

German Christian Communal-Settlement Activities in and around Zichron Yaakov, Israel, 1963–2004

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General Introduction¹

Past Christian Agricultural Settlement in Palestine

From the middle of the nineteenth century the Holy Land/Palestine became a lode stone for both Christian and Jewish rural and urban settlers. Many of the pioneering Christian groups such as the Family GROBSTEINBECK German Settlement in Artas and Jaffa (1849–1858), CLORINDA MINOR’s American Colony at Artas and Jaffa (1849–1855), ADAM’s American Colony in Jaffa (1866–1867), and the German Templers (1868–1948) were motivated by religious beliefs. Some of the Christian settlement efforts in Palestine were short lived whereas others such as the German Templers and the American-Swedish religious commune of the American Colony in Jerusalem were successful and persisted for more than half a century. This success was remarkable in light of the harsh physical conditions and the hostility of the governing regimes and indigenous populations.

Six settlements were established by the German Templers in Palestine during the last fifty years of Ottoman rule: Haifa, Jaffa, Saron, and Jerusalem in the first wave (1868–1873) and Wilhelma, Bethlehem in the Galilee, in the second (1902–1906). Waldheim, a colony of descendents of the Templers called “Kirchler”??, was established 1907. In 1914, before the outbreak of WWI, their combined population numbered between 1,800–2,200 persons and “... reached a level of development unparalleled in Palestine,” while “in planning, beauty and organization, they had no equal in the country”.² Though they were not alone in this endeavor, the Templers played an important role in the introduction of technological innovation into Palestine in many spheres, the most important being agriculture, industry, architecture, and construction.³

Christian Settlement in the State of Israel

The process of settlement of small Christian groups in Palestine/Israel continued during the twentieth century. There are numerous published reports on this settlement phenomenon in the Holy Land/Palestine in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it is difficult to find reference in the research literature to Christian settlement

¹ The authors wish to thank the Bethel Elder, Mr. GERHARD STREILE, Mr. AMIR FABIAN of Sichron Yaakov, the “Gidonim Association for the Development of Tourism” in Sichron Yaakov (Mrs. CARMELA BEN MOSHE and especially Mrs. ESTHER ROTEM), and Mrs. ALVIT FREUND of the Sichron Yaakov Local Council, for their generous help with our study.

² CARMEL 1975, S. 445.

³ KARK & THALMANN 2003; [EISLER/HAAG/HOLTZ 2003](#);

during the period of British Mandatory rule in Palestine (1918–1948) or that of the State of Israel (1948 onwards).

Noteworthy among the settlements established in the State of Israel, some of which were religious communes, are the Baptist Village in the Sharon region in central Israel in 1959, populated mainly by Americans; the *moshav* (a communal cooperative settlement) of Nes Ammim in the Galilee, established by a Christian Association from Zurich in 1964 and populated mainly by Dutch settlers; Yad Hashmona, a *moshav* in the Judean Hills founded by Christian volunteers from Finland in 1974; and two religious groups from Germany, members of the EMMA BERGER Society (Bethel – The House of God) and Maon Issachar (The Residence of Issachar) that settled from 1963 onwards in Zichron Yaakov (a Jewish colony established in 1882 as an independent smallholders agricultural settlement). The settlement history, ideology, activity, and material culture of the two German groups will be the topic of our paper. We will elaborate on the religious ideology of the two groups in a future study.

The German Settlement in Sichron Yaakov

During the year of 1932 a lively and pretty twelve year old with long braided hair faithfully attended her Sunday school lessons in the growing village of Gerstetten on the Swabian Alb in southern Germany. More than one hundred children came to these meetings in the Evangelical Church of Gerstetten, called Eben-Ezer (a biblical place-name; cf. 1 Sam. 5:1). The girl's name was EMMA BERGER (1919–1984). Thirty years later, EMMA BERGER would call one of her houses in Sichron Yaakov, Eben-Ezer. One wonders what was taught in these Sunday school classes so many years ago – and if perhaps already then the seed had been sown in the heart of little EMMA which would prompt her many years later to build her own Eben-Ezer and Beth-El (literally, “the house of the Lord”; related to JACOB's dream, cf. Gen. 28:19) in far-away Israel. The following pages will present evidence of what grew out of the seed of love for the biblical narratives and Israel that was planted into the lives of members of two small religious groups in Swabia: *Bethel Society* and *Maon Issachar* (the Residence of ISSACHAR – one of the twelve Tribes of Israel).

I. Bethel Society (BS)

The Bethel Society, or BERGER Society, named after its founder EMMA BERGER, has grown since 1958 from a group of small home-fellowships into an organization with approximately 1500 members that established and developed a “kibbutz” (a communal settlement organized along collectivist principles) in Sichron Yaakov, Israel with about three dozen homes for families, about a dozen community buildings, a huge factory, a farm, and an ABC (Atomic, Bacteriological and Chemical) shelter. According to one of their Elders, today they number about 500 persons – 350 adults and 150 children. Having been given the status of temporary residents or tourists for some thirty years, it was difficult for BS members to acquire the status of permanent residents in Israel. Only a few families were able to remain in the country on a long-term basis. In May 2004, in a first step taken by the Ministry of the Interior, fourteen of the group's members were [granted permanent residency status](#) in Israel, in recognition of their positive contribution to the security and economy of the State of Israel.⁴ This status does not enable them to vote for the Israeli Knesset, but they do have the franchise for municipal elections.⁵

⁴ STREILE 2004

⁵ RATNET 2004; PAYSACHOV, 2004

History

The founder and director of Bethel Society until her death in 1984 was EMMA BERGER. Financial manager until her death, and leader of the movement from 1984 to 1995, was ELSA BERGER (1918–1993), EMMA’s sister.⁶

Beginnings in Germany

EMMA BERGER was born on 21 Dec. 1919 in Gerstetten/Alb, in the south of Germany. Her father, JOHANNES BERGER (–), worked in the local sawmill (Obersäger). Her mother, BARBARA BERGER (–), née VEILE, was a housewife and gave birth to fourteen children, two of whom died. The BERGER family had come to the Swabian Alb with the Salzburg emigrants from Austria at the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁷ It is interesting to note that yet another of the Salzburg emigrants' descendants came to the Holy Land via the Swabian Alb. This was none other than the old Patriarch JOHANN LUDWIG SCHNELLER (1820–1896). The Salzburg emigrants identified strongly with the People of Israel, their sufferings, and especially their exodus:⁸ This may have been one of the underlying reasons for their subsequent coming to the Holy Land.

