



ELIEZER VERTHMAN

COMMUNAL CARE: Nurses take care of a bunch of babies at the Kibbutz Givat Brenner childrens' home in the 1920s

An award-winning documentary film on kibbutz life by a former kibbutznik has struck a chord with Israeli audiences

Bernard Dichek

MORE THAN 60 YEARS HAVE passed since she placed her baby in the communal children's home, but the kibbutz mother still recalls the unease and pain she felt upon being separated from her newborn child: "Was that a natural thing to do, I ask you?" she laments.

This is just one emotionally-charged moment in "Children of the Sun," a film that explores an aspect of life which was unique to the Israeli kibbutz movement: communal children's homes where youngsters were looked after by child-care workers from birth

and allowed to be with their parents for only a few hours a day. Combining old home movies with the poignant recollections of people who grew up in children's homes, filmmaker Ran Tal has created a riveting cinematic study that challenges viewers to reexamine the kibbutz way of life and the pivotal role it played in forming the collective identity of Israeli society.

The winner of the Best Documentary Award at the 2007 Jerusalem Film Festival, "Children of the Sun" has struck a deep chord with Israeli audiences well beyond the confines of the kibbutz. The film has sold a record-breaking number of movie theater

tickets for a documentary and continues to be shown in Israeli theaters even after being broadcast on television. It is currently being screened at film festivals across North America and will be broadcast in the United States on the Sundance Channel later this year.

Filmmaker Ran Tal, 44, grew up in a children's home in Kibbutz Beit Hashita in the Jezreel Valley. His mother, who is among the interviewees in the film, was raised in a children's home in the same kibbutz. In an interview with The Report, Tal explains that he wasn't interested in doing a film about victimization. "I don't think my parents saw

themselves as victims. I didn't want to ask my mother why she brought me up this way. I wasn't trying to attack or defend the kibbutz," says Tal. "I just wanted to explore the kibbutz, which is such an important part of my identity and, to me, the most dramatic story within the Zionist narrative.

"Because the radical way in which the kibbutz took apart the traditional family is what made the kibbutz such a radical place, it is through the prism of the family that I decided to focus the film," he says.

In making "Children of the Sun," Tal interviewed some 30 first generation kibbutz children who were communally raised from the 1920s through the 1940s. Tal chose to concentrate on the early days of the kibbutz because that was a period in which communal values were rigorously enforced.

"The ideological justifications were directly connected to the writings of Marx and Engels," he says, pointing out that by the 1960s and 70s the members of his generation were raised in what Tal describes as a "kibbutz-lite" society with relatively fewer ideological underpinnings.

In addition to communism and Zionism, the kibbutz founders were also strongly influenced by the emerging theories of Freud. "They believed they had the answer to the alienated neurotic Western man that Freud described and that they could create a new human being living in a utopia. This new human being would be the product of parents who only gave love and were not involved

in their children's education," says Tal.

One practice reflecting the ideological atmosphere of those early days was the way in which children received their names. As one interviewee in the film recalls:

"My father wanted to name me Nachum after his father. But then an important kibbutz member suggested another name... My father got angry and said, 'What do you mean? He's my son.'

'He may be your son but he belongs to the kibbutz. We are his spiritual family. The majority will decide, not you.' There was a vote... Nachum won by 8 votes."

The anecdote may seem harsh yet the speaker tells the story in a tone of voice that conveys warmth and understanding – even humor. This ability to look at events from many different emotional perspectives characterizes the entire film.

"I didn't want to present a one-sided view. I wanted to show how events could be interpreted and remembered in different ways, a sort of 'Rashomon' of the kibbutz," says Tal, referring to the Japanese film "Rashomon," in which a single event is retold in different ways by several participants.

In "Children of the Sun," Tal groups the memories he has assembled into five chapters. Each chapter mixes positive and negative vignettes with visuals that often seem to contradict what is being said.

