Hachshara: An Australian ‘Kibbutz’

Introduction

Kibbutzim are well known in Israel but it is little known that there was also a kibbutz, or at least a pseudo-kibbutz, known as Hachshara or the Hebrew Training Farm, in Australia between 1945 and 1967.

Many Australian Jews were affected by Zionism, the global enthusiasm to establish a Jewish homeland. Zionism, as a global political movement, formally began in 1897 at the first International Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. Although Australian Zionist precursors can be traced back to 1861, Australian Zionism formally began in November 1900 with Rabbi David Freedman’s formation of a Zionist group in Perth, and was greatly broadened during 1901-2 with the formation of Melbourne and Sydney Zionist associations. In 1927 the various Australian Zionist groups combined to form the Australian Zionist Federation, later changed to the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand.

The Zionist Youth Movement in Australia, as generally understood, began in December 1939 when Shmuel Rosenkranz, Isaac Roseby, Gedalia Perlstein and Michael Porter (Doari), all recent migrants from largely anti-Semitic Europe, met in Victoria. In Yiddish, they shared their European experiences of the politically savvy Zionist Youth Movements of Maccabi Hatzair and Hashomer Hatzair. They held their first public meeting in Herzl Hall, Carlton, Melbourne, in February 1940 and called their Zionist youth group ‘Habonim’. A similar Zionist youth group, called ‘Shomrim’, also began at about this time in Sydney. Three months later, Habonim bravely issued a call for Australian Jewish youth ‘to rally to the Flag of Zion and the proud Banner of our *chalutzim* [pioneers] in Eretz Israel’.

This rallying call was warmly received by few members of the Melbourne Jewish community which was riven by internal schisms. As one scholar observed,

> Melbourne Jewry was the battleground for a conflict in both style and content, between the ideal of the Eastern European ghetto, with its intense and vibrant Jewish religious, cultural and communal life, and the ideal of the English gentleman, seeking above all, respectability, avoiding publicity and controversy, maintaining formal religious affiliation, but wearing religion lightly and having little interest in Jewish culture.

This schism was also noted by Rabbi Harry Freedman in 1943 who observed that Australian Jews could be divided into three categories: 1) ‘assimilationists’ who just
want to be ordinary Australians; 2) those to whom Judaism is a matter of private religious choice; and 3) the Zionists who seek the establishment of Israel and hope/plan to live there. Other splits within the Jewish community of Melbourne were geographical, separated by the Yarra River, and based on social class.

In July 1941 the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand created a Youth Department in an attempt to co-ordinate, and perhaps control, Habonim and the other Jewish youth groups which had sprung up across Australia. On behalf of Jewish youth, they published a moderate, Sydney-based magazine, *The Young Zionist*.

During the early years of World War Two, Habonim was ‘an insular movement because geographically and culturally the foreign-born Jewish community was insular’. And within this European Jewish youth movement there was tension between the German and Polish born youth, as well as tension between them and the Australian and UK born Jews.

As the war progressed, and it became ever more apparent what was happening to Jews in Europe, the miniscule Habonim organization gained strength and influence as a Zionist Socialist Youth Movement. Under the direction of Dr David Tabor, a British chemist and metallurgist who had been sent to Australia as a ballistics expert, Habonim became an effective organization with the ultimate aim of encouraging young Australians to migrate to Palestine and help establish the state of Israel. In May 1944, Habonim adopted a charter, committing itself to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. To Habonim, being an Australian Jew came to be ‘synonymous with being a free and democratic Jew, bent on self-sacrifice and utter devotion to the Jewish people’. Habonim socialised Jewish youth with a Zionist edge which meant ‘speaking the language, learning the knowledge, believing the creed and performing the actions which were gathered under the Habonim canopy’.

While some young Australian Jews wished to migrate and help establish the socialist state of Israel, usually with dreams of communal living in kibbutzim in mind, ‘It was soon found … that the great change from life in the city … to communal life in a kibbutz in Israel, from mental and sedentary to hard physical work, together with the change of language, climate and standard of living … was too big to be made in one jump.’ It was argued and generally accepted that a pseudo-kibbutz in Australia
could serve both as a training centre and as a way of identifying and encouraging those young Jews with the right attitudes and abilities to best serve Israel. It would save the ‘misfits’ from wasting everyone’s time and money. It would also keep young Jews together until they could gain a ‘certificate’ (or visa) to go to Palestine.

A leading Australian Zionist wrote that the encouragement of communal living along kibbutz lines in Australia should be

so that Australian Zionists in general, and Australian Jewish Youth in particular might play their proper part in the rebirth of Israel imbued with a pioneering spirit and communal idealism which is so essential in the service of our people. Moreover, Israel is still demanding the aliya [migration to Israel] of young Jewish people from English speaking countries who are prepared to join the communal settlements as an essential contribution to the upbuilding of Israel.  

Following the Second World War there were many emotionally scarred European Jews anxious to go to Palestine but there was some preference for unscarred young people who might be better able to help form the new state of Israel. Asher Mansbach, Youth Envoy from the Jewish Agency, pointed out the need for western kibbutz migrants. ‘It is in Australia and other free countries that youth can be properly educated to the tasks of chalutziut [pioneering]. Only Jewish youth from those economically and culturally developed countries can give the impetus and drive … on which the future of Israel depends.’

The establishment in Israel of Bet Habonim, in Kibbutz Kfar Blum, with its concentration of English-speaking Habonim members, was a big encouragement to the creation of a kibbutz training farm in Australia.

