Beate Lehmann

A Zionist and educational flagship project. Siegfried Lehmann and the orphanage in Kowno

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

“Utopia” is a short story whose author, place and year of publication are unknown. The story was probably first printed in 1925, presumably in German. It was used to promote Siegfried Lehmann´s plan to establish an agricultural youth settlement in Palestine. With its educational description of the upbringing and training of young immigrants in Palestine based on Zionist ideas, the text is part of Jewish cultural heritage. “Utopia” also focuses on an agricultural settlement, a village, in the pre-state era of Israel. The text thus emphasizes the importance of rural areas, which were of great (Zionist) ideological interest but were rarely described in terms of their actual design at the time. The settlement planned by Lehmann – Ben Schemen – was finally founded in 1927. Four years after his death, a Hebrew collection of his writings was published in 1962. Although the editors included “Utopia” in “The Idea and its Realization ” Lehmann´s authorship is questionable: the style of the narrative differs significantly from other texts he wrote during the same period. A diary entry written at around the same time as “Utopia” with a sketch of the planned youth settlement can be clearly attributed to Lehmann: “The Idea and its Realization”, the English translation of the collection of texts, was finally published in 1978 on the 20th anniversary of Lehmann's death as a private print. “Utopia” describes a visit by a group of adults to a Palestinian youth village. The visitors get to know the village, including its residential buildings, educational facilities, and workshops. They attend church service, school lessons and a celebration. In conversations, they learn a lot about community life and the origins of the young villagers. The guests later hear from Jewish settlers who have been living in the country for a long time that the presence of the children and young people motivates and encourages the settlers themselves. After their visit, the group must return to Europe. “Utopia” concludes with an appeal to readers to support the realization of a youth village like the one described.

“Utopia” is one of many publications and campaigns with which Siegfried Lehmann and his supporters sought support for the realization of an agricultural village for children and young people in Palestine. Siegfried Lehmann, born in Berlin in 1892, came from a middle-class Jewish family, was closely connected with other protagonists of the Jewish youth movement and was a member of the Jewish socialist party Hapoël-Hazair. In 1916, he and like-minded people founded the Jewish People's Home in Berlin's Scheunenviertel district, a Jewish community center that quickly became a meeting place for Jews from the West and East and became known for its educational and cultural work. In 1921, the Jewish National Council of Lithuania, whose members greatly appreciated the work done by Lehmann and the Jewish

People's Home, entrusted Lehmann with responsibility for Jewish orphan care in Lithuania. Most of the children and young people Lehmann cared for in the following years were young people who had returned to the country from Russia after the end of the war, either because they had lost their parents in the war or because their parents were unable to care for them. Many of these children and young people wandered through the country hungry and begging. Some committed crimes to ensure their survival. Both for reasons of Jewish social ethics and to avoid conflicts with the non-Jewish population, the Jewish National Council decided to provide structured and professional care and support for these children and young people and entrusted Lehmann with the management of this work. The children's home he founded in the provisional capital of Kowno (now Kaunas) quickly became the central institution and heart of the work: with space for 200 children between the ages of zero and 18, a large medical department and an office for child welfare, the facility was the largest orphanage in Eastern Europe. The progressive educational concept underlying the pedagogical work and extensive publicity ensured that Lehmann's work soon became known beyond the borders of Lithuania, especially in Germany. For years, the children's home was regarded as an institution where “deeply neglected children were raised to become people of the highest caliber”.

Sponsors wanted

In response to a personal crisis triggered by separation and divorce from his first wife, a heavy workload and burgeoning nationalism in Lithuania, Lehmann decided in early 1925 to make aliyah together with a group of older teenagers and several colleagues. Lehmann no longer wanted to work as a pediatrician in Palestine, but instead wanted to establish and run an agricultural settlement for children and young people. In order to finance the settlement, which was finally established in 1927, sponsors had to be found. Lehmann and his supporters used various means to achieve this: They gave lectures, mainly to women's, student, and Zionist groups, published an illustrated brochure, made a film (no longer existent) and used their personal contacts and networks. Lehmann´s circle also founded a support association, the Jewish Orphan Aid [Jüdische Waisenhilfe e. V.], and established a sponsorship system: A monthly donation of 40 Reichsmarks was used to finance accommodation, food, and education for an Eastern European orphan in Palestine. The material used to appeal to potential supporters included the short story “Utopia”.

Visionary: The youth settlement in Palestine

“Utopia” describes, unsurprisingly, an ideal settlement for Jewish youth in Palestine. Stylistic devices include short sentences, direct speech, and distinctive symbolism (the kingdom on the mountain, the numerous stars, the arrangement of the houses in a semicircle around the school, etc.). Texts that can be clearly attributed to Siegfried Lehmann do not exhibit these characteristics. They are generally strongly ideological. Lehmann often confronts his readers with high moral expectations and demands. He does not provide detailed descriptions of living situations, festivals, school lessons, etc. Adults play hardly any role in the community described. Even visitors only enter the village after an explicit invitation, and after their visit they must leave and return to their normal lives. Their task is now to spread the word in Europe about what they have experienced in Palestine: that children and young people in rural Palestine live, learn, and work together in a peaceful and productive community. The fact that the young residents themselves refer to their difficult past and the long process that was necessary to live as a community in the youth village is a reference to the children for whom the children's and youth settlement was to be founded: the orphans

and social orphans from Kowno.

