

The Structure of Habonim.

By M. DONEN.

About three and a half years ago the Habonim (The Builders) idea was transplanted from London to South Africa. In this short time it has grown from a mere plant into a strong organisation scattered through the length and breadth of South Africa and the Rhodesias.

What is the cause of its rapid growth? It may be the voluntary service which its leaders and officers so generously give to it and to the children, it may be the idea of building with actual bricks the remarkable edifice still in the course of construction by the Jewish people; it is all this and also the following:

Firstly, its efficient organisation, secondly its curriculum, and thirdly its method of application.

Training.

The training is provided by way of the Scout system. The children are grouped into Gedudim of about twenty-five under the charge of at least one efficient, suitable officer and an assistant. The Gedud is further divided into three smaller groups called Kevutsot to each of which is appointed a subsidiary leader and an assistant, known as a Rosh Kvutza and Segan Kvutza, respectively. The group leader Rosh-Gedud guides the activity and destiny of his Gedud and is responsible for applying the curriculum in its proper form. It will be at once realised that this leader holds in his personal characteristics, his ability and keenness the key to success or otherwise of his Gedud. He is, therefore, the most important link in the scheme of the Habonim structure. As far as possible he divides the work between himself and his assistant in such a way that by a further distribution the work filters through the Roshe Kevutsot to the rank and file. The information that is imparted to those in the ranks comes to them by way of songs, games, sports, short plays, ceremonial and competitions of a general nature indoors and out of doors, all of which are dear to children. Instruction is given in an atmosphere of affectionate respect for the leader, who is looked upon more as a big brother or sister than a teacher or instructor. The children in his or her hands are made to feel at ease, comfortable, and happy. At the same time discipline, that highly essential quality is maintained not by overbearance, awe or austerity, but by a relationship that silently but definitely tells the child the complete goodwill and personal welfare that reposes in the heart of the leader, the Rosh Gedud, for each of them.

Interest is further maintained and stimulated by having camps, hikes, and by meeting together each year in general competition of all work done by Habonim. This gathering is known as the Annual Chagigah, and is the culminating event of the year's activities.

Before a child actually passes into the movement, he must pass his first test and then go through the initiation ceremony or Hakdashah. All the meetings are commenced and closed with a short appropriate ceremony of which children will never tire.

Curriculum.

It is impossible to state here the whole curriculum used by Habonim, so I shall make reference to it generally. Even by this mere reference it will be seen that the curriculum is calculated to instil a sense of pride and understanding in the child, an appreciation of his rich incomparable heritage, a sense of personal discipline and a proper perspective of his position as a citizen of the country in which he lives.

We can start with Hebrew. All through Hebrew is taught directly and indirectly. Its use is encouraged at every step, and the atmosphere of the weekly meetings is Hebraised as far as circumstances permit. There are many children who before joining Habonim looked upon Hebrew as a foreign gibberish, but to-day regard it with veneration, and curse the days that sped by when there was time to acquaint themselves with its strange sounds.

The history and tradition of the Jewish people is taught in a plain simple, secular way, giving an intimate close idea of events and persons. Those of our people who have made some notable contribution to its rich store of sciences are carefully selected and termed Master Builders. The important incidents of each Master Builder are collated into a synopsis of his life history and each officer is provided with a copy of the pamphlet. There are in all thirty-one Master Builders divided into three separate periods reckoned from the time of Abraham to the present day. Many historical and legendary incidents in the lives of these famous people are portrayed in the form of short plays and sketches. In most instances children under a bit of supervision enact these most efficiently. Short lectures or addresses are given on all festivals in the Jewish Calendar as they recur each year. Those of a joyous nature are appropriately celebrated, and whenever possible, buns, sweets, etc., are handed round.

Knowledge of a general or special nature is imparted through specially set syllabuses. There is a variety of sixty odd special tests with a separate emblem or badge for each. On passing any one the child is presented with the badge, a distinction that is highly coveted. A special feature is the Chalutz Badge. The curriculum provides for a comprehensive knowledge of ancient and Modern Palestine, having special reference to its historical, geographical, industrial, agricultural, religious, administrative and natural information.

These tests are not taught indiscriminately, the child indicates which tests he cares for and concentrates on those he chooses under the direction of his Rosh Gedud. Examiners specially qualified are appointed to test him when he is ready. No actual time limit is set in which to pass the test, but through means of competitions eagerness to get on with acquiring the knowledge for the test is stimulated.

The singing of songs, especially Hebrew ones, playing of games and an active participation in sport is encouraged whenever possible. The songs are happy ones, tuneful, brisk, spirited melodies, and through them is portrayed the rejuvenation of our people in our own time.

Inter Gedud sport is a special feature of the training. Football, hockey, tennis, athletics, swimming, boxing etc. are encouraged in order to train in self-defence and discipline.

Administration.

The movement is controlled by a Council of twenty-six influential people with headquarters at Johannesburg. This Council has an Executive of ten which meets at least once a week. The Executive is concerned generally with administrative matters and recommendations from the various centres. The special work for the organisation is done by sub-committees who meet once a month or more often as occasion requires.

The whole of the country is divided into separate divisions, of which there are five. Each division is governed by a Ba-Koach, who as a Commissioner is fully responsible to the Council and its Executive at headquarters. A Ba-Koach has a District Committee consisting of lay ladies and gentlemen to help him in an advisory capacity and generally to assist the movement in its area. A training course for officers in each centre is run by the Ba-Koach, or those appointed to do so.

At present the movement consists of about 2,000 strong, divided into about eighty Gedudim, with approximately one hundred officers, meeting their groups weekly, sometimes more often. Being based on such sound foundations there is no reason why it should not grow twice as strong during the ensuing year.

In order to cope with its progress and maintain attention to details and administration, headquarters has a staff of full-time Organising Secretary, three full-time typists, and an office boy, all of whom are energetically engaged.

The movement has created and published its own magazine known as "Habinyon" (The Building) which is written for and by Habonim. The last issue contained fifty pages of most interesting material and so popular was the issue that it was sold out within a week, which has necessitated printing a second edition of the same number.

Negotiations are on foot to become affiliated with the Boy Scout Movement, and there is every possibility that this important step will be accomplished in the near future.

Thus it will be seen that the Habonim structure is on a sound foundation built of material that can weather all storms, and that it is a refuge, a true home, where Jewish children and their elders, too, for that matter, can learn to build their characters, their store of knowledge, their health, their sense of civic duty and their responsibility as citizens of the country in which they live.