

Hurst Grange. (1948-49).

The idea of going on Hachshara (the communal farm, or commune) was finalized at a concert of Beethoven's 9th symphony performed by the Scottish Symphony Orchestra. Whether it was the words of Schiller (Ode to Joy, all men are brothers) or the stirring music that sealed my decision to go on Hachshara, I do not know. I turned to my Madrich (Group leader), Zvi Frisch, who was at the concert and said something like "I am ready". I was fed up with high school, with studying piano, and, what I then considered the decadent life of Glasgow Jewry (Jewish social clubs, Ballroom dancing, etc). I had had all these years of Zionism and socialist indoctrination, having joined the movement at around 10 years old, graduated to the Daily Worker, and was imbued with the idea of creating a 'utopian' society. This could only be done through going on Aliya to Israel and living in a Kibbutz. I must have been quite a romantic, and decided that this was a superior way of life, better than going to university and following my contemporaries in study or business. Of course I had come under the influence of the movement and its leadership, which frowned on the idea of a university education. In fact if you read the minutes of the discussion in the movement at that time, you will find that this was a deliberate policy, to persuade young people not to go on for higher education even if it was possible. Thus at the age of 16.5, some time in 1948 I arrived at Hurst Grange, near Reading (at that time Twyford was the nearest train station and was just a village). I had come from a very middle class home, and had never done a days hard work in my life except for pulling out a few weeds around the rhubarb patch in the back garden. By this time the family had moved up to Holeburn Rd, in Newlands, one of the newer suburbs on the South side of Glasgow.

That I ended up in Hurst Grange was just chance, since the movement had three training farms, "Reading" as the one at Hurst Grange was called, David Eder Farm, near Horsham, and a third at Bosham, in Sussex. The idea was that this would be training for kibbutz life in Israel. Hachsharot (commune) as these were called were actually set up in Europe before the war, and continued in the UK after the war as a means of organizing the immigration into Palestine, which was under a quota, by the British authorities. This of course was relaxed with the creation of Israel, but the concept of using these as a training farm, and possibly the future leadership of the movement was maintained. In fact it turned out to be a very idealistic kibbutz life compared to the real thing, and even idyllic. The premise was that we would work as farm laborers if such jobs were available, and pool our earnings. I don't remember how much I earned but it all went

into a common kitty. I am sure it was not very much, as farm laborers, particularly unskilled did not earn very much. In fact we often worked piecework, being paid by the row we hoed, or number of boxes of sprouts or lettuce we harvested. Although we believed in the equality of the sexes, for the most part it was the chaverot (girls) who did most of the cooking and the housework. We lived on a very limited budget, and tried to be very self sufficient, i.e. not taking help from outside, although I am not sure how much Hechalutz (the parent organization, meaning the Pioneer) and the Zionist organizations subsidized the training farms. In most cases we were about 20 young people of both sexes, mostly single with a few married couples, either both from the movement and in some cases one was there because the other belonged to the movement. Occasionally non-movement people did join for ideological reasons, mostly socialist ideas. I must emphasize that this was not like the communes of the 60's, no drugs, hot tubs etc. It was a working commune and very self disciplined.

We ran the place very democratically, the instrument of decision being the asepha (meeting) where all of us would participate in discussion on what we considered “ important “ matters. These important matters revolved around social items: internal about personal relationship or about our relationship to the outside world. We were most definitely not religious, completely secular, and although we did celebrate some Jewish holidays (selectively) they were related to the season (agricultural) or given a nationalistic flavor.

We also elected a secretary (Mazkir), treasurer (Gizbar), and various committees particularly to attend to our cultural (tarbut) needs. Culture was very important, particularly music (classical) and intellectual discussions on philosophy, Zionist and socialist writers etc. I do not remember there being any interest in “ pop music” or pop culture, which might have been natural for a group of youngsters. However we did relax at times and sing old pub songs, and dirty ditties, this was the “ British” coming out. This was a specialty of certain chaverim (comrades), mostly those from a Cockney background. We really were an odd mix of British and Jewish culture, and I suppose in retrospect we were an odd group of kids. We definitely were not the run of the mill teens or young people. We also very much believed in the idea of an educated peasantry., an idea proposed by A.D. Gordon, a philosopher of the pioneer movement.

