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## Creating a National Identity through Agricultural Education in Mandatory Palestine

**Abstract:** Formation of agricultural education in high schools was a milestone in the early 20th century history of Zionist education, and in the Jewish society in Mandatory Palestine in general. Agricultural education was a means of changing the character of the Jewish people by imparting agricultural knowledge and training. Candidates came from agricultural settlements, but mainly – and this was its uniqueness – they also came from the towns. In addition, agricultural education provided a framework for absorbing immigrant youth. This educational framework was, among other things, ideological because those who joined it were usually motivated by a desire to change the character of the Jewish society, return to the land and work it. The cost of funding agricultural schools was high for the local Jewish community, and therefore these schools remained dependent on private initiative and philanthropy. In spite of the widespread ideological support, not many students actually took part in agricultural education due to the high cost of tuition on the one hand, and the need to help support their own families on the other. It can also be said that during this period, parents who had the means to provide their children with higher education, favored the “Gymnasium” high school model, which could lead to them engaging in other professions.

**Keywords:** *Agricultural education; Mandatory Palestine; Zionist ideology, Jewish society; high school; identity.*

### Introduction

During the British Mandate in Palestine (1918–1948) education played an important role in molding the national identity of the young Jewish generation (The system of Education, 1946). Agricultural education was in this sense the highlight as it emphasized nationality, return to the land and working the land. The Hebrew literature of the forties and fifties often represented the archetypical young Israeli as a graduate of the agricultural schools (Almog, 2000). This fact reflects the importance attributed by Jewish society to the Hebrew-Zionist educational system in Palestine, and the agricultural education system within it, that

played an important role in molding the identity of the Israeli young person – the “Sabra”.<sup>1</sup> This was a generation for whom Hebrew was the language of conversation and of reading, consisting of young people who were educated under the mythical aura of the pioneer settler and defender. They studied in schools and boarding schools affiliated with the labor movement – the socialist Zionist political parties united under the aegis of the *Histadrut* labor federation – or schools belonging to the general educational system sponsored by the Jewish Agency. The term “Sabra” includes immigrants who came to Palestine as children and whose personalities were shaped in the melting pot of Sabra socialization. Therefore, the context presented in this article is used in the cultural sense – a generational unit identified not by country of birth, but rather by affiliation with the institution that imprinted a specific culture on these young people.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of agricultural education in formulating the ideological identity of the “Sabra” and to follow the motives that led the students to choose agricultural education.

### **Agricultural education within the Jewish educational system during the Mandate period**

Jewish education was developed during the late Ottoman period by individual educators and Jewish philanthropic organizations which sought to increase the productivity of the Jewish Yishuv through modernization. During the British Mandate the Jewish community strived to preserve cultural and educational autonomy, and attached great importance to Jewish national education. Thus, the Jewish education system became a conflict zone for questions relating to national sovereignty and to the arena of political and inter-communal struggles. As a result, a split educational system was created in the 1920s, in which every political group had its own educational stream, the Mizrahi stream of national-religious education, the *Histadrut* labor federation stream and the general stream. ( Reshef & Dror, 1999).

Agricultural education in Palestine began with the establishment of the Mikveh Israel Agricultural School in 1870 by Alliance Israélite Universelle (Alliance).<sup>2</sup> This event took place before the renewal of Jewish settlement in Palestine (Radowa, 1989). The idea was to create a change in the Jewish way of life, by training the population towards productive professions. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Palestine started going through political, economic and social changes. One of the characteristics of these changes was the development of agriculture and a Jewish agricultural society alongside the local (Arab) population, which

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of the term “Sabra” relates to Jews born in Palestine toward the end of World War I through the 1920s and 1930s, who were educated in social frameworks belonging, formally or informally, to the labor movement of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the formation of the state of Israel in 1948).

<sup>2</sup> Mikve Israel is located near Jaffa, along the coast line.

was based on agriculture. Shortly after the establishment of the first colonies in Palestine it became clear to the initiators that success depended on the settlers having professional agricultural training (Meyerson, 1899). Therefore, it was considered necessary to promote agricultural education for future generations.

The common goal of Jewish agricultural education in Palestine combined ideology and practice, qualifying its graduates as professional farmers with the aim of returning to their family farms or of training them as candidates for the new agricultural settlements. The candidates, as expected, were from the young generation which grew up in the colonies (the *moshavot*) established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* members established from the 1920s and onward.<sup>3</sup> However, two special groups also integrated with them: (1) a unique group of Hebrew pupils from gymnasiums (academic high schools) in the large cities – usually members of pioneering youth movements; and (2) a large proportion of youngsters who had immigrated and who were oriented towards agriculture. As a result, agricultural education became the social framework for youngsters who had a common goal – settling the land (Yankelevitch, 2004).

