

# Reflections on the Road to Kibbutz Ein Harod: *Nahal Oz Photographs*



*Soldiers at the Sa'ad Junction, Werner Braun. 1956.*

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On January 19<sup>th</sup> I was picked up by my Israeli 'parents' Michal and Avi for a daytrip in Israel. Our destination was Kibbutz Ein Harod in the north. To be more specific, our destination was the Mishkan Museum of Art, located within the kibbutz. The museum,

founded in 1937, specializes in Jewish diaspora and Israeli art, and today is considered a heritage site in Israel. Directly next to the Mishkan sits another museum, the Haim Sturman House, inaugurated in 1941 and host to a collection of animal taxidermy and archeological items. I mention both museums because, although we originally set out only to visit the Mishkan, a chance visit to the Sturman House was how I came to view *Nahal Oz Photographs*, the subject of today's note.

*Nahal Oz Photographs* is a small collection of photographs which, as the name implies, features subjects from Nahal Oz, a kibbutz in the Gaza Envelope. The photographs, which were taken between 1955 and November 2023, were originally on display in the kibbutz as a celebration of the more than 70 years since its founding. On October 7<sup>th</sup> the kibbutz suffered heavy civilian losses and property destruction as a result of Hamas terrorists' infiltration. Reports circulated that the gallery space had also suffered damage, and the fate of the photographs was unclear. After a joint decision by the staff at the Sturman House and one of the photographers of the work, Moshe Gross, the photographs were rescued by Gross and brought to Kibbutz Ein Harod for display. Upon their arrival to the safety of Ein Harod, the exhibition was expanded to include photographs taken of Nahal Oz after October 7<sup>th</sup>. When interviewed about the decision to re-exhibit the surviving images from the kibbutz, Gross explained "This exhibition must go on. Together, we've managed to resurrect the damaged display for the public to see once more".<sup>1</sup>

Of course, I have included some images of the photographs, and I will talk about them. But I feel it is equally important and interesting to discuss the road to Ein Harod itself, a journey of about an hour from the centre of Israel. The road we took to Ein Harod from Tel Aviv put us right beside the Green Line – the border between the State of Israel and the West Bank. After months of war and very few excursions outside of the bubble that is central Israel, I had a lot to think about and reflect upon as we drove alongside our Palestinian neighbours. If you will bear with me, I would like to share some of my thoughts and reflections with you, here.



It is Friday morning, and we are driving through *Emek Yisrael*, the Jezreel Valley. Traffic is relatively light, and it is a bright and sunny day. After months of war, I feel relieved to be back out in the 'real Israel', kilometres away from my tiny bubble near Tel Aviv. After a bit of driving, we make a stop at a rest stop to get some coffee. Every rest stop in Israel looks the exact same: a few small restaurants, gas pumps, and a convenience store. What is unexpected about *this* rest stop, however, is the dozens of *Haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox, young men who are squeezed into the small convenience store. Michal and I decide to wait outside while Avi deals with the coffee and the crowd. "They are travelling to Tsfat and other holy

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Moskowitz, "A photography exhibition damaged on October 7 set to relaunch in northern Israel", Ynet, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.ynetnews.com/culture/article/by5xwq2ut>

places in the north for Shabbat” Michal tells me. I observe the *Haredim* as they drink their coffee and fiddle with their *Tzitzit*, the holy fringes peeking out from their *tallit katan*, a small prayer shawl worn under their clothing. Soldiers weave in and out among them, adding to the diversity of the group. *Nothing is simple* I think to myself. The truth is, despite the fact that my area of the centre is relatively religious, it has been a while since I’ve encountered this level of religiosity in Israel; the kind where being a woman feels a bit like being an alien, having men perform near acrobatics inside a crowded convenience store to avoid our arms brushing. But, this is Israel. Nearly every interaction, both between residents and the land itself, is full of tension points, an unavoidable reality of life here. We hop back into the car and continue driving.

As Avi drives, I stare at the cement wall next to us, the security barrier – or the separation barrier between us and the West Bank – which has become a kind of fourth passenger in the car. Avi and Michal tell me it is easy to distinguish a Palestinian area from a Jewish one, all you have to do is look at the architecture. Palestinian, and broadly, Arab, architecture is very recognizable. The buildings have a distinct Mediterranean style, often stacking endless floors one on top of the other. The Jewish areas of the West Bank, in contrast, are full of apartment buildings and newer structures, a repeating pattern of terracotta roofs and beige walls.

I have my map on my phone open as we make our way north, Avi, Michal, me, and the security barrier. We pass Tulkarm, a large Palestinian city in the West Bank. I want to get a good look at the city, curious about the site of near weekly IDF operations. It is hard to see clearly, the barrier in the way. Northern Israel is also home to many Arab-Israeli cities within the Green Line, such as Umm Al-Fahm. As we pass by the entrance to the city, Avi tells me it is one of the biggest Arab cities in Israel. “You know, there was a Hamas cell there” Avi tells me. I look at the city, imposing and intimidating from its elevated position on the mountains. Years ago, back in 2017, on my first trip with the Azrieli Institute we had been scheduled to visit, but due to security concerns we changed our plans. Michal tells me that Umm Al-Fahm is home to an amazing contemporary art gallery, it is too bad that the security situation in recent years rarely allows for visitors.