The first chapter, "Separation," deals with early childhood memories and presents some of the film's most jarring juxtapositions. We see young smiling children being put to bed by their caregivers but the voices of those children – today people in their 60s and 70s – tell a different story. One woman recalls that "I felt there was no way I could make it through the night without my mother... I would go from tree to tree to avoid the night guard... I wanted to be with her." And as we see parents happily playing with their children on the kibbutz lawn, another woman recalls, "It really makes no sense but I can't remember anything at all of the time spent with my parents... It was all very proper. There were no arguments, no shouting, no hugging, no kissing... We never saw our parents naked, we never saw them kissing. We would wait for a birthday so we could say to father: 'Give mommy a kiss...'"

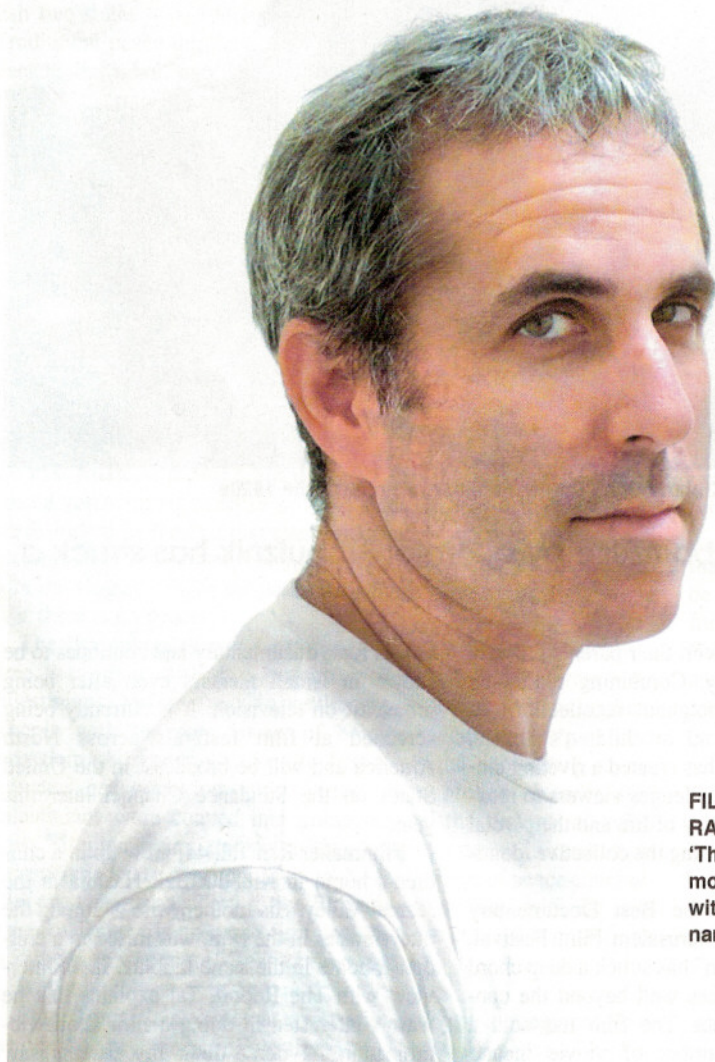
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– Ran Tal

FILMMAKER

RAN TAL:

'The kibbutz is the most dramatic story within the Zionist narrative'



DAVID QUAINY



EGALITARIAN PRACTICES: Potty time for boys and girls at the Kibbutz Givat Brenner childrens' home in the 1920s

The second chapter, "The Group," describes the upside and downside of growing up in an egalitarian peer group. "Everyone received one pair of pants, one shirt, one pair of sandals... I'm happy it was like that," recalls one man. And another notes nostalgically that "the kind of freedom we had could never be recreated." We see children roaming freely across the kibbutz grounds, seemingly without the interventions of adults and the apprehensions of city life. But the nostalgia is shattered by memories of how some of the egalitarian practices, which included boys and girls showering together, led to humiliation. A woman, recalling being mocked during her puberty years, remarks: "Until my dying day I won't forget those showers."