**Hachshara at Springvale:**

The first record found of a group of young Jewish Australians wanting to establish ‘collective living, if possible on the land’ in Australia is in a letter dated 16 June 1944. To this youthful, and perhaps naïve, Australian enthusiasm, the Habonim Office in Palestine responded with guidelines pointing out that ‘Hachshara’, as it was already known throughout Europe and North America, should promote four ends:

1. Collective living;
2. Independence and responsibility;
3. Manual labour; and
4. Agriculture and Nature.
Before the end of November 1944, these would-be Australian kibbutzniks, mainly centred in Melbourne, had ‘taken the concrete step of pooling all money, including bank money’.\(^{18}\) They located a 3.5 hectare (8.5 acre) chicken farm on the north side of Heatherton Road, just west of Springvale Road, on the eastern edge of Melbourne, and inspected this land on 29 April 1945. It had a farmhouse and chicken sheds but was run-down and unproductive.\(^{19}\) The youth group tried but failed to gain financial support from the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, so instead raised finance from two local supporters, Joseph Yoffe and Yehuda Berkon, and, with a sizeable loan from Union Bank, purchased the land for £2600, with an additional £400 for livestock and equipment. The property was registered in the names of Yehuda Berkon, Joseph Yoffe and David Tabor. The first three communards, Henry Urbach, Arthur Weisinger and Max Leffelholz, moved in on 21 May 1945, and were soon joined by Michael Porter. Hermann Stern was hired to direct the farm and its training activities. Initially, the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand appears to have been unaware of this project, and this created a degree of suspicion and potential ill-will.\(^{20}\)

Almost at once the communards realised that this property was inadequate and that they really needed a large mixed farm and an instructor from Israel. Being purchased privately rather than by the Zionist Federation, Hachshara had a dubious legitimacy in many eyes. Their 1200 chickens were found to be sick, the previous owner who had agreed to stay on as an advisor had disappeared, and Hachshara faced bankruptcy within weeks of opening. Only an infusion of additional donations averted disaster, although this also led to demands for control by the Zionist Council of Victoria. Seeking legitimacy, the Hachshara people requested the Zionist Council to form an Advisory Committee, to be led by Dr Fred Benfey. This position was taken over by Dr Ernie Krauss during the 1950s and then by Sam Aubor during the final years.\(^{21}\)

Members used the farm house as a communal cooking and meeting place, and initially the boys slept in the house and the girls slept in what had been the chicken-incubator shed. Eva Urbach (nee Nothmann) recalls the first year of Hachshara; ‘the baby chicks were gone but they left behind their fleas! Lots and lots of fleas … and when I went home occasionally for a bath, the water surface was completely covered with fleas’. Needing the incubator-shed for other purposes, they eventually erected
an unlined fibro hut, about six metres square, as a dormitory. Only four to five people could comfortably live there at a time although many young Jews came out from Melbourne for working-bees, parties and meetings. By the end of 1945, five young men and four young women were crammed into this inadequate space with scarcely enough work to do. Eva Urbach remembers that ideological discussions were intense. After she and Henry married in March 1946, they went for a week’s honeymoon, only to receive an urgent message from their fellow communards.

They had held a meeting at which it was decided that honeymoons were “unchalutzic” [too bourgeois] and that we should return immediately. And we did! Such a childish interpretation of kibbutz ideals seems funny now but it was dead serious to us at the time.22

In April 1946, Betty Kezelman (later Doari), Max Leffelholz/Loftus, Michael Porter (later Doari) and Henry & Eva Urbach became the first Australian Hachshara aliya group. But, until one could move to Israel, Hachshara, where ‘the strangeness of Palestine was infused into the familiarity of the Australian landscape’ would have to do as a pseudo-Israel.23 As one early resident wrote, there was nothing extraordinary about its location or scenery. Approaching it there is also nothing extraordinary about a few be-overalled young people, clearing a patch of bush for cultivation. Yet once inside the gate it is different … there more than anywhere else do I feel closest to Eretz Israel.24

This Hachshara, the residential face of Habonim, became what Irving Goffman calls a ‘total institution’ serving almost all needs and becoming central to identity. Hachshara ‘excluded from the environment all categories of meaning and identity other than that of being a Zionist youth’. This passion, however, was possibly almost as much about youth rebellion as about founding the state of Israel.25 One member captured this complex mix of motives when she wrote in 1948 that Hachshara was, Where Habonim meets … a place where long and fruitful or otherwise discussions are held, where lungs can be aired at frequent intervals, where horas can be danced when felt like, plays rehearsed, tests passed, posters painted … a home where Jewish boys and girls want to express their spirit and enthusiasm.26

In late 1946 Hachshara was in financial crisis and when extra funds were requested from the State Zionist Council, Simon Roth objected, saying that ‘before money was given, the Zionists who had contributed previously were entitled to know to what use the money had been put as he could not see where improvements had been made’. In the end, £150 was reluctantly granted to keep Hachshara afloat. In the following year, with better relations between Hachshara and the Zionist Council, this donation
was increased to £1500, and an additional £250 was received from the Jewish Agency, Jerusalem.27

At the 1947 conference of the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand, Mr Ehud Lederberger, the first Shaliach [envoy from Israel], showed a short film about life at Hachshara Springvale, while Shirley Rose, a member, spoke about their daily life and finances. The Zionist Federation, which had not been involved in the self-funded Hachshara now offered regular support of £250 per annum. The farm had nine residents who were growing a commercial potato crop, green feed for their chickens, and vegetables for themselves, as well as running a 2000 chicken egg-laying operation. Some members had to work off Hachshara to bring in additional money, even though this was contrary to their principles. Besides working, they learned Hebrew and botany, and tried to understand and apply socialism and communalism as they imagined these to operate in Palestine.28

