

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

Siegfried Lehmann, The idea and its realization

Date	1978
Source Type	Text
Creator	Siegfried Lehmann
Rights Statements	With friendly permission of the Richard Levinson Archive of the Ben Schemen Children's and Youth Village, Israel.
Download	Download for scholarly or private use
Source Description and Interpretation	A Zionist and educational flagship project. Siegfried Lehmann and the orphanage in Kowno (Beate Lehmann)

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.

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Transcription

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THE IDEA AND ITS REALIZATION DR. SIEGFRIED LEHMANN

Collected from his lectures, writings and conversations

Translated by Ruth Birk

THANKS TO ALFRED LEHMANN
WHO ENABLED US TO TRANSLATE IT FROM THE HEBREW

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UTOPIA

Dr. Lehmann came to Eretz Yisrael in 1925, in order to find a place suitable for establishing a youth village. This idea, at the time, seemed quite unreal to most people and institutions. As Robert Welch wrote, "It was sheer madness." But Lehmann did not give up and, after returning to Europe he began raising funds and other aid for his project. He circulated the following (fictional) report as promotional material.

The new youth kingdom, perched high up on a hill, overlooking the villages of the valley, houses hundreds of children and adolescents. With its dormitories, dining halls, workshops, classrooms, cowsheds, fields and gardens, it takes care of all their needs. It was still early in the morning as we drove up the broad avenue leading to the village, for unlike most visitors, we are not content to spend only a few hours here. We intend to get to know intimately this strange realm, so remote from the world of the grownups. Some of the children notice us as we stand there, somewhat strange and lost in the entrance court. They approach and suggest showing us the village. Their kind offer is gladly accepted. On our way through the village, our kind guides explain all that we see.

The "family houses" for the children are arranged in a wide semicircle, small bungalows with gay red roofs and little gardens in the rear. Twenty-five children of all ages live together in each

of them, with a house mother or father whom they have elected in the course of time. In the center of the semicircle is the schoolhouse, somewhat elaborate and awe-inspiring in its architectural features, in contrast to the dwellings with their more intimate and homey atmosphere.

We are led through the sports grounds to a large hall where many of the children are already assembled for the morning service, and wait silently for it to start. The service brings together the whole community and unites them, directing mind and soul towards the essentials of life, before they set out for their daily work. A last song together, and all leave for work.

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In front of the workshops and farm buildings, members of the various work groups are gathered to discuss the day's tasks, assigning new jobs, dealing with suggestions, and so on. There seem to be many different trade groups, field workers, gardeners, carpenters, locksmiths, welders, weavers, dressmakers, shoemakers, etc. Each group wears its own particular uniform, with badges proudly indicating its functions, each with its own flag which the group bears in solemn processions on festive occasions and holidays. There are songs too, each trade having its own. It is not surprising that as we pass through the village, we hear various tunes sung by the groups as they go off to work, each song in tune with the rhythm of the particular work of that group.

Silence reigns in the house of the study group. Although all the children working in fields, cowsheds and farmyard attend various courses in their leisure time, they are not members of the students' group. Only those who show special learning ability and who are willing to devote themselves, for a time, to scientific study and research are members of this particular group.

On entering the schoolhouse, we notice immediately a contrast in the layout of its two wings. In the large, bright halls of the west wing, children are busy in the laboratories, working at their experiments. Along the walls, in large glass-fronted cabinets, all the many collections gathered by the nature study group are displayed. The youngsters here have done vital nature research work for decades. They have studied Israel and its flora and fauna under the guidance of the faculty of life sciences of the Hebrew University. Thousands

of hands assembled these collections, without which there would have been no solid knowledge of the country's nature.

The scene that meets the eye in the east wing is quite different. Here too the rooms are bright, but the windows are narrow, as though to shut out the outside world. Along the walls are bookcases, and we see the older students at work at tables in the center of the room, studying Hebrew literature, old and new.

We pass through vineyards, cornfields, orchards, fruit

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plantations, and everywhere we see the same sight, children of all ages working together in cheerful harmony, each one at the task assigned him by the group. We are told that things had not always been so orderly and peaceful. What we are seeing is the outcome of a slow process of growth through the years. When the first children arrived in the village, there was hardly a visitor who could come near without being afraid. The chaos and confusion of rough and unruly youngsters gave the impression of a madhouse, rather than an educational institution, as can be learned from the diaries of that period. The educators could, of course, have intervened, with a shout here, a blow there, which could have established order. Such a quick and shining success would have raised their self-esteem, but would this order imposed from above have helped the children? The educators, conscious of the fact that it would not, did what any real educator should do, they waited patiently. The children, no different in their nature from other human beings, soon came to realize that community life without law and order is impossible. They set up a children's court, and gradually they worked out the rules by which their life as a community could be lived, in orderly fashion and to a purpose. Our Lord in heaven needed seven days to create an orderly world out of chaos. Hence, the seven years which the children needed to achieve order cannot be considered such a long time.

Through the courtyard we approach the schoolhouse of the smallest children. There are no divisions between the arts and the natural sciences as yet. "Only when we reach the age of 13 do we decide which course of studies to follow in the senior school," our guides tell us.