Hurst Grange was an old rambling run-down mansion that had seen better days. I think the house probably still exists, or it did a few years ago. I shared a room with another newcomer,

Nat Ritsky from London. The chevrah (group) was made up of a few of us newcomers, mostly younger members of the movement, and older members in the early 20's many of whom were born in Europe and had come to Britain as refugees. Although I knew how to cycle, I had never cycled long distances. This was essential if I wanted to get to work in one of the nearby (or not so nearby) farms. We had a collection of bikes left over from other members. I quickly learned the ropes and the next day was sent out to work with Nat and Leon, another new arrival. I do not think any of us had ever been close to a cow before and here we were in front of a pile of cow manure, shoveling the stuff into a cart. It must have looked like a scene from a comic movie or Monty Python show. We all struggled getting the fork into the pile, and equally struggled lifting it up and moving it into the cart. Nat was a well-built, dark boy, about my own age, with dark curly hair. He came from the East End of London. Leon was a gangly, pimped young man, I think from NW London. Nat had been a tailor's apprentice and Leon a hairdresser's assistant. I do not think either had been very involved in Hachshara, certainly not as much as I had been. It was tough work. None of us had handled pitchforks and shovels before, and with great difficulty we extracted the material, which was all compressed together. Although we thought we were working hard, when it came time to go home, the farmer in no uncertain terms told us to not bother coming back. Although we were cheap labor, our productivity was such that he preferred local labor. Thus my introduction to Hachshara, and farming, ended after one day on the job (This was not to be the last time it happened, but that belongs to another era. When I arrived in New York, I was penniless and had no profession other than what I had learned from working in the Kibbutz. There were no sheep in New York. I got a job in the fruit market as a book keeper through the Hebrew Immigrant Society, but was fired after one day because of illegible handwriting and not knowing how to keep books). I do not know what happened to Nat or Leon, but both returned to London after a short time. During a visit to Kfar Hanassi in Israel in 2007 I met a distant relative, (Irene, wife of Nocky Shine (deceased)), and it turns out that she was instrumental in convincing her nephew to go on Hachshara. This was the same Nat Ritsky. Apparently he left the Hachshara after a few months and became a London taxi driver.

The next day after this incident I was sent to work in a local market garden. The owner of the farm was a Mr. Lobjoit, a decent gentleman farmer. He employed quite a number of the crazy "Jewish kids". I must have worked quite well since I did not lose this job but did all sorts of jobs around the farm, including harvesting various kinds of greens, feeding the pigs (who always

wanted to take a bite out of me), and milking the cows. This was before milking machines were common, and I also learned to drive a tractor, a Ferguson and Ford, which placed me in a good position later on in life. I actually used my tractor driving skills to help put me through college 15 years later! These were the type of tractors where you had to use all your strength to turn the starting handle which had a terrible kick back, not like today with automatic ignition. I have pleasant memories of this time, and although the work was hard it did not bother me. I learned a lot about agriculture, and the exposure to different tasks came in handy later on. The worst job, as I remember, was picking Brussel sprouts covered with ice in a cold frosty morning. I remember one freezing morning picking these ice-cold sprouts with one of the girls Aliza, I think from London. She cursed like a trooper, and amazed all the local yokels with her vocabulary. I remember Mr. Lobjoit taking me aside and asking whether all our girls behaved like this! I loved working in the cowshed, it was warm and cozy, even if it smelt a bit, and sitting next to the cow and milking by hand was quite an experience. I became a good cowman, and it helped that I had a love of animals (previously cats and dogs). As far as I can recall I worked at Lobjoit's all through my period at Hurst Grange. Certainly my Hachshara was a success in learning how to work, and to some extent enjoying it. I also may have been one of the few to have a stable job. Apparently Lobjoit's was a famous market gardener, there being a type of Cos lettuce called after the farm.