EMMA was raised in the Protestant church (Evangelische Gemeinschaft) and trained in the Diakonissenanstalt Bethesda (another name that will show up again later on in Sichron Yaakov) in Wuppertal-Elberfeld to become an unsalaried Deaconess-Sister.⁹ In 1946, while working near X-rays, she absorbed what was thought to be a lethal dose of radiation, “and the doctors gave me up as lost”. She sought solace in intensive study of her beloved Bible and came to believe that “if I would serve God faithfully, he could cure me, and I was privileged with a miraculous cure”.¹⁰ During the time of her illness she had promised to dedicate her life to God's service if she recovered and became thus a sort of a “nun without a cloister” after her recovery.¹¹ Reports of her miraculous cure spread throughout Württemberg.¹² EMMA and her sister ELSA, who had not been particularly religious up to this point in her life, thus started home fellowships in various places, prompted by a special call of God. Of great importance in these meetings was the laying on of hands, prophecy, and a deep feeling of relatedness to Israel. Home fellowships were established in her hometown Gerstetten – even today a fellowship comprising about thirty members meets every Sunday at the house of her sister KLARA SEIBOLD (–) – and in Korntal, which would become the center of the group later on.¹³ Today, outside of Israel there are meetings being held in Germany in Gerstetten, Korntal, Zaberfeld, Schönaich, Bernhausen, Denkendorf, Schwabach, and also in Canada, Ghana, and Holland.

In 1958, with the help of friends it was possible to establish a center in Korntal, where EMMA had been working for many years. All work was performed by members of the group who were able to finish the project without incurring any debts. The house was called Bethany, another biblical name that we will encounter again one decade later in Sichron

⁶ ELSA BERGER was born on May 13, 1918. She grew up in Gerstetten and worked there in a coffee house and later in a factory that produced calculating-machines (Rechenmaschinen), called “Walter”. It was probably during that time that she developed her aptitude for financial matters.

⁷ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 21–22.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 15–16. About the SCHNELLEERS From Salzburg see the article of HERMANN EHMER in this Vol.

⁹ FRIEDLER 1980.

¹⁰ **Ebd. Page ?????**

¹¹ SOFER 1977.

¹² FRIEDLER 1980.

¹³ SCHMIDGALL, 1993, p. 24–25.

Yaakov. This modus operandi would later become a trademark of the group in Israel. They built most of their houses themselves and without incurring debts.

After BS was established in Germany in 1958 they began to settle in Israel since 1963. Their settlement in Sichron Yaakov and its surroundings is best laid out in five phases.

Phase 1: Peaceful settlement in Israel (1963–1967)

Some time after the group was established in their new center in Korntal, near Stuttgart, they made contact with the German offices of Israeli Youth Aliyah, an organization which brings Jewish youth to Israel and helps them become absorbed in Israeli society. In 1961 the Rabbi of Stuttgart introduced the representative of Youth Aliyah in Germany, Mrs. ELSA LEVI (–), to the BERGER group during her fund-raising drive in Germany.¹⁴ The group became the main German supporter of Youth Aliyah with donations amounting to about DM10,000 annually.¹⁵ Thus it was only natural that their first contacts with Israel were made through Youth Aliyah, which had invited them to come and visit Israel.

On 8 May 1963, two of the brothers (G. ULMER and R. BAYER) disembarked in Haifa and stayed in Shavei Zion. During their visit, they expressed their interest in buying some property for a guest-house for the use of their members when visiting Israel¹⁶. Miss BERGER's contacts with Youth Aliyah suggested several non-urban communities where it might be possible to find private land for sale and would be suitable as tourist resorts, places like Nahariah, Shavei Zion, Sichron Yaakov, Gedera, and the like. During their stay in Shavei Zion the two emissaries heard of an unfinished house in Sichron Yaakov that was for sale; it was bought in June and registered in August – after having been inspected by the sisters EMMA and ELSA BERGER, who came to visit in June and gave their personal blessings to the project. The group turned the structure into a guest-house which they called “Beit Zion”¹⁷. YAAKOV LEVI, then mayor of Sichron Yaakov, gave his blessing to the venture, but was later surprised to learn that the property had been purchased for Miss BERGER.¹⁸ “The people supported us because we were to open a guest-house, which would bring tourists to the region,” recalled one of the former members.¹⁹

What motivated EMMA BERGER and her group to settle in Sichron Yaakov? Because of their love for Israel, it was important for the group to have a guest-house in Israel for its members so they could visit the country. By 1987, 10,000 had made such a visit.²⁰ The members of the group identify deeply with Israel and its fate. “We feel that we are all of the seed of Abraham, and an invisible hand has led us to Israel”, said EMMA BERGER, expressing the over-all feeling of the group.²¹

Another reason for the coming of the BS to Israel is of an eschatological nature. It is part of their teaching that Jesus would soon return for the rapture (Jesus’ return preceding his Second Coming) in the middle of the seven-year period preceding the tribulation.²² Since 1963 it was especially emphasized by Emma Berger that the rapture of the Church would be in Israel and that anyone wanting to have a part in it consequently needed to be there.

¹⁴ Their first visit to Israel, however, was not in 1962, as claimed by Canaan, but in 1963 CANAAN 1971B.

¹⁵ REIMER 1976, p. 59.

¹⁶ SCHMIDGALL, 1993, p. 29–30.

¹⁷ SOFER 1977.

¹⁸ CANAAN 1971B.

¹⁹ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 32.

²⁰ FRIEDLER 1987.

²¹ quoted by LOTH 1980, p. 126.

