

Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments	vii
Chapter One	01
<hr/>	
1 The Promised Land	01
Chapter Two	16
<hr/>	
2 Kibbutz Merhavia	16
Chapter Three	66
<hr/>	
3 Afula	66
Chapter Four	96
<hr/>	
4 Training Base Four	96
Concluding Remarks	112
Bibliography	117
Index	120

For my *sabra* grandchildren Oria, Shai, Alon, Gal, and Shir

Preface and Acknowledgments

In this book, I tell the story of my new life in Israel in the early 1950s. My individual story is closely linked to the story of the newly established Jewish state and to the events that shaped its society in those years. After a childhood in Eastern Europe, I was a particle in an enormous wave of immigration that swept over Israel from all parts of the world, and I was among those who had to adapt to a completely new way of life. For close to two years, I lived in kibbutz Merhavia in Jezreel Valley. This *kibbutz*—a distinctively Israeli form of communal living—was the flagship community of one of the major pioneering movements, and it produced some of Israel’s leading artists and statesmen. When I left the kibbutz, I moved to the nearby town of Afula and experienced small-town life in 1950s Israel. Subsequently, on graduating from high school in Afula, I was inducted into the army and went through “boot camp” at the famed “Training Base Four.” In just those years—things would change afterward—the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was a melting pot which had more foreign-born recruits serving in it than native Israelis. I was one of those who melted and melded in; in this book, I try to describe the transformation.

My “Israelization” occurred at its most intensive and rapid pace in kibbutz Merhavia. In those years, kibbutz life was regarded as the most “Israeli” and most desired mode of existence. Immigrant youngsters of my age who wanted to join a kibbutz usually did so as part of a peer group of immigrants from a similar locale; otherwise, they mostly joined their families in small towns or cities. I did neither of these. For better or worse, I was thrown right into the lion’s den, with boys and girls who were mostly native-born Israelis—*sabras*—and whose parents were members of the kibbutz.

Later, when I moved from Merhavia and lived with my mother in Afula for the next few years, that was a regression of sorts; but, in some ways, life was more natural and easier for me in town than it had been on the kibbutz. The initial weeks of my army service as a recruit in Training Base Four weren't easy, but they left their mark and were crucial in the process of becoming Israeli.

This is the third and final book in a trilogy about my childhood and adolescence, with each book trying also to paint a picture of the historical contexts in which I grew up. The first book was about my childhood in prewar and wartime Brzezany, a town in eastern Galicia.¹ The second book dealt with my adolescence in postwar Lodz, in Poland.² As it has turned out, the research for the present book was more difficult and challenging than for the earlier ones. Being a professional historian with expertise in Eastern Europe assisted me greatly in the writing of those books. Yet the subject of Israel in the 1950s was completely new to me. I hope that I have caught and expressed the essence of Israel during that period. Regarding methodology, the reader will see that I draw heavily on vivid personal memories. Yet this book is not a memoir. I try to place the memories of my absorption into Israeli society within a wider historical context, using scholarly studies and archival sources. I also interviewed people who had lived in Merhavia and Afula in those years, as well as those I could find who had shared with me the trials of basic military training in the IDF.

Kibbutz life, as it existed upon my arrival in the country, has nearly disappeared. The image of the kibbutz and the popular national attitude toward it have altered considerably. Indeed, my personal perceptions of early 1950s Israel, and of the kibbutz in particular, have also changed—although perhaps not entirely in tandem with the national mood. Whereas for years after leaving Merhavia, I nourished ambivalent or even harsh feelings toward that place and its people, recent developments in Israeli society and in Israeli politics, in particular, have made me somewhat nostalgic for “those good old days.”

The Israeli kibbutz has been extensively studied by historians and anthropologists. Studies of small Israeli towns are by comparison very scarce,

1 Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

2 Shimon Redlich, *Life in Transit: Jews in Postwar Lodz, 1945–1950* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

and so are studies concerning the IDF in those years—Training Base Four, in particular. For the latter, I was fortunate to also be able to draw on literary works, specifically the fine novel by Yehoshua Kenaz, *Infiltration*.³ I've also greatly benefited from Oz Almog's socio-historical studies.⁴ Last, but not least: I have made efforts in this book to look critically at my younger self, and to trace how I changed both physically and mentally as I grew into my new Israeli environment.

