

# *Archives in Literature: Chapter from* **We Were the Future—A Memoir of the Kibbutz**

---

**Yael Neeman**

*Translated from Hebrew by Sondra Silverston  
(Published 2016 by The Overlook Press, New York)*

## **CHAPTER 8**

**T**HE FOUNDERS OF OUR KIBBUTZ consisted of two main groups: the “Israelis” and the “Hungarians.”

Later came the “French,” the “South Americans,” and individuals or small groups from many other countries.

Apart from their different native countries and languages, the old-timers were different from each other in many other ways, and we didn’t know how they managed to get along. The adults lived their lives on a separate planet from ours.

The founders—the Israeli Meadow group and the Hungarian First of May group—first laid eyes on the rocky ground of Yehiam in 1946. The Israelis knew the language well, not just Hebrew, but the language of the land, of hiking trails, of the Israeli holidays. Back then, Zimi (from Hungary) wrote this:

When we discuss our approaching aliyah to join the kibbutz, Hebrew words appear here and there, but our main language remains Hungarian. And like our knowledge of the language of Israel, such is our knowledge of the realistic conditions.

We have only vague notions about everything. Those who came to organize us warn us again and again: the land apportioned to you is especially rough. You’ll find mostly rocks there, but no water [,,,) They ask us to get out and cover the last part of our journey... on foot. At that moment, we feel what it will be like on Yehiam. Everything is crumbling, both inside us and in the countryside. Rock-strewn hills, a horizon of dust and sparse bushes. Absolutely nothing. All the way to the place where we will have to put down roots. The Israelis, who have more direct contact with the life here, consider coming here a heroic act in a hostile environment. It is true that everything is sublime here. But right now—I don’t feel very enthusiastic.

The members of the Hungarian Workers group were not among the kibbutz founders. They joined Yehiam after the War of Independence, in 1948, after a year of training in Kibbutz Sha'ar HaAmakim and after the Israeli Meadow group and the Hungarian First of May group had already internalized the rules about Hebrew that were customary in Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim.

Members of The First of May locked Hungarian away in their hearts. They read only Hebrew books. And they so internalized the Hebrew regime that they spoke only Hebrew to each other. So did our parents. The only sentence in Hungarian that we sometimes heard in our biological homes during our afternoon visits to our parents was made up of two words that flew over our heads: "*Hoi diod*," which means, "Let it go," the short version of, "Come on, it doesn't matter. Don't fight with the child when he's only here for an hour and fifty minutes."

But members of the Workers group had a different attitude towards the obliteration of Hungarian. At bedtime in our room in the Narcissus group, Shlomit whispered (tenderly) to Ronen: "*Chilagom*," "*Daragom*" (my star, my dear one). The rest of the parents spoke Hebrew like sabras or had been speaking Hebrew a few years old with a Hungarian accent, but grammatically correct and without any terms of affection. When Shlomit and Edna, from the Workers group, were on night shift in the children's house, they sometimes left us French fries, which for us were like a Hungarian lullaby (food not at mealtime, and food that was merely a treat, were categorically forbidden). They put them in a bowl on the counter in our dining room, sometimes adding a letter: "To the Narcissus children, good night to you, from the night shift." Once they even drew a moon on the bottom of the letter. Those nights were our happiest. After the French fries we found on the counter, our dreams became as light as a white cloud, like a holiday.

The members of the Workers sometimes clapped their hands together, glanced up at the sky, sighed and said, "*Ishtenam burzulom*" ("Dear God!" And not only did God not exist in Hashomer Hatzair, but he was forbidden; he was an irrational, pagan obstacle to the remarkable abilities and productivity of the sublime human being. God was a vestige of the dark Middle Ages, held in even greater contempt than Hungarian or tender words and lullabies).

