

## THE FOUNDING CONTEXTS OF KIBBUTZ MUSEUMS AND THE CASE OF THE MISHKAN MUSEUM OF ART, EIN HAROD

### *Abstract*

*This article surveys the circumstances in which kibbutzim built museums between the 1930s and the 1960s. It focuses on the two largest kibbutz movements and their divergent attitudes to the founding of museums, to art, and to the role of artists in society. In particular, this paper examines the case history of the first art museum to be built in a kibbutz—at Ein Harod, the birthplace of the largest kibbutz movement, the Kibbutz Meuhad. This movement envisioned and promoted a “city/village” form of habitat where agriculture and industry, manual and intellectual labor could co-exist. The article’s analysis of the social construction of space shows how the dynamic network of diachronic and synchronic contexts structures the potential meaning of a particular museum, its status and eventually, its fate.*

### *Keywords*

*kibbutz, museum architecture, art, Jewish art, Ein Harod, collections, Israel, Diaspora*

### *Museum-Building and the Paradigm of the Dedicated Founder*

It is an interesting fact that Israeli museums were first established in kibbutzim at an earlier stage and on a relatively broader scale than in the urban centers. Between the 1930s and the late 1960s, more than 50 museums were established in kibbutzim—mostly museums of nature and archeology, but also several art museums and museums for Holocaust research.<sup>1</sup>

Discussion of the phenomenon of museum-building in kibbutzim has often centered on the actions of a dedicated founder. In a pioneering study on museums in Israel before 1948, Yehudit Kol-Inbar, the administrator of the Museums Department at the Ministry of Education and Culture from 1972–1994, wrote that the founding of museums in Israel “was determined

by the few who were ‘obsessed with the idea.’”<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, the establishment of the art museum at Kibbutz Ein Harod in the late 1930s was explained by the vigorous activity of the charismatic local artist Haim Atar (1902–1953), (fig. 1) who conceived, struggled for, and finally succeeded in establishing the museum. In her study on Israeli museums, Kol-Inbar identified such “obsessed” individuals among the first and second generation of founders of museums in Eretz-Israel, and the conclusions of her study are in line with the spirit of the Zionist ethos that informed these museums. In her study she described the dynamics of how museums were established as parallel to the way Zionism as a whole came to be realized, from an idea to a deed that “was borne on the shoulders of the pioneers who built this country from nothing, with an abundance of impetus, devotion, ideals and sacrifice of the individual for the collective.”<sup>3</sup> The generally accepted narrative of museum history in Israel as initiatives of a solitary pioneer echoes a prevalent Zionist narrative of the heroic individual overcoming numerous obstacles.

Yet, history bears out a different story. In two divergent museum-building projects in Israel, that I consider emblematic of broader trends, it appears that in the absence of a supportive local public context, all the efforts of a dynamic individual, even one “obsessed with the idea,” were not sufficient for the establishment and sustainability of a museum. The first example, of an “obsessed individual” with a vision is Abba Kovner (1918–1987), a charismatic poet and thinker, who managed to implement his ideas but not as he envisaged them fully. Kovner had been one of the leaders of the Vilna Ghetto uprising, and during much of his life he engaged tirelessly in drawing up plans for museums. Kovner’s lifelong wish was to establish—within the framework of his movement, the Kibbutz Artzi of

<sup>1</sup> See Yehoash Biber, *A Guide to Museums in Israel*, (Jerusalem: Ministry of Culture and Education, 1966), (in Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Yehudit Kol-Inbar, *The History of the Museums in Eretz-Israel Before the Establishment of the State, as an Expression of the Zionist Vision* (MA thesis, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1992), 167. (in Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