At Hurst grange there was an interesting group of people. Most were older than I. The secretary of the group was Meir Weisleman.. Two of the girls were in love with him, Annie and Sylvia. They were sisters, and there always appeared to be rivalry between them. I know he married one of them, I think Sylvia, but I am not sure. Many of the members at this time were from Europe. There was Susie, with a strong German accent, a very friendly motherly type. Sylvia Brooks from Glasgow, a few years older than I. She was a very attractive young woman. There is a photograph of her with a flower in her hair, in one of the old newspaper articles. She probably dressed much better than any of the others. I met her a few years later at in Kibbutz Afikim where she had settled with her husband. There was Yetta, a very attractive young girl, always happy and smiling. She ended up marrying Ivor Pope, whom I remember as being a very strong character and ideological driving force. Another Glaswegian was Sylvia Polli, later Sylvia Flowers. Harold had received his Ph.D. in Chemistry and was one of the few academics in the group. One of my best friends was Ronnie Silverstein, later Ronnie Sillers. We were both

known as skirt chasers. Ronnie eventually married an Israeli at Amiad, Yael Neumann. However that was not to last very long. He left Israel, settled in Britain and married another acquaintance, Laura Shur of Glasgow. Two inseparable friends whom I think had been in the air force (RAF) together were Alfie Mann and Frank Beth. Frank eventually went on aliyah to Amiad and helped establish the filtration plant. His wife Deborah is still alive at the time of this writing. Frank had a stroke in his mid-50's and was handicapped for years before his death although he did turn out some nice art.. Alfie never made it to Israel, at least not for any length of time.

Then there was Manfred, a “ wild” rough character. He was as strong as an ox, and not very bright. Most of the girls were afraid of him, and on one occasion the police were called in after he had “ assaulted” one of the girls. I think it was either Annie or Sylvia, and he hid in one of the bathrooms. When the cops came and asked him why he was hiding in the toilet his answer was classical “ I’m having a shit, mate”. He then escaped out of the window. I do not remember whether he was arrested and charged, or charges were dropped. He was a disturbed person. Eventually he was sent by the movement to Israel

In retrospect I must have been the youngest kid to ever go on Hachshara up till then. Most of the others at the farm were in their 20's, some were married, many were those who had escaped from Europe, or had served in the forces during the war. I can imagine that I must have appeared like a little kid, or an unruly teenager. (From photographs of that time I looked like a “ wild” unruly teenager, sporting a large Afro in the days before such a “ style’ was known).

Obviously being 17 years old, sex was important to me. Although I had been to Habonim summer camps, notorious for their sexual freedom, I was quite innocent and naïve. Standard of behaviour were quite different in the 1940s and 50's from that of today. One did not go to bed the very first time (at least I did not). Very shortly after arriving, I found a “Chavera” in Ruth. The laundry ,which was an annex to the building was a suitable place to “ schmooze”. It was isolated and very warm since the clothes were dried there. This was not a serious affair, since Ruth's parents were immigrating to Australia and she was going with them, but it fulfilled a need for quite some time. Ruth was a small, not unattractive young girl (17-18 years old). However when I saw her mother, a small wrinkled old lady, I realized this is what Ruth would look like in a few years, thus she was not for me. In fact one can judge a lot by meeting the parents of a

prospective bride. I have to remember to tell that to my grandchildren. Many years later I met Mimi, my wife to be's mother, and I thought her a very beautiful woman. That must have played a role in my decision to ask Mimi to marry me. (That she accepted was quite a surprise !) Of course there were always visitors who came down for the weekend or a few weeks, and I think I must have been constantly in love (or thus it appeared to a 17 year old) with at least one of them. One episode I do remember very well. A group of young beautiful girls of Indian-Jewish background came down from London to visit, and I in my usual fashion began to flirt with them. (There was no doubt that I and Ronny Sillers and Louis Williams were the " great" flirts among the bachelors). Somehow I was quite successful with one of the older girls. She was a school teacher and must have been in her early to mid 20s. I was this inexperienced youngster, who was accustomed to necking but not anything else. We went to one of the fields behind the building, and lay together ,on the grass it being a warm summers night. I realized I was in for more than I bargained, and according to Ray who was a sort of father figure in the group (a married man.. I do not know what happened to him) , I came back into the living room as pale as a ghost. I think the story got around that I had been raped. I would have loved to have met her again some other time, but this never happened.