I'm immensely grateful to all my interviewees, with whose help I succeeded—at least partly—to relive my past. I wish to thank the staff of the Merhavia Archive for its prolonged and extensive assistance during my immersion into the history of the kibbutz. I am very grateful to the staff of the IDF Archive, who assisted me in locating source materials related to my basic military training. I'm not sure whether I could have conducted my research in Merhavia without the generous help of Yoel Mintzer and his wife, Ruthi. My meetings with the late Ezra Tsamri and his wife, Esther, enriched my understanding of their life stories. Ezra's artwork graces the cover of my book, and I thank Esther for letting me use it. More than once, I enjoyed the hospitality of my cousin Reuven Nir, one of the first children born in Merhavia. With him and with his younger brother, Yitzhak Nir, I discussed some of the intricacies of life in that kibbutz. I am also greatly indebted to Mrs. Mali Cohen and Ms. Natanela Bekler for their generous assistance. Mrs. Yocheved Granot sent me some excellent photos by her late husband David Granot (Dedi Grinshpon). Mr. Amos Ben-Arie shared with me his profound knowledge about Afula and his extensive research on his roots and family.

I would like to thank Professor Lazar Fleishman of Stanford University for recommending my manuscript to Academic Studies Press. I've discussed my Israeli project with Professors Oz Almog, Mordechai Altshuler, Omer Bartov, Yuval Lurie, Gabriel Finder and Terrence Evens, and with Dr. Avigdor Shachan.

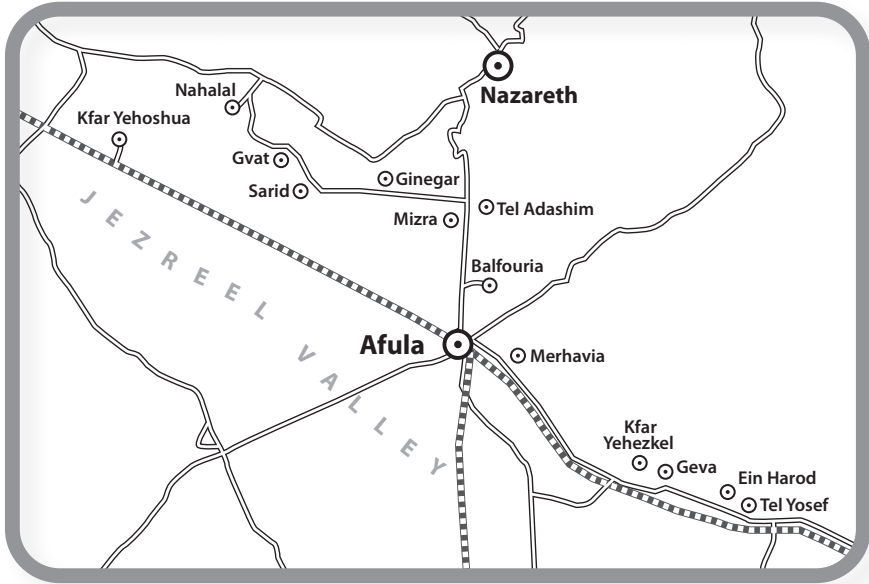
Dr. Saadya Sternberg edited the initial manuscript of this book and I very much value his work and his advice. I am grateful also for the subsequent editing by Ms. Amanda C. Fisher.

3 Yehoshua Kenaz, *Infiltration* (South Royalton, VT: Zoland Books, 2003).

4 Oz Almog, *Farewell to 'Sru'lik': Changing Values among the Israeli Elite* [in Hebrew] (Haifa and Or Yehuda: Haifa University Publishers and Zmora-Bitan Publishers, 2004); Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Thanks to Mr. Ofer Cohen of Tel Aviv's *Li Nof Studio* for his help with the pictures. I was very lucky to have the professional advice of Dr. Faith Wilson Stein and Dr. Oleh Kotsyuba of Academic Studies Press.

As always, I owe much to the patience and forbearance of my wife of the past fifty years, Judith Redlich, née Blumberg.