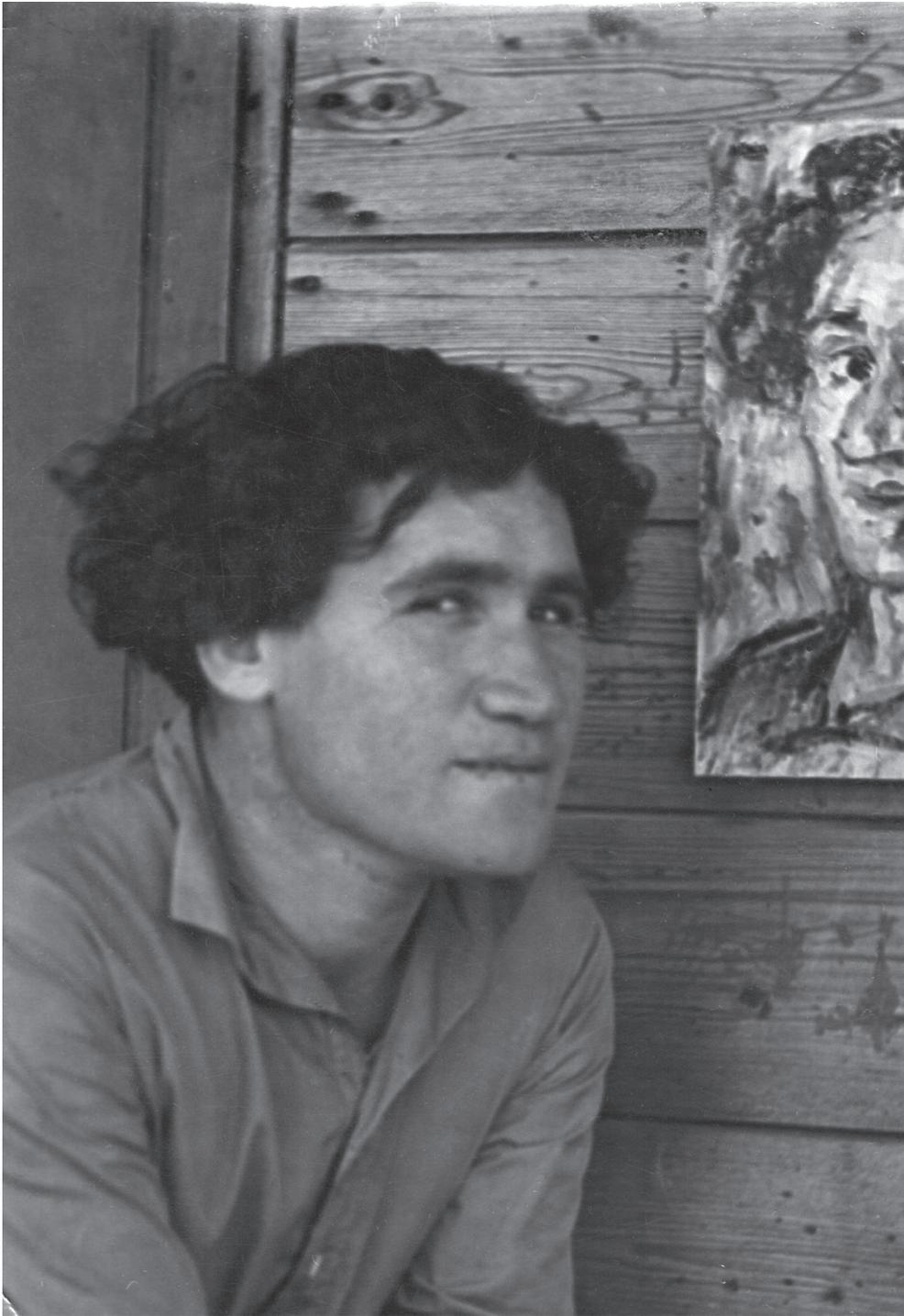


Fig. 1. Haim Atar beside one of his self-portraits, 1930s, photograph. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod).

Hashomer Hatzair—a museum that would focus on the heritage of the Zionist youth movements, their sources (Jewry and Judaism), and their resilience during the Holocaust period. During the 1950s Kovner began planning such a museum, which he wanted to establish in the movement's center for studies Givat Haviva. Kovner sought to develop an innovative way of translating content into visual displays, different from the method of documentation and reconstruction that had been employed in the Ghetto Fighters' House (Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetat) and at Yad Vashem.<sup>4</sup> Yet, unfortunately, Kovner did not realize his dream of building a museum at his dream site in his kibbutz community and his kibbutz movement. Kovner kept trying to realize his project for the rest of his life, frequently changing its form (he drew up sixteen alternative plans for a museum). As history would have it, over the years, many of his ideas were implemented in museums that were built in Israel and abroad (on his initiative or that of others), but he died in 1987 without having been able to implement his vision at his movement's center in Givat Haviva. Soon after his death Rozhka

Kurczak, a comrade of Kovner's in the ghetto uprising and a member of another Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz, Ein Hachosh, complained: "It is maddening that we are the only movement that doesn't have a memorial site."<sup>5</sup> The historian Dina Porat observed "the puzzling disparity between the fervor with which the leaders of the Kibbutz Artzi spoke about the heroism of the Jewish resistance fighters during the Holocaust and their incessant dithering about establishing a memorial site."<sup>6</sup>

The Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz, on the other hand, offers a more successful model in establishing a museum on kibbutz grounds. Yitzhak Cukierman (Antek) (1915–1981) was one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and a friend of Kovner's. Both of them arrived in Palestine in the same period. Only a few years later, in 1949, he was among the founders of both the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz and of the institute for Holocaust documentation and commemoration, the Itzhak Katzenelson Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Museum, which is still known as the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum (fig. 2). The establishment of this museum became possible not only because of the



Fig. 2. The inauguration of the new building of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, 1958, Israel, photograph. (Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters House Museum's photo archive).