Enthusiasm over the formation of a Jewish state led to the establishment of Zionist Youth Leagues in several Australian cities. Membership consisted mainly of Australian-born university students who were not involved in Habonim, but quite a few went to Hachshara, and went on aliya. At the same time as this radicalisation occurred, other Jewish youth were moving from Zionism back into conventional, bourgeois Australia society. Ephraim Ehrmann, in 1948, lamented that

Members of Habonim when they reach the age of about eighteen seriously begin the wonder whether they really want to go to Palestine as halutzim [pioneers] and the great majority leave Habonim. … It must be realised that the average Australian has no desire to leave a country which so far has treated him well.29

Although the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand provided an annual subsidy of £250 to Hachshara, there was always the perceived problem that Hachshara was too independent. By 1949 this divide had been bridged and, although still semi-independent, the Zionist Federation now referred to the ‘Zionist Federation’s Hachshara Farm at Springvale’.30 Nevertheless, concern about the too strictly socialist-communal nature of Hachshara led to a Zionist Federation resolution ‘that the Hachshara Training Farm should be open for training to all youth who desire to settle in Israel irrespective of living there in communal settlement or in private capacity’. To make more palatable this watering down of Hachshara’s communal drive, the Zionist Federation agreed to pay for an agricultural advisor.31
By late 1949, following the enthusiasm engendered by the creation of the State of Israel, there were twelve males and five females crowded onto Hachshara, and they anticipated twenty for the following year. Most of the communards were working off-site, a far from acceptable situation. They optimistically imagined/hoped that ‘the greater number of chaverim [comrades] and the greater activities brought about conditions closer to those of life in a kibbutz’. Forty ex-Hachshara members had gone to Israel, and another group was preparing to make aliya. There were difficulties in finding ‘a common cultural level and ideal relationship’, and an inability to balance the financial accounts, but learning Hebrew became more effective under the supervision of Professor Maurice Goldman from University of Melbourne. Members were anxiously looking for a larger farm and, in the meantime, erected another small fibro bungalow. They boasted that fifteen Hachshara communards were on Israeli kibbutzim.32 The Zionist Federation agreed to try to find a new, larger farm in the Shepparton area, where there was already a Jewish community.33

At Springvale in 1949,

One of the Chevra [group] acts in rotation … is responsible for the organization of the work on the farm. He places chaverim in outside jobs, co-ordinates the work and time schedules and arranges the programmes, etc. Chaverim [male comrades] on the farm work in the kitchen, the laundry and the poultry, and one is the truck driver. Three chaverot [female comrades] … work in the [local] hospital kitchens and children’s nurseries, while chaverim work on other farms and as linesmen and carpenters. Some of these jobs are interchangeable when half the period of the training has been completed to give a wider range of experience. The truck is utilised for delivery of eggs and general carrying, thus earning income.34

Throughout its five year history, while a number of young people were trained there and migrated to Israel, the limitations of this site were always a serious concern. Supporters searched for a better place, with a climate more like that of Israel, with enough space so that mixed farming could be developed, and far enough from a capital city so that it would be less of a holiday experience and more like aliya.

**Hachshara at Toolamba**

In May 1950, the Zionist Federation located a 33 hectares (81 acres) farm on the corner of Waugh Road and Mooroopna-Toolamba Road, at Toolamba, near Shepparton, Victoria. Although this land was mostly planted out to apricot, peach, plum and pear orchards, they thought that they could also establish a mixed dairy
and vegetable farm. The Zionist Federation and the Jewish Agency bought the land from Moishe Feiglin and his son-in-law, Aaron Kaploun. The Feiglin family were pioneers of this Jewish farming community of forty to fifty families which had been established in April 1913. Moishe Feiglin, from Palestine, was involved in the Shepparton Jewish Club and in contact with Melbourne Zionists, so he wanted to help establish Hachshara in the area. The Zionist Federation believed that ‘The Toolamba Farm has the advantage of being near Shepparton where an old Jewish agricultural community exists and … the climatic, soil and irrigation conditions are similar to conditions in Israel.’

This area was the traditional land of the Kaitheban Aborigines. In 1840, David Innes had squatted on a 35,700 hectares (87,800 acres) sheep station which he called Toolamba, after 'toolambi' an Aboriginal word meaning ‘small lagoon circled with paper-barks’. Toolamba village was gazetted in 1873, and developed as a mixed farming community after the railway arrived on 13 January 1880.

The Zionist Federation financed this Hachshara ‘so that Australian Zionists in general, and Australian Jewish Youth in particular, might play their proper part in the rebirth of Israel imbued with a pioneering spirit and communal idealism which is so essential in the service of our people.’

Three Hachshara members moved from Springvale onto this land by the end of May, with all the others moving during June 1950. They dismantled and moved their four fibro bungalows from Springvale and re-erected them at Toolamba, then sold the Springvale property with the money repaying bank loans and their original backers. Unlike Springvale, this Hachshara lacked telephone, gas and electricity, and water was scarce. Aaron Kaploun was employed to teach the communards how to prune fruit trees, since that winter task had to start at once or they would lose the next crop.

One of the early visitors recalled why she and other young Jews went to work and live on this Hachshara. It involved

Preparation for a life of socialism, living communally, for people who were the children of mostly middle-class households; preparation for living … and working on a farm for people who had been school or university students … or working in offices or shops; and preparation in socialist doctrine and for speaking, writing and reading Ivrit, the official language of Israel.
During 1951-2, Habonim went through a fundamental shift, from being a relatively undefined youth movement to a more radical political entity. Much of the leadership tried to insist that Habonim members must, at eighteen, either promise to join Hachshara or leave. While some less radical members left, for those who remained Habonim became 'a symbol of youth in revolt and of a dynamic identity which was entrapped in a conservative and complacent community'. A further split occurred in 1953 with the formation of Hashomer Hatzair, a more radical socialist Zionist youth group. Experience would show, however, that this radicalisation of Zionist youth was out of step with changes in the Australian Jewish community.