²² BS thus ascribes to a mid-tribulationist theology. See STREILE 1993.

Once a base had been established the group began to expand rapidly. Within six months they bought a second building, a small rest-house in town, called Sarepta Soon, plane loads of German tourists began arriving on regular visits. At first, the residents of Sichron Yaakov were happy to see this extra asset to their local tourism. There was one demonstration against them, but apart from that the group was well received and the residents were helpful and courteous. Whereas only a few houses were built during the first few years, much land had already been bought in Sichron Yaakov (mainly in HaShaqed Street) for further expansion.²³

In Pardes Hanna, BS bought 60 dunams (1 metric dunam equals 1000 sq. meters) of orchards²⁴ Only in 1967, when the group bought nine dunams of land near the rest-house, a committee of concerned citizens made an unsuccessful attempt to block the purchase by soliciting funds from the Jewish National Fund.²⁵ But real trouble would only begin one year later, when the group bought the hotel of DORA SCHWARTZ (-).

Phase 2: Years of Conflict (1968–1974)

In 1968, Mrs. DORA SCHWARTZ retired and put her well-known vegetarian pension up for sale. After looking unsuccessfully for a Jewish buyer for over a year, she finally sold the building and the spacious grounds of the resort to EMMA BERGER for IL250,000.²⁶ The pension was to be used for members of the group visiting Israel from Canada, Switzerland, Holland, Sweden, Hungary, Rumania, and Germany.²⁷ The purchase of such a prestigious building by the BERGER Society annoyed the citizens of Sichron Yaakov; however, they would not have begun by themselves so fierce a conflict as occurred in that city in the years to follow. Only when the religious community heard about the German group in Sichron Yaakov that had bought land and was involved in missionary activities did BS begin to encounter trouble. The religious community of Pardes Hanna and the surrounding area took upon itself to counteract the expansion of the BERGER group and its activities. In the end, the struggle over the DORA SCHWARTZ Pension actually became one of the reasons for the settlement of a religious community in Sichron Yaakov, thus adding Jewish fundamentalism to Christian fundamentalism there. The orthodox community settled right next to the new houses of BS in Tamar and Hazon Ish Streets in order to counteract their further expansion.²⁸

What caused Orthodox Jews and the community of Sichron Yaakov at large to react so violently against the BERGER Society and eventually settle in Sichron Yaakov as a reaction to its activities?²⁹ First of all was the fear of missionary activities,³⁰ second, the fact that they still remembered the settlement efforts of similar groups such as the Templers and their

²³ The second house was Sarepta and not Bethesda, as mentioned by Sofer. SOFER 1977.

²⁴ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 35

²⁵ SOFER 1977, also mentions at this point the fact that “one of the ‘concerned citizens’ later sold property of his own to the group”.

²⁶ ARDON 1973.

²⁷ JERUSALEM POST, 1972.

²⁸ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 39.

²⁹ In violent demonstrations organized by the religious community, the damage done to BS buildings and property exceeded tens of thousands of Shekels; see: SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 40; cf. also JERUSALEM POST 1981.

³⁰ In interviews conducted in Spring 1993, both O. ROSENZWEIG of Sichron YAAKOV and Mr. SEFER of Binyamina verified that after these events there were no more missionary activities conducted by members of BS.

nationalistic activities³¹, and third, the concern that the Jewish character of the town would be destroyed, because BS settled in various locations right in the middle of town.³²

Under pressure from the Orthodox community, the local council contested the sale of the DORA SCHWARTZ property in the Haifa Magistrate's Court but the claim was rejected by the court.³³ The local council appealed to the Supreme Court in Jerusalem which upheld the previous verdict on 19 July 1972.³⁴

The local council also failed to issue an expropriation order and regain the property via the administrative route. In January 1970, the local council tried to gain entry to the property by force and the police were called in to thwart the attempt.³⁵ On 19 September 1973, the Supreme Court also declared the local council town planning scheme invalid.³⁶ Justice ETZIONI concluded that "There is no provision in our law which is against the acquisition of property by German or any foreign nationals, or against missionary activities". An attempt of the local council to cancel the tax clearance of the property also failed. On 28 May 1974 the Supreme Court ordered the council to refund to Mrs. SCHWARTZ IL14,842 together with 11 percent annual interest. Thus ended a long series of court battles by the Sichron Yaakov local council against BERGER and SCHWARTZ; it is believed that the total court costs incurred by the local council in its opposition to the sale of the DORA SCHWARTZ property came to more than IL100,000.³⁷

During this time of conflict, BS experienced its greatest expansion. In addition to the DORA SCHWARTZ property, more land was bought in the center of Sichron Yaakov and in the industrial area on which later its factory building was erected. A farm with several hundred dunams of land was bought in Binyamina, another orchard measuring over a hundred dunams was added to the property in Pardes Hanna, and in Haifa two more houses were acquired in the Bat Galim area.³⁸

Phase 3: Decade of Expansion (1975–1984)

Strangely enough, BS expanded in spite of the conflict with the religious community and the Sichron Yaakov local council in the early 1970s. Expansion also continued during the decade following the conflict and up to the death of EMMA BERGER. In Binyamina, the farm was enlarged and over half a dozen more houses were built. In Sichron Yaakov itself about ten houses were built and the factory was expanded. During this decade also, development of the ABC-filter began.³⁹

In the early 1980s, BS also attempted to begin a new settlement in the Druze and Arab village of Isafiya on Mt. Carmel. A family of fifteen Hungarian-Canadians from their Canadian affiliates tried to settle there in 1981. ALEXANDER KURUCZ, head of the family, strongly opposed deportation from the country on the grounds that the family members did not have the proper visas and were suspected of having carried out missionary activities. "We

³¹ REIMER 1976, p. 60; cf. BALKE, 2001. see also BALKE in this vol.

³² LOTH, 1980, p. 126

³³ JERUSALEM POST 1971.

³⁴ ARDON 1972.

³⁵ JERUSALEM POST 1971.

³⁶ LANKIN 1973.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 46; STREILE 2004.