<sup>4</sup> Kovner said the displays at the Ghetto Fighters' House and at Yad Vashem were "a collection of horror scenes" dispersed schematically in various galleries. See *Plan 1961*, Givat Haviva Archive 3.10.7–40:2 (in Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Kurczak was referring to the memorial site of the Ihud Hakevutzot Vehakibbutzim movement at Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak, established in 1971, and incorporating a museum, a library, and extensive educational activity. See Dina Porat, *Beyond the Material: The Life of Abba Kovner* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), 327 (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 314. On the diverse positions of the three large kibbutz movements on the question of settling the survivors of the Holocaust (whether to disperse them among the movement's kibbutzim or to establish a kibbutz of their own) and also on the subject of memorialization, see Adi Portoguezzi, *The National, Political and Social Characteristics of Hashomer Hatzair members of the Moreshet Group 1963–1973*, MA thesis (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2003), 27 (in Hebrew).

initiatives of an individual “obsessed with the idea”—in this case Cukierman—but first and foremost because the particular kibbutz movement that he belonged to (the Kibbutz Meuhad) considered it important to include the memory of the Holocaust and the revolt into its system of symbols. The movement’s decision to hold an annual assembly at the museum building to commemorate the Ghetto fighters was avant-garde, pre-dating the Knesset’s 1953 resolution to mark an annual Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day by two years. The idea of linking the Holocaust Remembrance Day with the uprising was conceived by the Kibbutz Meuhad movement’s leadership who, in the same symbolic spirit, had earlier set the groundbreaking ceremony for Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetat on the sixth anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

From these two examples, it seems then that institutional, ideological, political and social contexts are indispensable to the founding of a successful kibbutz museum, particularly in the context of a kibbutz, where the founder owns none of the necessary resources: he has no money in his pocket; the land does not belong to him; and even his work hours are not his to decide on. Refocusing scholarly attention from the charismatic individual to the layered institutional histories of kibbutz museums offers us a more complex understanding of the rise of museums within the kibbutz movement.

### *The Social Construction of Space: Art Museums and the Kibbutz Movements*

Although it may seem that kibbutzim are all alike, there were four main kibbutz movements, each with a somewhat different ethos during the period under discussion. Each of the kibbutz movements had a different approach to the concept of the entrepreneur, economic or cultural, to the initiator of cultural institutions, and to the idea of the artist. The questions of whether to establish an art museum in any of these kibbutz movements and what shape these institutions should take were thus profoundly linked to the “social construction of space,” to each movement’s ideas, and also to each particular kibbutz personality.

Each kibbutz movement developed its own ways of constructing the collective memory, its own meth-

ods of mobilizing collective endeavor, and its own characteristic life-style. The differences between the movements are discernible in matters such as the building of monuments, the production and use of posters, the publication of books, the propagation of memory narratives, and the founding of museums.

To some extent, these variant movements shared some ideas about the form that museums should take. For example, natural history and archeology museums were established in all four major kibbutz movements. The proliferation of museums of nature and archeology in kibbutzim may be explained by the spirit of the time: archeology became a meaningful tool for the project of nation-building. Circles were formed to study local archeology as a form of “Knowledge of the Land” (*‘Yediat ha-aretz’*), and local excavations yielded collections which were exhibited and which gradually grew into museums. These museums aimed to confirm the settlers’ affinity with an ancient past dating back to biblical times and to establish a historical basis that connected “the people” with “its Land” as part of the nation-building process. For the immigrants, becoming acquainted with local nature was also a means of creating a sense of home in a land that was ostensibly familiar (as part of the Jewish collective memory) but different from anything that they might have imagined in the Diaspora. Various items in nature were identified, were linked to their biblical names, and took on mythical and historical meaning in the nascent Israeli culture. The veteran kibbutz movement leader Yitzhak Tabenkin explained this phenomenon:

For the immigrant, the Hebrew Bible served as a kind of birth certificate, aiding him to destroy the barriers between man and the Land, and fostering a ‘homeland feeling.’ These ties empowered him and helped him to strike roots and become attached to this land, which was so different in its climate, its nature and its landscapes from the country of his childhood.<sup>7</sup>

The local accessibility of archeological items was conducive to the growth of these museums: archeological findings and natural history collections were gathered in the nearby vicinity and brought together at one site by members of the kibbutz. The first of these museums, the “Gordon House,” a natural history museum, was established in Kibbutz Degania Aleph in 1935.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak Tabenkin, “The Ideological Sources of the Second Aliyah,” in *Addresses* (Tel Aviv: Yad Tabenkin, 1972), 2:25 (in Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> Gordon House was established in Kibbutz Degania Aleph as a museum of nature and agriculture. It was named after Aharon David Gordon (1856–1922), who migrated from Russia to Eretz-

Israel in 1904. His thought and his personality had a significant influence on the immigrants who arrived in the Second Aliyah and on the labor movement, and he was the uncrowned leader of the members of the Hever Hakvutzot movement.

