

Kibbutzim in Israel

Why their idealism cannot prevent or solve their economic crisis

By PAUL NOVICK

ENTERING a *kibbutz* in Israel you encounter a community of hard-working people, farmers and those who perform other tasks in the collective—machinists, cowherds, kitchen workers, teachers, etc. Fields and gardens surround the *kibbutz*. The people (in dozens or in hundreds) have dedicated themselves to the work of farming. In the *kibbutz* itself there are a number of institutions, including a nursery and a school. In the better established *kibbutz*, older and more prosperous, the institutions are very well maintained.

Every *kibbutz*, or almost every one, has a definite socialist ideology. We won't go into detail here as to whether the ideology is a consistent one or not, whether it leads to socialism or, perhaps, the reverse. This is another matter. However, one thing is clear. Here you are confronted with hard-working people, hard-working intellectuals, who are striving for socialism. They have repudiated the urban culture and its hustle-bustle. They despise the hocus-pocus of capitalism. They have dedicated themselves to the

soil of Israel to extract its fruitfulness for themselves and for the people as a whole. They have put labor on a pedestal.

Clearly, one can have only friendly feelings toward these people in the *kibbutz*! You observe the fields, barns, workshops, nurseries and schools. You step into the dining room where all meals are prepared and served to each alike. You are greeted in a comradely fashion and are served a meal like everyone else.

You are surrounded by people who have just broken away from work for a few minutes. They have little time for you, but the atmosphere is a friendly one. In no time, they are already back to work, in the fields, in the gardens, on the tractors, to repair trucks, to drive them loaded with produce, etc. The closer you get to these people, the more your liking for them and the greater your respect for this group which has dedicated itself to work.

It is no wonder that for many years the *kibbutzim* were the pride of Israel, admired even by those who did not respect labor so greatly. The *kibbutz* is a very important part of the economy of the land. Thanks to the *kibbutz*, the agricultural economy of Israel has, to a great extent, a cooperative quality.

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I visited the central office of the agricultural division of the Histadruth. Not only did they receive me in a friendly manner, but the head of the division, Yitzhok Shapiro (of the Mapai), invited a number of co-workers also from other parties (Mapam, Ahdut Avoda), who acquainted me with the situation of the *kibbutzim*, and the agricultural economy of Israel as a whole.

There are 221 *kibbutzim* divided into three groups with three different viewpoints. The alliance of Mapai (Ihud) encompasses about 74 *kibbutzim*; Mapam (Kibbutz Arzi) also has 74; the Ahdut Avoda (Kibbutz Hamehad) has about 60. There are smaller alliances of Mizrachi (religious group), Progressive Zionists, etc., and also some individual *kibbutzim* which belong to no alliance. Among these is the left-wing Yad Hana, named after Hana Senesh. (See T. Wendy, "Kibbutz Yad Hana," JEWISH CURRENTS, October, 1958, copies at 40 cents.)

In addition to the *kibbutzim* there are 304 *moshavim* (colonies) affiliated with the Histadruth and 35 not affiliated. These are also cooperative agricultural colonies. Here, however, each family keeps house for itself with its own kitchen. Unlike the *kibbutzim*, the parents keep the children at home when they are not in school or in kindergarten, during their parents' working hours. The land is owned formally by the Keren Kayemet (National Fund). The fields are cultivated and harvested cooperatively by machines which are the property of the colony.

The guiding principle dictates that each must live by his own labor. During the harvest however, extra help is hired (all *kibbutzim* do this). Everything is bought and sold cooperatively. Each member of the colony tills a

small piece of land around his house—which is not the case in the *kibbutz*. There, as is well known, people live a communal life in communal houses with separate rooms for adults and couples. The children live in their own communal houses and visit with their parents for a few hours after work.