³⁹ A. FUCHS, quoted in BAR 1991.

are not missionaries”, he said, and “we only want to farm this land, bring tourists and wait for the Messiah, whose coming we believe to be imminent”.⁴⁰

Moreover EMMA BERGER had been “waiting for His coming”, and many in the community actually believed that she would never fall ill and would not die till the occurrence of the rapture.⁴¹ When she passed away in Sichron Yaakov on Sunday, 14 October 1984, after having suffered from intestinal trouble, many of her followers were stunned. She was buried in the Protestant cemetery in Haifa. The funeral was attended by about 300 mourners, mostly sect members and Israeli business contacts. The German Embassy was represented by its honorary consul in Haifa, ILSE KIESLER.⁴²

Phase 4: Decade of Consolidation (1984 –1993)

After the death of EMMA BERGER, her sister ELSA was asked to be the “Mother of the Community”.⁴³ In financial matters, she had been the leader of the community from its inception. It seems, however, that now, when her authority was extended not only over financial but also spiritual matters, this was not so well received by all members of the community. Thus, in the following summer of 1985 several families and some individuals left the community in Israel, among them two Elders. At the same time a process of democratization began, as a result of which leadership now rests more on the shoulders of the Elders and no longer on just one charismatic leader. The main leaders during this period, in addition to ELSA BERGER, were A. FUCHS and G. STREILE. During this last decade the work was consolidated. Only a few more buildings went up in Binyamina and Sichron Yaakov, including the new school in Phinlis Road and three more factory halls. This period came to an end with the death of ELSA BERGER on Monday, 9 August 1993.

Phase 5: Decade of Openness (1993 –2004)

After the death of ELSA BERGER the process of democratization was continued and the Elders took full charge of BS. The presiding group of Elders is composed of seven spiritual Elders (e.g., FUCHS) and seven administrative Elders (e.g., STREILE), some of them serving simultaneously on both committees, though the main power continues to lie with the spiritual Elders.

BS is still expanding and new houses are being built both in Sichron Yaakov–South (Hazon Ish Street) and Binyamina (Mesillah Road). Plans are also on the way for expansion in Sichron Yaakov–East, the city’s industrial area. The community acceded to two requests of the local political leadership: decentralization (establishing a new kibbutz at the foot of the Golan Heights) and employment of local workers (during the Second Gulf War).

Ideology

The Bethel Society is best described as an Evangelical, Pentecostal holiness group, with a strong emphasis on eschatology, love for Israel, divine healing, and communal living. We shall briefly relate to its main religious characteristics and principles.

Evangelical: Bethel Society is Evangelical in that it subscribes to a trinitarian theology with a high view of Scripture and a strong emphasis on personal salvation (“being born

⁴⁰ FRIEDLER 1981.

⁴¹ REIMER / N.N., 1990, p. 50.

⁴² FRIEDLER 1984.

⁴³ REIMER / N.N. 1990, p. 50.

again”). Adult baptism by immersion is practiced, and BS members are encouraged to leave the traditional churches.⁴⁴

Pentecostal: The “Pfingstjubiläum”-songbook of the Bethel Society is the standard worship hymnal of most German Pentecostal groups since 1911. The services of the BERGER group, however, are much less enthusiastic than a typical Pentecostal service. It is more reminiscent of worship among pietistic circles. Prophecies and visions play an important role during the services. Prophecies are usually by the leaders, and in particular EMMA and ELSA BERGER. Many times the prophecies were used, especially by the sisters, to point out “sins” in the lives of the believers⁴⁵

Holiness movement: With the BERGER group, much emphasis is placed on the aspect of holiness in the community and the lives of the individuals. The children of the members of the community participate in “Bible courses”, the main emphasis of which is to detect “sin” and be cleansed of it by means of confession and prayer.⁴⁶ Both in Israel and Germany it is relatively simple to spot the members of the group because of their modest dress, short and old fashioned hair cuts for men, and long bobbed and stuck up hair for women.

Eschatology: BS teaches a typical Evangelical premillennialist theology, that places the rapture at the beginning of the tribulation. The immediacy of the rapture was, however, overemphasized at times. In 1963 EMMA BERGER had begun to teach that the “saints” had to be assembled in Israel for the rapture. Not all members of the group shared this conviction, but those who did waited excitedly for the “Exodus to Israel”.⁴⁷ Since the death of EMMA BERGER in 1984, the strong emphasis on the immediacy of the rapture has slightly subsided.

Love for Israel: Like many other Evangelical groups, from its inception BS held a great love for the Land and the People of Israel. Before they settled in Israel its members had already paid some of their tithe to the German office of Youth Aliyah.⁴⁸ With the beginning of their settlement in Sichron Yaakov this relationship was intensified. Particularly in Israel, BS has chosen to refrain from all missionary activities after some negative encounters with members of the Orthodox religious community. The group sees its presence in Israel as a ministry of intercession and reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18ff.). Daily prayer for the Land and help – especially in times of crises, like wars – are the only activities of the group at this point. There is, however, the hope that at the End of Days the Messiah will come to the Land for the rapture of the saints and the salvation of the Jewish nation.⁴⁹

Divine Healing: According to BS, the victory of Jesus over disease can already be appropriated now. One ex-member asserts that “divine healings have actually happened”.⁵⁰ Should someone not have been healed, however, this was interpreted as a lack of faith on the part of the sick person. Members who went to consult a physician were frowned upon. Only after the sickness and death of Emma Berger in 1984 were two allowances for sicknesses conceded: sickness may to a certain extent have an educational function or serve as chastisement.

Communal Life: BS is run like a kibbutz. Families eat breakfast and supper in their homes. For lunch, however, everyone comes together in the community center. Since the death of EMMA BERGER, ELSA BERGER and a group of Elders were responsible for the affairs of the

⁴⁴ REIMER 1989, p. 120.

⁴⁵ REIMER / N.N. 1990, p. 47.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ REIMER 1976, p. 59.

⁴⁹ STREILE 1993.

