

**Training for *Aliyah*: Young Jews in *Hachsharot* across Europe
between the 1930s and late 1940s**

by *Verena Buser* and *Chiara Renzo*

Introduction*

This monographic issue of *Quest* deals with the history of the *hachsharah* (pl. *hachsharot*), a term meaning literally “preparation” in Hebrew, but whose translation or interpretation varied among “collective farm,” “vocational training,” “retraining center” and “agricultural training.” Though the nature of *hachsharot* varied in space and time, the term steadily referred to the practical preparation of young Jews for emigration to Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel), through both mental and physical training based on work, collective living, and the study of the Hebrew language, Jewish history and culture. This preparation—aiming at the transformation of the whole personality—was often carried out in collective centers gathering (generally) young Jews. The creation and development of the *hachsharot* in the Diaspora is part of a unique and complex chapter within the history of Zionism, that of the He-Halutz, i.e. the pioneering movement, and its collaboration with Jewish organizations in their respective countries. The He-Halutz—having its foundation before World War I in the Russian Empire and its consolidation in interwar Poland—drew on the principles of Labour Zionism, grounding the Jewish national project in the emigration to Eretz Israel (*aliyah*) and the establishment of an economy based on agriculture. Originally established to train the new *halutzim* (pioneers), the following history of the *hachsharot* is deeply entangled with the history of the *kibbutz*, as well as with the contradiction between its utopian aspirations and its daily uncomfortable reality, and the difficult encounter between newcomers and veterans therein.¹ However, against

* The first section of this Introduction has been jointly written by Verena Buser and Chiara Renzo, “Hachsharot in Sweden and the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia after the rise of National Socialism” was written by Verena Buser, “Hachsharot after the Holocaust” was written by Chiara Renzo.

¹ For a comprehensive history of the *kibbutz* movement, see Henry Near, *The Kibbutz Movement: A History*, vol. 1 “Origins and growth, 1909-1939” (Oxford: published for the Littman library by

the theoretical and ideological constructions of Zionist parties, the distinguishing feature of the He-Halutz lied in its effort to make self-fulfillment (in Hebrew *hagshamah*)—intended as the fulfilment of the Zionist ideals by aliyah and life in a kibbutz—a concrete experience through hachsharah.² In a way that recalled the approach of Jewish youth movements, other crucial features that characterized He-Halutz from its inception were the emphasis on a democratic and egalitarian attitude, on mutual help and informal relationships as the basis of collective living during hachsharah. However, as the movement grew and the numbers of adherents in its ranks increased, especially after Hitler came to power, its internal structure, leadership and ideology became more formalized and partisan-based.³

The history of the hachsharot has been mainly analyzed in studies which have privileged a regional approach in order to investigate He-Halutz's operations or as part of broader studies on Zionist immigration policy and rescue attempts by the Yishuv during and after the Holocaust.⁴ Instead, the focus of this monographic issue is not limited to the analysis of how the various branches of He-Halutz developed their programs in different national contexts in Europe vis-à-vis the rise of National Socialism, instability in post-war Europe and Zionist migration policy. Binding together two moments which have been usually considerate as separate in the analysis of the hachsharot—i.e. the wartime and the post-war period—we adopt a “perspective from within.” In doing so, our primary objective is to explore how these crucial factors and events impacted on the lives of those European Jews who joined the hachsharot with the final goal to escape persecutions during the war or rebuild their lives after the Holocaust.

Oxford university, 1992), vol. 2 “Crisis and achievement, 1939-1995” (London - Portland: The Littman library of Jewish civilization, 1997). On the integration of the Holocaust survivors in the kibbutzim see: Hanna Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), 153-230.

² Israel Oppenheim, *The Struggle of Jewish Youth for Productivization: The Zionist Youth Movement in Poland* (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 1989).

³ Asher Cohen and Yehoyakim Cochavi, *Zionist Youth Movement during the Shoah* (New York: Peter Land, 1995).

⁴ For the state of art of the history of He-Halutz and the hachsharot in the countries and regions considered in this monographic issue of *Quest* we refer to the analysis and references of the individual essays included in this volume.

