish geographies and the men and women who proposed them. These individuals risked public ridicule, assassination, personal betrayal, financial hardship, the physical dangers posed by a pitiless natural world, and an equally unforgiving political climate. At stake was nothing less than the salvation of European and Russian Jewry. They failed in their rescue efforts, and because they failed, their dreams and schemes have mostly been forgotten. Until now.