⁵⁰ REIMER / N.N. 1990, p. 48.

society. All financial matters since the beginning of the settlement were under the oversight of ELSA BERGER. Members were informed concerning financial transactions by ELSA “by way of testimony”, a practice that at times caused people to doubt her financial integrity.⁵¹

Material Culture

The material culture of Bethel Society in Israel is best described under the following headings: homes, community buildings, industrial centers, and agricultural plants. All property is registered in Israel under the name of the society. Property of members living abroad (Germany, Ghana, Canada, Holland, Hungary, Rumania, and Switzerland) is private. Members from abroad that join the Bethel Society in Israel transfer all their assets to the Society. Several of the members who joined had sold everything in Germany and usually would bring with them about DM 400,000–800,000.⁵² This is the main reason for the Society’s prosperity. Anyone wishing to leave BS later on does not get back the assets he had earlier made over to the Society. Members from abroad pay tithes and visit Israel in order to help to build up the Bethel Society. Children of members who are not “believers” may inherit their parents who are members of the Society. All extra assets are to be used to build up the ministry in Israel. “Many a house was not built in Germany because the money was needed to build houses for the Society in Israel”, is how Dr. REIMER summarizes the secret of the Society’s success and prosperity in Israel.⁵³

A society with assets of over one hundred million dollars cannot allow itself to have a less than perfect record on its financial transactions. If this principle is not observed, it is only natural that rumors will develop and doubts concerning the trustworthiness of the organization will spring up. At first, all assets were registered in the name of EMMA BERGER, but were always considered to be a “common possession” of all the community members.⁵⁴ Today all assets are registered in the name of the Bethel Society⁵⁵ and should the Society disband, everything will be bequeathed to the State of Israel.⁵⁶ The real estate assets of the commune in Israel are as follows:

Homes: The homes, which are very well kept, are usually resided in by only one family or one person who take care of the house and garden. Most of the homes carry a biblical name. Families and individuals eat breakfast and supper in their homes. In a detailed field study conducted eleven years ago we documented thirty three houses of the Bethel Society in Sichron Yaakov and in Binyamina.

Community Buildings / Dining Hall: The main meal is eaten together in Bethel, the community center. Workers commute from the factory to the dining hall in their own buses. BS produces bread, noodles, and various other food items in its own bakery. Meat, milk, eggs, vegetables, and fruit come from their own farm in Binyamina.

Religious centers: Of greatest importance for the community are the religious services conducted in the spacious central building of the community, called Bethel. The main convocation is held on Saturday in order to coincide with the local work schedule.⁵⁷ There are also weekday services, usually convened on Wednesday afternoons. During the years in

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 16; STREILE 2004, refused to comment on this issue.

⁵³ REIMER 1989, p. 50.

⁵⁴ REIMER 1976, p. 60.

⁵⁵ STREILE 1993.

⁵⁶ LOTH 1980, p. 126.

⁵⁷ CANAAN 1971A.

which BS was led by the two BERGER sisters, the “Mother of the Community” would reside in the beautiful community center.

Guest-Houses: The community has three guest-houses which are used for BS visitors: “Beit Zion”, “Sarepta”, and “Bethel” which is used not only as a religious and community center but also as a guest house. It is interesting to note that the oldest group of houses have basically stayed faithful to their original function. Since 1963 more than 10,000 visitors have come to Sichron Yaakov from Germany, Canada, Holland, Ghana, Switzerland, Sweden, and many other countries.⁵⁸

ABC-Shelter: After Bethel had grown so greatly, the municipality required BS to build a shelter in close proximity to it. Right next to Bethel we thus have today a spacious 250-person shelter with walls 40 cm thick. The shelter was built during the mid-1980s, and since at that time BS had already developed its ABC-filter system, it was equipped with one. This was most likely the first private ABC-shelter in all of Israel. During the 1991 Gulf War, neighbors were invited to use the shelter during Scud missile attacks.⁵⁹

Kindergarten and School: In the late 1960s a kindergarten was established in a building which bore the name “Shiloah”. During the 1990s it was attended by about thirty children.⁶⁰ As the children grew older a school was established in the early 1970s. A new school building was completed in 1986 and served as a proper school as of 1987. In 1993, 31 children were taught in the new school in 8 classes by three BS teachers and one local Hebrew teacher.

Old folks home: The old folks home, called Bethany, is a complex of six houses mainly comprising the property acquired from DORA SCHWARTZ in 1968. There were, however, some additions over the years and there are presently about 15–20 senior citizens living in Bethany. Beyond that, it also contains a dining hall, a meeting hall, and residences for the workers of the home. The gardens of Bethany are nicely kept and the arrangement of the houses is quite beautiful.

Cemetery: As the final resting place for its members who pass away, the community has chosen the Protestant cemetery at the entrance to the city of Haifa. Grouped together in orderly fashion, there are about forty graves of BS members, the oldest dating back to 1976. The most important tomb to date is that of the first leader, EMMA BERGER. Nevertheless, her gravestone is in no way different from the rest of the tombs of BS members. Its inscription simply reads: “Des Herrn Magd” (Servant of the Lord).

Industrial Centers: In Sichron Yaakov–East, going down towards the road to Yokneam, BS has built an impressive industrial compound with five factory halls erected during 1970–1982, and two larger halls added in 1988–1993. Their industries produce noodles (a diet staple back in Swabia), aluminium windows, shutters, and iron frames for the vineyards. Its compound also houses workshops for carpentry, repairs, furniture upholstery, tools and dies needed by the community, as well as a dry-cleaning installation and a bakery.⁶¹ In addition, feather-beds, blankets, coats, and small baking ovens are produced.⁶² The factory employs about thirty men and women, all members of the community.⁶³ However, scarcely a single month passes without a support team from abroad assisting the factory work-force. In addition, about 100 Israelis are also employed in the various factories, in line with the Germans’ policy and desire

⁵⁸ FRIEDLER 1987.

⁵⁹ LAVIV 1991.

⁶⁰ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 77–78.

⁶¹ FRIEDLER 1980.

⁶² WEINER/BEN-ELIEZER 1991.

