

## **THE BLOOMS AT KIBBUTZ GVAT - ALONE IN COMMUNAL LIFE**

As I was not a son of a farmer, the Agricultural Faculty at the Hebrew University required their students to spend a year at a mixed farm, and Kibbutz Gvat, overlooking the fertile Jezreel valley, was chosen as my introduction to agrarian practices. I arrived there in November 1946, and my adventure in communal life on the land began.

The kibbutz had been established by Polish and Russian chalutzim in 1920 and by my arrival had developed into a diversified farm with a total population of 600 on 4000 dunams producing a wide range of agricultural products. In tree crops we had olive, apple, plums, and citrus; field crops of wheat, corn, and cattle forages; a large section produced vegetables of myriad variety befitting the four seasons; and poultry, dairy cattle and a flock of sheep in animal production. The last but most beautiful branch was the vineyard, rolling down the hillside towards the valley, where its dry gnarled vines of winter would change to a supreme summer green, heavy with delicious table grapes for market.

All 600 on the kibbutz were not members. A good third on the settlement were the illegal immigrants of that day, plus a group of teenage Bulgarians who had been saved and brought to Gvat by the Jewish Agency. Also, there was a small group of young Egyptian Zionists eager to work the land, while receiving the most delicious Halvah ever from their families in Cairo. So I too joined this mix, equally ignorant of farming and we were all dubbed affectionately as "P'cok." Now this in Hebrew is "a cork" and as a cork bounces easily from place to place, so all new workers were sent to work in many different areas, depending on the specific daily schedules set by the managers of each specialty on the kibbutz.

While I told the work coordinator of a vague desire to work with dairy cattle, he intimated that I couldn't be immediately entrusted with such valuable stock and should in the first months enjoy their diversity of kibbutz activities. For a starter he suggested the vegetable garden, and my very first day's work was preparing the cement foundation for a root crop washing machine, so that carrots, turnips could be marketed cleanly and attractively. Aching days followed where I lagged behind women, inured to duck walking, as I tried thinning out young plants sown too thickly. Tomato picking certainly was much easier, but left your hands black with tomato plant secretions, which you finally washed off with a few green tomatoes at work's end. I've gleaned potatoes missed by the potato picker, and attempted a straight furrow with a mule, whose sense of direction was not

controlled by my reining skills, and made a mockery of my first day behind the plow.

The road from Haifa to Afula bisected the land worked by kibbutz Gvat, and the vegetable plot lay to the North of the road and bordered the first small hills of the lower Galilee. One morning at dawn, we were assigned to pull carrots for market and made our way across the road to the plot just as the sun rose over the horizon. Heavy dew hung on all vegetation and especially on the lush delicately pinnated leaves of a full dunam of carrots. As we neared the carrots, the early sun's rays caught every dewdrop and transformed all those carrot tops into a veritable field of glistening diamonds. It was if we were to pull gems, not carrots, from that field and we stopped for a moment in awe of the shimmering beauty created by light and dew. The praise for dew in scripture was verified in this gleaming field of diamond carrots. Directly approaching our work, the angle changed, the sun rose a bit more, the illusion was over and we bent over to pull carrots, whose tops drenched our hands, clothes and shoes with the long praised dews of Israel.

I also enjoyed working in fields of early wheat which seemed to stretch endlessly on the flat plains in the valley. The manager of field crops provided me with a few sacks of red dyed poisoned wheat, with instructions to lay down a few grains at each mouse hole, I found. This was done faithfully and while finding many burrows, I can't remember ever seeing a mouse. But as I walked hour after hour through young wheat protected by poisoned wheat from the ravages of rodents, I did see the small moshav in the center of the valley far beyond our lands, the distant hills of Ephraim looming up through heat's haze at the south end of the valley, and occasionally the steam powered train puffing slowly across the valley, as it had since Turkish times, from Haifa to the Jordan Valley.