Hence, through case studies on wartime Sweden and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and post-war Greece, Italy, Romania, and Hungary, in this issue we situate the Jewish experience(s) and daily life in the hachsharot at the center of our analysis. The essays cast light on who were the young Jews who joined the hachsharot in Europe between the 1930s and the 1940s, their individual and collective struggles to endure the selection process for aliyah, their contrasting feelings while experiencing collective living, and their motivations and expectations. In order to uncover these aspects, we have intertwined institutional sources with ego-documents and oral history testimonies from former trainees or Holocaust survivors who reflected retrospectively on their experience while living in the hachsharot. Such a wide-range of sources constitute the prism through which the authors of the essays collected in this issue could move beyond the ideological and political dimension which predominated in the Zionist narratives and reports surrounding the hachsharot. Shifting the gaze from a macro- to a micro-history level and adopting different methodologies which draw on sociological surveys, a biographical approach, a cultural perspective, the gender dimension, the history of emotions, and a focus on memory, this issue of *Quest* contributes to revealing how hachsharah participants concretely related to Zionism and aliyah, and to which extent their decision to join a training center for emigration was based on political or national ideologies, or rather on the hope to have a better chance to leave Europe.

Through this issue, our shared goal is to re-discuss the role of the hachsharot and depict the complex and nuanced reality of life within them, questioning the Zionist affiliation of their participants and challenging the idea of hachsharah as a warm and welcoming environment serving as the stepping stone for aliyah.

***Hachsharot* in Sweden and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia after the rise of National Socialism**

A synthesis of the situation and development of pre- and post-war hachsharot sheds light on the shifting character, the protagonists and goals of emigration training. In pre-war Sweden or the Protectorate, but also in other European countries, hachsharot were far more than sites of transformation and preparation.

Training in Zionist, but also in non-Zionist training sites like in Nazi Germany, had the character of a “surrogate school” and was a form of youth work for the Jewish communities. It had many interfaces with the Youth Aliyah, which taught similar lesson plans, like the middle-hachsharah.⁵

Malin Thor Tureby has published extensively on hachsharot and He-Halutz in Swedish. In this article she revisits her dissertation, other previous publications and various sources from and about the movement to give an overview of the history of He-Halutz in Sweden, where the experiences and perspectives of the people who came to Sweden through the halutz-quota are at the center. Drawing from various unpublished materials produced within the movement in Sweden as well as interviews with former members of He-Halutz, the aim is to place the persons who entered Sweden through the halutz-quota as central actors in the text, both as important agents in the past and as constructors of the stories about that past. Informed by current discussions in oral history, Holocaust studies and Refugees studies, Thor Tureby creates a refugee/survivor-centered narrative that offers new/original perspectives on the He-Halutz movement and Jewish exile in Sweden during the 1930's and 1940's.

Daniela Bartáková analyses Zionist activities in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from the time when completion of hachsharah training became a prerequisite for obtaining an emigration certificate, and the reorganization of hachsharah training centers became a crucial task for Zionists. She focuses on changes in age groups, social status of emigration candidates and trainees, reorganization of training camps from the perspective of the Zionist movement as well as temporal changes of the Jewish geography in the former territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

⁵ The term “middle-hachsharah” refers to a training initiative for Jewish teenagers who had just finished schooling and had no chance to start a vocational training due to restrictions or exclusion from several professions. Verena Buser, “Hachsharot after 1933 - Welfare, Child Care and Educational Aspects,” in *Jewish horticultural schools and training centers in Germany and their impact on horticulture and landscape architecture in Palestine/Israel*, eds. Tal Alon-Mozes, Irene Aue-Ben-David, and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (München: AVM - Akademische Verlagsgemeinschaft, 2019), 23-38.

Hachsharot in Sweden were connected to the Auslandshachscharah movement (hachsharah abroad), which was set up step by step by German-Jewish Zionists in collaboration with the Swedish He-Halutz. In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia the idea of retraining was an integral part of the Zionist program within the so called “normalization” of the Jewish nation and its employment structure—a process which was already under way in pre-Hitler Germany and after the Nazi regime came to power. Training centers were reserved for Jewish youth and young adults, were connected to Zionist movements and predominantly run under the supervision of He-Halutz.