JEZREEL VALLEY

CHAPTER 1

The Promised Land

It was a sunny and cold morning: Tuesday, February 7, 1950. The *Galila* was approaching Israel's northern coast. A very unusual sight emerged as the ship neared Haifa. The Carmel mountain ridge came into view, all covered in snow. People began to gather on the upper deck. Someone began to intone the Hatikva; others joined in. Following a week-long voyage that had started near Venice we were finally getting to see the Promised Land. I was there with my mother. The previous afternoon, when the *Galila* had stopped a few miles outside the port, people called me and my mother onto deck. It turned out that my uncle Zeev—my mother's younger brother—was in a motorboat down below trying to locate us. Minutes later we were shouting back and forth at each other. These were the first moments of a reunion between two branches of a family separated by the war and the Holocaust. Zeev had reached Palestine as a young *chalutz*—pioneer—in the early 1920s. Pnina, a younger sister of my mother's, came a few years later and was among the founders of kibbutz Merhavia in Jezreel Valley. Zeev and his family lived in the nearby town of Afula. My father's sisters Rachel and Tsipora, who settled in Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan, arrived in Palestine in the 1930s. My mother, my aunt Malcia, and I were the only survivors of our large extended family.

My new life in Israel began that winter morning. Though I was aware for years that this had happened sometime in early 1950, I had no outside information about it. Only sixty years later and by complete chance did I come across details relating to that event and that sea journey. I had gone to London to participate in a showing of *Unzere Kinder*, a Yiddish-language film produced in Lodz after the war, in which I had performed as a child actor. Following the presentation, a man of about my age approached me and began speaking in English and Polish. It turned out that both of us had arrived in Israel at the same time and on the same ship. Within a day or two we were having tea in his London house, exchanging memories. Janek Geller, a business consultant fluent in several languages, showed me his personal documents, which helped

me to retrace our itinerary from Poland to Israel. Our Israeli visas were issued at the Israeli legation in Warsaw in December 1949. Permission to pass through Austria and permission to stop along the way in Italy—this was granted in mid-January 1950. The train on which we traveled departed Warsaw on January 19, entered Austria on the twenty-first, and crossed the Italian border on the twenty-second.¹ The train journey must have been exciting, but I can barely recall it today. I do remember some of the stops. What amazed me when we passed the Italian border were the dark-skinned, black-haired men who were not Jewish. We were taken to a transit camp in Poveglia near Venice. The few buildings on the tiny island of Poveglia had previously served as a quarantine station and a hospital for the mentally ill. In local folklore it was always considered a spooky place. For me, Poveglia was mainly a transit site where we spent fewer than two weeks on our way to Israel. I recall a huge hall filled with bunk beds. It must have previously been a barracks. The food was quite poor: little dried-up rolls and spaghetti. It was there that, for the first time, I encountered oriental Jews. For years I would remember two pretty dark-skinned Jewish girls from Egypt who, like us, were on their way to Israel. Janek's parents arranged for a tour of Venice. We couldn't afford such luxury.

We boarded the *Galila* on February 2. The journey was to last a week. Certain images, sounds, and smells stand out in my mind. They were corroborated by Janek's memories. Part of the voyage, apparently near Crete, was stormy: many passengers became seasick. The strong smell of disinfectants was everywhere, especially in the crowded toilets. Those who could, preferred to stay up on the deck at all hours. I also recall, however, some pleasant moments when the dark-blue sea was quiet. Israeli music could be heard all over from the loudspeakers. I recognized some songs that I must have heard in Lodz. Among them were new Israeli hits performed by Shoshana Damari and Yaffa Yarkoni. Years later, I learned that the *Galila* had been built in the United States as a cruise ship before the First World War and had served for entertainment purposes along the Hudson River. During the Second World War it was requisitioned as a troop carrier. It was acquired by the shipping company ZIM in 1948 and for the next few years was used to bring Jewish immigrants, mostly Holocaust survivors, to Israel. After an interview with Nira Bleiberg-Hardof, a classmate of mine from Afula High School, she sent me some photos of the *Galila* dating from 1950 or 1951. Her husband Yoram, then a young cadet at

1 Janek Geller, interview by author, Tel Aviv, September 2011.

the Beyt Sefer Yami, a naval school in Haifa, was sent on a training trip to Venice on that same ship and brought back these photos. Small world!²

Alona Frankel, who would become a popular children's author in Israel, had come over with her parents on the *Galila* a few weeks earlier. Her memories differed completely from mine. For Alona, twelve at the time, the *Galila* remained always *Galila mag'ila*—disgusting *Galila*. This was where she menstruated for the first time. Our differing memories may have stemmed from the fact that I was very much looking forward to my new life in Israel, following years of Zionist schooling in postwar Lodz. Alona's parents were communists and she didn't know a word of Hebrew. For her, the sea voyage and the change of worlds must have been traumatic. While I had a few mixed feelings, I was quite eager to face my new life.³

