

# The Experiences of an American Teacher in a Kibutz.

By SOPHIE SMITH SETTEL, M.A., (Columbia University).

I came to the Kibutz (collectivist farm), with a petty bourgeois mind dressed up to look like a healthy edition of Thoreau, or Rousseau. High-sounding "back-to-nature" phrases, queer quips about "plain living and high thinking" stuff consumed in American universities, was the sales-talk that possessed me on my arrival at Kinereth. And Kinereth gratified every little whim that I had acquired in Walden.

Here were the rough and ready "zrifs" (barracks) to live in; here was the coarse food and simple fare; here was the crudeness of apparel, the roughness of work, the rawness of life, framed by a rhythm of nature all about that enhanced the wholesomeness and beauty of this "way of life." Every little self-abnegation thrilled me. So was it with Thoreau, thought I. The little Kibutz was in the centre of rolling hills, and it overlooked the Sea of Galilee. Beauty breathed upon the place.

I wanted to be put to work immediately, and I was put on the soil. I was given blue shirt and black shorts, hard-leathered shoes and sun-cap. I revelled in the simple attire. Immediately it took all the starchiness of the schoolmarm out of me. I could exult in this simple living without cracking.

At 4.30 a.m., when the cocks begin to crow, pounded the shomer (night-watch) on my door. "Hurry, if you want to catch the auto for the meshek (farm). Up I jumped and with scarcely any time to put my room in order, I was on the truck. Some other bachurim and bachurot (young men and women) with early morning faces climbed in. There was no exchange of words, except for gruff necessary grunts. It was dawn. The mountains were coming into shape. The scene was a study in lights and shades and a puzzle in hues. The beauty of it took one's breath away and made speech sacrilegious. I almost pitied Thoreau for the choice of his modest New England retreat, as the auto whizzed through the wind and towards the sky almost touching the clouds on the road to the meshek.

And there, the chaverim (co-workers) were already at work. The ovodah (director of labour), wearing a bright boyish smile, handed me a rake. I grasped it with pleasure. My hands could scarcely encircle the stick. I walked across the fields to where three figures in black shorts and white shirts, with white cloth caps protecting their heads from the beating sun, were raking the field together. They stopped to look at me when I approached. They greeted me cordially. Instantly I became one of them. Helen, who spoke English with a German accent, showed me how to level the earth. The steady up-and-down motion, the muscular movement of the arms, the backward and forward sway of the torso, all meant healthy and wholesome work. As I raked earth, it took on a richness of colour, a softness and warmth. Life was really sweet, I thought. The sun beat down and tanned my face and arms and legs. It *schmerzed* my head—but I didn't mind. I tried to keep up with Helen. She had a beautiful athletic figure and handled the rake with facility and deftness. She painted the earth a rich brown as she turned it, and removed the large stones. I envied her ease and wished I were more dexterous. We worked until sundown, resting now and then stretching out on the yielding soil and refreshing ourselves with water from the earthenware jug. The water was warm and tasteless, but we knew nothing except that it was like wine to our parched throats. We poured it over our faces.

The bachurot working with me were constantly concerned about my welfare. I tried to speak with them, but my Hebrew was weak. Gradually I was able to say, "Yesh li cham" (I am hot), and "Hashemesh lohait" (the sun is beating down). And as we raked with steady and persistent motion, as we shovelled the fertilizer and scattered it over the field, as we transplanted the seedling eggplants and stooped for hours over the rows and rows of ploughed soil tediously placing the sticks into the ground to indicate the path for the sowing, and cut and plucked and weeded the crops, I learned to say "Ani ayefah" (I am tired).

But my companions always laughed sympathetically and burst out in incomparable Hebrew-Kibutz philosophy, "Ain Davar!" (It isn't anything at all!).

And the days rolled on. Each morning I was awakened promptly at 4.30 and had to coax myself out of bed. Everyday saw me again under the pitiless sun, working the soil of one of the hottest places in the East, 800 metres below level of sea. And each evening I wearily returned to await the next day's work. And so gradually I drifted from Rousseau to Thoreau. The "back-to-nature" stuff was wearing off. Could one live a Courty happiness of incessant toil and hardihood?

I began to look about me. What do these people think, I thought. What makes them remain on the farm? Thoreau Impossible. What keeps them aloof from the artificial lure of the cities? Pretty delicate Garbos with brighter and sweeter faces and men with the energy of conquerors! Why do they toil in this hinterland? And with such zest and love and song!

When my little bugbear ideal of a "back-to-nature" life wore away, my eyes were suddenly opened to the lives of the people around me. I saw Dorka, a delicately shaped girl with arms of shining steel digging and shovelling and raking and sowing and weeding with an incessant drive of energy that was remarkable. She was no more than twenty-five, blonde and pretty with a frank smile and sparkling blue eyes.

"How long are you here?" I asked in choppy Hebrew.

"Two years." She answered without interrupting her raking. She made me feel guilty for having tried to begin a conversation when so much work remained to be done. She was always thinking of the deal of work yet to be done. But I was determined to know more about her. What held her at it!

