

Habonim in the Old Days from Across the Seas by Ivor Kosowitz

Jewish life in Cape Town in the 60's and early 70's was not only about which shul one went to (or did not go to) but also about the Habonim Zionist Youth Movement. To a lesser degree there were others, namely, Beitar (Revisionist), Bnei Akiva (Religious), and Ha'Shomer Ha'tzair (Communist). The latter of course could hardly function in Apartheid South Africa!

So, as my parents were "verbrente" Zionists, my brother and I joined Habonim at an early age - I was 8. From 1958 to 1972, I was deeply involved with Habonim, going through the various age groups – Shtilim (Saplings), Bonim (Builders), Solellim (Pavers), and Shomrim (Watchmen).

In those days, Habo was still a Jewish Scouting Movement. The ideology was based on encouraging Jewish youth to make Aliya but within the umbrella of the Socialist Kibbutz Movement. In fact, a number of groups, called 'Garinim', were formed and went to Israel mainly to kibbutz Tzora near Beit Shemesh, and to kibbutz Yizrael in the Galil. My brother, Mike, went to Tzora in 1965, and is still there today. There was also a *garin* which went to the development town of Carmiel.

The scouting aspect was quite strong. We attended many camps (*machaneh*), and were taught all about camping, cooking on an open fire, rope knotting and building "gadgets" with sticks and rope, map reading etc.

We even had *Hitcharut* (Jamboree). I belonged to *Gedud* Tel-Yosef, and this troop was famous (or infamous). In 1966, because we won the Cape Province Hitcharut. We even entered 2 teams, the winning team went all the way to Bloemfontein by train, to compete in the South African National Hitcharut. The tests we had included camping/scouting skills but also knowledge of Israel, and performing a mini-play, or "skiet". We also got to visit Rabbi Coleman's old shul in the city.

Well, we were really well prepared. We took a crate with all our gear, as well as some pre-fabricated gadgets. In the end, our team won the cup and were the overall winners in SA. I still have a small cup which each member received. After more than 35 years, I met up with another team member last year. He now lives in Sydney.

Winning was really great. However, I recall that the final ceremony took so long that when we got to the station, the train back to Cape Town had started leaving the platform. It was a mad rush to throw all the gear and ourselves on to the train!

In the winter holidays, we went to Jo'burg again via the "Trans Karoo Express". Once there we were bussed to Magaliesberg for the Habo Seminar. It was always freezing in these mountains but this time we were housed in chalets rather than tents.

These seminars were all about Zionist ideology. However, we used to have a shul service on Shabbat especially as some of my close mates were religious. I don't know why they

did not go to Bnei instead! It is really a small world as another person who I met at these seminars, also lives in Noranda.

When summer arrived, most of us attended camp at Onrus. This was the largest Jewish camp in the southern hemisphere with 1200 kids from 8 to about 25 spending almost three weeks away from home. The infrastructure was huge to cater for everyone. They built two permanent kitchens, ablution blocks, a store and even a hospital with a resident doctor. As the campsite was on the coast, life guards were employed for the duration.

We had a fantastic time, living in the old-style canvas bell tents. At night some of the kids would go on “raids” to annoy the others, armed with shaving cream! We built “gadgets” to make our lives more “comfortable”. We also went on hikes. The older you were, the more kms you walked. One year it rained, so we ended up sleeping in the rain the open. Most of us became ill after that!

When we finished school, after the usual year in the SA Army or Air Force (as in my case), you either left the movement, or became a “madrich” (leader), until you made aliyah, or got married, or simply left.

During the Apartheid years, we had to be very careful not to make our feelings known to the wider community although we all had strong feelings against it. If you were game enough, you could express your feelings under the auspices of the University of Cape Town. One of my mates did this once at a student demonstration, and got attacked by a police Alsatian!

Once a year, the Habonim Concert was held in the huge Weizman Hall in Sea Point. There was a choir, which I participated in and, an Israeli Dance group, which I did not. Various groups staged short plays, and there were solo singers etc. One year, I was in a play about 'Shalach Manot' during Purim. Well, we had to learn to speak English with a Yiddish accent. This took time and much practice until we perfected it. Then, after the concert, one of the audience came up to me and asked why we did it with a Yiddish accent. He insisted that we should have spoken normally! You can't win can you!

One year I was the sound-man as I had started my collection of Jewish music way back then. I put together music and sound effects for the plays. The caretaker let us use his “Brunell” Reel-To-Reel Tape Recorder. Now this man was a “wilde-chaia”, and had a very, very short fuse. This is what happened. I plugged in my stereo headphones into this tape recorder which was mono. This caused a short circuit, and smoke started coming out of the damn thing with the caretaker, Mr. Ruben, in the hall at the time. Very luckily for me, he did not see the smoke, and I switched the machine off in great haste as I realised what was going on, praying that Mr. Ruben would not turn around. I then switched the recorder on again. No smoke, and it continued to work, and Mr. Ruben had no idea of what had happened to his very expensive tape recorder.

Folk singing was big in those days. Some will remember Don McLean, Arlo Guthrie, The Weavers, Joan Baez, Donovan, Miriam Makeba, Jeremy Taylor (Ag Pleez Daddy), Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger (We shall Overcome) etc. One of our madrichim, Stephen Shulman, composed “Kugelcuffs” to the tune of Greensleeves, in 1967. This song became very popular. Here is the chorus which I found buried deep in the internet recently:

“Kugelcuffs was my delight
Kugelcuffs was my kneidel, my joy
Till she ran off with a goyishe boy
On the eve of my barmitzva”.

These were special times for us, just as Habo and Bnei is in Perth today.

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