

Uri Izhar

Pioneer Without Followers

History of Hakibbutz Hamehuchad during
the years of the state (1948–1980)



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ABSTRACT

The United Kibbutz Movement was established in 1927 as a union of several kibbutzim that had been established previously. It was centered at Kibbutz Ein Harod. The Movement was established as a national movement whose primary goal was to settle the land of Israel with large and growing kibbutzim as the best way to realize the goals of Zionism. The Movement was centralized and determined, through its central institutions, how the individual kibbutzim were to operate. The fundamental principles on which the kibbutzim operated were equality and cooperation. Equality meant that each person would give to the kibbutz according to his abilities and receive according to his needs. Cooperation held that kibbutz members did not own private property. There was common ownership of all production and consumer assets.

In most years, the kibbutz was unable to provide for each person according to his needs, and in practice there was formal, quantitative equality among the members in various consumer products. Differences were allowed only according to the principle of seniority. Housing, for example, was allocated according to seniority.

The economic model of the United Kibbutz was called a “mixed” economy, which included agriculture, industry, skilled craft and trade, and services. Agriculture had multiple branches and did not rely on just one or two branches. Agriculture included livestock (dairy barn, chicken coop, flocks), citrus and apple orchards, vineyards, field crops (extensive crops, animal fodder, vegetables and more). The diversification was necessary both for protection against market fluctuations and to provide

work for members throughout the year. All the economic systems were operated by kibbutz members only.

The United Kibbutz was an activist movement, with activism expressed in willingness to volunteer for any national or social mission and even to initiate such missions as needed. The United Kibbutz was a leader in the field of settlement of diverse areas of the land of Israel and also recruited members for the security services, to fill jobs in factories such as the potash factory at the Dead Sea, for emissary work among Jewish youth in the diaspora and more.

The founder and charismatic leader of the United Kibbutz Movement was Yitzhak Tabenkin, an immigrant from the Second Aliyah (1911) and a member of Ein Harod. Tabenkin delineated the movements' goals and placed them in historical context. A group that unified around him actualized the goals. The main workforce arriving at the kibbutzim of the United Kibbutz Movement in the 1920s and 30s came from the Hehalutz (pioneer) youth movement in Eastern and Central Europe. Some young people from the local pioneer youth movements, such as Mahanot Olim and HaNoar HaOved, also made connections with the United Kibbutz Movement and established their kibbutzim in this framework.

During the 1930s, the United Kibbutz Movement built itself up as an independent movement with its own mechanisms and means to achieve a position of decisive influence in the youth movements in the diaspora and in Israel. In addition, the United Kibbutz under Tabenkin's leadership opposed political moves of the Mapai leadership, such as, for example, the agreement made by Ben Gurion, then secretary of the Histadrut Labor Federation, with Jabotinsky, leader of the right-wing revisionist movement.

This situation was undesirable for Ben Gurion and Berl Katznelson, the leaders of Mapai, the majority party in the labor movement. Katznelson even filed suit against the Unified Kibbutz Movement, a move that the United Kibbutz Movement, led by Tabenkin, vehemently

opposed. They wanted to preserve the independence of the United Kibbutz Movement and its unique identity.

Following these struggles and other differences, a split was created in the United Kibbutz Movement between the majority, loyal to Tabenkin and his path, and the minority of those loyal to Ben Gurion and Katznelson. The minority coalesced over time into an active opposition that demanded control over absorption of new immigrants and youth education based on movement power relations, a demand that the majority leadership vehemently opposed.

The large pioneering Aliyah in the first half of the 1930s turned the United Kibbutz into the largest kibbutz movement and the leader in the settlement process. This wave of immigration ceased or diminished in 1936 during an economic crisis in Israel. In that same year, extensive Arab riots broke out, directed against both the British rulers and the Jewish settlement. The United Kibbutz Movement became active in the field of security and sent one of its leaders, Yisrael Galili from Kibbutz Na'an, to the national headquarters of the Haganah, the military organization of the Jewish settlement in the land of Israel.

In 1939, the Second World War broke out. Following the defeat of the Italian army in the Middle East, Germany sent two armored divisions, the famous Afrika Korps under General Rommel's command, to assist the Italians in Libya and Egypt's western desert. Rommel intended to conquer Egypt and take control of the British-controlled Suez Canal, an important route on the way to India. There was great alarm in the Jewish community and thousands of women and men enlisted in the British forces.

In 1941, the Haganah established the Palmach (Hebrew acronym for *plugot machatz* – strike force) as a regular mobilized force to defend the Jewish community in the event of a German invasion. At the outset the Palmach was small and received assistance from the British for training and equipment, which continued while an invasion by Rommel was a real threat. When Rommel was defeated at El-

Alamein by the British Eighth Army under Montgomery's command (October 1942), the British ceased assistance to the Palmach and it became a semi-underground force. The initial organization was in platoons. Over time the Palmach suffered a lack of personnel and their budget also decreased. In view of this situation, the United Kibbutz Movement decided to divert the core groups of its youth movement to service in the Palmach. In order to make this financially feasible, the United Kibbutz Movement decided that the regime of the Palmach in the kibbutzim would alternate two weeks of work on the kibbutz and two weeks of military training. This arrangement made possible the existence and growth of the Palmach up until the War of Independence in 1948. Other kibbutz movements also adopted this method. Most of the Palmach commanders during this period and during the 1948 War of Independence were members of the United Kibbutz Movement.