The differences between the kibbutz movements are perhaps more discernible in the issues that seemed to strike at the heart of their worldviews. While all four kibbutz movements established natural history and archeology museums, only two of them established art museums. Art museums were established only in kibbutzim that belonged to the Kibbutz Meuhad ["United Kibbutz"], and the Kibbutz Artzi—both of them avant-garde movements that aspired to have a significant influence on Eretz-Israeli society as a whole. It was these two movements, too, that established additional networks of cultural institutions, such as publishing houses and printing presses.

The first kibbutz movement in which art museums were founded was the Kibbutz Meuhad: the art museum in Kibbutz Ein Harod was founded as early as the 1930s, and another art museum was established in the 1950s in Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov. Both museums were founded on the initiatives of local members who collected art from Israel and abroad.

The second movement in which art museums were founded was the Kibbutz Artzi, in which two art museums were established: one in the early 1950s, the Wilfrid Israel House Museum in Kibbutz Hazorea, and one in the early 1960s, the Museum of Middle-Eastern Archeology in Kibbutz Nir David. But in this movement—which was affiliated with the United Workers' Party (Mapam)—the idea of establishing an art museum was perceived as somewhat problematic. The movement fostered "internationalist" values, did not support the building of "symbolic capital," and negated status and hierarchies. It championed a social art that its members perceived as an inseparable part of the working class struggle. Kibbutz Artzi artists strove in their art for a way of addressing "the people," and sought to formulate a "comprehensible" art that would give expression to man and his surroundings. These artists developed a distinctive painting language of their own, which was nonetheless a long way from the formalist rigidity of Soviet art and to a large extent intimate and poetic. Thus the two art museums were initiated mostly as a result of collections donated by private collectors, and the decision to create a museum was not easily made.

In contrast, the Kibbutz Meuhad movement, like the Histadrut (Workers' Federation) and the majority of the labor movement, championed "universal" values. The discourse that was considered legitimate in the Kibbutz Meuhad movement gave intellectual backing to the status of the "individual," viewing the person dedicated to a vision as a vital force in society.

The movement's complex vision of a community-society assigned a special role to the individual, and developed a view that it was necessary to safeguard the individual's autonomy while balancing this with the society's collectivist demands. This recognition prepared the ground for the legitimation of the person obsessed with an idea whose activities extended to extraterritorial areas in the spheres of society, the economy, culture and art.

Kibbutz Meuhad artists focused on modern art and crystallized a conception of art that is mostly defined by the components of the language of art, the medium, the paint and the brushstroke. Around 1957, however, a complex process—collective and private, cultural and political—took place in the Kibbutz Artzi, and artists of this movement also turned towards a more formalist and theoretical approach to the dominant modern art orientation.

The four art museums in kibbutzim mentioned above are still active today, as is another art museum, in Kibbutz Bar'am, which was established in the 1980s. These museums, as well as a network of non-commercial art galleries exhibiting contemporary art in kibbutzim, constitute a significant component in the overall artistic activity in the country, above and beyond the relative proportion of kibbutz members in the population of the State of Israel.

#### *The Village-City Movement and the Art Museum*

The permanent building of the museum in Ein Harod, planned by Samuel (Milek) Bickels, was the first museum building to be opened in pre-state Israel (in 1948). The museum buildings in the major cities were built years later. The permanent building of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem was inaugurated only in 1965 (until then it had been a part of the Bezalel Art School), and the permanent building of the Tel Aviv Museum was opened only in 1971 (until then it had been housed in the renovated residence of the city's first mayor, Meir Dizengoff). Moreover, the museum building in Ein Harod was innovative in its architecture—an excellent early example of art museum architecture based on natural lighting (fig. 3). Its architectural qualities are relevant to this day. They served as inspiration for the architect Renzo Piano in his planning of the Menil Collection building in Houston in the 1980s.

How then can one explain the establishing of a museum possessing such qualities at such an early stage of the settling of the kibbutz? It is commonly



Fig. 3. Elad Sarig, View of a museum gallery, installation: *The Rough Law of Garderns: Holzapfel and Tevet*, 2016, Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Israel, photograph. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod).

thought that the establishing of a museum requires the existence of sufficient conditions such as a large population, a concentration of capital, and a social elite's need to define itself as a separate class, as well as the activity of an "obsessed individual."