Another new immigrant who traveled on the *Galila* was the twenty-five year-old Ferenc Hoffman, who soon would have his name changed to Ephraim Kishon. He was a Holocaust survivor from Hungary who later would become Israel's leading humorist. Here is how he described his arrival: "The old slave ship *Galila* arrived at the port of Haifa with a cargo of new immigrants. Among them was yours truly, an emaciated and fearful young man. The Jewish Agency clerk asked him for his name and when he answered Ferenc, the clerk said: there is no such thing, and wrote 'Ephraim.' After that he Hebraicized his last name as well."⁴

The winter of 1950 was the harshest one in years. Headlines in *Haaretz* declared "Snow and Storms All Over the Country," adding the comment, "this is real winter, like in Eastern Europe." In kibbutz Merhavia, it snowed continuously for thirty hours, and the temperature dropped to minus eight degrees Celsius. In some places, the snow lasted a whole week. One kibbutz member recalled that "the slopes of Giv'at Hamoreh resembled Switzerland."

The weekly Merhavia bulletin spoke of a snow-clad kibbutz. The scenery changed completely. Trees broke and toppled. Tents were blown away. All transportation came to a halt. People were walking at night in snow-covered, moonlit fields enchanted by views that reminded them of their old country. Children and adults built snowmen and threw snowballs at each other. A little

2 Haifa City Museum website, accessed July 25, 2012, <http://www.hms.org.il/Museum/Templates>; Nira Hardof, e-mail to author, June 14, 2013.

3 Alona Frankel, *Teen Years* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2009), 7–31.

4 Ephraim Kishon, *Partachia, My Love* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Maariv Publishers, 1976), 8–10.

girl exclaimed, “from now on *khutz laaretz*—the lands abroad—will stay here and the kibbutz will be over there.”⁵

At a get-together to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, I was showing family and friends old photos from postwar Lodz and from kibbutz Merhavia. In one photo from Lodz, dated December 1948, we are taking our leave of one of our teachers at the Hebrew school, who would soon be departing for Israel. The setting is quite official. Some of us are sitting in the front row. I’m the first on the right. The others behind us are standing. I’m wearing a dark jacket and a white shirt. My hair is neatly combed back and I look quite serene. In a picture taken in Merhavia, just two years later, the setting and mood are completely different. Three adolescents, two boys and a girl, are standing at the entrance to their communal quarters. I’m up front, bent forward so as not to block those behind me. The three of us wear identical casual gray jackets. My hair is a mess. Yet when I visited my family in Tel Aviv, I encountered very different styles of dress. My cousin David, a year older than me, used to go out in the evenings with his friends, in their upper teens. They were always neatly dressed in gabardine pants and impeccably white shirts, and they had shiny, sticky hairdos—just like James Dean. There was definitely a difference between the kibbutz and the city.

I recently opened a bundle of old, disintegrating letters. These were mailed from Brzezany to Palestine all through the 1920s and 1930s. Most were written by my mother and addressed to her sister Pnina in kibbutz Merhavia. Grandpa Fishl would add a few lines from time to time. The letters are in German or Polish, interspersed with some expressions in Hebrew. In spite of Pnina’s new life in Palestine, family bonds were maintained. One postcard was from Soviet-ruled Brzezany, as late as 1940. Correspondence ceased in the wake of the German occupation, in the summer of 1941. It was only around 1946 that my mother wrote her first postwar letter to our relatives in Palestine. She complained that other Brzezany survivors had already managed to reestablish contact with their relatives in Palestine. “Why aren’t we getting any letters?” she wondered. She went on to tell of our enormous loss: “Out of our extensive family in Brzezany and Kamionka only the four of us survived. I’m unable to tell you what we went through. I can hardly believe that I’m alive, having lost so many close and dear people. My only wish is to rejoin you as

5 *Haaretz*, February 6, 1950; *Bameshek*, *Information Bulletin of Kibbutz Merhavia*, February 10, 1950; David Cnaani, ed., *Sefer Merhavia, Kibbutz Hashomer Hatzair* [in Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Hapoalim Publishers, 1961), 138.