By early 1952, Hachshara, with thirteen members, had a common house for eating and socialising, four unlined bungalows for sleeping, plus two showers, with hot water, and two toilets. They could accommodate up to twenty people. They had also built a small cottage for their Shaliach, Gershon and Shosh Epstein, who had just arrived from Israel to live and work with them. In May, the first — and only — birth occurred at Hachshara, that of Aviva Epstein. Life improved when electricity was connected in July. Three years later, physical comfort had improved and ‘the bungalows stand warm and snugly-lined with an electric lamp at every bed.’

As far as possible, members sought to live as similarly as possible to what they believed to be the life of kibbutzniks in Israel. Although Hachshara ‘is not an exact replica of a kibbutz in Israel, it is of such a size as to provide sufficient work for all chaverim there’. The problem was, however, that at least two years would be required to train even superficially a person in the principles of fruit growing. Moreover … the fruit produced at Toolamba was not the same type of fruit as produced in Israel and perhaps little practical value would be derived from this hachshara farm.

The Jewish Agency in Jerusalem reminded the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand that practical farm training was not the real point of Hachshara anyhow. Instead, it should train young Jews in: 

- Avoda - the right mental attitude to work;
- Chalutziut - training in communal living and a pioneering spirit;
and Tarbuth - education in Jewish history and Hebrew language.

Some Australian Zionists saw Hachshara as a waste of time and resources - ‘a paradox that Israel should be sending its youth to Australia to attend technical colleges when we had young people learning to grow peaches’. They complained
that it was costing about £200 to train each person to go to Israel — even before they had left Australia — and argued that Hachshara should be closed down or seriously changed to include technical training. Others dismissed Hachshara as an ‘idea which has out-lived its purpose and usefulness’, and the sooner it closed, the less money and energy would be wasted on ‘communal nonsense’. This was rebutted by others who saw Hachshara as ‘the most worthwhile effort being made by Australian Zionism’.

There was a decline in the fervour of many Australian Jewish youth in the early 1950s. In 1953, Hachshara membership declined and it was endangered by an ideological split in Habonim between moderate socialists and radicals. This bitter schism roughly emulated the split in Israel within the United Kibbutz Movement — an ideological split which tore apart several kibbutzim and some families, and whose effects persist to some extent today.

The Zionist Federation believed that ‘Israel is still demanding the aliyah of young Jewish people from English speaking countries who are prepared to join the communal settlements in Israel.’ In early 1954 Hachshara membership dropped to only nine, insufficient to do the necessary work. Hachshara, however, was helping aliyah and between 1946 and 1956, of the 166 Australians and New Zealanders who had gone to live in Israel, 106 had been at Hachshara.

In 1956 further attempts were made to close Hachshara but it was defended as ‘a desirable asset’, and was said to be ‘fulfilling its purpose’ of promoting aliyah. Jerusalem sources stated, ‘Hachshara in Australia was an essential for which there was no substitute’. Members of the Zionist Federation were urged to not think about the accumulating financial losses of Hachshara but to focus on the many young Australians who had been trained for communal life. Another member argued, ‘aliyah must continue to be the main goal of Zionism, and Hachshara is the best means to this end’. To the suggestion that Hachshara should either be shut down or include trade skills, another member rejoined that ‘Hachshara is not the place to learn a trade. It is a place where you learn to live together, to be a responsible member of the community’.

In 1958 Hachshara again came under attack by members of the Zionist Federation because of continued financial loses (£3619 in the previous two years), the lack of
technical training, and the complaint that it was unsuitable for religious Jews. This was rebutted by the assertion that Hachshara was the best way to train Australian youth for the communal life of the kibbutz, and for Israeli life in general. One supporter argued that *aliya* required ‘an infusion of a spirit and a consciousness to realise the needs of Israel, and the Hachshara prepared *chaverim* in that direction’ through ‘collective living, responsibility, initiative, and the running of a collective settlement … a miniature kibbutz’. Another delegate argued that at Hachshara the communards ‘underwent a personal revolution which was necessary prior to their settling in Israel’. One delegate claimed, without citing a shred of evidence, that ‘Hachshara was necessary for the security of Israel since it produced youngsters imbued with the right spirit to settle on the border settlements and defend the borders of Israel, to become the soldiers of Israel, and the Hachshara alone could psychologically prepare them for this task’. As a concession to those who believed that Hachshara ought to teach trade skills, carpentry and cabinet-making training were started but, with only fourteen members, few had time away from farm work.\(^{57}\)

By 1960 the Zionist Federation’s investment of £6500 in restructuring Hachshara was paying dividends and it was claimed to be ‘one of the most up-to-date [farms] in the district, and is one of the centres for the continuation of Jewish life in Shepparton’. They hoped to make Hachshara self-funding by creating a 35 cow milking operation, doubling fruit production through better husbandry on less land, and enlarging poultry operations to 750 caged hens. In the meantime, because of low farm income during the transition phase, some members had to work off the commune as labourers, teachers and nurses. Membership declined to barely sufficient to run the property so the time available for cultural pursuits suffered badly. They hoped for ten members for the following year. Their youth *Shaliach*, Michael Doari, praised the central role of Hachshara in promoting *aliya*, and reminded Zionist Federation delegates that 81 graduates were on Israeli kibbutzim; but it was obvious that opposition from was increasing.\(^{58}\)