On Yehiam, where we grew up, we spoke correct Hebrew and pronounced names properly. We didn't know that during their first years on the kibbutz, the old-timers had warned and reprimanded the Workers over and over again on bulletin boards and in the kibbutz newsletter about speaking Hungarian:

Language is a major problem in your absorption into our kibbutz. In our last newsletter, we mentioned the effect of language on our children. Things have reached a point where a mother speaks Hungarian to her son. You must show your willingness and make an effort to restrain yourselves from speaking anything but Hebrew.

I have a request to make of you: please, speak Hebrew at least in public places! The Kibbutz Movement has always prided itself on the fact that new immigrants on kibbutzim learn to speak Hebrew quickly. The dining room and everywhere else is buzzing with Hungarian. Even the kitchen is run entirely in Hungarian.

Not all of us are "Hebrews." A large number of us come from abroad. We too came to a Hebrew community. We didn't know Hebrew, but we were still ashamed to speak a language other than Hebrew in the dining room, and if we didn't know how, we kept silent or at least whispered if that was the case.

**If you begin speaking Hebrew in public places, you will get used to the language and speak it in your rooms too!**

The kitchen buzzed with Hungarian, as the notice on the bulletin board said, because the kitchen workers sat on low stools peeling potatoes with no rotation in sight, and the women who cooked in enormous pots stood on their feet and never sat down.

When we, the Narcissus group, passed through the kitchen as part of our “help the *metapelet*” program, the workers called us over for a minute, quickly, so no one would see or hear them pampering us, and let us taste the food. And they also asked us if it was good, fishing for compliments because there were no compliments on our kibbutz. Applause at the end of a performance was frowned upon too; that was a bourgeois custom.

The women who worked in the kitchen and were rebuked for speaking Hungarian preferred to stay close to the food. They had been starving when they came from Europe and took greater pleasure in soup and bread than in people, whether they were socialists or not, whether they spoke Hebrew, French or Hungarian.



We thought that all the Hungarians in the world were older. All the ones we knew were older. And there was also a minority of parents from there who had survived and were even older than they were, grandparents. They were called Grandpa Vilmosch, Grandma Guttman, and so on. All the Hungarians were our parents, and the smallest minority, a handful of survivors—their parents.

Only once did we see a Hungarian girl our age. She was Idit’s cousin, who came for a surprise visit one summer. She wore an embroidered white blouse just like the blouses sent to us in packages from abroad that we would open and send straight to the *communa*, so they could be turned into travel clothes for all the children and come back to us too, when it was our turn to go to the kibbutz apartment on Sheinkin Street in Tel Aviv once every summer with our biological families.

The embroidered white blouse she was wearing was hers alone. She ate every meal with us around the small Formica tables and went to the pool with us every day. She was so pretty. The Hungarian she spoke sounded like a mistake to us, the standard deviation of a single case.



It wasn’t only language that separated the Hungarians from the French and the Israelis. The French were more talkative. They hadn’t come in a single large group after a bitter war that left them no choice, as the Hungarians had, but had made aliyah in organized groups of various ideological persuasions during the ‘60s and 70s after freely choosing to leave their homes and jobs in Paris and move to a place where they believed that everyone was working to fulfill a dream, but came up against the kibbutz. They wanted to establish a new, progressive society. As they saw it, they had been hurled to the ground and they believed that the Israelis, mainly the Hungarians, were the killers of their dreams.

The Hungarians said that, for the French, work clothes were merely a costume, while the French said that there was nothing worse than listening to a stupid Hungarian who thinks he’s smart.

The French sometimes wrote open letters in the kibbutz newsletter before they left. For example, in 1977, they wrote:

We had to be more than a little crazy to take ourselves out of a life that was organized (according to well-planned steps leading to a brilliant career) in the leftist style of the Jewish students in Paris, as well as in every other place in the Diaspora.

But the true test of our ideas has come.

With eyes closed, as if in a fog, we made aliyah to a kibbutz. All of you more or less know the rest of the story.