Louis Williams had joined the group a little later. I always considered him a good friend, although we lost contact afterwards in Israel, since he did not go with the group to Gal -Ed. Mrs. Williams, his mother would always come down to the Hachshara with clean sheets, blankets or something else. She did not approve of our level of sanitation and insisted on making us more comfortable. Louis was very embarrassed by this, and he led the revolt against accepting anything from his mother (other than cigarettes). At that time he was a bit of a slob, as was I. Mrs Williams was a kind hearted woman, typical of the WIZO. Type. Mr Williams was high up in the management of Marks and Spencers. I do remember that Louis had a beautiful sister, whom I fell for. She was much younger than Louis (therefore probably a year or so younger than I). She had a long pigtail, was very dark and very pretty. . I do not know whether she immigrated to Israel or stayed in London. Louis ended up writing a history of the Israeli army, and a translator of books from the Hebrew to the English. Somehow we have never met since the days on Hachshara.

It was during this period that I must have come out of my “ shy” shell. I was quite outgoing, made friends with both sexes quite easily, although I was still put off by rough behaviour or too much cursing. The language of the group was very crude. I think many of the group tried to out do the local “ peasants” and were constantly swearing. There were others who would talk of nothing else but sex and make sexual innuendos or risqué conversations. This was particularly true of SL .I still to this day remember many of his “ dirty” jokes, at the time I was uneducated in the way of the world, and though many were related to homosexuality, I had a hard time interpreting them. I really was an innocent kid. I had a reputation among the local farm workers for being very polite and was called “ parson Taylor” at work, because I did not drink, nor curse. I did occasionally go to the local pub, but at that time I did not feel at home in this atmosphere. This has most certainly changed, and today I do not mind having a beer with friends and students!

Apart from work, I served on the Vaa'd Tarbut (cultural committee) , which dealt with programs for holidays and our general Zionist-Socialist education. Our general meetings once a week, dealt with important issues such as how to fit into the “ general proletariat”, i.e. should we steal booze from a liquor factory where Frank worked like all the other workers, in order to conform to the proletariat or be “ Honest”. Our identification with the working classes was more important. The Vaad Tarbut (cultural committee) also organized the Friday night Oneg Shabbat, and the holidays, particularly Passover. We did not use the traditional Haggadah (prayer book) but developed our own, focusing on spring, agriculture, and longings for the land of Israel. I wonder whether any have survived. I found this emphasis on spring and nature more appropriate than the Hagaddah we traditionally use.

I never doubted that I was doing the right thing, and was quite sure of my Zionist and to a less extent my socialist convictions. Some doubts did creep in as I got to know the English countryside, and saw a different aspect of people. Looking back I realize that I certainly had a “ chip” on my shoulder and was very suspicious of non-Jews. Although I did not have very much in common with the local farmers or farm workers, I found them decent and pleasant, and most certainly not Anti-Semitic, just curious. I also grew to love the English countryside. I would get on my bike, and ride off to Sonning and Henley on Thames at the weekend. I do not remember who my companions were, but we loved the small towns, the beauty of the summer, and in general developed a romantic attitude to Southern England. Of course I read a lot, (New

Statesman, Tribune etc.) We had non-stop political and ideological discussions, and we had lots of lectures from Shlichim (emissaries from Israel) , and from personalities like Shimon Appelbaum, a well know archeologist. We also studied Hebrew quite intensively, and many a weekend was spent at other Hachsharot, getting to know chaverim, forming bonds, and in general being educated (or was it brain washed ?).

Many of the chaverim formed couples, and it was quite a job if one was on shmira (guard duty) waking people up at 5 or 6 a.m. for work, since very often they were not in their own rooms but somewhere else. After I time one got used to finding various people in each others rooms. Others kept on joining the group, different in some respects from the “ old timers”, a different generation, who grew up during the war, but had not fought in the war. I think a schism developed between those who would go to Kibbutz Beth Haemek, and on Aliya in 1950 and those who stayed behind and in actual fact formed a new garin (group). I was caught in between ,having joined the “ older” group as a youngster, and was now the same age as those now joining the Hachshara and forming a new group

One has to ask the question was the movement correct in recruiting some one as young as I was, and later when Hachsharat Noar (a younger group) was established of recruiting a large number of 15-17 year olds . Would it not have been better to have encouraged us to go to university, or technical schools to have careers that could contribute to the building of the State, rather than farm workers.? With hindsight of course higher education and non-agricultural work were to be the mainstay of the State of Israel in the future but we could not predict this. The philosophy of the Zionist-socialist movement was to create an “ educated” peasantry, and to invert the typical Jewish demographic society, with more workers and less businessmen and educators etc.