⁶³ STREILE 1993.

to also provide jobs for Israelis.⁶⁴ On the factory compound there are also large garages for maintaining and parking the community trucks, buses, and a fleet of vans.

Because of their apocalyptic outlook on history and their expectation of the war of Gog and Magog in which ABC-weapons would be used, many BS members decided to come to Israel, which they believed would then be the safest place in the world.⁶⁵ To prepare for this final showdown, in 1978 the group already began developing ABC-filters for bomb shelters. In 1982 BS began actual production of this filter.⁶⁶ Prior to the gulf crisis in 1991, experts would only smile at them, but during the first Gulf War the BS factory worked day and night to meet the demand. By the 22nd of February 1991 they had already sold 200 filters. BS then requested special permission to bring in more workers from Germany because they simply could not produce enough, even though 100 workers were already labouring around the clock.⁶⁷ The new filter system is called “Tewat Noah” (Noah's Ark), reflecting BS belief that their filter would enable them to successfully survive the final cataclysm. Before the production of the filter began, BS had been subsidized up to 80 percent by its German brethren, and even after the first Gulf War it was far from being a kibbutz that could stand on its own feet economically.⁶⁸ In the 1990s they began supplying their products to Israel Defence Forces bases and its Merkava tank, Israeli nuclear reactors, and hospital emergency rooms.⁶⁹

Some friction and repeated mention, especially in the religious Hebrew newspapers *Ha-Zofe*, *Yated Ne'eman*, and *Ha-Modia*, of BS missionary intentions arose in 1996 when the community began to manufacture gas masks. This claim was raised by the manager and workers of the Shalon gas mask factory in Kiryat Gat, who feared economic competition by the Germans and the possible loss of their jobs.⁷⁰

In concluding this section mention should be made of several small “industrial institutions” of BS in and around Sichron Yaakov – a laundry center and a tailor for the community, and a bakery that sells bread and pastas throughout the country. According to a recent source, the Society also has industrial plants in the Ta'anakh Region, in the Golan Heights near Kursi, and in the Shahak Industrial Region near Shaked in the West Bank.⁷¹

Agricultural Industries: Already during the time of the struggle in Sichron Yaakov, beginning in 1968, BS looked for “safer” territory. Thus in the early 1970s a farm and some lands were bought in Binyamina. Two families farmed about 450 dunams, of which about 186 belong to BS.⁷² On the dairy farm BS raises about 50 milk cows and over 100 cattle for meat for their commune. The stables of BS are a combination of Israeli and German farming experience. Their farming equipment is partly bought locally while some is imported from Germany. Some of the milk of the Binyamina farm is processed immediately into cheese and other products in the local BS dairy in Binyamina. In 1993 there were also eleven greenhouses on the farm in which pineapple was raised. Community members in Binyamina plant many sorts of vegetables in the gardens of their homes. BS also raises sheep, chicken, and ducks to supply their needs in meat and eggs. Some of the duck feathers are used in the

⁶⁴ STREILE 2004.

⁶⁵ LABIB 1991.

⁶⁶ FUCHS, quoted in BAR 1991.

⁶⁷ WEINER / BEN-ELIEZER 1991.

⁶⁸ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 93–94.

⁶⁹ FARKASH, 1996; HALEVI 1966.

⁷⁰ PIKASH, 1996; ZISMAN 2004; HA-MODIA 2004.

⁷¹ GILAT 2001; STREILE 2004.

⁷² SEFER 1993.

feather-bed industry in the factory in Sichron Yaakov, but most of the feathers (goose feathers) are bought. In addition to the farm land, BS also owns orchards and vineyards. Their grapes are sold to the local winery (at first, this was impossible, because the local religious community declared them to be “non-kosher”), but also to the Trappist monks at the Latrun monastery.⁷³ On the outskirts of Pardes Hanna, BS owns about 170 dunams of orchards.⁷⁴ They were bought during the first and second settlement phases in very bad condition, but have been improved by BS and today produce excellent fruit.

Altogether, BS owns only about 445 dunams of land in the following breakdown:

Sichron Yaakov	–	c. 70	dunams ⁷⁵
Pardes Hanna	–	c. 170	dunams ⁷⁶
Binyamina	–	c. 203.5	dunams ⁷⁷
Haifa	–	c. 1.5	dunams. ⁷⁸

They also own some property east of the Sea of Galilee,

II. Maon Issachar (MI)

Maon Issachar is the Israeli branch of the German group called Freie Christengemeinde Schorndorf.

History

As was the case with BS, MI is another group that in its past history experienced a time of severe persecution that resulted in a strong identification with the People of Israel. The Freie Christengemeinde traces its earliest roots back to JAN HUS (ca. 1373–1415) during the persecutions of the Bohemians and Moravians. Even though this contention cannot be verified with absolute certainty, nevertheless there is no doubt that the group was the object of persecution by the communists during the period of its formation in the middle of the twentieth century.⁷⁹

These beginnings go back to a revival in the year 1954 in the Czechoslovakian village of Nejek. Out of this revival was born a church community of about 100 adherents under the charismatic leadership of KURT OHYBSKI (1925–1989). During the opening up of Czechoslovakia in 1967–1969 the group decided to leave the country and settle in Germany. They were helped in their endeavor by Mr. SCHOCK, an Elder of the Volksmission Church in Schorndorf (a local Pentecostal church). Most of the members settled in Schorndorf, found work in the factory of Mr. SCHOCK, and attended the local Volksmission Church. In 1968 they built their own church center in Schorndorf.⁸⁰ The leader of the Freie Christengemeinde Schorndorf until his death in 1989 was KURT OHYBSKI, who eventually settled in Canada and commuted between his home there, Germany, and later on Israel as well. In addition to the

⁷³ SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 95–99.

⁷⁴ CANAAN 1971A.

⁷⁵ OREN 1993.

⁷⁶ CANAAN 1971A.

⁷⁷ SEFER 1993.

⁷⁸ CANAAN 1971A.

⁷⁹ SLESÁK 1992.