It may be thought that in setting up a cultural institution of this kind even before their settlement was fully established, the members of Ein Harod were in some way replicating a cultural model they had grown up with in their countries of origin, and therefore gave precedence to culture-building, which in the "natural" process of development occurs only in the final stages.<sup>9</sup> But the members of Ein Harod grew up in towns where their "habitus" did not contain art museums or concert halls. Ein Harod was founded in 1921 mainly by immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to Eretz-Israel after a wave of pogroms in Ukraine that had dealt a fatal blow to many hundreds of Jewish communities. They came from families of artisans, lower middle class people who observed a religious way of life, and had arrived with no possessions.

A possible solution to the Ein Harod museum riddle may be found in the social and cultural ideas underlying the vision of the large kibbutz proposed by the Kibbutz Meuhad and articulated at an early stage in its history at Ein Harod. Ein Harod was the leading kibbutz of the Kibbutz Meuhad, which developed an alternative to the notion of the "small group" settlement based on agriculture. Instead, they envisioned a "large group" settlement, a new form of living that integrates elements of both city and village. They proposed a diversified society numbering hundreds of members living a full life: working in various fields including industry as well as agriculture; developing culture, intellectual life, and education as essential elements of their communal existence; and conducting free and reciprocal relations within their own frameworks.

The interdisciplinary thinking of the time embraced the fields of sociology, economics and architecture, and criticized the two forms of settlement known in modern society, describing the agricultural village as

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Gellner, for example, described Zionist nationalism as a movement of urban intellectuals who had opted for tilling the

land: Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 106–108.

depleted and exploited, and the city with its industry and mass society as rife with alienation, violence, and pollution. The idea of the large kibbutz that integrated positive elements of both city and village offered a solution that its proponents saw as relevant to the spirit of the time. This would be a new framework of social solidarity, neither a “community” in the sociological/historical sense, authorized by custom and venerated tradition, nor a “society” in the capitalistic sense, where every person is left to his own fate, but a new synthesis that adopted elements from both archetypes.<sup>10</sup> In 1927, a number of settlements that identified with these principles founded the Kibbutz Meuhad movement, which over the years became one of the largest kibbutz movements in the country.

The Ein Harod members’ articulation of the city-village idea was clear and distinctive, and was expressed in a memorandum that they sent to the “settling institutions” of the World Zionist Organization defining this new conception of a settlement form:

Our goal in our settlement is to live the life of a large society, a working society that overcomes the artificial differentiation, harmful in both its human and its national-economic aspects, between work in ‘pure agriculture’ and work in artisanry and industry, keeping urban work and ‘rural’ work separate. Our aspiration is a society that unites physical and mental work within itself.<sup>11</sup>

The eight densely-typed pages of this detailed memorandum outlined the settlement’s structure and an economic analysis (including a feasibility assessment). The document also emphasized the subject of culture:

Our aspiration also includes our wish to create a cultural center in this settlement to provide for its cultural needs, in which the means dedicated to culture, adult education and the education of children will be concentrated.

Although most of the members of Ein Harod came from impoverished homes and had not received a proper high-school education, the ideological intensity of the time, coupled with their interest in international thought and their extensive reading, had turned them into self-taught intellectuals. A journal report indicates

that in March 1924, about two months before the memorandum was sent to the settling institutions, the ideological circle in the kibbutz discussed Pyotr Kropotkin’s book *Fields, Factories and Workshops, or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work*, on the topics of relations between agriculture, artisan and factory work, centralization and non-centralization of industry, manual work and mental work, and the nature of cooperation.<sup>12</sup> The anarchist thinker Kropotkin envisaged the future society as a federation of large and small communities based on a mix of agriculture and industry, and with no governmental authority. As an anarchist, Kropotkin championed the idea of the individual as an autonomous entity, but he developed an agenda of a new form of settlement that emphasized collaboration between individuals and “mutual aid” (the title of another of his books, which was published in Hebrew translation in 1923). His observations of animal behavior during his long stay in eastern Siberia led him to the conclusion that in the battle for existence, especially of humans, a decisive role was played by mutual aid. Solidarity, then became crystallized as a social and political theory, an alternative to the dominant to approaches such as the Social Darwinism propounded by Herbert Spencer (“the survival of the fittest”). Kropotkin’s thought thus contributed to the dialectical thinking prevalent in the movement and to its conception of the individual’s autonomy within a mobilizing society.