soon as possible.” One of those letters to Palestine was a heartbreaking letter from my aunt Malcia. It spoke of her personal tragedy: “Imagine, I gave birth to two babies, a son and a daughter. One child died during the German times and the other just recently when I traveled to Lodz by train. It was only two weeks old.” My mother kept repeating how hard she was working to get the necessary immigration papers. She also wrote about my longing to already be in *Eretz Israel*—the land of Israel. In one of the letters I added a few lines, in the Hebrew I had acquired recently at the Lodz Hebrew school. I asked my relatives’ advice as to whether I should join *Aliyat Hanoar*—Youth Aliyah. I wanted to make sure that there would be a possibility to continue my schooling.⁶

My memories of the first days following disembarkation are scant and vague. I recall Aunt Pnina waiting for us at the Haifa port, among a small crowd of relatives and friends of the immigrants. She gave me a sandwich of bread and margarine. We were then taken to Sha’ar Ha’aliya transit camp near Haifa, but we didn’t stay there long. Uncle Zeev brought us to Afula, to his nice and small newly built house, where I spent my first few weeks in the new country. Besides Zeev and Pepka, his second wife, there were three kids: my cousins Ora and Amos and a boy named Ofer.

What impressed me most was the neatness of the place and the prevailing bright colors of the rooms. How different from our dimly lit Lodz apartment on Gdanska Street! Ora showed me her collection of pictures of film actors and actresses. The radio played both familiar and new Israeli tunes, which I eagerly absorbed. Within a day or so I had my first haircut in the town center. The transition from huge and gray Lodz to small Afula seemed quite smooth and natural, perhaps because of our family. We soon met up with Pnina and her husband Shaya in nearby Merhavia. There was some talk about me starting school in Afula, but a few weeks later I was brought to the kibbutz, where I was to live for the next year and a half. The language of communication in Zeev’s house was mainly Hebrew, with bits of Polish and Yiddish mixed in. Zeev’s Polish was rather rusty; Pepka’s, excellent.

I would get to know Afula later. In the meantime, the first meaningful and formative steps of my new life were taken in kibbutz Merhavia. It was there that I would actually turn into an Israeli. I was placed in the Merhavia boarding school in the early spring of 1950 and would remain there until the summer of 1951: less than a year and a half. However, the impact of these fifteen months was enormous.

6 Author’s personal archive.



The immigrants who arrived at the port of Haifa on the *Galila* in early 1950 were just a tiny drop in an enormous wave of immigration that reached the shores of Israel during the first three years of the new state. Whereas on the eve of Israel's independence—in May 1948—the total Jewish population in the country numbered 650,000, by May 1951, that figure had reached 1.3 million. The newcomers originated in various European and non-European countries. Close to 110,000 people arrived from Eastern Europe in 1949, nearly half of them from Poland. The total number of immigrants in all of 1949 came to 240,000.⁷ In 1950, another 170,000 immigrants arrived in Israel from various countries. The highest number in that year was in October, with close to 20,000 immigrants; the lowest, April, with slightly more than 8,000. Around 11,000 arrived in February 1950. We were among them.⁸ Beginning in December 1949, trainloads of Jews left various points of departure in Poland in the direction of Italy. Each trainload carried five hundred to seven hundred passengers. The immigrants boarded Israeli ships either in Bari or Venice. We boarded the *Galila* in Venice. These immigrant ships were usually overcrowded. At times, the number of passengers was twice the ship's normal carrying capacity.⁹ Shortly after disembarking, the immigrants were usually moved to a huge transit camp: Sha'ar Ha'aliya at St. Luke's, a former British army camp south of Haifa. Conditions there were harsh. People from different countries speaking various languages stood in lines to register and to receive food and bedding.¹⁰

Besides this huge camp, dozens of temporary immigrant camps were hastily set up throughout the country. More than 100,000 immigrants were sheltered in fifty-eight temporary camps in May of 1950. Within a year, a new type of immigrant dwelling compound—the *maabara* transit facility started replacing the initial camps. Close to 80,000 immigrants were still living in those first camps at the end of 1951, but another 180,000 were already living in the *maabarot*.¹¹ The *maabarot* were usually located near existing settlements.

7 Tom Segev, 1949—*The First Israelis* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Domino Publishers, 1984), 105.

8 Moshe Lissak, ed., *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882: Israel—The First Decade* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy for Sciences and Humanities and The Bialik Institute, 2009), 115–20.

9 Dvora Hacoen, *Immigrants in Turmoil: Mass Immigration and Its Absorption in Israel, 1948–1953* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute Publishers, 1994), 65.