By 1962 the ten members, coming from Habonim and Hashomer Hatzair, had given up growing peaches and grubbed out the trees for more pasture. A Department of Agriculture officer advised on maintenance of their remaining orchard, mainly apples. They milked twenty cows, fed on twenty hectares of pasture and cereal crops. They had 600 caged laying hens and, although the financial returns were small, felt this to
be a worthwhile educational venture. During the previous two years, of twenty-two Hachshara graduates, seventeen had gone to Israel.\textsuperscript{59}

The arrival from Israel of John and Rene Tenna, with their three children, to live on the farm had, by 1964, established more of a family atmosphere at Hachshara. Their ‘chaperoning’ role meant that ‘most of the old prejudices and fears [of youthful sexual activity] have disappeared’ and Jewish parents could feel safe that their sons and daughters would be ‘properly supervised’. When the long-term farm manager, Ernest Baker, died in 1963, that work was also taken over by John Tenna.\textsuperscript{60} After the Tenna family returned to Israel in late 1965, this role became the responsibility of Yaakov Gluck, the \textit{Shaliach} to Melbourne Habonim.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{Daily Life for These Would-be Kibbutzniks}

From 1951, Sol (Shlomo) Etzioni remembers communal life as being very primitive in the unlined fibro huts, without even ‘electric light to give the illusion of warmth. There’s nothing that casts a cold spell over … dreams of sun-scorched Israel more than dressing in pitch-dark in freezing cold—literally freezing, for the rain-puddles froze over solid — to learn Hebrew.’\textsuperscript{62}

From 1952, when there were twelve members, Dov (Frank) Golembowicz recalls, We lived in one room bungalows, 2-3 in a room, the toilets and showers were all outside. Every Friday night we had a ceremonial Sabbath evening (there were no religious members). There were parties, skits, trips … for films. Life was no picnic. … It was only a few years after the establishment of the state of Israel so we were in euphoria over the “messianic” events.\textsuperscript{63}

By 1955, as well as eight and a half hours of manual work on each of six days per week, members spent an hour each day learning Hebrew and had regular evening sessions on psychology, heredity, socialism, history and art and music appreciation.\textsuperscript{64}

Zvi Solow recalls that during the mid 1950s, We worked long hours, six days a week. … We did physical farm work for the first time in our life. … We … washed our clothes by hand (that was an undesirable job and in the name of full equality was done by everyone in turn). However we didn’t feel that life was hard. We were young and had plenty of energy. … As no one wanted to cook permanently, but someone obviously had to, we all did it by turn for six weeks. The trouble was that most of us (especially the boys) couldn’t cook even if their life depended on it. So we learned to cook
on the job. The result … was that for the first two weeks of someone’s “cooking watch” the food was inedible, for the next two it was passable and in the last two it was usually quite good – and then it was the next person’s turn and it all started again.\textsuperscript{65}

In mid 1957, in spite of the tragic death in a traffic accident of Hachshara member Sol Rosen,\textsuperscript{66} the five women and six men who remained were making the place more comfortable.

Three girls sharing one room have added bookshelves, lampshades they made themselves and pictures to make the room more like home. Both men and women do the household jobs, and women work in the orchards. They start the farm work daily at 7 a.m. except on Saturday, and their day ends at 5:30 p.m. Even the kitchen staff stops then, and a new shift completes the evening meal. Another group cleans up.\textsuperscript{67}

As part of the reorganisation of the farm during 1958-60, it was accepted that living conditions were too spartan, so the kitchen was modernised with a new gas stove and cupboards, gas heating was installed in the communal house and sleeping areas, and a new shower block built. The cost of £1048 was paid by the Zionist Federation.\textsuperscript{68} The interiors were repainted, a new washing machine lightened the work, and curtains and fly screens improved the aesthetics.\textsuperscript{69} In spite of this, it was admitted that ‘living conditions are still in many ways sub-standard’. That did not prevent the members from organising six camps and a conference for Jewish youth during early 1963, with over 300 attendees.\textsuperscript{70} In the following year, living conditions were still said to be ‘below standard’ leading to the perceived scandal of ‘unshaven, unwashed \textit{chaverim} roaming about the farm’.\textsuperscript{71} Little had changed by 1965 when living conditions were again condemned as ‘most unsuitable for youth’.\textsuperscript{72}

\textbf{Governance and Economics}

When the Zionist Federation of Australia and New Zealand took over full financial control of Hachshara in 1950, they sought to run it as ‘a business undertaking which should be run strictly on business lines’, but nevertheless lost £830 during the first year. The Zionist Federation quickly admitted that ‘Hachshara cannot be treated merely as a business proposition’, and anticipated a deficit of £2000 for 1951-2. As well as the orchard, they had a medium sized poultry operation, plus a milch-cow and vegetable gardens for domestic consumption.\textsuperscript{73}
Dov Golembowicz recalls,

The organization of life was discussed on Saturday nights by the whole group. I remember being quite uncomfortable at raising personal requests in public. … I had been very active in the Youth Movement and going to the farm was regarded as a natural step for committed members. I … had strong left wing views at the time which certainly added spice to much of our discussions.74

Members received no allowance. They could retain their own money but were not allowed to use it for personal treats. If they wanted/needed something, then they had to ask the treasurer.