Trains had always fascinated Norman and me, and Dad purchase of the Lionel gunmetal gray locomotive and passenger cars was the high point of young life at 684 Bergenline Ave. So naturally this train crawling across the most fertile valley in Palestine drew my attention. On winter mornings, stepping out of the room shared with another trainee, I would see steam puffs rising through the cold mist from the locomotive and those round buns seemed to hover in the same place, and only after a moment's careful watch, were you convinced that the train was indeed moving forward. That train had an exemplary record for tardiness, and earned the following story about its most famous trait.

One morning a kibbutznik went through the poisoned wheat routine in wheat fields bordering the narrow gauge tracks of our famous valley train. He puts his

lunch bag and his ceramic water jug in the shade of an eucalyptus tree to provide cool water and food at noon. Just as he steps out to begin work, he looks up and sees someone lying across the railroad tracks. He tells him, "Hey, you better get off those tracks or the train will come and kill you!" To this he gets the reply, "Leave me alone. My beloved has run off with someone else and I want to die." Well the kibbutznik leaves this unfortunate to his own mishigas and goes off to destroy wheat field mice. He comes back for lunch and there under the tree sits the unfortunate eating a sandwich. "Didn't you tell me this morning," asks the kibbutznik, "that you're waiting for the train to kill you; so why are you eating now?" To this he gets the reply, "What, do you want me to starve to death until that train comes!"

Another link of memory brought that train to mind upon reading "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom" by Lawrence of Arabia. Did you know that British officer and his band of fighting bedouins attacked this then Turkish train? He describes laying in wait for the train at night, in the middle of winter, with a cold rain pelting down. The damp, the cold, the clinging black fertile mud made them all miserable, shivering and aching all over as they waited to destroy the train. This author was describing my exact body responses during muddy, wet and cold winter days at work in fields so close to that famous train raid by Lawrence. The same aches, the same mud sucking your boots right off your feet. To have someone describe your feelings exactly does send an emotional shiver through you as his words become part of your body. And its interesting that the old-timers on the kibbutz, having come from rigorous winters in Russia and Poland in their youth, complained bitterly about the much milder winters in the Valley of Jezreel. Their exposure to Middle East heat made the winters doubly hard to bear.

A day on the kibbutz was patterned into "before shower" and "after shower" segments. Up at 5:30 you would get a cup of milk-coffee at the communal dining hall and heat for work, then return two hours later for the big breakfast. The tables were loaded with a dark break baked earlier, bowls of sour cream, farmer cheese, vegetables in season, porridge, margarine, halvah, jam and urns of the kibbutz version of "cafe con leche." Your daily egg was delivered by a member pushing a cart down the aisle with bowls of soft or hard eggs, and at this time you could express individuality in choosing which type you desired. Then back to work till the noon meal which usually had a heavy type soup as a main course and plenty of bread, margarine and jam to fill up on. The Middle- East climate now demands a siesta, and it would last until 1:30 and then back to work for another three hours. This was daily work life before the "shower", and this mighty

communal tradition prepared all for transition to the leisure of relaxed evening activities.

You are tired, hot and sweaty in your soiled khaki work clothes, so you stop at the laundry where the member in charge pulls out an identical set of clean khakis from your personal cubbyhole. Then to the one bathhouse serving all, a large structure divided for the sexes with a wall that is only seven feet high, so that all the chatter, gossip in treble and base registers flows freely as the steam over both sections. Though betrothed to Helen, but part of a highly-sexed family, I would try to link high voices over that wall to their nude forms based on how they filled their khaki clothes at work. But here people started to relax and chatted mostly, in this work-driven idealistic society, about their accomplishments at work and the progress of the kibbutz. The shower prepares you for evening activities, which for me was the evening meal, Hebrew study, and early to sleep to recoup strength for the next day's work. Members with children would now go and fetch them from their quarters, as during the work day children and parents go completely separate ways.