The village: clearly visible and inspiring

The location of the village emphasized its beacon function: the author described the village as a new kingdom, towering high on a mountain above the villages in the valley. It is striking that an image from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 5:14) was used here. But the village's location on the mountain was significant in other respects as well: in the biblical context, mountains were places of divine revelation or encounters between God and man in both Jewish and Christian tradition. The village at the top of the mountain – the youth settlement – differed significantly from the villages in the valley, which were home to Jewish immigrants who had arrived earlier. The young people were not only a model of successful education, which was an important aspect for potential donors, but also an important part of the Jewish community in Palestine and an inspiration for settlers already living in the country. In the mid-1920s, against the backdrop of only a few Zionists from Central and Western Europe deciding to make aliyah, the latter urgently needed encouragement and the prospect of support from young immigrants.

A place to live, a place to learn

The family houses, where the children and young people live together with an adult carer, are arranged in a semicircle around the building whose significance is clear from its central location alone: the school. It inspires awe in visitors. It has nothing in common with the family houses described as “inviting” and “cozy” – an indication that, for the author, living and learning are two completely different matters with different objectives. The two wings of the school building, each with its own focus, represent two areas that were important to the Jewish settlement project in Palestine: One wing – bright, open, connected to the outside world through large windows – is the place for scientific (research) work, while the second wing has a concentrated, almost contemplative atmosphere. It is reserved for the study of new and old Jewish literature – and thus also for the fields of religion and culture. The village school is thus a place where opposites find their place and where everything is brought together in such a way that the young residents of the village and the settlers in Eretz Israel derive the greatest possible benefit: natural sciences and cultural studies complement each other just as much as loud and concentrated, quiet learning. Interaction with the environment finds its place just as much as seclusion. Research and learning – e.g. through the creation of scientific collections – serve both to increase the knowledge of many and to promote individual education.

Conquest through work

The fact that the children and young people in “Utopia” do not live in an urban community but in the countryside refers to the Zionist principle that the land of Eretz Israel should not be conquered by force but with spades and ploughs, i.e. through agricultural work that can only be carried out outside cities. This vision incorporated the idea of occupational restructuring, which had been virulent in Zionist circles for decades. According to this idea, qualifications that were underrepresented among working Jews but urgently needed for the success of the project were necessary for settlement in Palestine. Job retraining thus aimed to train young Jews in agricultural and craft professions. Trade, but also academic careers, were considered less important and desirable in this context. “Utopia” mentioned several professions, but also skills in craftsmanship and agriculture, including field workers, gardeners, blacksmiths, welders,

weavers, tailors and a farm with cowsheds, fields, vineyards, and orchards. “Utopia” states that each craft group not only has its own workplace, but also its own flag, its own insignia, and its own songs. This description reflects elements of the Jewish youth movement and its communal life.

Conclusion

“Utopia” deserves special attention because the text describes many of the institutions that were later realized. Admittedly, the flags, badges and songs of the youth associations did not play a role in the later Ben Shemen, at least not in connection with craft work. Nor was there a communal morning service celebrated in a large hall, as mentioned in the text. (It should be briefly mentioned here that the room for worship in “Utopia” is more reminiscent of a multifunctional school hall than a synagogue.) The family houses with groups of up to 25 children and a house father or mother were actually built and became the new center of life for Eastern European orphans. Ben Shemen became a place of refuge for them, but also for children and young people who came mainly from Central Europe after 1933. The focus of education in the children's and youth village was on agricultural work, but several other work opportunities mentioned in “Utopia” were also established – e.g. home economics and infant care courses for girls and a sheep farm for younger pupils. In the early years in particular, great importance was attached to progressive education, which meant that the pupils had a major influence on the form and content of school lessons and on how life was organized in their respective groups. Although not located high up on a mountain, Ben Shemen was nevertheless considered a flagship project among Jewish educational institutions in pre-state Israel. Its realization was due not only to Lehmann and his colleagues' elaborate advertising campaigns, which included “Utopia”. A similar project, which was never realized, was the garden city, whose foundation was proposed in Zionist circles on the occasion of Max Nordau´s 70th birthday. Siegfried Lehmann would certainly have been able to identify with the definition published in the corresponding promotional brochure, according to which a garden city was a “social, if you will socialist, in the most modern sense of the word: a 'communal economic' form of urban cohabitation” .

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About the Author

Beate Lehmann, born in 1964, is a doctoral candidate at the TU Braunschweig in the Department of Educational Sciences, a member of the executive team of the Jewish Welfare Working Group and deputy chair of the Judaica in Meimbressen e. V. association. Her research focuses on the life and work of Siegfried Lehmann, the history of Jewish social work and biographies of Jewish social workers.

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