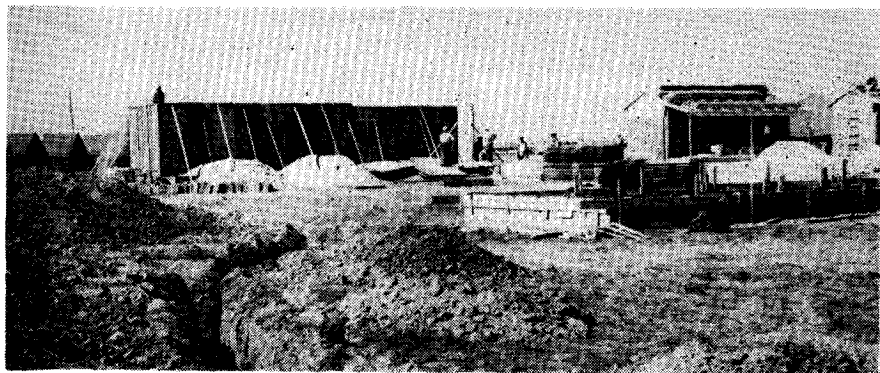
Private farms also exist in Israel. What position do they occupy in the economy of the country?

I was told in the Histadruth that 70 per cent of the nation's agricultural economy is cooperative in nature and only 30 per cent is privately operated. Well, this seems pretty good! One might think that we have here, in the cooperative sector of the economy, an important foothold toward socialism.

All is well until one becomes aware of the very serious problems with which the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* are struggling as well as the problems which beset the total agricultural economy.

The *kibbutzim* have many debts and have to pay tremendous interest rates. In certain *kibbutzim* it is "accepted" that each worker's labor for an hour or two each day goes just to help cover interest rates. (The principal could hardly be touched at this rate!) At the Histadruth, a representative of the *kibbutz* "Merhavia" (Mapai) estimated the value of this *kibbutz* at 3,500,000 pounds; the debt is 1,500,000 pounds. The *kibbutz* pays annually 80,000 pounds in interest, or more than five percent of the yearly income of 1,500,000 pounds. (An Israeli pound is 55 cents.)

Here is another case. Among the six *kibbutzim* I visited, there was "Afikim"—one of the best established in the country. I was officially told there that each family bears a debt of about



Putting up a settlement in the Negev. Courtesy Hashomer Hatzair, N. Y.

10-15,000 pounds. The *kibbutz* having more than 300 families, their total debt is between four and five million pounds. I did not learn how much interest is paid on this. However, these facts are known. The Sukhnut (Jewish Agency) lends money to the *kibbutzim* at the low rate of $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent interest for construction purposes covering 40 per cent of the cost of the given project. The other 60 per cent the *kibbutzim* have to obtain themselves as best as they can.

The official interest rate charged by the bank is 11 per cent—with some minor items even more! It is also sometimes necessary to make private loans from money-lenders who charge as much as 20-25 per cent and even more.

Why are the *kibbutzim* so deeply in debt? I was told in the Histadruth that the cause is “extravagance.” For example, should a new dining room be needed, 250,000 pounds are spent rather than 150,000 pounds, which would probably be enough. (Similarly with other buildings, dwellings, houses for the children, schools, etc.) The old buildings are no longer usable or have become inadequate. The same situation exists in regard to machinery,

stables, kitchens, etc. And so the *kibbutzim* sink into debt.

This answer is partly true but not completely satisfactory. If the *kibbutzim* were self-sustaining, supporting their members in their very frugal way of life and also saving for further investments such as new machines and repair of dwellings, there would be no debts. If the *kibbutzim* were “extravagant” (though why should they *all* be extravagant?), there might be some debt, but not an overwhelming debt! The problem is a fundamental one, for the crisis of the *kibbutzim* is only part of the total crisis of the agricultural economy of Israel.

Tourists returning seven or eight years ago brought grave reports concerning the food problem. Those days, it may be said, have disappeared completely. This is one of the miracles wrought in Israel by human labor and science. For breakfast you may have good, fresh eggs, tasty butter; there is enough milk and fresh meat; also some vegetables, though they are scarce and expensive. Fruit is still a problem. Apparently, in spite of all effort, it is still difficult in a sub-tropical land to produce the apples, pears, cherries and other fruits which grow

in northern countries. However, there are citrus fruits—oranges and grapefruits. Israel has adopted the American custom of drinking citrus juices. Seltzer is no longer the “national” beverage of Israel!