We had the feeling that the people asked themselves: what are these guys looking for here? A year passed and a few members of our group (out of twelve) decided that true realism is in the Diaspora.

Two years passed and another few left for all kinds of reasons, and with a bitter taste in their mouths.

Three years have passed, and the last remaining members are trying to find their way in this country. I take the liberty of mentioning these facts because of the sincerity of this experiment.

[...] Regarding the French group of Kibbutz Yehiam, I can now say that the experiment is ending in total failure.

Our group has not been assimilated into the kibbutz. There has been no integration between us, as “Jews from France,” and you, as Jews from Eastern Europe, the earliest members of the kibbutz and the young sabras, because of a mutual lack of communication and understanding.

And so, an entire French group left. Other French members remained.



Smoking on Yehiam was like an additional language. In addition to their faith, each in his own way, in a better world to come, the Hungarians and the French were also united by their profound love of cigarettes.

But again there were disagreements about all things related to the manner of smoking.

Hungarian smoking had no breaks, hesitations, rules or rests; it was work, and it seemed to come in place of speaking, a part of what they were working at.

The term passive smoking didn't exist in those days, but if it had, it couldn't have applied to the Hungarians and their children. We loved cigarette smoke and never waved our hands around to disperse it.

In our biological home, we were already allowed to smoke on Purim when we were in the first grade. When we were in the fifth grade, and still on Purim, our parents told us in our biological family—my three older brothers and me: “We know you'll smoke. Obviously you'll smoke your first cigarette with friends, but the second one you'll smoke at home; don't hide it.” They kept repeating that as if they were sitting impatiently on the edge of the couch, anxious to get past that inevitable moment, the moment we'd start smoking. The four of us really did smoke. The windows in our parents' house were never opened when we were smoking.

When a relative or friend of the Hungarians died, the death announcements were sometimes passed from one to the other in the following form: “Zili has stopped smoking.” And there were no misunderstandings. No Hungarian ever stopped smoking in those years unless he was dead.

Hungarians never put their head back when they're smoking, and they don't exhale slowly and luxuriously. They seem to only inhale, never exhale. The argument about whether to inhale or not could take place only in America, never in Hungary.

The inhaling was deep and full of longing—longing for the next puff, that is, the next cigarette that was on its way right now and would lead to the next pack. Because they inhaled so deeply and for so long, Hungarians would smoke a cigarette in two-thirds or, in some cases, even half the time it would take other smokers, whether they were French, Israeli, South American or anything else.

Hungarian smoking had other striking characteristics apart from its intensity: there was no place where smoking was inappropriate, and going from one place to another did not mean taking a break from smoking. On the contrary. After all, it was a waste of time not to smoke when you have to go somewhere. And the expression “cigarette break” had no meaning for them because they had no breaks from work, or from anything else, and also because they smoked constantly and continuously, lighting one cigarette with the butt of another.

Already during the first kibbutz meetings in November 1946, the Israelis pleaded to issue regulations about smoking restrictions in various places, including during the meetings themselves. The Hungarians objected firmly to regulating or restricting smoking in any way. When the Israelis asked for smoking to be permitted only in open areas, at least, my father said, as recorded in the minutes: “No one has ever died from smoking, but millions have died from the cold.”

For fifty-six years, a file was left sealed in the Yehiam archives. Yaakov Carmi's file. He was killed in January 1948, in the War of Independence, during the first, fierce attack on Yehiam, which also killed three others. He was buried under his name, but no one knew his true identity or his family. People on the kibbutz had barely gotten the chance to get to know him because he was killed a very short time after he came there.

In 2004, a man arrived suddenly from Tel Aviv asking for details about him. The only thing the old-timers could recall after straining their memories to provide a few answers for the man who had been searching for him for fifty-six years, was that he had been older than most of them and even a worse chain smoker than the other Hungarian chain smokers. His archived file contained only one letter he had received from his sister in Hungary ten days before he was killed. There was no address on it.