In the meantime, school has begun. Compared with the methods used in Europe, the way of teaching and studying here is bound to seem strange to us. There are no seats or desks, no discipline, no

teacher shouting, and yet the children's eyes show that they are engrossed in their studies a thousand times more than we were, in our well-regulated schools. Many of the children have already done

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farm work for half a day. They help their older colleagues in the cowsheds, with the cattle grazing in the fields, and with other work on the farm or in the workshops. Now they bombard their teachers with questions on all that has happened on their rounds through the village and the fields, and each question requires an urgent answer.

Today there are more questions than ever, for tomorrow is the day of the annual youth festival. A great commotion already indicates the importance of the event. We decide to stay overnight, and make use of the time till evening to talk with the staff about the educational philosophy of the village. "Here we do not espouse any specific educational doctrine," they tell us. "Neither do we have any officially qualified instructors. We have one aim, to educate ourselves to be human beings worthy of the name. Only then will the children love us and try to emulate us. since many books on education nowadays offer a thousand tricks and easy methods to facilitate an educator's work, giving him a cheap substitute for the demand, self-education, a demand though self-evident yet hard to achieve, we thought it advisable to remove most of the books on educational subjects from our libraries. We left only a few, and not just the most modern ones."

At nightfall, tense with expectation, we accept the invitation of the staff to climb up the many steps leading to the flat roof of the school house. A bright, starry night, much brighter than in our northern latitudes, is bound to awaken an ardent desire to follow the stars in their constellations, and to study the mysterious laws of their movements. Behind telescopes of all types and sizes, the young people are sitting quietly and noting down their observations.

Early the next morning, the noise and commotion of children running around wakes us from our sleep. The day of the great festival has arrived. The first guests begin to come in the afternoon. Crowds of workers from neighboring villages come up the hillside, along the broad avenue in the shade of the leafy trees. Those coming from further places arrive by carriage, a gay crowd of people looking forward to a holiday after a long period of hard work.

The great amphitheater on the slope of the hill is gradually

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filling up with thousands of visitors. The performance begins. We can only mention a few of those features which so deeply impressed us and all the other visitors. The village symphony orchestra, supplemented by amateur/musicians from neighboring settlements, had prepared a great symphonic arrangement for the occasion. A children's choir of hundreds of voices echoes the equally large workers choir. Hundreds of young, graceful bodies move to the rhythm of the music against the warm afternoon sun. You can well understand that we, the visitors from Europe, had followed the rehearsal of the dance with some misgivings. Weren't we familiar with the place of rhythmic exercises in the bourgeois society of Germany? But from the very first moment when these figures appeared, radiant in their white garments against the blue sky, we knew that what happens here is altogether different from what they call by the same name in Germany. Callisthenics is here not an island of grace in a life ruled by entirely different laws, nor is it an aesthetic play of light under a gray everyday sky. This is a direct, natural expression of landscape and life. Nothing could have been more authentic than the visitors joining the groups of young dancers. There is no division between audience and performers. This experience of all-embracing unity differentiates this festival from the theater we were used to, and it moves the hearts of children, of men and women, old and young, of the strangers like us, as only a religious experience can do.

We leave the youth village late at night, joining a group of workers who were going our way. "It would be impossible now to imagine our life here, in this neighborhood, without the youth village," they say. "If it were not for these youngsters, from where would we draw our strength to bear up to all our failures, to the poverty and want which are part of our existence here?"

They would be unable to live without this certainty that there is a purpose to their labor, that after they have gone or are unable to work, there will be a new generation to continue their work in the spirit of the second Aliya^a and its ideals. They see

^a *Second Aliya, the wave of immigration of young idealists from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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the many thousands who came to the country, and they well know that few of them are ready to give up an easy life and make sacrifices for the old ideals. That is why they built the youth village high up on the hill, so that the villagers from outlying places will always be able to see this hill of hope. That is why they are all so inspired with the joy and excitement of the day as they return home. Tomorrow they will work with renewed vigor. The idea of a commonwealth of youth, integrated as a center of strength in the community of the adults, is as old as any other educational doctrine. On boards, ship as we sail back to Europe, we feel moments of bliss at the thought that the people to which we belong is the first to realize this old dream of the great educators, from Plato to Goethe. This is what strengthens us in our determination not to rest until we win thousands of friends for the youth village.

There will be three kinds of readers of this paper. The first will be put off after having read only a few lines, and will throw it away, annoyed at these day dreams of a made teacher, and a Zionist into the bargain. Readers of the second kind will read through to the end and will pat the author on the back, figuratively speaking, with a patronizing smile, remarking with disparaging kindness, "Day dreams, my dear!" But the third kind of reader, and may we be forgiven for considering them the most likeable, will send up a silent prayer "May this fantasy, these visions, come true!" To these readers we offer our detailed proposals in another chapter.

Recommended Citation

Siegfried Lehmann, The idea and its realization, edited in: Jewish Textual Architectures, <<https://jewish-textual-architectures.online/source/jta:source-7>> [October 26, 2025].