At an agricultural exhibit in Tel-Aviv, we saw very impressive statistics and diagrams describing the accomplishments in connection with the food problem.

Naturally this is all to the good, but it turned out that abundance in this capitalist economy led to crisis! This must be understood if one wants to know the facts and if one is truly interested in the *kibbutzim* and in the fate of these hard-working people dedicated to the soil of Israel. To understand their problems, one must ponder the source of the crisis.

We recall an afternoon in one of the *kibbutzim* we visited. The fields spread far and wide about the farm. Spring was almost at an end and the summer heat—a dry season for months to come—threatened to burn the greater portion of the farmland, especially that area which was not artificially irrigated. For the time being, it was still green all about and on the fields there grew the fruits of honest labor. Nevertheless, our guide was in a melancholy mood. In the distance was heard the sounds of work in a factory on the *kibbutz*. It is hoped that budgetary problems will be mitigated through industrial projects. However, there was no great expectation of any basic changes. Why? Because the market price is low; there is “too much.”

In the United States we are acquainted with this situation. Even now, a bitter crisis exists among chicken and egg farmers of New Jersey and other states. Generally speaking, farmers have problems. It is unfortunate, but there is “too much.” But how did

Israel ever become involved in such a crisis? Why were the *kibbutzim* affected? Aren't they founded on socialist, even communist, principles?

It is true that, thanks to their communal and meagre (often very meagre) existence and thanks to their devotion to the soil of Israel, the *kibbutzim* are somewhat better off than certain farmers of the *moshavim* or some of the smaller individual farmers. Some *kibbutzim* have been in operation for years and years. But all of them are subject to the conditions of the general agricultural situation and the entire Israeli agricultural economy faces serious problems.

We have seen that the *kibbutzim* are severely in debt because their earnings are too small to permit new investments. Investments, however, are necessary—not only to build new houses, kindergartens, dining rooms, etc., but to meet a growing need for more machinery.

One of the reasons for the great agricultural achievements of Israel is its intensive mechanization. For example, from 1948 to 1954 the number of tractors increased from 680 to 3,415. [The Research Department of the Israeli Consulate in New York reports that in 1957 there were 4,900 tractors in use.—*Ed.*] Most of the *kibbutzim* were forced to go into debt to get more machinery so they could compete with capitalist enterprises in agriculture. About six-eight years ago the agricultural economy of Israel was at least 95 per cent in the hands of cooperative producers—*kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. By now, however, about 30 per cent of the cultivated land is in the hands of capitalist producers, who possess a great deal of machinery and employ “farm hands.” These provide sharp competition to the *kibbutzim*. Along with this situation, there ap-
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peared the malady of overproduction, of "too much food," when in fact many Israelis cannot buy enough food.

For instance, there is "too much" butter and milk in Israel, which has reached a high level of production in dairy produce. This is a great achievement when one recalls how recently there was such a shortage. But why should there be a crisis now? One of the causes is the influx of butter and powdered milk from the United States. In earlier days this help was necessary, but the flow of help was not stopped at the right time. This was the answer of the Histadruth.

But at a conference of agricultural workers in Israel (held Dec., 1958 in Tel Aviv) the question of U.S. "help" in the form of butter, cheese and powdered milk was critically analyzed. Although most of the participants were members of the Mapai (Ben-Gurion's party), there was a sharp clash between them and the government representatives.

It was charged that the "help" from Washington was simply an act of "dumping," and that this was calamitous for the agricultural economy of Israel.

Haim Galperin, a member of the Mapai, director of the agricultural bank and lecturer on agricultural subjects, compared such "help" to "poisoned candy." He declared, "our economy is quite badly conducted and has no future because it is not oriented toward peace with our Arab neighbors."

This last is a different issue. But let us examine the government reply to the complaint concerning American help. Said P. Sapir, Secretary of Commerce and Industry, "There is only

one account that covers both arms and other goods. . . . We had to buy either all or nothing. . . . I should like to know what choice you would have had. . . . You probably think that Abba Eban tells Dulles what to do and not the other way around. . . ." A clear and meaningful answer!