While in the post-war period a great number of trainees lived in hachsharot, often for pragmatic reasons and without the declared intention of building a new social order in Eretz Israel, the sites operated against a wide spectrum of historical actors and political interests. The trainees themselves had many choices of action, even though their decisions were largely based on emigration efforts and the possibility of escaping. Until the beginning of the Second World War they still had a small chance—against the background of the Nazi regime’s brutal antisemitic policy of exclusion and expulsion—to leave Germany to other destinations apart from Mandate Palestine. In the aftermath of the Holocaust hachsharah had only one goal: transferring camp survivors and refugees - of whom the majority were from the Soviet Union—through illegal refugee ships on the basis of their political-Zionist affiliation. As of May 1939 the British White Paper still limited immigration strictly to a quota of 1500 persons per month.⁶

Hachsharot after the Holocaust

Seventy people from different worlds have come to live together; they sit at one table and work towards one goal, though they are a collection of every possible attitude towards the world. The kibbutz that binds them is beautifully placed in a harmony of blue sky, black forest, and fresh green fields, sometimes burnished with the bright yellow color of harvest. In a

⁶ For British Immigration Policy see Hagit Lavsky, *The Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2017) or Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

house amidst all this peace and beauty live the Buchenwalders—people with sick hearts living their way out of a horrible past. People who dream of the time when they will breathe deeply of the cleansing and healing air of Palestine. Lonesome people who are trying to put together an imitation of a new family.⁷

This entry appeared in the diary of what is known as “Kibbutz Buchenwald,” the first *kibbutz hachsharah* established on German soil at the end of the Second World War. Its creation was promoted by a group of pre-war leaders and active members of Zionist movements who, while in concentration camps, just a few months before the end of the war, started to plan the establishment of Jewish associations and committees of self-help with the goal of rebuilding their lives after liberation.⁸ The above entry—signed by “a *halutzah*” (in Hebrew, female for “pioneer”)—sheds light on the diverse background and nature of the people who joined Kibbutz Buchenwald and, at the same time, their shared mixed feelings of hope and pain, their deep loneliness and desperate search for companionship and family. Grappling with their sorrow, fears, and anxieties in the apparent peaceful and warm environment of Kibbutz Buchenwald, the *halutzim* lived their experience of *hachsharah* as a “way out of a horrible past,” a transition towards their future lives. Despite being short, this excerpt from the diary of Kibbutz Buchenwald faithfully portrays the multi-faced reality of *hachsharah* after the Holocaust, as the four articles dedicated to this period in this issue of *Quest* will show.

The history of the *hachsharot* after the Second World War and the Holocaust can be fully grasped only in close relation to Jews’ efforts and determination to reconstruct their lives and the political, social and cultural factors that influenced such a painful and lengthy process. Their establishment within the refugee camps or nearby what remained of former Jewish communities across Europe entangled

⁷ Meyer Levin, ed., *Kibbutz Buchenwald: Selections From the Kibbutz Diary* (Tel-Aviv: Lion the Printer, 1946), 59-60.

⁸ For the foundation and history of Kibbutz Buchenwald see Judith Tydor Baumel, *Kibbutz Buchenwald: Survivors and Pioneers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009).

with what is commonly named “the liberation” and the complex consequences this moment brought both to global and local politics, and especially to people’s individual lives. The end of the hostilities has been long interpreted, represented, and remembered as a turning point, paving the way towards democratization in Europe and a new beginning in the war victims’ lives. However, despite the significance of this moment in contemporary history, the end of the war in 1945 did not directly open the doors to a new era, neither from a global perspective nor from an individual one. Indeed, Europe’s recovery and the setting up of a new post-war order led to a convoluted and never-ending process of reconstruction which started and developed in parallel with the outset of the Cold War.⁹ Against this backdrop, the re-assessment and rebuilding of individual lives was no less an uneven and long process.¹⁰

Even if the experiment of Kibbutz Buchenwald is unique, the seeds of all the activities aiming to gather and prepare groups of survivors for emigration to British Palestine sprouted all over Europe. In the turmoil that followed the liberation, Jewish partisans, activists, former leaders, and representatives of Zionist movements established local self-help committees in order to respond to essential needs and explore escape routes to leave Europe.¹¹ These efforts by Holocaust survivors soon found the encouragement of the Jewish soldiers in the Allied Army and later the support of the delegates of Zionist movements from Palestine (in Hebrew known as *shlihim*).¹²

⁹ For two pioneering studies which challenge our understanding of the Second post-war period as a turning point in the history of Europe see Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) and Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