Of course other thinkers also provided inspiration for the crystallization of these ideas, such as Nahman Syrkin, who emphasized the voluntary element in history, developed an idea of a socialist Jewish state, and attacked the rise of bourgeois elements in the Zionist movement. An epigraph selected from Syrkin’s statements for the fifteenth-anniversary issue of the *Ein Harod Journal* attests to the centrality of his role: “If you eliminate from Hebrew history the socialistic doctrine, the spirit of morality that was materialized in it, there will no longer be any content in Judaism, and Hebrew history will have no right to exist for the future.”<sup>13</sup> This quotation was taken from an address Syrkin delivered

<sup>10</sup> For discussions and illuminations of the conceptual dualism of “community” and “society” as applied to kibbutz life, see Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1949).

<sup>11</sup> “Memorandum to the Settling Institutions,” (Ein Harod, May 5, 1924; Central Zionist Archive (CZA), S15/21918–8 (in Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops, or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work* [1898] (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1912); “A Survey of Cultural Work in Ein Harod,” *Mibifnim: Organ of the Kibbutz Meuchad* 6 (1924), (in Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> *Ein Harod Journal* (September 14, 1936), (in Hebrew).

at a workers' assembly in Jaffa in 1920, in which he emphasized the socialistic/universal ethical element in the spirit of Judaism.<sup>14</sup>

The clear articulation of such ideas in a specific agenda is apparent in every major discussion in the Kibbutz Meuhad movement. A good example may be found in the preface of the first book published by the movement's publishing house, which was founded in Ein Harod:

Our movement builds settlements according to the logic and the imperatives of a central idea, and in building them strives to eliminate the "division of labor" that prevails in the capitalist regime, the division that cuts into the living flesh of human society by separating city from village, human society from the animal and vegetable world, man from woman, physical work from spiritual work, ideas from professionalism: in brief—our movement builds settlements each of which constitutes a social cell that in itself fills the principal functions of life.<sup>15</sup>

During the 1930s and 1940s, institutions of education, culture and art (an open theater stage and two museums among them) were built in Kibbutz Ein Harod. Such a concentration of culture and art buildings in a peripheral settlement was not considered extraordinary in a movement that had espoused the city-village idea. The initiative to establish the art museum came from "below," from groups of members who argued, "there has never been a generation as much in need of art as ours, because for us art offers a possibility of living spiritually."<sup>16</sup> In an earlier article they explained:

What does art reveal to us? Ourselves. That which is essential and which exists in us, which is covered under layers of dust and worthless things [...] We do not fear self-criticism, we do not hesitate to look at the truth, be it as bitter as death, for we draw strength from the true source, from our inner power.<sup>17</sup>

These members also insisted that although all generations have needed art, for themselves "art is no longer a means but the essence."

Art offered an alternative to the intimacy within the collective space that most members had experienced in the synagogue back in Europe. Moreover, the belief in the elevating power of art as expressed in the work of artists invested the art events at Ein Harod with an almost sacred aura. This is reflected in the terms used by contemporaries in describing the concert given by the violinist Jascha Heifetz at Ein Harod in 1925 in a quarry that served as a natural amphitheater (fig. 4), and two concerts given by Bronislaw Huberman (in the 1930s) to the members of Kibbutz Ein Harod in the kibbutz dining hall.

These members' serious and uncompromising attitude to art may be demonstrated by a response that Haim Atar made to Mordechai Narkiss, director of the Bezalel Museum, when asked to send works on a kibbutz theme or a workers' theme to an exhibition abroad:

In response to the request by Mr. Vilner of the National Committee that I send a picture for the Asian exhibition in India, I am also sending a 'still-life' picture for this exhibition, even though your request, or rather Mr. Vilner's request, was that I send something specific from kibbutz life. This is not the place to present [the argument] that the art of painting is not connected with one way of life or another. As an art, painting has only one status—painting. I hope you will add my small picture to the works you are sending. At any rate, I would ask you to let me know about this. With blessings from the vernal valley.<sup>18</sup>

#### *The Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod: The Founding Discourse and the Phases of Construction*

The art museum in Kibbutz Ein Harod was founded in 1938, during a period of harsh economic depression and amid a sense of growing anxiety over the sweeping rise of Nazism and Fascism. For nearly a decade, the museum operated in a wooden hut, collecting art and

<sup>14</sup> Nachman Syrkin, "Our Mission: An Address at an Assembly of the Workers in Jaffa," *Quntras* 19 (1920): 179 (in Hebrew). At this time Syrkin was head of a World Poalei-Tzion delegation that consolidated a plan in Eretz-Israel for the cooperative settling of a million and a half Jews on a scientific and ethical basis. Yitzhak Tabenkin, who was one of the authors of the idea of the "large group," took an active part in the delegation's discussions as a representative of the Achdut Ha'avodah ("Unity of Labor") party.

<sup>15</sup> Menachem Dorman, "Introduction," in Moshe Braslavsky, *Do You Know the Country?* (Ein Harod: Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publishing House, 1940) not paginated. (in Hebrew).