Israel exports butter; therefore this American "aid" aggravated the difficult plight of the Israeli agricultural economy. For example, even though the Histadruth's organization "Tnuva," which purchases agricultural products, had in its storehouses 1,000 tons of "surplus" butter, 600 tons of United States butter were added. The people of Israel can no longer stand the sight of American salt butter, but the price of Israeli butter fell—both because of the American competition and because of "overproduction."

We were told by a Mapai official that Israel now exports butter to England. But the English market is flooded with butter from Denmark, Canada and other countries. The Israeli government guarantees the exporter 290 pounds (about \$160) per ton whereas England does not pay more than 200 pounds per ton!

In order to solve the problem of "too much," the government proposes slaughtering 10,000-15,000 milking cows to decrease total dairy production, which has been developed under such tremendous duress and, instead, to concentrate on producing articles for export and industry (citrus fruits, cotton, tobacco, etc.). Suffice it to say that the members of the agricultural conference—among them Abraham Harzfeld, a Mapai leader and Knesset deputy—were opposed to such a plan and favored the retention of the current combined economy. This example is adequate illustration of the

crisis facing the *kibbutzim*, a crisis which also faces the major portion of the agricultural economy of Israel.

This is one of the reasons why newly-arrived immigrants ("oilim") seldom join *kibbutzim*. Here is renewed evidence which vividly demonstrates how unreal it is, to put it mildly, to propose to build socialism in a capitalist environment, and at that in an economy further subjected to the pressures of foreign capitalism. The hard working people of the *kibbutzim* came face to face with this harsh reality.

Because of this development the *kibbutzim*, in spite of significant achievements, do not carry as much

weight in the Israeli agriculture and in general life as before. We have seen that the entire cooperative sector of Israeli agriculture was reduced from 90-95 to 70 or even 60 per cent. As *kibbutzim* alone, their weight in Israeli agriculture has shrunk from 49 per cent in 1948 to 20 percent in Dec., 1957. Furthermore, the people living in the *kibbutzim*, everyone included (children, invalids, etc.), now comprise no more than four per cent of the entire population of Israel.

This is the situation regardless of the fact that there have been great achievements thanks to the dollars which flowed into Israel since 1948, and thanks also to the labor and inventiveness of the masses of hard workers and scientists.

Moscow Radio Rebuts Charges of Persecution of Judaism

S. Rabinovich, Moscow correspondent for the *Morning Freiheit*, was presented July 16 and 25 in Moscow broadcasts to comment on charges of Soviet persecution of Judaism appearing in the *New York Times* and inflated in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the *Day-Jewish Journal* and other periodicals. On the basis of recent personal observation, Rabinovich reported that synagogues were functioning fully in Kiev, Vinnitsa, Lvov, Odessa, Kherson, Nikolayev, Berditchev, Dnepropetrovsk and Kirovograd. He stated there are 11 synagogues in Moldavia, six in the Zhitomir Region, five in the Vinnitsa and three each in the Hmel'nitsky, Chernigov and Transcarpathian Regions, as well as others in the Georgian, Uzbekistan, Byelorussian and Russian Republics.

As for matzos, they were baked in state bakeries in Lvov, Odessa, Simferopol, Vinnitsa, Kherson, Chernigov, Chernovtsy, Zhmerinka, Berdichev and other Ukrainian towns, in Leningrad, Kuibishev, Moscow and other Russian cities. In Moscow, 91 tons were produced, 11 more than in 1958, and sold in 20 shops. "In some cities where it was impossible to organize matzo-baking at state enterprises, the religious Jews made the matzos themselves."

The charge that Jewish cemeteries were being desecrated was denied. It was pointed out that in some cities expanding rapidly in size and population, cemeteries that were in the way of new building were relocated. Thus *non-Jewish* and Jewish cemeteries were transferred. graves and tombstones together, in Moscow, Vilna, Kishinev and Voronezh.