

THE WAR-TIME HABONIM HOSTELS

(This article, written in 1949 by Asher Tarmon (formerly Tremberg), was published in a Habonim Souvenir Publication on the occasion of the movement's 20th anniversary).

In September 1939, the sirens sounded and the bulk of London Jewish children was scattered helter-skelter over the country-side – their “chadarim” and youth groups helplessly disorganized. They found themselves in a completely alien atmosphere, a darker “galut” than they had ever been in before. The situation needed a new approach and Habonim was the first to adapt itself to the new conditions. They founded a hostel for these evacuees in Exmouth, Devon; the spirit of Hebrew invaded their lives; Hebrew slogans covered the walls; merry-making filled the rooms; Jewish studies began; they learnt to live together as a group; Shabat and Yom-Tov transformed the “bayit”... Similar hostels were opened up in Dawlish and Teignmouth and 140 children in all, became full participants in formal Habonim groups. The initial brainwave for the concept came from Baruch Tal, who served as our war-time emissary from Eretz Yisrael.

The “Batim” were born of an emergency and seemed at first to be only a stop-gap. They turned out to be a first-rate instrument of education towards a full Jewish life. Many chaverim now engaged on the sterner task of building Israel, will remember with gratitude their early training in our war-time “Batim”.

One of the greatest achievements of the movement arose from a negative phenomenon. Batei Habonim – the war-time hostels – were brought into being as a result of war.

That which no other Jewish institution attempted to do for lack of finance, qualified personnel and sheer initiative – we went into, head first! The ‘movement’ in town had suffered a crippling blow due to evacuation, we were almost financially bankrupt due to the 1939 Summer Camp Jamboree, the leaders and older ‘madrichim’ were being mobilized, many others left the movement immediately to concentrate on defence activities and the war effort, and we had decided to open two more ‘hachsharot’ and fill them! In this situation we embarked upon the setting up of Habonim Hostels. We had to mobilize the madrichim, equip three houses to provide a normal life for nearly 50 souls in each, find the money to do so – and then find the kids. Luckily the parents had faith in us and entrusted their progeny to our inexperienced care.

By trial and error we learned the hard way. We attempted to imitate what we thought to be the perfect example of a children’s community – the children’s house in a kibbutz. We undoubtedly did far better in many respects, for I have since been able to judge this personally and can compare.

The life in Batei Habonim was intensive and the active day was long, the celebrations and festivals (both Jewish and domestic) were manifold; not a spare moment went unexploited. Within a framework of educational and cultural activities (in addition to normal schooling), designed to cover every possible aspect of Judaism, Zionism and scouting, there were the ever-prevalent features of merry-making, of practical joking, of adventure in the open and a festive and happy group life inside.

We began to gain a name for ourselves in the Anglo-Jewish community, and the parents and visitors from far and wide propagated (at large) their unique impressions. An official of the Ministry of Health, who paid us a visit, confided that we had succeeded where the general evacuation programme had failed.

We were almost at the point of having to close down for lack of funds, when financial help was organized and our future was secured. Development was rapid and the “Chevrot Noar” (Youth Communities) in the hostels reached standards such as we had never dared to dream of.

Apart from attendance at school, where our children attained the highest standards in their respective classes, (thus adding unwittingly their quota to the spread of anti-Semitism!), there was the organized educational and cultural programme in the “bayit”. This included Ivrit, Scouting, Jewish History, Bible, Palestinography, Current Affairs, Jewish Customs and Practise, Zionism and Eretz Yisrael, Handicrafts, Gardening, Musical Appreciation, Hebrew songs (by the myriad), Drama, Folk Dancing, Habonim Ceremonial and many other subjects, directly and indirectly relevant to the upbringing of a ‘movement’ product. The effect of informal educational activity cannot be over-estimated. This was ever prevalent in the decorations on the walls, in the example set by the madrichim, in the symbolic celebration of festivals and above all, in the structure of the children’s community itself.

This community elected its own committees for ‘toranut’ (chores), ‘tarbut’ (culture), ‘va’adat chaverim’ (member’s council), ‘gizbarut’ (funding) etc. All matters affecting the ‘chevra’ (society) were decided upon at a weekly ‘asepha klalit’ (general meeting). Contact with the outside world was maintained by our active participation in local events, charitable and otherwise. We nearly created a sensation by giving an illustrated presentation on “The Story of Jewish Music” at the Congregational Church.

We did make plans for the continuation of the hostels after the war, and their eventual conversion into “Hachsharot Noar” (youth training centres). Had this materialized, the manpower crises and problems would have been forever obviated in the movement. But the fates were unkind and there was of course the conscription law, which would have partially ruined our plans.

In our short but eventful history of 20 years, the advent of “Batei Habonim” is as outstanding a landmark as any other enterprise or operation ever undertaken by the movement. I venture to say that such an institution is as necessary to the evolution of Habonim today as it was then, but I hope it doesn’t take another world war to establish it again.