By 1955, Hachshara had 8000 apricot, peach, pear, plum and apple trees, as well as a small poultry operation and vegetable gardens, plus suitable equipment. Six men and five women learned ‘what it means to lead a communal life, and accept the responsibilities that go with it … an intensely active and healthy life, both mentally and physically.’75

Members rotated positions such as ‘kitchen manager’, ‘farm manager’ and ‘treasurer’, with all farm and inter-personal decisions reached at weekly meetings following democratic lines.76 Originally, after a member had been there three months, and again after eleven months, she/he would be discussed by all members and a decision made about his/her future as a communard.77 A member was supposed to stay for at least eighteen months but this was rarely observed. It was hoped that the appointment as Shaliach on Hachshara in December 1951 of Gershon Epstein, would increase both the number of people coming to Hachshara and their length of stay.78

Zvi Solow remembers,

Once a week, in kibbutz style, we had a general meeting chaired in turn by every one of us. But our direct democracy went further than the classic kibbutz model. As we all ate our meals together around one big table—the dining room in the original three room farmhouse served also as a clubhouse and meeting hall—anyone who felt the need could ask the chairperson of the week to “bring up a point”. On such an occasion the chairperson would, at the end of the meal, ask everyone to stay and keep quiet, and the person “with the point” had his say. Sometimes this led to a discussion and even a vote. Minutes were kept and the decision was as binding as that taken at a regular meeting. Issues ranged from current administrative problems of the farm to permission for various members to take “leave” … for personal (boyfriend/girlfriend) … reasons.79

Hachshara visitor Sophie Caplan recalled one of these ideological debates;
On the Saturday, the one day of rest, a very hot day, there was a long ideological argument among the chevra as to whether it was proper ideologically to use the farm truck to drive to the local swimming pool since it was Sabbath and driving was forbidden. The main argument for non-use was not by a religious member of the chevra but by a member who was a lawyer and ideologue. Eventually there was a vote and the truck was used.80

Long-term kibbutznik Sol Etzioni remembers,

The finances of the farm were meticulously accounted for by the treasurer, one of the most important spare-time responsibilities, elected every three months. The Australian Zionist Federation, which owned the farm, gave us a regular modest allowance and we did our utmost to stick to it.81

This partly democratic, partly consensus, partly autocratic system of governance appears to have worked because the Youth Emissary from Israel pointed out that these Australian Hachshara migrants ‘fit in much better and are much more successful in their lives in the settlements of Israel’.82

During 1956 and 1957 the farm was badly flooded and many peach and apricot trees died. Rather than replant the orchard, the dead trees were removed and improved pasture planted so that they could diversify into dairying to supply Shepparton Butter Factory. Concrete milking facilities were constructed, and they employed a neighbouring farmer, Ernest Baker, to advise on this venture. The Zionist Federation believed that Hachshara should be almost self-sufficient by 1960, rather than the financial ‘bottomless pit’ which some alleged. Habonim Shaliach, Asher Mansbach, strove, without success, to increase the number of members, as did his replacement, Yehuda Riemer, who arrived in late 1957. They grew two hectares of tomatoes and a small patch of peanuts, both profitable but also labour intensive crops which added to the problem of insufficient workers.83

In 1962, when the land and buildings were valued at just over £10,000, Hachshara’s debt had increased to £13,500. Members hoped they could reduce this by £1000 per annum, but the bank was demanding £1500 per annum, plus interest. Their modest budget for living expenses rose from £20 to £23 per member per month. They managed work and finances ‘in as close to a kibbutz pattern as possible’, through elected departmental heads, and tried to be an Israeli Kibbutz in the Australian countryside.84

By 1964, the full effect of their farm re-organisation was apparent with 32 milch-cows, 750 laying hens and 2000 pear and apple trees. Members hoped to operate
profitably and break the twenty year series of losses. They sought to ‘prove to themselves and the world that what the farmer next door can do, they can do too’. In 1965 they had 1350 laying hens but continued to lose money, although members still hoped to become ‘economically self-sufficient’. In spite of this financial optimism, during 1964-65 Hachshara earned £9,864, less than \( \frac{2}{3} \) of their expenses of £15,657. Such losses could not be sustained.

**Social and Cultural Life, and Interpersonal Relationships**

While many parents feared that male-female relationships at Hachshara were far from platonic, and some locals accused them of ‘free-love’, Zvi Solow from the mid 1950s remembers, ‘although the neighbouring farmers thought that we held orgies every night … boy – girl relations were extremely proper’. Members ranged in age between 18 and 22 with one 24 year old being considered a ‘senior’. Most of us knew each other from the youth movements or even had attended the same high-schools or at least had a nodding acquaintance from interstate meetings. We all had more or less the same backgrounds, kids of middle-class first generation Jewish migrants to Australia, mainly from Eastern Europe who had somehow survived the Holocaust, so as a whole we got on very well with each other. We were young and had plenty of energy. The social life was intensive. In the evenings we talked, argued our differences of Zionist-Socialist ideology, the culture committee organized musical evenings … & we played chess & other games. Occasionally we all piled into our little van and went to the open air movie theatre in Toolamba.

Sophie Caplan, a ‘working guest’ during the early 1950s, remembers, ‘on Friday evenings there was a better meal and a blessing of the candles, and wine and [Sabbath] bread’. She recalls their great social life, and that the shortage of females led to plenty of male attention—and sexual jealousy. She asserts that in spite of their non-sexist ideology, washing, cooking and mending was still ‘woman’s work’.

Sol Etzioni, from 1951-52, remembers,

> the girls were in charge of the cooking and housekeeping but also participated in all agricultural jobs, whereas we blokes helped with the laundry and other domestic tasks. … All the blokes’ clothes were put into a general store, with the exception of one good set for the Sabbath. As needed, we took clothes according to size.

Zvi Solow recalls, ‘equality was keenly observed, in fact we were feminists before the term was invented’.