To the man from Tel Aviv who was searching for him, they gave the letter that had been left in the file, the letter that had come for the Hungarian smoker whom no one on Yehiam had a chance to get to know, the letter that came such a short time after he arrived on Kibbutz Yehiam from the war in Hungary, and ten days before he was killed, a soldier on the southern post of the fortress, by a mortar shell in a battle that went on for six straight hours.



During the long siege of Yehiam, the members sent the other half of the kibbutz (which was still in Kiryat Haim with the children) Morse Code messages listing the supplies they needed.

After the list of vital supplies was decoded, they were airdropped from the skies over Yehiam. Ezer Weizman was one of the pilots who airdropped those supplies. Every day, a flashlight signaled the Kirya: “Send cigarettes urgently.” Sometimes, the joy after the airdrops turned into annoyance and disappointment, like on the day the plane rained candy over Yehiam, but no cigarettes. That evening, they learned that a mistake in deciphering the Morse Code message had

led to the bitter substitution of candy for cigarettes because in Hebrew, the words are so similar (candy is *sucariot* and cigarettes is *sigariot*).

Two weeks before the disaster of the convoy that was attacked on the way to Yehiam in March 1948, the members trapped in the fortress had completely run out of cigarettes. When the war ended, the commander there, Zvi Gershon, wrote about that:

I don't smoke. But for some reason, I had collected about two hundred cigarettes. I used that stockpile to help the smokers who were suffering the most, handing out half a cigarette a day. As members of Hashomer Hatzair, many of us didn't smoke, and we were shocked to see how desperately the smokers needed a cigarette.

The lack of cigarettes made them jumpy, and they launched a search for something they could smoke. They foraged for butts that had been tossed casually away during times of "plenty." Investigation revealed that the members who were staying inside in the sheds flicked their cigarette butts through the window at the stone fences that enclosed the small buildings. That was a very significant discovery. They immediately took apart the fences, pulled out the cigarette butts, removed the little tobacco that was left, rolled new cigarettes and smoked to their heart's content.

When the plane appeared overhead, the smokers would look at it, breathless with anticipation. I remember one of the professional smokers running after the parachute and opening it, and when he saw that it contained only bread, he kicked it furiously.

That was when I began using my hidden treasure of cigarettes to encourage people to go out on patrol. I gave out "prizes"—half a cigarette before patrol and half afterwards. The smokers would fight over the right to go out on patrol... And they also tried to find substitutes—smoking dry leaves. My Morse Code messages and demands to send cigarettes were to no avail, and the people suffered terribly.

Some of us asked ourselves if the day would ever come again when a member could tap his comrade on the shoulder and say simply, "Give me a cigarette."

Zvi Gershon, who was both wartime commander on Yehiam and the inventor of agricultural machines and techniques in peacetime, hit the nail on the head in describing the professional smokers.

Because with all that the Hungarian smokers had in common, they fell into different categories. The categories of smokers cut across lines dividing urban from rural, members of The First of May from member of the Workers, touching only on the number of cigarettes the smokers consumed. Papa, my mother, Agi, Esther N., Yuda B. were all in the same category: heavy, not fussy Hungarian smokers who went through about three packs a day. They weren't choosy about the kind of cigarette, and even if they did prefer a particular brand, they always smoked what was available. One cigarette was stuck in their mouth and another waited its turn behind their ear or in their hand, or had been placed on a chair beside them. They lit the cigarettes with matches, not lighters. There were also more stylized Hungarian smokers, but only for the sacrosanct purpose of making people laugh, and they would exhale the smoke through their ears, like Zambo.

The very best, in a league all their own, were the Szandors. Flawless professionals. The Szandors were master craftsmen of smoking. All the ash of their cigarettes remained hanging in one piece and never broke in the middle. The phrase "flick your ashes" had no meaning for them.