It should be noted that agricultural education took place throughout the period in various frameworks, beginning, as mentioned, in the *moshavot*, in boarding schools for orphans and immigrant youth (Shefeya and Kefar Yeladim) (Berger, 1928). Then there were added the religious youth village Kefar Hassidim and towards the end of the period, at Kefar HaRoeh, the first Bnei Akiva agricultural (religious) yeshiva, as part of realization of the concept of ‘*Torah v’Avodah*’ (Torah and work) (Manor, 1987; Fuhrmann-Naaman, 2017), as well as in the *kibbutzim* (Ruppin agricultural school in the Jordan Valley). Vocational-agricultural training for women was established at Nahalal and in working women’s farms such as Ayanot, Afula and others (Manor, 1987; Carmel-Hakim, 2007). This study is constrained to examining high schools defined as agricultural, that operated in the 1930s and 1940s and examining the students’ motives underlying their choice of where to study.

## The Uniqueness of Jewish Agricultural Education in Palestine

In Western countries agricultural education was an outcome of advanced research that began at the universities. Agricultural education was a means to improve existing agricultural methods, to produce higher yields and to slow down urbanization (Jenkins, 1884; Richards, 1983). But at the same time, the education given to the natives in the colonies of those Western countries, was only basic if it even existed at all.

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<sup>3</sup> A *moshava* [Hebrew] plural: *moshavot*, was a form of rural Jewish settlement in Ottoman Palestine, established beginning in the late 1870s and during the first two waves of Jewish Zionist immigration. In a *moshava* all the land and property are privately owned, as opposed to later communal settlements like the *Kibbutz* and the *moshav*.

The British occupation of Palestine in 1918 and the acceptance of the Mandate from the League of Nations in 1922, obliged Britain to develop the country, bring it into a status of self-rule and fulfill its dual obligation to the Arabs and the Jews. The portion of those engaged in agriculture in the Jewish economy in Palestine was approximately 20% in 1922 (~ 5,300 people) and 22.2% (~ 40,000 people) in 1939. The growth was due to an increase in population (Metzer, 1998).<sup>4</sup>

During the British period in Palestine, two educational systems were set up. One was run by the government, and the other by the private sector. The Church education and the Jewish education belonged to the latter. The Jewish education was under the auspices of the Jewish *Yishuv*. This period is characterized by on-going discussions between the Jewish authorities and the government concerning the financial support and recognition of the Jewish system (Reshef & Dror, 1999). The British Mandatory authorities recognized the importance of agricultural education and encouraged it to the extent of the means at their disposal, which were very slim.

Agricultural education for the Arab population was given both to village school pupils and adult farmers. The first mainly entailed the planting of school vegetable gardens and running the government agricultural schools; whilst the second was concentrated on demonstration plots, with the added feature of lecture tours, etc., all targeted at improving the lot of the *fellah* (Arab farmer) (El-Eini, 1999). Humphrey Bowman, the director of the Education Department noted in his memoirs that the aim of agricultural education in the Arab villages was to “leave the peasant on his land” (Bowman, 1942).

On the other hand, the Jewish community, as stated, managed its own educational system and was aware that its society lacked any agricultural tradition or knowledge. Therefore, it was necessary to establish an agricultural educational system which would give the required agricultural knowledge.

A 1928 document, written as the final report of a Jewish-American Committee on Orphans in Palestine (Berger, 1928), sheds light on the educational approach in this context: “It is an almost accepted axiom that to a large extent the success or failure of the experiment in the Land of Israel will depend on the extent to which the Jewish population succeeds in agriculture. Every effort towards this goal is therefore a direct step towards the building of a Jewish state.” (p. 12) Moreover, as stated, agricultural education affects the collective image of youth.

Eliyahu Krauze (1943, p. 2), the principal of the Mikve Israel school (1913–1954) defined the aim of Jewish agricultural education as follows: “Agriculture lore is acquired by tradition [...] in our case, as we lack agricultural tradition, agricultural education is the means to acquire the knowledge [...] I would call it imbuing agricultural religion”.

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<sup>4</sup> In parallel in the Arab economy, in 1922 64.1% were engaged in agriculture (~123,000 people) and in 1939 58.2% (~163,000 people).

The schools in the Jewish settlements devoted effort to promoting the agricultural ideal, to fostering the image of the youth as “working the land,” and to training them in the school vegetable gardens. Although these vegetable gardens were indeed used as a means of imparting agricultural knowledge, their utility was limited (Seltenreich, 2014). These attempts were dependent on the teachers’ initiatives, and it was clear to all, that professional vocational education could only be carried out within the framework of professional agricultural education in high schools.