Judy & Miron Shapira write,
we tried to insist that the sexes were equal, but the girls were not very good at working with a shovel on the irrigation all day, nor the boys in cooking and catering for 12-20 people three times a day. And the clothing store was a shambles when clothing was made communal … Unfortunately, the groups were never large enough to allow for real equality and sharing. … The diversity of backgrounds and interests, and education made integration into a group very difficult.94

Sol Etzioni relates, ‘contact with one’s family was considered very important and one evening was devoted to writing home. My logical suggestion that each of us take turns in composing and dictating a communal letter was, for some reason or other, rejected.’95

The only outside entertainment was to go to the pictures in the nearby town … usually less than once a week. Trooping in with the treasurer holding our tickets, we apparently made quite a stir with the locals and once we heard, “Here comes the Jewish Reform School”. Each of us arrived with some personal money, but we were not permitted to use it. … If the treasurer felt that we couldn’t afford it, no one had ice cream or sweets at the pictures.96

Hachshara’s social and cultural life, not unexpectedly, had its ups and downs. There were disputes, jealous intrigues, sexual frustrations and personality clashes. There were also high points such as the forging of life-long friendships and even the establishment of classical music and play-reading circles. Hachshara was said to be the ‘ideological focus point for the majority of Zionist Youth in Australia’ and this both heightened and challenged members’ social life. It was challenging, exciting and at times depressing to live in such an ideologically-charged commune.97 During the early 1960s, Hachshara members took part in local theatrical and symphony orchestra groups, held lecture and film evenings about Israel, and socialised with the local Jewish community during the major religious holidays.98

Some young Jews came to Hachshara full of hope that they could live the utopian communal dream, only to find themselves quite unsuitable. In an extreme case, during 1961 of the fifteen members who joined, five soon left because of incompatibility with communal living.

In 1962, reflecting a range of personal and interpersonal concerns that would have been unthinkable bourgeois a decade earlier, members complained about the lack of ‘guidance and advice which are needed by the chevra with their personal problems’, and wanted the ‘help and advice of a woman with experience in house-keeping and management’ to promote ‘a homely atmosphere rather than a camp-like one’.99 This
was why, in early 1963, John and Rene Tenna were appointed to be residential *shlichim* [youth envoys].

**Closure**

In early 1966, the Zionist Federation became truly alarmed at the continual financial losses of Hachshara in spite of the recent investment in restructuring. They argued that the Youth and *Hechalutz* Department of the Jewish Agency in Israel should pay at least the ever-mounting interest, if not clear the debt. When this was refused, they decided to close Hachshara. It was offered for sale, by auction, on 3 December 1966 with a very optimistic reserve price of $45,500, even though their own valuation was only $35,600. In the end, the farm sale netted $40,742. Hachshara closed in February 1967, having been sold to Natale and Luigina Cecchin, and this communal experiment of 22 years was at an end.

There are several reasons for this closure but the mounting debt was the final straw. There had been continuous complaints within the Zionist Federation about the costs, and Miron Shapira, Hachshara Farm Manager between 1951 and 1955, admits that ‘it was a very expensive way of training young people for an agricultural life in Israel, as after they went to Israel they then had to find a group to join, train with it, and finally settle on the land.

As well, some members of the Jewish community believed that Hachshara was too remote from Melbourne (even though that had been one of the original objectives). Others within the Zionist Federation believed that ‘the Hachshara idea had out-lived its purpose and usefulness’. Some critics alleged that not enough Zionism and Hebrew were learned at Hachshara because the communards had to work too hard. Others bemoaned the lack of religious instruction, and the supposedly loose morals of members. A major factor was that international travel was becoming cheaper and it was more economical for young Australian Jews to go to Israel, to a real kibbutz, to learn Hebrew and communal living there, rather than ‘playing at’ kibbutz life in Australia.
Was Hachshara Successful?

Yehuda Riemer, a senior Israeli scholar who is an expert of the world-wide Hachshara movement, and who was at Hachshara Toolamba during the late 1950s writes;

The fact that people left the hachshara, because they couldn’t adjust to communal life has been held up as a positive feature – it saved them the aggravation of undergoing the process in the tough realities of the kibbutz. But on the other hand it was claimed that hachshara conditions were very different from kibbutz life, and those who couldn’t adjust there would have managed in kibbutz. Not just because of physical discomfort, lack of cleanliness and disorder (at times) but more because of the social pressures existing in such a tiny community, with little privacy and everyone exposed to everyone else’s evaluation. The young people were often left to their own devices and since they had no experience with communal life and in fact with adult life in general, tensions could erupt into crises. All in all it is admirable that the Australians managed to get along so well.104

Hachshara was responsible for several hundred young Australian Jews making aliya. These Hachshara graduates are today almost all positive about their experiences. Len Goldzweig, who lived on Kibbutz Gesher Haziv, feels that at Hachshara he ‘learned how to do physical labour for long hours’, and that this has stood him in good stead throughout life.105 Sol Etzioni, of Kibbutz Tzora, recalls that Hachshara ‘enhanced my maturity and expanded my horizons. … I found that I could live in close quarters with others whom I didn’t necessarily like.’106 Eliyahu Honig fondly remembers his time on Hachshara as ‘an extension of the Youth Movement experience rather than real and solid preparation for a life of agriculture on Kibbutz’.107 Dov Golembowicz, of Kibbutz Nirim, tells me ‘we grew up in that year at Hachshara’. Zvi Solow, also of Kibbutz Nirim, reflects that ‘the friendships we formed there were deep and have lasted to this very day. We still meet now usually at our kids’ weddings … and every ten years there is an Australian immigrants reunion.’108 But, Zvi then reflects, ‘most of us would recall Hachshara as a positive experience … because the many years that have passed since have probably caused us to forget the hardships and frustrations … and because of simple nostalgia.’109

Epilogue:

The ex-hachshara farm is now owned by Mario Tena who, with his two sons, operates a prosperous and intensive dairy operation. One of the Hachshara
‘bungalows’ remains intact while another has become part of a larger shed. The neighbours report fond memories of the ‘Hebrew Training Farm’, even if its members were, at times, thought to be ‘a bit strange’.  