⁸⁰ Address at that time: Freie Christengemeinde Schorndorf, e.V., Hammerschlag 4, 7060 Schorndorf.

Schorndorf community, the group also has connections with Australia. The entire community, including children, does not exceed 200 adherents⁸¹.

It was their late founder, OHYBSKI, who also initiated the project in Israel. In 1970 he visited Israel for the first time in order to find a suitable property for the group, traveling throughout the country from the south to Metulla in the north. A house in Qiryat Tivon was first considered, but then, in 1972, property could be acquired in Sichron Yaakov – an old boarding house called Dina. Its dedication ceremony was held during Passover 1972 and the house has served since then as a retreat home for people who suffered at the hands of the Nazis during the Third Reich. It is interesting to note that “Pension Dina” had also been offered to BS, who declined to buy it, and that all of these transactions were carried out during the time when the Jewish religious community was creating a furor about them. These events apparently did not make too deep an impression on the locals who continued to sell land to foreigners in the midst of them all.⁸²

What prompted Ohybski and his group to come to the Holy Land and found Maon Issachar? Unlike BS, that only offers prayers for Israel and helps in an indirect way, Maon Issachar is to be commended for its direct service to the people of Israel. Modeled after the Hofacker Institute in Shavei Zion and the Sisters of Mary in Talpiot, Jerusalem, they established a retreat center for survivors of German concentration camps, as an expression of their love for Israel.

Another reason for their coming to Israel was their identification with the tribe of Issachar. Sichron Yaakov – and not Afula, which would be more compatible with “their” tribal territory – was chosen for pragmatic reasons of land availability. There were also eschatological reasons that somewhat backed up this choice. OHYBSKI was convinced that Israel was going to be the only safe place in the future apocalyptic clash between Gog and Magog, one safe even from the Russians, identified by the group with the above. On the far side of Armageddon (Jezreel Valley) one would be safe from all harm. In order to be prepared for the final battle, food has been stored in their second house.⁸³ It is thus interesting to note how similar BS and MI are on this point, even though MI, in terms of preparation for the final battle, does not reach the sophistication of Bethel Society.

Ideology

Maon Issachar is quite similar to BS in its theology, except that they are more moderate and do not put so much emphasis on divine healing and communal life. MI is an evangelical, Pentecostal holiness group that identifies strongly with Israel. Their eschatology does not require them to be in Israel for the rapture, but nevertheless they also believe that at the End of Days Israel will be the safest place on the face of the earth. They see themselves as a part of Israel and identify themselves with the lost tribe of Issachar; in fact, they believe that all real Christians belong to one of the lost tribes of Israel in one way or another. Their teaching is evangelical (trinity, personal salvation, verbal inspiration, baptism of adults by immersion) with the typical legalistic tendencies of the former East-bloc Christians. Quite similar to the BERGER group, MI are moderate Pentecostals with a pietistic slant, and during the lifetime of their founder KURT OHYBSKI there were also instances in which the group was directed

⁸¹ SLESACK 1992.

⁸² SCHMIDGALL 1993, p. 108–109

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 110.

through the special revelations of their leader. OHYBSKI was an authoritarian personality and was considered to be specially gifted by God.⁸⁴

Material Culture

Maon Issachar has only two houses in Sichron Yaakov and an orchard of about 100 dunams on the way to Binyamina. Their main center at 4 HaNasi Street was bought in 1972 and serves during the summer as a retreat home for Holocaust survivors. Usually, during the summer they put up 7–8 groups, each numbering approximately ten visitors, for about ten days. For the purpose of this ministry, teams of three from the German branch come for roughly one month to Sichron Yaakov to host their guests. The house and garden are fairly well kept, even though the members of the group only have time for work on their property during the summer.

The second house is at 27 HaTamar Street. It was built in 1975 and is presently used mainly for storage. Since it is in close proximity to the Jewish religious community that settled in the south of Sichron Yaakov as a reaction to the German settlement activities, the house also suffered in the past from their attacks. During this time a pile of irrigation hoses was set on fire and members of BS, their neighbors, rushed to their help to extinguish the fire.⁸⁵

In the past, members of MI lived in Israel, and later on volunteers took care of the property. MI was not too happy with this solution, so today a local lawyer (Dr. LOEW), who also handles the group's administrative affairs, has taken upon himself to look after MI property most of the year. The houses are thus usually locked up and the orchard is leased. The orchard consists of apricots and olive trees, but mainly of grape vines. Grapes are usually sent to the local press since it is no longer economical to sell them in the markets. The income from the orchard helps somewhat with the current expenses. However, nearly 100 percent of the financial support for the ministry comes from its German branch. One piece of land, of about 15 dunams, was donated by MI to a school in Shefeyah that also has an agricultural branch.

Conclusion

The settlement of the two German communities in and around Sichron Yaakov may be considered in several contexts. First, the historical context of the settlement of Christians in the Holy Land/Palestine over the past 200 years; second, religious trends in Europe and Germany and attitudes to millennialism, to the Holy Land, and to the redemption of Israel; and third, the context of religious communes, their life-cycle and duration. In the present study we chose to reconstruct, discuss, and compare the religious and historical backgrounds of the two communities, and their settlement process and characteristics.

Comparison of the Two Groups

Let us summarize our discussion by comparing the Bethel Society with Maon Issachar. It was the teaching of biblical narratives and the fascination with Hebrew names, which made so indelible an impression on EMMA BERGER, as well as the identification of both the Bethel Society and Maon Issachar with the sufferings of Israel, that brought about the recent German settlement activities in and around Sichron Yaakov.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸⁵ SHIBOVSKY 1993.

Ideologically, both groups subscribe to conservative evangelical theology with emphasis on eschatology and a great love for Israel. While the love for Israel is expressed by the Bethel Society in the more indirect way of prayer and giving and by a specially-focused industry that helps to protect Israel from unconventional attack, Maon Issachar directly aids Holocaust survivors by hosting groups of them annually at their center in Sichron Yaakov. Historically, both groups identify with Israel and its suffering because of their own experience of past persecution; but while this identification is expressed in a general mode by Bethel Society, Maon Issachar identifies directly with the tribe of Issachar. Both groups intend to be in Israel during the final apocalyptic conflict between Gog and Magog.