10 Hacoen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, 83.

11 *Ibid.*, 326.

Some of the first ones were sited near Tiberias, Afula, Nahariya, and Hadera.¹² By late 1951, close to 260,000 immigrants were living in these maabarot and other temporary camps.¹³ The largest maabarot, those housing between 5,000 and 8,000 residents each, were located in the center of the country, between Bat Yam in the South and Ra'anana in the North. Four smaller maabarot were set up near Afula, each housing fewer than 1,500 residents.¹⁴

European and non-European immigrants differed in the manner in which they were absorbed into the new country. Prior to Israel's independence, close to ninety percent of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Palestine, was of European origin; and it was only natural that the absorbing society had more affinity for newcomers from Europe than for non-European immigrants.¹⁵ But the patronizing attitude of veteran settlers was on the whole extended to newcomers, regardless of where they were from.¹⁶ Some old-timers even considered their own newly-arrived relatives to be *golah*-type Jews: Jews of the diaspora.¹⁷

The kibbutzim absorbed only a small fraction of the immigrant population—most of them youngsters, members of the various Zionist youth movements. Eight thousand young people of Aliyat Hanoar settled in kibbutzim throughout Israel in 1948 and 1949.¹⁸



The kibbutz was a significant component of the Zionist settlement in Palestine and early Israel. The so-called “kibbutzniks”—the kibbutz settlers—symbolized the “New Jews” as opposed to the “Diaspora Jews.” They were perceived not only as Zionist pioneers but also as the builders of a new, just, egalitarian, and morally perfect society.¹⁹ The kibbutz movement's prestige and impact on Israeli society reached its peak in the early 1950s.²⁰ In the *Yishuv* and in

12 Ibid., 201.

13 Ibid., 298.

14 Ibid., 300.

15 Hanna Yablonka, “Immigrants from Europe and Holocaust Consciousness,” in *The First Decade, 1948–1958* [in Hebrew], ed. Zvi Tsameret and Hanna Yablonka [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute Publishers, 1997), 42.

16 Hacothen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, 320.

17 Segev, *1949—The First Israelis*, 123.

18 Hacothen, *Immigrants in Turmoil*, 138.

19 Amos Elon, *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 172.

20 Elon, *The Israelis*, 410.

early Israeli society, kibbutz life was thought of as the elite form of socialist existence.²¹ Around the 1950s, however, the kibbutz began to lose its centrality and special status. Its role in the absorption of the enormous immigration wave in that period was decidedly marginal. The great majority of post-independence immigrants lacked the ideological motivation to join the kibbutzim, and the kibbutzim had scant interest in absorbing great numbers of immigrants, lest they negatively affect the unique qualities of the kibbutz society. Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion had harsh words for “the pioneering movement’s failure” to absorb the newcomers.²²

The essence of kibbutz life was its communal nature. It was a collective meant to be based on openness, trust, and equality. It is possible these qualities truly existed in its early stages. In time, however, kibbutz society grew heterogeneous and variegated. The founding groups were people of like age who came from similar geographical, social, and cultural backgrounds. Over time, additional groups joined the initial settlers, and there were, of course, children born in the kibbutzim. Thus, one can speak of various cohorts within each kibbutz. While the subgroups did work to assimilate themselves into the collective, they also tended to band together.

The number of kibbutzim, as well as the overall kibbutz population, grew steadily in the 1930s and 1940s. Between 1935 and 1949 the number of kibbutzim increased from forty-five to 146. The overall kibbutz population grew from around 4,000 in 1932, to more than 47,000 in 1947, and over 49,000 in 1948. The kibbutz settlers comprised more than 7.6 percent of the Jewish population at that time.²³ Yet since the population of each kibbutz did not usually exceed a few hundred members, kibbutz society remained relatively small and intimate. One of the resulting features was the continuous closeness of day-to-day life in the kibbutz, which in turn resulted in a constant critique of the values of the other. Gossip was another characteristic; it functioned at least in part as a significant means for the society to exert its control.

While there were certainly some extremist and revolutionary ideas in respect to family life in the early stages of kibbutz society, the concept of

21 Henry Near, *The Kibbutz Movement: A History*, vol. 2, *Crisis and Achievement*, 1939–1995 (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 1.