¹⁰ For a study that frames the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the concentration camps in a historical perspective see Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹¹ On the establishment of self-help committees in concentration camps see Zeev Mankovitz, *Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24-51; on the *Brichah* (Hebrew for flight)—the underground effort that helped Jewish Holocaust survivors escape post-World War II Eastern Europe to reach possible embarkation points for Palestine—see Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹² For an overview of the activities of Jewish soldiers in liberated Italy see Yoav Gelber, “The meeting between the Jewish soldiers from Palestine serving in the British Army and She’erit Hapletah”, in *She’erit Hapletah, 1944-1948*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad

In fact, this encounter between the European diaspora and the Yishuv after the Holocaust revolved around aliyah, now charged with a new twofold meaning. Facing the dramatic news on the situation of European Jewry, the Zionist leadership in Palestine began to think about aliyah in different terms, and not just in regard to its economic connection with the Yishuv's absorption capacity. The Yishuv leadership imagined that a larger-scale aliyah could respond to the survivors' real need for resettlement, while—at the same time—putting an uncomfortable moral pressure on the British Mandate to ease restrictions on entry to Palestine. Therefore, by the end of the war, the *Aliyah bet* (or *ha-'apalah*), the illegal immigration of Jews into Palestine in violation of the British authorities' restriction on aliyah, was adopted by the leadership of the Yishuv as one of the primary means to challenge the Mandatory Government. By keeping alive the plight of the homeless Jews in Europe after the atrocities of the Holocaust, the Yishuv aimed to embarrass the British through the moral and political power embodied by Holocaust survivors.¹³ As the result of intense Zionist propaganda and the establishment of an underground way to reach Palestine, a flurry of activities to prepare new candidates for aliyah burgeoned among Jewish survivors. In turn, the number of hachsharot grew, becoming ever more politicized as they were run by single Zionist youth movements under the supervision of He-Halutz. Indeed, as the Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet established its branches in Europe and the presence of the Zionist movements and organisations increased considerably, the

Vashem, 1990). For a collection of *shlichim's* accounts of the mission of the United Kibbutz Movement in Europe and North Africa between 1945 and 1948 see: Yad Tabenkin and Ghetto Fighters House, eds., *Shlichut La-Golah* [Mission in the Diaspora] (Yad Tabenkin: Tel Aviv, 1989). On Youth Aliyah see: Shlomo Bar-Gil, *Mehapsim bayit motz'im moledet: 'Aliyat Ha-No'ar be-hinukh u-ve-shikum She'erit Ha-Pletah, 1945-1955* [Looking for home, finding homeland: Youth Aliyah in the education and rehabilitation of She'erit Ha-Pletah 1945-1955] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Tzvi, 1999).

¹³ On the Yishuv's migration policy and attitude towards the Holocaust during the Second World War see, Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Dina Porat, *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). On the *aliyah bet* in relation to the British Mandate after the Second World War see Aviva Halamish, *The Exodus Affair. Holocaust Survivors and the Struggle for Palestine* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998); Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Arieh J. Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, the United States & Jewish Refugees, 1945-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

hachsharot became indissolubly linked to the new immigration strategies adopted by the Yishuv. While the chances to be selected for aliyah and reach Palestine continued to be very limited, partisanship exasperated the fight for the aliyah quotas, determined according to each political party's strength within the Jewish Agency and their relative power within the kibbutz movements in British Palestine.

The Yishuv, moreover, was concerned not only with actually bringing the surviving Jews of the Diaspora to Eretz Israel, but also with securing their transformation from survivors to *olim* (Hebrew for “those who make Aliyah”), or better, *halutzim*. This triggered an intense debate on the nature of “what remained of the European diaspora” in the Yishuv's leadership and society, who looked at the survivors as “human dust,” “broken spirits,” “physically weak,” constantly questioning their ability to contribute to the creation of the Jewish national project. The Yishuv's attitude towards the newcomers was hesitant, judgemental and doubtful even in the case of those who had endured training in the hachsharot. This unexpected epilogue of the European Jews' training efforts after the Holocaust, made this experience even more disappointing and harsh for those who eventually succeeded in emigrating to Palestine/Israel.¹⁴

The articles of this monographic issue of *Quest* dedicated to the hachsharot in post-war Europe offer new insights on Jews' life in the hachsharot in two southern European countries—Greece during the Civil War and the DP camps in Italy, chosen by the Jewish Agency as a privileged headquarter for Aliyah bet—and in two countries in Eastern Europe, i.e. Romania and Hungary, threatened by the rise of communist regimes.