BS members do not consider themselves as belonging to the tribes of Israel as do the members of Maon Issachar (see below); nevertheless, many feel that somewhere in the past they may have had Jewish ancestors, especially if they carry seemingly Jewish names such as "Berger". This strong feeling of identification finds its expression in prayer and support for Israel. BS sees its presence in Israel as a ministry of intercession and reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18ff.). BS does not undertake relief ministries as does MI, but prefers to help financially or in practical ways in times of crises, such as help in the community, making their vehicles available, and letting people use their shelter. They are called upon to visit the Land of Israel and bless it, to work joyfully in it, and to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah.⁸⁶

The connection with the country appears to be much stronger among the members of BS. MI has already entered the second stage of its development. Founder Kurt Ohybski passed away in 1989 and many second-generation followers have diverged from their founder's ideology. Maon Issachar and Freie Christengemeinde Schorndorf are now led by 5–7 Elders in a more open fashion. Decentralization and pluralism have set in, leading to a state in which many in the group no longer share the erstwhile excitement for ministry and service. Some consider it a burden to be called upon every year to spend their holidays in Israel in the service of others. BS members, on the other hand, consider it almost a punishment to leave Israel. Maon Issachar at this point is much more orientated to Germany than towards Israel.

Sociologically, Maon Issachar is structured differently than BS: the latter is a kibbutz, while MI is a friendly society. The bond among MI members is thus not as strong as it is between BS members. Currently it is quite difficult for MI to excite and motivate its young people in Germany, while in BS it is particularly the young people who devote much of their time to serving the community. The leaders of Maon Issachar are facing the difficult task of stemming the tide of decline and disintegration that set in with the death of their founder. In Germany the group is considered an ethnic minority from Czechoslovakia; their children are absorbed in the struggle to find their own place in German society, with little interest in looking towards Israel. The concern for Israel among MI may thus soon become a past chapter of its history.

Although the transition from the founding stage to second-generation leadership led to a drastic decline of Maon Issachar, in the Bethel Society the group of Elders still maintains a cohesive community. BS appears to be more cooperative with the community of Sichron Yaakov (including employment of local workers) and has also channelled its expansion efforts to a less hostile location (east of the Sea of Galilee). The crucial test for the Bethel Society will be its mode of transition to second-generation leadership. This could also lead either to decline and disintegration, as it did with Maon Issachar, or, alternatively, it will provide the group with an opportunity to divest itself of theological peculiarities and to further

⁸⁶ REIMER 1976, p. 60.

escape from its relative isolation. However, at the same time, integration may lead to its decline.

Israel, Sichron Yaakov, and the German Settlers

Regarding the civil, legal, and social status of the two communities in Israel, suspicion of, alienation from, and conflict with the German settlers in the initial stages of their settlement in Israel on the part of Orthodox Jews and municipal and state bodies has been replaced by positive acceptance and legitimization. In May 2004 the BS members were granted permanent residency status by the State of Israel.

Their continuous expansion raises questions from time to time about the sale of land to foreigners.⁸⁷ At one point, as a result of their initial settlement activity, a new law preventing foreigners from buying land in Israel was proposed – but not enacted.⁸⁸ Since in Israel, 92.3 percent of all land is Stat- owned⁸⁹ – compared with only 33 percent in Germany, and with Switzerland where all land is in private hands⁹⁰, legislation was not deemed necessary. The quantity of land owned by BS is extremely small compared, for instance, with that of the Templers who owned 23,970 dunams in 1925.⁹¹ Even in Binyamina, where BS concentrated most of its land, it owns just 1.25 percent of the settlement's 16,000 dunams landed area. Furthermore, the fact that BS brings a lot of income to the local community by way of taxes – in 1993 Mayor SHIBOVSKY asserted: “BS is our best tax payer!”⁹² – and tourism is viewed positively. Concerns of people about another German Templer episode and development of nationalistic tendencies can be allayed, since such a development can be dealt with effectively, as became evident in the past; land purchase can always be reversed.⁹³ In the event of a closing down of BS, the land will in any case revert to the State of Israel. At the local level, if the Bethel Society adopts a more open style and sets its kibbutz on a solid economic foundation, it has the potential for full partnership with the community of Sichron Yaakov and its surroundings.⁹⁴ A card was sent in May 2004 by the mayors of Sichron Yaakov and Binyamina/Givat Ada (ELI ABUTBUL and ARIEH ZIETUNI) in which they congratulated all BS men and women who live in Sichron Yaakov and Binyamina on the occasion of receiving their new status as permanent citizens, and added: “The people of Sichron Yaakov and Binyamina bless you for your multi-year efforts, your continued contribution and voluntarism to the community in Sichron Yaakov and Binyamina, and your contribution to the State of Israel. We see in this recognition a doing right that was long due.”⁹⁵

⁸⁷ RUBINSTEIN 1980.

⁸⁸ DEGANI 1999, p. 172.

⁸⁹ WHITON 1993, p. 3.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹¹ SAUER 1985, p. 184.

⁹² SHIBOVSKY 1993.

⁹³ SAUER 1985, p. 273–328.

⁹⁴ Cf. Galtronics in Tiberias. We do not, however, foresee that the relationship with the religious community will ever become normal.

⁹⁵ A card issued by the mayors of the local councils of Sichron Yaakov and Binyamina/Givat Ada on 14 May 2004, the Gidonim Association, Sichron Yaakov.

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Photos

- Photo # 1: Emma Berger (Heidenheimer Presse, 23 Dec. 1972, 4)**
- Photo # 2: Pension Dora Schwartz (Schmidgall, 1993, 8)
Sichron Yaakov**
- Photo # 3: Tomb of Emma Berger (Schmidgall, 1993, 13)
Haifa**
- Photo # 4: Factory building (Schmidgall, 1993, 14)
Sichron Yaakov**