22 Anita Shapira, “The Kibbutz and the State,” *The Jewish Review of Books* 2 (Summer 2010): 5–6.

23 Israel Shepher and Reuven Shapira, *Kibbutz: Continuity and Change* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, Unit 8–9, 1998), passim; Near, *The Kibbutz Movement*, 364.

a family and of parents with close bonds to their children still prevailed. All the same, children mostly lived away from their parents. From an early age, they led their lives mainly with their peers. The *metapelet*—nursery-school teacher—the teacher, and the youth-movement counselor replaced parents to a considerable extent.

The physical architecture of the kibbutz was affected by its concept and ideology as well as by practical conditions. Prior to permanent settlement, kibbutz group members usually lived in a tent encampment that could be easily relocated to meet shifting labor opportunities. Some tent camps continued to exist during the early phase of the permanent settlement, as well. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, signs of architectural planning could be discerned, with influences from the “Garden Suburb” concept and from early Soviet architecture. In time however, the Bauhaus style prevailed. Some of the most outstanding German-Jewish architects, who had immigrated to Palestine in the 1930s, were approached to plan various building projects in the kibbutzim. Preference was usually given to communal projects such as children’s homes and dining halls. As for residential spaces, the tents were gradually replaced by wooden shacks, divided into several distinct units. The shacks in turn were replaced by permanent dwellings within which a single room was assigned to each couple. Communal showers and toilets were located nearby.²⁴

The communal dining hall—the *khadar haokhel*—served as the social and cultural focal point of kibbutz life. Here, people met for meals, celebrated holidays, and convened for cultural events. Holidays and celebrations associated with nature and labor were most significant. There were theater-like performances, music, and singing. Often, furniture was moved aside to make space for dances. There was both collective dancing, the most prevalent form of it being the *hora*, and dancing in couples, in forms such as the *krakowiak*. In general, music held a significant place in the cultural life of the kibbutzim. The most popular instruments, taught to elementary-school children and high-school students, were the recorder and the mandolin.²⁵

Assaf Inbari, in his book *Home*, tells the story of kibbutz Afikim, one of the largest kibbutzim in Israel. Afikim was founded in the hot and humid Jordan

24 Freddy Kahana, *Neither Town nor Village: The Architecture of the Kibbutz, 1910–1990* [in Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Yad Tabenkin, 2011), passim.

25 Tamar Gispán-Grinberg, “Mural Art in the Communal Dining Halls of the Kibbutz Haartzai in the Years 1950–1967,” *Cathedra* 135 (2010).

Valley in 1932 by a group of Hashomer Hatzair pioneers who had arrived in Palestine from Soviet Russia in the mid-1920s. They had come from such places as Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa. The most audacious of them dreamed of a large community of one hundred families. By the 1960s, there were close to 1,300 people living in Afikim.²⁶ Over time, the first founders from Russia were joined by settlers from Germany, Austria, and other European countries. “One could hear different languages in the communal dining room: Russian, German, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Hindu, Arabic, Yiddish, English.”²⁷ Some of the later arrivals were Holocaust survivors. Inbari, with his distinctive, slightly cynical humor, implies that they didn’t feel quite at home. Part of his story focuses on the 1950s, when the kibbutz had begun to change from a semi-utopian, egalitarian society to a more stratified and divergent community. German reparation payments to the Holocaust survivors caused quite a rift: “The Russian old timers, now in their fifties, told the camp survivors, now in their thirties, that if even one of them would accept an envelope with money without passing it on to the secretariat, the kibbutz as a way of life would cease to exist. The survivors, exhibiting their tattooed camp numbers, threatened to leave.”²⁸

Another point of friction was higher education. “A *teudat bagrut*—matriculation certificate—was superfluous and perhaps even dangerous to possess. A kibbutznik with such a certificate might even use it: he could leave the kibbutz!”²⁹ Inbari, a native son of Afikim, examines and relates the heroic and tragic story of “his” kibbutz, and of the kibbutzim in general, with his sense of humor and gentle irony.

Yael Neeman, in her book *We Were the Future*, tells the story of “her” kibbutz Yehiam in Western Galilee. Her narrative is a tapestry of personal memories and historical facts. The initial phase of the kibbutz’s existence was linked with the 1948 War of Independence. The first group of close to a hundred settlers arrived there in the fall of 1946: “among them were young people from the Rehovot branch of Hashomer Hatzair, graduates of the Ben Shemen boarding school as well as people from Hungary and Slovakia, who had arrived just a few months earlier from postwar Europe.” There was also another group of Hungarians who arrived in Yehiam after the War of Independence,

26 Assaf Inbari, *Home* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonoth Publishers, 2009), 184.

27 Inbari, *Home*, 201.

28 *Ibid.*, 178.

