

Then and Now (1957-2011)

Written by Geoff Bercovich

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Exiting the RAMC, in British Army, I was sent to Jerusalem for a year's study at the 'Machon,' the Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad in 1954-55. All the 72 students, from some 10 different countries, contracted to finish the year and then do 2 years Movement Work in the various Zionist Youth Movements around the world. Ours was HaBonim.

We studied hard for six months. Hebrew every day. Jewish History. Geography. The Arab/Israel Conflict. Zionist History. Community Organisation. Scout craft and Camping. And Handicrafts. After six months study we all moved to kibbutzim, all over the country, and spent our time working half days, picking oranges and studying Hebrew in the afternoons. We all came back for the Final Month in Jerusalem, speaking Hebrew fairly fluently.

The girl sitting next to me in class was to become my wife. When we got back to The UK we got married and worked in The Movement for two years, in London and Dublin. We made 'Aliyah' and got back to Kibbutz Amiad in 1957. My wife was seven months pregnant with our first of three sons, Yonatan.

The kibbutz was a very young kibbutz, nine years old. There were only 24 houses, 12 East of the kibbutz center and 12 to the West, nestling up against the Galilee mountains. The rest was

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very primitive wooden huts and that is where we lived, for the first five years. A single room, without water or a shower/toilet. For us, all that was still 'communal.'

My wife had an English Degree, so she immediately went into teaching, in the Junior School in Kibbutz Ayelet HaShachar. She eventually ended her teaching career a Head Mistress of The Kfar Bloom Area School, with 400 pupils. As for me, I went into agriculture and worked, at first, in Irrigation in the Orchards. Later I was 'elevated' to become Spray Tractorist and spent my time spraying the 400 dunams of apples, pears, plums and peaches against the insect onslaught.

Of course, we had never heard of Rachel Carsons (The Silent Spring) and expressions like 'The Food Chain' were not yet in the Public Consciousness. I merrily sprayed for years with DDT and Parathion, never guessing how dangerous all that was.

During the 10 years I worked there, ending as Pick Manager, I confided to the Farm manager, telling him my goal was to become the Kibbutz Landscape Gardener, a plum job, in my eyes. In the 9th year he came to me and said that he would make me an offer 'I couldn't refuse..' If I would agree to do a year in The Orange Groves, while someone was out studying and earmarked to be the Branch manager, I could definitely become Gardener.

Promises, promises. A year passed.

During this time I had been co-opted onto a number of kibbutz committees and volunteered to become Ambulance Driver and Volunteer Manager some five times,

1969. There was a crisis in The Catering Department. Once again with 'the offer.' If I would agree to go out on a short 6 months Catering Course in Rupin College and then do two years as Caterer, he would promise to make me the Gardener for as long as I liked. This time I was a bit wiser and made sure that this was part of the deal, when it was brought to the vote in The Kibbutz Assembly. Now everybody knew.

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I did the 2 years and it wasn't a job that anyone liked. Catering for 300 people, with a budget which was appallingly low, and a steam cooking system that broke down twice a week. The work pressure was hard on my cook team and there was a heavy turn-over of cooks, coming and leaving. The Community continually complained about the 'lack of variety.' The trouble was, we had the largest beef herd in the country, by now. And four huge Chicken Houses, about a quarter of a mile long, each. 12,000 chickens shipped to market ever 4 months. Consequently, The Catering Department was always being lumbered with tons of Grade C chickens and the occasional beef that got its leg broken amongst the Galilee rocks in the hilly pastures.

The rest of the country was suffering from Austerity and Amiad was glutted with beef and chicken. And Fruit. My team and I spent hours thinking up new recipes for chicken and beef.

In 1971 I finally made it to become landscape gardener. During that time I did the gardens and lawns for some 50 new houses and planted a number of forest groves in the surrounding hills on the annual Tree Planting Festival, Tu B'Shvat.

All in all, that was a 13 year period, with another couple of years as Caterer in the middle. Also, as Volunteer Manager, I had developed a number of Volunteer Weekend bus trips, to The Golan, Haifa Bay and The Western Galilee and The Jordan Valley, doing something I called 'In The Footsteps of the Pioneers.' That and the monthly talks and lectures I did with the Volunteer Community, which got to the ears of The Kibbutz Federation and I was 'head hunted' by The Center for Kibbutz Studies, in Efal, to become Seminar Manager. I took over from Jimmy Becker, from Kibbutz Gadot, a dynamic academic who developed a kibbutz board game, rather like Monopoly. He trained me in, before returning to work in his kibbutz. He also introduced me to my very first Chinese meal in town.