<sup>16</sup> David Maletz, "Farewell to Aptekar," *Ein Harod Journal* 295 (April 16, 1937): 2. Available in the Ein Harod Archive (in Hebrew).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Haim Atar, letter to Mordechai Narkiss, March 10, 1947, Central Zionist Archive, H 382 1–42 (in Hebrew).



Fig. 4. Jascha Heifetz concert at the quarry in Gilboa, 1925, photograph. (Courtesy of the Archive of Kibbutz Ein Harod Meuhad).

exhibiting small scale exhibitions (fig. 5). The period when the museum's permanent building was built was also not one of economic prosperity, but actually at the height of the 1947–1949 War. At the time of its inauguration, eighty of Ein Harod's members were serving in the armed forces. Living conditions in the kibbutz were difficult, mainly because of housing shortages. Sixty-nine members were still living in huts (the children slept in their parents' homes), and even those who lived in houses had to publicly share facilities. Although a year earlier a petition had been submitted to the kibbutz secretariat about the housing problems, there is no documentation that any of the members complained about the extensive efforts being invested in the construction of the museum at this time (fig. 6).<sup>19</sup>

Despite the battles at the front, the construction at the kibbutz continued throughout the year. Reports on its progress appeared regularly in the kibbutz journal; early in 1948, for example, a report stated that the boxing for the concreting of the roof had been taken down (it had remained in place for three weeks after the concrete was poured, until the concrete firmed). The door- and window-frames for the building's foyer had already been prepared by the kibbutz carpentry shop. The iron-framed windows along the southern façade were also ready and would be installed during the following week. The terrazzo mosaic floor tiles and the steps were ready as well. The first part of the construction would soon be completed, and a contract had already been signed with Sollel Bonnef for the construction of a second gallery, north of the first building.<sup>20</sup>

The new building was inaugurated at 11 a.m. on October 25, 1948, Tishrei 22, 5709 according to the Hebrew calendar—the day of *Simḥat Torah*, the “Rejoicing in the Torah” holiday. The choice of this date may well have had a symbolic significance—one of the opening addresses made a point of it: “A good day, *Simḥat Torah*, has been chosen for the inauguration of this institution. Indeed, this is a true *Simḥat Torah*.”<sup>21</sup> On the same day, an exhibition of archeology

titled “Weaponry and the Army in Antiquity (Israel and its Enemies)” opened at the Tel Aviv Museum, and a calendar of the events in this period tells us that ten days earlier, on the 15th of October, the army had launched Operation Yoav in the Negev. One day after *Simḥat Torah*, on the 26th of October, the Negev Brigade captured the city of Beer-Sheva.

The inaugural exhibition at the Ein Harod art museum included works by Israeli artists and Jewish artists from all over the world, as well as items of Judaica. At that time the collection already contained works by about 150 artists, among them Jozef Israëls (fig. 7), Lesser Ury, Shmuel Hirschenberg, Maurycy Minkowski, Max Lieberman, Leonid Pasternak, Mané Katz, Hermann Struck, Issachar Ber Rybak, Alfred Aberdam, and Ephraim Moshe Lilien.

The work of collecting had been begun in the early 1930s by Haim Atar, (fig. 1) the museum's founder, and was continued intensively by the movement's emissaries abroad, many of them from Ein Harod, as well as by friends of the museum in Europe, Australia and the United States. There were ongoing contacts between Ein Harod and Jews in Germany and Poland, which had begun in the early 1920s when emissaries from the Ein Harod movement were sent to work with the Hehalutz movement in Poland, Germany, and other countries in Europe. During the 1940s intensive work was also done with Jewish communities in the Muslim countries. In this period some 30 emissaries were sent to these countries by the Kibbutz Meuhad (compared with only eight from the Kibbutz Artzi, three from Hever Hakvuzot, and 15 from the cities). Letters written by emissaries in the late 1930s show that their work was accompanied by the feeling that Jewish life in Europe was on the brink of destruction, although in those days no one could envisage the future extent of the disaster. Bat-Rachel (Tarshish) wrote from Germany:

Here in Berlin there is a rich Jewish museum. The person in charge of it is Dr. Leo Baeck, but he is of the opinion that storms pass, and everything returns to normal. His view is that not a single one of the paintings that have

<sup>19</sup> Petition of residents to the Ein Harod secretariat, December 19, 1947, Ein Harod Archive (in Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> “The Museum of Art in Construction,” *Journal of Ein Harod* (February 13, 1948) (in Hebrew). Available in the Ein Harod Archive.

<sup>21</sup> [Translator's note:] *yom tov*—literally, “(a) good day,” traditionally any holiday in the Jewish religious calendar.