During the British Mandate the “veteran” Mikve Israel school continued to function while adapting to the changes that occurred and to society’s needs. The physician Siegfried Lehmann came to Palestine, with a group of Jewish children (orphans) from Kaunas Lithuania and initiated the youth village of Ben-Shemen (in central Palestine). Later an agricultural school was built within the framework of the village as part of the vocational training. This agricultural school became a refuge for several hundred youngsters fleeing from Europe on the eve of World War II. A bequest by Sir Ellis Kadoorie, a Jewish philanthropist from Hong Kong, gave the British Administration the opportunity to build two agricultural schools: one for Arabs at Tulkarem, opened in 1931, and the other for Jews near Mt. Tabor (Lower Galilee), opened in 1934. The government provided financial assistance through grants-in-aid. In 1934 Dr. Arthur Biram, the founder of the Hebrew Reali school in Haifa<sup>5</sup>, together with the farmers’ union, created an agricultural high school at Pardes-Hanna (Northern District), to educate the youth of the *moshavoth*. Each one of these schools operated under its own unique model for agricultural education. Mikve Israel, Kadoorie and Pardes-Hanna schools were boys’ schools with a few exceptions. The schools Kadoorie and Pardes-Hanna accepted students only after careful selection. The Hapoel HaMizrachi movement and the Alliance of Religious Pioneers established a religious youth village at Kefar Hassidim in 1938. The principals of the agricultural schools were professional agronomists, and the managers of the youth villages were professional educators.

The desire to be accepted into agricultural schools on the part of many student candidates, is attested to by dozens of recommendation letters found in the archives of the Kadoorie, Pardes-Hanna and Ben-Shemen schools. The approach to the agricultural schools stemmed from the sincere aspirations of the candidates, especially those from the city, to prepare themselves with the goal of eventually helping to establish new agricultural settlements. Some examples will clarify the motivation and nature of agricultural education during this period.

One of the applicants’ fathers wrote to the Kadoorie principal begging him to do all he could so that his son would be accepted by the school. This father wrote: “Under the influence of the youth movements he [my son] despises studying.” His parents asked him to finish his

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<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew Reali School of Haifa was founded prior to the beginning of World War I. In the 1920s, it became a leading academic school.

studies at the very least at an agricultural school, "...and there is no better place than your school." (graduate's files, 1933, Kadoorie Archive).

Another request letter was sent to the director of Kadoorie by Yosef Weitz (director of the Land and Afforestation Department of the Jewish National Fund), asking him to accept a candidate who he said was "a quiet boy ... very promising. He should be a dedicated land worker. I request that you help him in any possible way." (ibid, 1943)

A student from the first class at Kadoorie (1934) shed light on this topic:

"We had a mission to accomplish; we were part of a collective, and every individual had to do his best. The agricultural school was an educational framework for personal and national materialization. We had to set an example. It is the striving for self-fulfillment which guides our lives. Going to agricultural schools helped achieve this goal of personal and national fulfillment in society of the period with its high value on volunteerism. To establish from scratch – this is Zionism, and we were part of this endeavor." (Azaryahu, 2003).

Shimon Peres, Israel's ninth president, wrote in his autobiographical notes: "I was pale, introverted, speaking fluent Hebrew but with an Ashkenazi accent" (Bar-Zohar, 2005, p.12). In an essay he wrote upon arriving at Ben-Shemen in September 1938 he says:

"The most important service to the people of Israel is building the country [by] working the land; without that there will be no connection to our soil... People of Israel! Redeem the land! Hold to it! The land will heal your maimed and broken soul; it will heal your bent back that carries the heavy burden of exile for two thousand years... We have enough doctors and professors and people with education. Hebrew Youth! We need simple workers of the land... my place is not in the city, but in the village, behind the plough in the field!" (ibid, pp. 10–11).

Bar-Zohar, Peres's biographer summarized this period saying: "In Ben-Shemen, Shimon Persky became an Israeli. Peres' roommate Moshe Gerber also felt this way. He arrived at Ben-Shemen as a new immigrant from Kaunas, Lithuania, in 1935. Gerber writes about the agricultural training they had undergone in Ben-Shemen in preparation for establishing new settlements at the initiative of youth movements that operated in the village. (Gerber, 2013). Their third roommate Mulla Cohen, was a native-born Sabra. His choice of Ben-Shemen stemmed from the fact that Ben-Shemen offered a strong affiliation between the school, the Kibbutz movements, and humanities that were an large part of the curriculum (Cohen, 2000).