After about a year and a half, at Hurst grange, a momentous decision for me personally was made, either in an official discussion of the group or by the office of Hechalutz. It was decided that I should not go on Aliyah with the garin of the time (the group that went to Beth Haemek), but rather take a course in farm management at the West of Scotland College of Agriculture . Looking back it is difficult to know the motivation of the movement, certainly the

idea was not mine, and I was disappointed that I would not be going on aliya with my chevrah (this would have been to Beth Ha-emek). Perhaps it was decided that I was too young to go with the group, or I was not ready yet for aliyah. This “not ready for Aliya” was a vague concept that was quite often discussed. I do not quite know what it meant, not ideologically ready?. Although Hachshara was supposed to prepare us for kibbutz life in Israel, in fact, it really did not. It taught us the value of hard work, and how to work, and a person was valued by his work ethic, but it did not really prepare for the reality of life in the Middle East. Rather I think we all fell in love with rural England. We enjoyed our interactions with the local farmers who were pretty decent, the occasional visit to the pub, if we could afford it, and the bike rides at the weekends. Anyhow the movement decided that I should take this course, live at home, and return to hachshara (not Reading but the David Eder Farm, nr Horsham) and eventually help run the farm, with whatever skills I picked up from the course.

David Eder Farm.

The David Eder Farm was the show place of the movement. It was run by its “inmates”, a group of kids from all over Britain. There was a farm manager, “Jock” Rogers, who told us what to do, when to plant, what cows to buy etc. He was the boss. I was supposed eventually to take over from him. It was a very foolish idea and probably was never meant to happen, but this was the logic behind my taking this course in farm management.



The Eder farm was call after David Montagu Eder, a Zionist leader of the 1930's. It was a nice large farm house, with a cottage (seepicture) down the road (which is where I slept) and a separate buildings for housing the milk cows, the tractors etc., and had one or two silos.

After the course I arrived at the David Eder Farm expecting to take over the running of the farm (after all I had just studied that !). However it was not to happen. Mr Rogers (Jock) was still in charge, and the group at the Eder Farm seemed to run the place quite efficiently. For me life at the Eder Farm was full, there were many cultural events, performances for outsiders (I have a photograph of performing an Israeli dance with Esther Davidson for an audience from London.). I worked in the refet (cow shed), which by this time had been modernized with milking machines (known as a milking parlor), and was a tractorist, made silage etc. did all the chores of a regular farmer. Sundays (or Saturdays) we would take a small amount of money from the kuppah (a vase containing money sitting on a sideboard for common use) and go out to Horsham for tea, very rarely to a pub. I was going steady at this time with Esther Davidson,

from Liverpool. This was really my first serious relationship. Esther eventually left hachasharat noar, our relationship did not develop since, her parents did not consider me “ good enough “ . I actually did visit her parents one time, quite a wealthy Liverpool family. All our money was pooled (whatever we made), and there was a small sum set aside for general use. We lived a very pure egalitarian life style (at least I thought so). We took turns at running the kitchen, and I remember that in turn, the economit (person in charge of food and running the kitchen) was Irene, and Thilda, (not necessarily in that order). Food was reasonable, and the gilrs did very well on a limited budget. Again some time in 1952 it was decided that the group would go on Aliya, and that I should stay behind as a “ madrich” (instructor) to help run the farm. Thus another group !. however a few weeks later I received my calling up papers from the army, and Hechalutz decided that I and two others should now go on Aliya. Thus Dov Kapetanchick (who had been on noar, and who now (2005) has just retired from Aberdeen University), Phil Shearsky, who was to play a large part in my life later on in the sheep pens of Amiad and in the army, and is unfortunately no more and I very quickly were on the road to Paris, Marseilles and Gal Ed, Israel

Thus my road to Israel was a long one. Looking back these were among the best days of my life. They did not quite prepare me for the shock of Gal- Ed or real Kibbutz life. Work was not a problem, even though I became a roeh tzon (Shepherd). Again it sounds romantic !. It was far from it, no one would sit near me in the dining room because of the stench, my clothes were constantly dirty from sheep milk, and it meant getting up at ungodly hours.

However my life in Israel is another chapter and how I ended up in the USA still another one .

Thus what I learned from Hachshara was a work ethic (I am still accused of being a workaholic at the age of 78), a respect for other people and their opinion, and how to interact with others of different background.