“The Inauguration of the Museum of Art Building,” *Journal of Ein Harod* (October 29, 1948) (in Hebrew). Available in the Ein Harod Archive (in Hebrew). The speaker was Koler from Kibbutz Geva.



Fig. 5. The hut of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, early 1940s, Ein Harod, photograph. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod).



Fig. 6. Laying the foundations for the permanent building of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, 1947, Ein Harod, photograph. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod).



Fig. 7. Jozef Israëls, *On the Way*, 1885, oil on canvas, 91×61 cm. Collection of Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod. (Photograph of painting: Avraham Hay).

been preserved by the Jewish communities since the 16th century may be removed from here.<sup>22</sup>

The emissaries' mission was to try to rescue Jews rather than saving cultural artifacts. Nonetheless the correspondence with the emissaries reflected a profound anxiety about the imminent annihilation of Jewish culture and memory. We find explicit expression of these in Atar's letters: "You should know that we must rescue the art of the Jews to the same extent as we rescue the lives of people."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Bat-Rachel, A Letter from Germany, June 29, 1938, Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod (in Hebrew).

<sup>23</sup> Haim Atar, an undated letter, Archive of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod (in Hebrew).

With its clear formulations that link the past with the present, its Jewish collections and its exhibitions, the Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod thus marked an independent approach that differed from the orientations of the Tel Aviv Museum and the Israel Museum, which later adopted an approach that saw a contradiction between high art and Jewish art. That approach, expressed in the exhibitions and collections policies of the major museums, reflected the spirit of the time in Israel from the 1940s on, which was characterized by its repression of diasporic Jewish contexts. These art institutions chose to emphasize a modernist identity and an ostensibly autonomous perception of art, and were not inclined to confront matters of private and collective identity that connected art with Jewishness, refugeehood, or the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup>

The founders of the kibbutzim evidently understood that social change does not start from a *tabula rasa*, and that tradition, culture and art are not a mere superstructure but an inseparable part of their lives as individuals and as a society. They saw a future-oriented ideology as important, but also believed that in order to make a significant social change they needed to work with deep cultural structures that had been part of the fabric of their lives in the Diaspora. This is why the idea of the kibbutz entailed not only some rejection of the past, but also a re-interpretation of old values, a renewal of institutions—for example, forms of mutual responsibility (such as mutual aid committees traditional in Jewish communities) or the conversion of Jewish religious experience into modern secular spiritual experience (as projected in the building of institutions of high art). All these influenced the structure and the development of the kibbutzim, and each kibbutz movement developed a different attitude to the relationship between tradition and change.

At the height of the construction process of the Ein Harod art museum there was a split in the Kibbutz Meuhad movement, and Ein Harod was divided into two kibbutzim: Ein Harod Ihud and Ein Harod Meuhad. The split was political and ideological, but quite exceptionally for the time, the museum was kept as a joint institute of both kibbutzim, and the museum

<sup>24</sup> Galia Bar Or, "Collections and Museums in Israel" in *Israeli Art from the Collection of Gaby and Ami Brown* (Ein Harod: Mishkan Museum of Art, 2009), 314–322; Galia Bar Or, "Art in Wartime," in *Citizens at War*, ed. Mordechai Bar-On and Meir Chazan (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, and Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2010), 205–230.

area became a place where members of both kibbutzim meet and share experiences together. It illuminates the deep undercurrents of collective consent on the basis of which the museum had been founded, which went beyond ideological disputes of the time.

The fact that the museum was established in such difficult conditions, in the midst of a war and a world crisis, reflects its organizers' and supporters' belief in the power of art, which sometimes reveals itself in the harshest of human situations, helping people to cope with trauma and uprooting, to build a perspective that possesses a meaning for the individual and for society.

At the opening of a new wing of the museum in 1951, with Marc Chagall among those present (two months before the opening of his exhibition there), the museum director, Haim Atar, said: "To bring forth an exhibition is easy, but to create the place for the exhibition is harder. If the heart does not beat in us, the museum will be of no value."<sup>25</sup>

This study has shown how museum institutions were established in kibbutzim—dynamic workers' societies of immigrants who, in historical conditions of radical change had gathered from various countries of origin, leaving behind them their homes and families, and adapting themselves to a new way of life in Eretz-

Israel. It has examined the variant forms of society and of art created by the founders of the kibbutzim by analyzing the ideology and the social ethos and praxis by means of which they grasped the narrative of their time and tried to confront its challenges. The art museum has been discussed here as an institution that shapes a central narrative, but also as a liminal space that opens channels for alternative memory, for significant sites that can contend with social situations of change and with questions of private identity and collective consciousness.

#### *Bio*

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<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the session in Ein Harod in honor of Marc Chagall, 1951, handwritten text, Ein Harod Archive (in Hebrew).