Katerina Kralova's article traces the history of three hachsharot set up between 1945 and 1949 in Athens and Thessaloniki, and the experiences of their few hundred members, almost exclusively survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Using the records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and some reports of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the author depicts the difficult living conditions in these collective training centers and examines the roles

¹⁴ On the social integration of Holocaust survivors in Israel see Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust*.

of the actors involved in running the hachsharot. At the same time, intertwining these institutional sources with the analysis of some rare personal accounts by former hachsharah members, the article sheds light on the emotional and daily life struggles endured by the Jewish survivors who returned to Greece and decided to join the hachsharah. Shifting the focus of her analysis from the perspective of the Zionist and Jewish organizations to that of the witnesses who lived within the training centers, Kralova introduces a key factor that moved Greek survivors towards the decision to join the hachsharot: the fear of the Civil War and the risk of participating in another conflict through military conscription.

The article co-authored by Achinoam Aldouby, Michal Peles-Almagor and Chiara Renzo is primarily based on the private archives of Zvi Aldouby, a Zionist delegate of the Mapai party in charge of “cultural affairs” in the DP camps in Italy. Exploring his mission, the authors challenge the traditional idea of hachsharah as a preparation for aliyah based primarily on physical and agricultural training. On the contrary, Zvi Aldouby privileged theatre as a channel to educate Jewish DPs about life in Eretz Israel, using the stage for political and ideological discussions surrounding Jewish identity, the rejection of the diaspora, aliyah and Zionism. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to analyse a diverse set of sources (official reports, correspondence, personal diaries, sketches, photographs and drawings), this article frames the activities of He-Halutz within the predominantly Zionist environment of the Italian refugee camps and offers an in-depth analysis of two theatrical plays directed by Zvi Aldouby as step-by-step training towards aliyah: *The Golem* by H. Leivick and *This Land* by A. Ashman.

Moving to Eastern Europe, Blanka Lebzester’s diary is the lens through which Julie Dawson portrays the situation of the hachsharot in Romania in the early years after the Holocaust. Fortuitously found in the women’s balcony of a shuttered synagogue in a small Transylvanian town, this ego-document provides a close look into the struggles faced by two Romanian Jewish women (the author of the diary and her mother), repatriated after their deportation to Transnistria. As the sole survivors of their entire family, the two women left for Constanța, where Blanka Lebzester joined the hachsharah, leaving her mother behind. The younger woman’s feelings of alienation and frustration for both the separation from her

mother and the long waited aliyah in an uncomfortable environment dominate this first-person account. In stressing these aspects, Dawson intertwines biography and micro-history to question the hachsharah as a site of rehabilitation, empowerment and social interaction, demonstrating instead its limits in responding to the most compelling needs of its fellow members.

Finally, the article co-authored by Ildiko Barna and Kinga Szemere examines the situation of the hachsharot in post-war Hungary through a systematic survey of 101 oral testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archives. By focusing on the minority of Hungarian Jews who decided to leave the country, the article explores the hachsharah members’ backgrounds and motivations behind such a decision, their actual attachment to Zionism, and their difficult encounter with Israeli society after aliyah. Barna and Szemere—using oral testimonies as the main sources for their investigation, and aware of their potentials and limitations—depict a long-term picture of the Jewish experience in Hungarian hachsharot. From this sociological survey it emerges that, while interviewees shared mainly positive memories of their time in the training farms in Hungary, they remembered their arrival and integration in Israel as a challenging and unexpectedly tormented process, which disappointed the expectations raised in the hachsharot.

This collection of essays cannot fully encompass all the nuances of the history of the hachsharot in Europe. However, inquiring into specific case studies, this monographic issue of *Quest* aims to set the stage for rethinking the hachsharot, by taking into account both their changing functions in space and time and the voices of those who experienced the training personally. This perspective allows us to delve into the reasons that led young Jews to join the hachsharot in order to make aliyah, their emotions and expectations, thus contributing to a more intimate portrait of Jewish life in Europe and its relationship with the Yishuv between the 1930s and 1940s.

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