"Do you like it here?" I asked.

"I love it here. The whole 'gan' (garden) is mine. I've worked here since I came. Every season I gather the fruits of my labour. I watch the plants bud and bloom. I see them on our table in the kitchen." Her face glowed as she struck a stubborn weed.

"The land acquired by the energy of the Jewish people and guarded for them by the Keren Hayesod (Jewish Foundation Fund), has grown fertile here, and I have helped in making it fertile. She stopped. And then, looking at me wistfully, she asked: "Do you doubt my word?"

I was shamefaced at the challenge. But more than that, I was surprised at the slant on life this girl showed me. It was as if a white shaft of light had suddenly revealed a new way of life.

Dorka was still working although the sun had set an hour ago and dusk was turning into night so fast that one could see nothing but shadows upon the field.

I saw Leah, a dark-haired girl with jet black eyes that never stopped laughing, with rapid step and determined air, scrubbing clothes, carrying pails of water, washing floors, washing dishes, cleaning and working and playing. And what, I wondered, was her secret?

One day I was asked to make my turn in the "kvisah" (laundry). I had to help scrub the clothes of the hundred and forty men and women on the Kibutz and the clothes of the children. Already there in the kvisah was Leah singing to the tune of the scrubbing board. She was a newcomer to the Kibutz, having arrived a week later than I—but already she seemed to have become totally assimilated among the chaverim. As we worked at separate tubs, she told me that she had come from Latvia, that all her life she had wanted Palestine, "the land of Israel."

"But did you want to work like this in Palestine?" I wondered whether this was her fulfillment.

(Continued on Next Page).

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"You call this hard work?" she exclaimed! "When I think of how I had to work 'chutz l'Aretz' (outside of the land) for a pittance! This is nothing. I am working for myself. No matter how hard it is I love it."

"Do you want to go to the city?" I questioned further.

"Never," she blurted. "In Latvia I worked in the Hechsharah (training for pioneers) for two whole years for this. I was training for this kind of life in Palestine. This is the kind of life I want to lead. I love to be part of one large family—all of us working together to build up the Homeland. One large and happy family, that's what Palestine should be," she added enthusiastically.

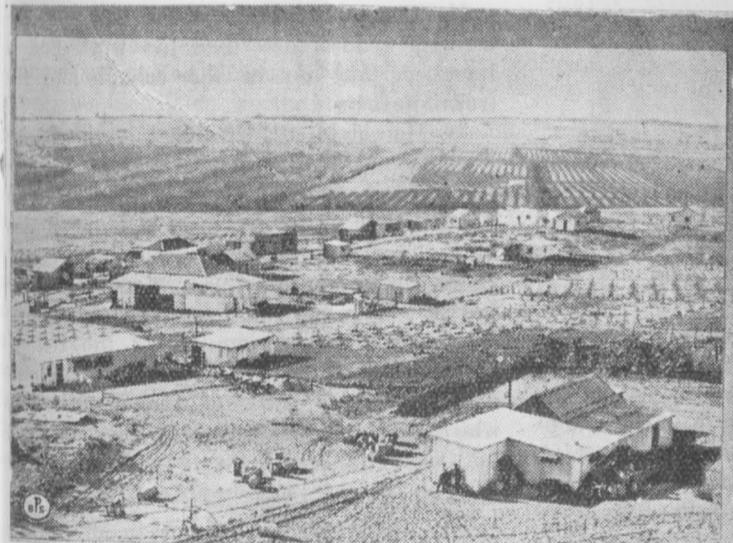
"But don't you like the things in the city?"

"What things in the city? Don't we get everything we want here? And in addition, a large circle of friends, always ready to help us!"

That afternoon, when work was over, as I passed the library door, I heard somebody playing the Sonata Pathetique by Beethoven. I stopped. The music was gripping. It was played with a most delicate touch on the piano. The player had a deep understanding of music. I looked into the reading room. Leah was sitting at the piano absorbed in the famous composition. Yes, she had everything she wanted—what more was there?

Fingers that were red and new to work were flitting over a keyboard in intense appreciation of Beethoven. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, I thought to myself.

And soon I too began to feel the surge of the new life, and I was swept into the mainstream of life among the chaverim. The work became less boring, became in truth something meaningful and alive, and life itself became something more precious to me.



Kfar Witkin in the Emek Hefer. The first provisional buildings.

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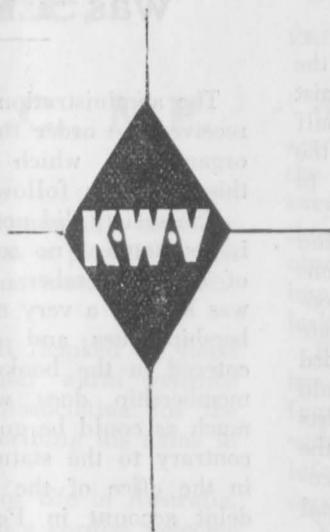
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