29 *Ibid.*, 206.

with somewhat different characteristics, but “the Israelis” and “the 1946 Hungarians” were always considered the founding fathers of the kibbutz. Over the years, additional groups joined kibbutz Yehiam, such as “the French” and the “South Americans.”

The author extensively describes childhood in the kibbutz and her childhood in particular. What was most important to the adults, according to Neeman, was to build a community of children that would remain separate from their parents’ world: “the intention—and hope—was to create a new child who would become a new man.” And indeed, those children were the future. Stories were told and repeated about the first children of the kibbutz. More than once in the book she delves into the nature of the children’s peer group, the *kvutza*: “we were born into the group called Narkis—Daffodil. There were sixteen of us: eight boys and eight girls. The group’s name would accompany us for life.” Toward the end of her book, Neeman touches upon the sensitive and the sad issue of leaving the kibbutz. She, herself, left Yehiam in 1981 when she was twenty-one. “A kibbutz is not just a village with a pastoral landscape. It’s a political act. And we are deserters. Not traitors anymore, like we would have been ten years ago, but still we have to leave very quietly—on our tiptoes. We are no longer the sons and daughters of the kibbutz, but ‘*ozvim*,’ quitters.”³⁰

The Spiros, an American anthropologist couple, made a study of childhood and adolescence in Beit Alfa—one of the first Hashomer Hatzair collective settlements in Palestine—during the early 1950s, when I was living in nearby Merhavia. Their research concerned the various stages of growing up in that kibbutz in those years. The basic and most intimate social unit for children in the kibbutz was the *kvutza*—the peer group. Each peer group was given a specific name, usually adopted from nature, history, or ideology. Children went through the nursery, the toddler’s house, the kindergarten; completed primary schooling at age twelve; and had their secondary education at the boarding school—all as part of the same *kvutza*. Thus, a kibbutz child lived with his or her peer group from early childhood up until graduation from high school at age eighteen. Kibbutz members continued to be identified with the name of their peer group throughout their adult lives. Boys and girls slept in the same rooms, showered together, and often

30 Yael Neeman, *We Were the Future* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Achuzat Bayit Publishers, 2011), 15–16, 40–41, 72, 203.

ran around nude before getting dressed in the morning or after undressing in the evening.³¹ Although from kindergarten and onward, group solidarity and identity were closely maintained, there was also verbal aggression, most of which consisted of name calling.³² Living quarters and classrooms were usually located in the same building. Teaching was quite informal, as was the teacher-student relationship.³³

The permanent core of each kvutza consisted of kibbutz-born boys and girls. In time, however, additional youngsters joined the peer group. These were the *yaldey khutz*—city children from broken or problematic families whose parents were ideologically close to the kibbutz movement. The day in boarding school started around seven in the morning. After classes and a short rest at noon, the youngsters would work for a few hours in the afternoon. Supper was usually followed by intensive social and cultural activities. What made kibbutz education different from formal education elsewhere was the “project method”: instead of separate courses in history, geography, and literature, a specific historical period was examined, and various aspects of that period—such as economics, politics and science—were discussed.³⁴

The Hashomer Hatzair youth movement was an integral part of life in the boarding school. Each peer group in the boarding school was also a kvutza within the movement, and all the peer groups constituted the local *ken* or nest. Each group had its *madrish*—counselor. The activities were quite similar to those of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in the cities: scouting, discussions, and ceremonies. Sports constituted a significant part of that life. Relationships within each kvutza were often complicated. Some youngsters were more popular than others. Some were rejected because of personal characteristics. Interpersonal aggression took the form of gossip, teasing, derision, and the use of derogatory nicknames. It was usually the *yaldey khutz*, the outsider children, mostly refugees and recent immigrants, who bore the brunt.

With regard to sex life among the teenagers, there seem to have been dichotomous views. Although sex was regarded by the kibbutz as a natural aspect of human life, sexual relations before graduation were strongly disapproved of.

31 Melford E. and Audrey G. Spiro, *Children of the Kibbutz* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 221.

32 Spiro, *Children of the Kibbutz*, 154, 164.

33 *Ibid.*, 262–63.

34 *Ibid.*, 289–302.

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