"The Elite" describes how the children were educated to be role models for the rest of Israeli society, with an emphasis placed on the importance of military service and self-sacrifice. One of the few occasions that the children were taken outside the kibbutz was to participate in May Day parades in cities like Tel Aviv. Participating in the parades is recalled with much pride: "We were the top of the world... the kibbutz was the real thing... I felt a certain superiority as a girl at the age of 11 [compared to city kids]."

Another notes drily that her only recollection of the annual event is being given a new pair of sandals.

In "A Second Life," the first generation of kibbutz-raised children look at what it was like to become parents. Some remember the

advantages of the communal child-raising system. "It was convenient... We did whatever we wanted." Others describe the pain of separation. "When my son was born, I took him to the nursery and came back home and started crying. I felt lonely."

The final chapter, "The Disintegration," covers many topics including the closing of the communal homes, the changes in the kibbutz way of life and the departure of many members. One woman notes that when she moved to the city she had to get used to starting sentences with the pronoun "I" rather than "we."

Is the harsh name of the final chapter justified? After all, there are still more than 200 kibbutzim today, many with thriving industries. Tal acknowledges that if he had to make the film again he probably would have added a question mark after the word disintegration.

TAL LIVES IN TEL AVIV WITH HIS wife and two small children and teaches filmmaking at Sapir College, near Sderot in the south. He left Kibbutz Beit Hashita in 1986. His mother, Chana, who is among the film's interviewees, continues to live there. Like the other speakers, she is not shown while talking. "We were trying to recreate a world that once was, to sense the atmosphere of the past. 'Talking-heads' would have broken this atmosphere," Tal explains.

Instead of showing the speakers (who are finally seen with the closing credits), the film relies totally on archival footage, most derived

from home movies taken from 80 different sources. Some were obtained directly from the families who made them, but much of the footage was located in various film archives. The high cost of paying to restore the films which had deteriorated over the years and the even higher cost of purchasing the rights to use the archival footage would have been prohibitive if Tal hadn't managed to find an investor in the project. The U.S. public broadcasting authority ITVS paid approximately \$100,000 to cover those costs. Tal points out that he was influenced by American filmmaker Alan Berliner's 2002 film "Family Album," which uses home movies to present an oral history of life in the United States from the 1920s through the 50s. "There is something very intimate about home movies. The people shown tend to be on very intimate terms with the person taking the pictures. This connected with what I wanted to do because it was a film on the subject of the family," says Tal.

Although the film depicts a period in the past, no specific dates are given and there is no attempt to build a chronology. "The film creates a reality of its own, one that exists only on the screen," he remarks.

The film's sound design is also unusual. Sounds are used selectively for theatrical effect. For instance, a scene showing a burial in a kibbutz cemetery is accompanied by the amplified sounds of sandals walking on gravel giving way to the isolated noise of shoveling. Absent are all the other sounds such as voices that would ordinarily have been heard

in such a situation. “The soundtrack is not meant to be real; we were not trying to create a feeling of reality but rather present the mood of memories and dreams,” he says.

Summarizing the impact of these techniques Tal says that his goal was to create a more active form of cinematic viewing. “Because there is a dialectic between the sound and the picture, viewers can’t sit back passively. The have to work hard and put the pieces together by themselves.”

Tal is not surprised to hear reports of people, many former kibbutzniks, going to see the film in groups, often with family members of a few generations. “It could be that the experience of viewing the film gives them something of the feeling of togetherness that is no longer.” But he is quick to qualify that statement. “That feeling of togetherness,” he adds, “was also accompanied by lots of loneliness.”

Why is the film so popular in Israel? Tal believes it is because so many Israelis have a personal connection to the kibbutz. Some were part of the Nahal army units that spent part of their military service on kibbutzim; others spent summers there as volunteers. “People tend to have strong feelings about their kibbutz days. Either it was the best time of their life or the worst,” he observes.