At the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, relations worsened between the majority leadership of the United Kibbutz Movement and the Mapai leadership. In 1944, most of the members of the United Kibbutz Movement, together with urban allies from Mapai, split off and founded a new party – Ahdut HaAvoda (Labor Unity). This split worsened relations even more between the majority and the minority in the United Kibbutz Movement. The background of the split was ideological and political differences and the prohibition imposed by Mapai on the existence of organized factions within the party.

During the period of struggle against the British Mandate in the land of Israel (1945-1947), members of the United Kibbutz Movement and their kibbutzim were active in the struggle through providing shelter to illegal immigrants (*ma'apilim*) and providing bases of operation and housing for Palmach units. The Palmach commander at that time, as well as during the War of Independence, was Yigal Alon, in his 30s, a member of Kibbutz Ginosar, which belonged to the United Kibbutz Movement.

During the War of Independence, several United Kibbutz Movement

kibbutzim were attacked by the Arab forces, along with kibbutzim from other movements. Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, south of Jerusalem, was conquered by Arab forces and destroyed, but was released after a time and rebuilt.

Between 1947 and 1950, the United Kibbutz Movement established 28 new kibbutzim in different regions. Not long after their establishment, most of them experienced large-scale departure of members. The movement was forced to send all their settlement groups to kibbutzim that were suffering from departures, in order to ensure their continued existence. This situation stopped new settlement by the United Kibbutz Movement until the Six-Day War. Between 1950 and 1967, the United Kibbutz Movement established only three new kibbutzim, out of which one did not survive and was dismantled.

In 1948, the Ahdut HaAvoda party joined the Hashomer Hatsair party and together they formed Mapam, the United Workers Party. This was a radical left party that was in opposition to Mapai and had widespread sympathy for the Soviet Union and its leader Stalin. This process worsened relations within the United Kibbutz Movement between the majority, who supported Mapam, and the minority, who supported Mapai and could not make peace with approbation of the Soviet Union. In 1951, there was a political split within the United Kibbutz Movement as 25 kibbutzim, about a third of all movement kibbutzim, withdrew, together with many other members from kibbutzim with Mapam majorities, and formed a new movement – Ichud Hakibbutzim. In 1954, Mapam split and its original components reverted to independent political entities. The United Kibbutz Movement reverted for the most part to the Ahdut HaAvoda party.

In the 1950s, the Movement was mainly occupied with rehabilitating the young kibbutzim that suffered from departures and with rehabilitating the kibbutzim that had been damaged by the split. Another important movement effort was the struggle against employing outside workers in the kibbutz, which was considered contrary to the

principle of independent labor. This struggle succeeded in agriculture and services, but several large factories continued to employ dozens of outside workers over a period of many years.

The 1960s were years of economic consolidation, increase in standard of living and demographic rehabilitation. Agriculture became more efficient and more profitable, and a broad wave on industrialization began, based on capital-intensive factories with few workers, in order to avoid employment of outside workers.

In the veteran kibbutzim, the second generation began taking responsibility for the economy and society. Trends of privatization in consumption, in clothing and furnishings, were also instituted, through budgets for individuals and families to purchase the products they preferred instead of receiving them according to norms set by the kibbutz.

The United Kibbutz Movement had a unique educational method, which was in part shared with other movements. The second generation was raised according to the United Kibbutz method. The children lived in baby houses, and as they grew in nurseries and in collective houses during elementary school, eating, learning and sleeping there. A fundamental principle of the United Kibbutz Movement was establishing a school on each kibbutz, even small kibbutzim. When there were not enough children for a class at a single grade level, they established two-grade classes. The children and youth were educated to continue the kibbutz as it had been built by their parents. They usually remained loyal to this path.

After the split in the movement, a youth unit was established as a youth movement for the children that held social activities (trips, meetings between kibbutzim) and ideological education.

After the Six-Day War, the United Kibbutz Movement tried to return to the period of major settlement, but with very limited success. From 1967 to 1980 (the end of the independent existence of the United Kibbutz Movement), 9 new kibbutzim were established in the

framework of the United Kibbutz Movement. Most were small and were located in the Golan Heights, the Jordan Valley, the northeastern Sinai and the Galilee. For the United Kibbutz Movement, which hoped for a large influx of Israeli youth to the new settlements, this was a significant disappointment.

In 1968, the Ahdut HaAvoda party reunited with Mapai and another party (Rafi) which had split from Mapai in 1965. Together they formed the Israeli Labor Party.

During the 1970s, trends of privatization in the kibbutzim increased. Personal budgets and a general budget, that had previously been considered prohibited due to its resemblance to the salary paid to city workers, were introduced, and pressures began in the direction of moving children from sleeping in children's homes to family accommodation. The pressure succeeded and in the 1980s, all children up to age 14 were sleeping in their parents' homes. High school students began learning in regional schools in which general matriculation exams were given, something that had not been accepted in kibbutzim in the past.

In the 1970s, there was also increasing pressure to unite the Kibbutz Movement. After internal and external struggles, the United Kibbutz Movement joined with the Ichud Hakibbutzim in 1980 and ceased to exist as an independent body.