Even while they were still alive, we called cigarette ash “szandor” in their honor, saying things like “Don’t drop your szandor on the floor, here’s a szandortray.” He was very tall, an ever-present stocking cap on his head, and she was very small. The identical way they smoked made it seem as if there were many more than two of them, as if they were an entire troupe and not just a couple.

Miriam Szandor, in addition to her regular job, ironed and folded laundry for soldiers on Saturdays. And even when both hands were full of work, the eternal cigarette was stuck in her mouth. Avraham Szandor had the same smoking technique. The cigarettes in their mouths never went out, not even for a second, as they did for every other smoker. And they inhaled constantly. We used to watch them as if they were magicians. Even when our eyes were glued to them and we concentrated, we never managed to see the moment when they switched from one cigarette to another.

The only time Szandor’s szandor fell was when the famous shot blasted into the Szandors’ room. A stray bullet flew through one window and out the other, and they say it hit Szandor’s szandor on the way, but apart from that, nothing happened. Inquiries were made, however, about who fired the shot and why. But about the fact that there had been a stray bullet, there was no disagreement. The matter was closed.



Perhaps because of the art of smoking that characterized Yehiam, the most popular branch on the kibbutz was tobacco.

When they first began growing tobacco, in 1953, it was part of the vegetable garden, which is why it was located on the kibbutz itself and not far away in the fields. That was still before they established the prestigious and productive branches: the citrus groves and the bananas.

The beginning was very difficult; the tobacco wasn’t planted properly and mistakes were made in the drying sheds. Diuri, from the Hungarian Workers group, who was in charge of the tobacco growing, thought they should dry the first-year leaves in an open area and close down the tobacco branch. But supervisors from the industrial department of the Agriculture Ministry said that the tobacco plants in Yehiam were uncommonly beautiful and convinced him to continue. After a period of trial and error, Yehiam became the only kibbutz to succeed in growing Virginia tobacco. Kibbutzim that tried to grow it in other areas failed. For a variety of reasons related to the quality of the soil and its salinity, the tobacco that grew there did not burn when put to the test.

Our tobacco world was shrouded in magic and mystery. Its stars were the planting fields, the “camel,” a machine two-and-a-half meters high invented by Zvi Gershon for spraying and picking tobacco—and rituals that included tying the tobacco leaves on long poles and climbing the walls of the drying sheds to hang them. When the drying sheds were opened, the aroma of tobacco spread throughout the kibbutz like Hungarian perfume.

With the years, the Virginia tobacco grown on Yehiam made an excellent name for itself and Zerah Gahal, the national tobacco king from Dubek, the city cigarette factory, would sometimes come to the kibbutz, smell the tobacco, stroke the leaves, impressed by its quality.

The parents and children of the members, the *mossadnikim*, volunteers and group members worked with tobacco. It was everyone’s favorite place to work. On days when there were

fierce hail storms and the workers couldn't go out into the fields, they came to help sort and pack tobacco leaves in the sheds.



The tobacco branch closed down in 1971 and we, the Narcissus children, grew up in the shadow of the closing and never had the chance to work there. When we passed the old-timers walking up or down the narrow and steep stone sidewalks, we said hello to all of them. That's what we were taught—a kind of bourgeois-European custom that had survived the New Child regulations.

When we bumped into Diuri, our groupmate Hagit's father, we knew that they said he had never recovered from the kibbutz meeting where it had been decided to stop growing tobacco, which despite the certificates of excellence it received every year, was no longer profitable. Since the tobacco branch had been closed down, Diuri's gentle smile was marred by a small cloud of sadness that went with him everywhere, like a column of smoke. When we met him on the sidewalks, we saw the tobacco sheds in our mind's eye.

We said good morning or good evening to him and nodded in mute condolence. After all, we were children and couldn't vote at the kibbutz meeting to overturn the decision to stop growing tobacco.

Leaving sadness behind, we ran down to the field to play prisoners or dodge ball, or up to the reservoir pool to sail on the rafts we'd built for ourselves from boards. A