The Study Center was headed by David Sacks of Kibbutz Givat Brenner and my work partner was Benny Kaye from Ain Harod Ichud. We gave seminars to all the groups turning up in Israel who wanted to learn about the Israeli Kibbutz Movement. Academics. Religious Christian Groups. Youth Movement Groups. Summer Camps and Volunteers. Actually, in its heyday, the number of volunteers was estimated in the thousands and reached nearly 1/4 of a million by the time it faded, in 1994. Consequently, there was always a volunteer seminar twice a month. We averaged 42 three day seminars a year.

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Prof. Yaakov Oved, head of The Communes Desk, asked me to handle the English correspondence coming in from The World Commune Movement and thus I also got to sit on the Communes Desk Committee in Efal too. During that time I received funds to visit and study an Urban Commune in San Francisco called Kerista. They had dreams of becoming 'The American Kibbutz Movement' but, sadly, broke up after some 15 years of very successful economic communality, selling Macintosh Computers. They broke up for more or less the same reasons the kibbutz did, opting for Privatisation instead of Commune. I still correspond with some of the ex-members.

I worked in Efal from 1984 until 1990 and transferred over to the HaBonim Office for a final year, then returned home to resume work in the kibbutz. In '92 I took over the Children's farm and worked there for two years.

Sadly, my wife died in 1994. My three sons were married and opted to live outside the kibbutz. One is a Therapist and is living in Oregon. The second is a doctor and the third a Real Estate Agent, working for The Golan Lands Commission. I have nine grandchildren. The eldest is a pilot in the IDF.

In 1994, the kibbutz voted to Privatise. This was a very stormy time and the community was badly split, down the middle. The Pro-Privatisation faction had a majority and in '94 the first steps were taken to end communality. However, an odd mixture of kibbutz sharing and privatization came out of all the decisions. The budgets remained universal and people added salaries to that, so a graduated pay scale was introduced.

Today members pay for food in the dining hall. And the shop. Electricity, water and gas are all paid for, as is laundry and haircuts.! Virtually everybody owns a car now and parking has become a problem. Cars parked all over the kibbutz and around the Security Road. Everybody owns a PC or laptop, a landline phone and a cell phone. A TV, DVD player, VCR, a fridge, cooking stove and a fully furnished house, including the spare bedroom.

There is no money exchange. Everything is done via credit cards. The kibbutz budgets, salaries and pensions are paid directly into the member's bank account. The dining hall, shop, kibbutz clothing stores and clinic all take credit cards or charge the member's accounts and the bills are settled at the end of every month. That actually means a monthly credit.

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Personally, I find the system perfectly adequate, budget-wise. Since retiring, I am able to travel abroad every year and have been to some 10 countries since 1996, including three visits to Thailand and a yearly trip to The States. Mexico, Alaska, China, Spain and Portugal. Turkey. Costa Rico. Cyprus. Vietnam and of, course, the UK to see my family.

The kibbutz still functions, in some ways, like the old style kibbutzim. There is still quite a lot of 'Mutual Aid,' and the community looks after and provides services for The Seniors. The Health Care System still works and there's a nurse in the clinic every day and a doctor visits twice a week regularly. Of course, members now pay for medications but the Health Fund Kupat Holim Insurance scheme is still the prime source of kibbutz Medicare.

Community Activities include art classes, pottery, Bridge Classes and Club. The Kibbutz Library still functions on a volunteer basis, as it always had, though it no longer enjoys a kibbutz yearly 'new book' budget, as in the old days. Book donations are warmly welcomed. The Cultural Committee still operates and organizes entertainments, evening performances and all the Kibbutz Festivals, including the Kibbutz annual Birthday.

I'm retired now and every year I spend half the year over in California. The kibbutz finally finished the wearisome process of getting the houses signed over the members. So now I own my own house and the land around it. Since my house was never renovated, one of the last acts the kibbutz dealt with was compensation and I recently received a large sum of money in order to add rooms and redecorate.

Since this is Friday evening, I'm taking my car, a Mazda Corsa down to Karkum to dine with the two boys and their families, for Friday Night Dinner. They live next door to each other. So it's always a combined meal and usually there are six or seven grandchildren present too.

I'm not too fond of eating in the Dining Hall any more. If anything, I go and take food home. For one, the 300 place dining hall is half empty, and there's only a few members eating there. The rest are the Kibbutz Factory Workers and they look at me and wonder who I am and what I'm doing there.!

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Kibbutz Amiad. January, 2011.