Social critics contend that the enormous interest in “Children of the Sun” stems in part from the way in which the film provokes strong emotions while, at the same time, presenting a balanced picture.

“The kibbutz was the avant-garde of Israeli society,” said Prof. Amia Lieblich, a psychologist at the Hebrew University and a kibbutz researcher, in an interview with The Report. “During the early days of the state, the kibbutz projected the blossoming of the country. Whenever researchers would come here from abroad, they were taken to the kibbutz and shown the children’s homes, as if their communal upbringing was a great wonder to behold.”

She notes that the image of the kibbutz changed markedly by the 1970s and 80s, when many kibbutzim fell heavily into debt and many members left for the city. “People began to project this abandonment on the rest of society. It seemed that the same deterioration of Zionist values was taking place in society as a whole. In some ways it seemed like the end of the kibbutz was also the end of Israel,” suggests Lieblich.

The downfall of the kibbutz economic

model was accompanied by a decline in the image of the kibbutz social model. A flurry of books, art exhibits and films made by former kibbutz members vented stored-up anger that had until then been subjected to self-censorship. Abuse and alienation were frequent themes.

Among them was “Shiva,” a book by Avraham Balaban, in which the author revisits Kibbutz Hulda, where he grew up in the 1950s and sums up the time his father



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spent with his children as the “transition between his shower and dinner.” In the autobiographical feature film “Sweet Mud,” Dror Shaul describes the way a young boy and his mother are insensitively treated by kibbutz members.

Lieblich believes that “Children of the Sun” offers a more nuanced contemporary perception of the kibbutz, which acknowledges the role the kibbutz played in building Israeli society, while recognizing its limitations. “Now we are in a different era and what Ran Tal has succeeded in doing is create a balanced picture of the kibbutz, one that is very complex and that has a duality to it,” says Lieblich.

Art curator Tali Tamir initiated a group exhibition called “Togetherness” at the Tel

Aviv Museum, in 2005, in which more than 20 kibbutz-born artists reflected on their experiences growing up in the children’s homes. Tamir believes that “Children of the Sun” resonates with audiences because the debate about individualism and collective thinking is still very much alive in contemporary Israeli society. “The feeling of the group remains very strong in Israel, with many people having trouble with the idea of individualism even as Israeli society becomes more and more privatized,” she tells The Report.

“The children’s homes were really just one example of this. There is something about Israeli society that doesn’t let you be on your own and if you try to be, you are often considered strange,” she says, pointing out that the current controversy over draft evasion is one example of this. “If you don’t serve in the Israeli army, then to many people it’s as if you are not part of Israeli society; you have no legitimacy,” she says.

Another example of the phenomenon is the way Israelis travel to distant parts of the world after completing their army service. “Once people started going to India to be on their own,” notes Tamir, “but what happens today is the opposite. As soon as they leave the army, they travel thousands of kilometers and then climb mountains thousands of meters high. But then when they get there they meet up with the their buddies who served with them in the same platoon. Going to India has very quickly become part of the collective biography of young Israelis,” she observes.

For kibbutz member Yonatan Peled, who saw a screening of the film on his kibbutz, Ma’abarot in central Israel, “Children of the Sun” was a welcome relief from other depictions of kibbutz life he has seen. Peled served as the kibbutz manager during the 1980s when Ma’abarot, along with the rest of the kibbutzim, decided to close the last children’s homes. Speaking in a discussion held after the film, in the presence of the director, Peled explained that he felt offended by what he considered to be the accusatory tone of the Tel Aviv Museum exhibit and many other artistic portrayals of the kibbutz. “I reached the conclusion that works of art are created out of frustration and that those who were happy simply wouldn’t talk about it,” he began. And then, turning to Tal, Peled added that he was heartened by what the film had accomplished. “I was very moved by what you did,” said Peled. “It helps set the record straight.” ●