Students who studied at Pardes-Hanna school claim that their choice was influenced by the high academic standards of the school especially in sciences, and from the fact that it's graduates passed matriculation examinations upon completing their studies (Ben-Meir, 1999).

A letter written by a student who had begun his studies in Pardes-Hanna, sheds additional light on the feelings of some of his contemporaries. (This student eventually graduated from Kadoorie.)

“Father, please do not demand that I become a learned person, a doctor etc. That was not what I was meant for. I know that you only mean well ... I found that this school does not suit me. There are two exceptional schools in Palestine; Kadoorie, a school with an immeasurably larger farm than in our school. There they have all sorts of agricultural tools ... You can only begin studies there at the age of 16. The fee is symbolic ... here you pay 150 £... Mikve is also a perfect school, but only at Kadoorie can one acquire an agricultural education in the general sense.”<sup>6</sup>

The acclaimed Israeli poet Haim Guri, studied at Kadoorie between 1939 and 1941. In his correspondence with the principal of the school (August 1953, Kadoorie Archives) he raised the question, “How did a mandatory government school become a nest for Hebrew life and lofty patriotism?” Guri commended the principal for supporting initiatives that could serve the national (Jewish) interest, and for educating students in that spirit.

To sum up this point, the ideal of working the land formed the ideological basis of the agricultural schools, and was part of the idea of transforming the society through a productive profession and returning the Jewish people back to the land. The initiators – the principals, the teachers and the students – were visionaries and believed in this way of life. They saw themselves as serving the community and saw their future in agricultural settlements in Palestine.

As noted, a significant percentage of the students belonged to the youth movements and studied at the agricultural schools. This immersed them in a sense of mission to become part of the “serving elite.” Studying at agricultural schools gave them the feeling that Zionism was in fact an unrepeatable part of the new world’s socio-Zionist movement which created identification between man and purpose. In this case studying at the agricultural schools meant following the ideal: agricultural training towards becoming farmers.

But in fact, less than 10% of the Jewish youth attending high school opted for agricultural education. This meant only 1% of the Jewish youth (Riger, 1945). Considering the aura associated with agricultural education and settlement at the time, one would expect a significant number of students in the agricultural schools, but in practice this did not happen. The high tuition costs and the need to help support the families, were among the causes for the small number of students in high schools and in agricultural schools. In fact, as time went on the members of the Jewish community encouraged their children to prefer other vocations and not agriculture. During the 1940s, there was a change in the trend, partly due to the increase

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<sup>6</sup> Meir Harcavi was later killed in action in the 1948 war (Kadoorie Archive).

in the number of students who arrived in Palestine just before and during the second world war as part of Youth Aliyah, for whom agricultural education was a solution.

Apart from studying agriculture, the students as a group joined the quasi military forces, first the *Hagana* and after the summer of 1941, the *Palmach*. Their process of maturing included: studying at boarding schools away from home in isolated areas, and military training was part of their mission.

As shown, the agricultural schools were tailored for boys. Young women's agricultural training began at Kinnereth farm in 1911, and after WWI several Working Women's farms were set up. An agricultural school for young women was established at Nahalal (Esdraelon valley) in 1923, but only during WWII did it become a girls' school and later a mixed school. One can say that agricultural education was also part of girls' ideology and identity. Women's training included the field of house-keeping and husbandry, gardening, dairy farming and professions suited to women's physical abilities Manor 1987; Carmel-Hakim 2007).

## Shaping Identity Via Agricultural Education

Despite the short period the students spent in school (two to three years) it was a significant period in their lives, during which their personalities were shaped, creating a strong sense of commitment to society and country (interviews 2003–2013). Surveying their integration into agriculture shows that more than 80% of graduates either settled in *Kibutzim* and *Moshavim*, became agricultural workers, or were employed in connected occupations. This leads to a conclusion that agricultural schools fulfilled their main purpose by creating a base core of knowledge in agriculture, and by training a generation of farmers and settlers. Moreover, in schools that emphasized theoretical and practical agricultural studies over general studies, the percentage of students who later worked in agriculture was higher. The meaning of this statistic is that the students who directed themselves to agricultural education came for a certain purpose, were devoted to it and upon completing their studies fulfilled the goal. Although, as presented, the number of students was relatively small, agricultural education had a constitutive significance for contemporaries, and the presence of graduates in fields of agricultural activity was significant. Moreover, follow-up of the graduates also reveals that a significant percentage of them also integrated into the ranks of the Israeli Defense Force's senior command in the first days of the state and continued later into political leadership as well.

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