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Endnotes:

1. I wish to thank the many Hachshara members, visitors and neighbours who helped with this research: Jack & Selina Beris, Sophie Caplan, Gershon Epstein, Sol (Shlomo) Etzioni, Paula Field, Martin & Freda Freiberg, Harry Frydenbeg, Harry Glickman, Len Goldzweig, DoV (Frank) Golembowicz, Eliyahu Honig, Mark Leibler, Cliff Pogue, Yehuda Riemer, Hope Roberts, Shmuel & Betty Rosenkranz, Miron & Judy Shapira, Lionel Sharp, Zvi Solow, and Eva & Henry Urbach. I also acknowledge the support of fellow historians and librarians: Sister Maryanne Dacey of University of Sydney Archives, Susan Faine of Jewish Museum of Australia, Sharon Klein of Griffith University Library, Lurline Knee of Tatura and District Historical Society, John Mackellar and Gwenda Collins of the Historical Society of Mooroolbark, and Walter Struve of the State Library of Victoria.


10. Baker, pp. 7-15; and Hyams, p. 79.


15 *Resolutions Passed at the 12th Conference of ZFANZ*, Melbourne, 19-23 January 1945, p. 4.

This land is now covered by Moncur Avenue and Red Hill Road in the suburb of Springvale.


Henry Urbach, born in Poland, was one of the first three Habonim members on Hachshara in 1945, where he married Eva Nothmann. They moved to Kibbutz Kfar Blum, Palestine, in 1946, where he joined Haganah and fought for the creation of Israel. He returned to Australia in 1950 and died in 2003.

Eva Urbach (nee Nothmann) was on Hachshara from November 1945 until April 1946. There she married Henry Urbach and they went to Palestine in 1946 and joined Kibbutz Kfar Blum. They were two of the first five chalutzim from Australia. She returned to Australia in 1950 and lives today in Melbourne.

Hope Roberts (nee Tikvah Berkon) was the daughter of one of the Hachshara founders, Yeduda Berkon, and a member of Habonim. She was a frequent visitor at Hachshara Springvale, and a member of Hachshara Toolamba during 1951. In the early 1970s she and her family went to Israel and joined Kibbutz Hagoshrim. She returned to Australia in the late 1980s and lives in north Queensland.

23 Baker, pp. 16-8 & 30.
Sophie Caplan was an active member of Habonim and the Australian Zionist Youth Council, and a frequent working guest at Hachshara between 1950 and 1953. She has been to Israel many times and is now President of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Sydney.


Baker, p. 42.


Gershon Epstein was an active member of Habonim in England before going to Israel in 1949. He was Shaliach in Australia and lived at Hachshara during the early 1950s. He lives today at Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi.

Aviva Epstein obtained a BA in English and French from the University of Jerusalem. She lives at Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi with her family and works for a high technology firm.

Morvell, p. 183.

Etzioni, p. 20.


Ibid., pp. 40-1.

Ibid., p. 41.

Ibid., (debates) p. 23.

Report of the Sixteenth Conference of ZFANZ, Sydney, 10-12 October 1953, pp. 21 & 24; and letter to author from Zvi Solow, 7 January 2006.

Baker, p. 53.


Minutes of the SZCV, 11 February 1954.


Dov Golembowicz joined Habonim in 1944, lived on Hachshara during 1952, and was a co-founder of Hashomer Hatzair in 1953. He moved to Kibbutz Nirim, Israel, in 1955 and became a history teacher and school administrator. He has retired but remains active in kibbutz affairs.

Zvi Solow was a member of Melbourne Habonim, and a co-founder of Hashomer Hatzair in 1953. He lived for a year at Hachshara in 1954-55, then went to Israel in 1958 where he joined Kibbutz Nirim (and still lives there). He lectures in History and Philosophy of Science at Ben Gurion University.

Sol Rosen was killed when the Hachshara farm truck skidded off the road while returning from a social visit to enjoy the snow at Mount Buffalo. He was intending to go to Kibbutz Yizreel, where there is a today pergola in his memory.

Sol (Schlomo) Etzioni (born Sol Woodman) was on Hachshara in 1951-52 and was Federal Secretary of Australian Habonim in 1953. In 1954 he joined Kibbutz Tzora, Israel, where he remains, and became a chemistry teacher. He is now Secretary of the International Communes Desk.


Sophie Caplan, interview by the author, 13 May 2002.


Judy & Miron Shapira in a letter to the author, 8 July 2002.

Miron Shapira was hired as Hachshara farm manager between 1951 and 1953, and remained a part-time advisor until 1957 when he moved to Sydney where he died in 2005. Judy Shapira was a member of Habonim and lived at Hachshara in 1951-52, where she met and married Miron.


Ibid.


Report of the Executive of ZFANZ, Melbourne, 6 April 1966, p. 126; Report of the Executive of ZFANZ, Melbourne, 30 November 1966, p. 179; Report of the Twenty-Third Conference of ZFANZ, Melbourne, 6-7 April 1968, pp. 3 & 14; Report to 23rd Conference of ZFANZ, Melbourne, 6-7 March 1968, p. 51; and Morvell, p. 188.

Judy & Miron Shapira in a letter to the author, 8 July 2002.


Len Goldzweig was a member of Sydney Habonim and a Hachshara member in 1953. He joined Kibbutz Gesher Haziv but has since retired to Queensland.


Cliff Pogue, Toolamba, interview by author, 21 September 2005.