Finally, we reach a fork in the road – or, what used to be a fork in the road. Our time with the security barrier is ending, and I look at my map. We are close to Jenin, a place that I have no doubt readers outside of Israel are familiar with. At the intersection in front of us, Michal and Avi tell me that there used to be a sign pointing the way to Jenin, but the sign has been removed. Who needs a sign when nobody would want to – or to be honest, be permitted to – go there? I look to my right, and there is a simple dirt road seemingly leading to nowhere, to Jenin. I think of my ulpan classmate’s cousin who had his leg injured in a roadside bombing during an IDF operation there, months before the war. Jenin, an epicentre of violence and confrontation, a fitting end to our journey with the security barrier and the West Bank.



We have made it to Kibbutz Ein Harod. Passing through the gates of the kibbutz gives me a brief feeling of anxiety, and I wonder when entering a kibbutz transformed from menial routine into a reminder of what happened on October 7<sup>th</sup>. After a few hours of exploring the vast (and impressive) collection of the Mishkan Museum of Art, we decide to start heading home.

Before we leave, Michal tells me she wants to quickly see something at the Sturman House, so the two of us walk over and go inside. The woman working at the desk tells us she is just about to close, but offers to let us have a few minutes to look at a collection of photographs from Nahal Oz. Walking up the steps to the exhibition space, Michal tells the woman I am a journalist and that I am from Canada, two pieces of information which earn me the routine Israeli reaction: that I do not look like a journalist, and that I am out of my mind to have moved from Canada to Israel. After we enter the exhibition space, she leaves me and Michal on our own to view the works.



*Two images of Kibbutz Nahal Oz in the 1980's, Moshe Gross.*

The exhibition space is quiet. I walk around, looking at the dozen or so photographs on the wall. Everything is in Hebrew, and so I opt to look at the images before trying to engage the text. Against the main wall there are several large black and grey prints. I come across an image of three women in the kibbutz kitchen, smiling and laughing. There is a noticeable hole in the cheek of one the women, and I am about to ask Michal what happened to the image when she tells me that some of the photographs were damaged on October 7<sup>th</sup>, evacuated here as survivors of the massacre. Looking again, I notice another image with a bullet hole in it, a woman holding a cigarette. The damage to the images of course forces new meaning upon them: what better representation of October 7<sup>th</sup> than a bullet through scenes of everyday life? I look at the images of women working in the kitchen in the 1980's on Kibbutz

Nahal Oz, and I feel like I am starting to grasp the gravity of what was lost in the Gaza Envelope on October 7<sup>th</sup>. The attempted destruction of not only the present and the future, but also the past.

*Nahal Oz Photographs* is a small exhibition. Aside from the main prints, there are a few smaller images of the kibbutz and a series of prints from a project which documented the graduating high school class with a different theme every year. Other images capture more classic scenes of the history of the kibbutz, the development of the land and the work of the pioneers. Walking around, I cannot shake the feeling that the photos too have become displaced refugees; they are not in their home, where they belong, but instead way up north, separated from their community. The space feels empty, and not only because it is just me and Michal filling it. I think about how the original purpose of the exhibition was that it would highlight the life of the kibbutz *in* the kibbutz itself. Now, instead of capturing the life and vibrancy of the kibbutz, the photographs serve as forensic documentation of what has been lost.



*Two sets of images taken of Nahal Oz before October 7<sup>th</sup> (left) and afterwards (right).*

After we finish looking at the main exhibition, Michal and I head down a few steps into a small room. There is a simple display of two sets of images pinned on what appears to be corkboard. On the left half of the display, ten images capture life in Nahal Oz before October 7<sup>th</sup>. The right side contains eleven images documenting the aftermath. Next to the photographs there is a smaller board, with some postcards tacked on. Visitors are invited to write a message to the survivors of Nahal Oz, the messages will be passed along to the kibbutz when the images, and the residents, are permitted to return. An example postcard contains a message to the kibbutz which was written by David Ben-Gurion in honour of its founding: "Dear Nahal Oz, you may not have a stream (*nahal*), but you do have strength (*oz*)!" Michal

picks up a pen and writes a short message. I look away to give her some privacy, feeling a sense of relief that I will not be expected to write anything. It feels overwhelming to even consider writing something for the survivors of the kibbutz – what words could possibly bring comfort and strength in the aftermath of such a tragedy?



*Kalaniot, Megiddo Airfield. January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023.*

Thanking the woman at the Sturman House for generously allowing us to stay well past the closing time, we leave Kibbutz Ein Harod. After lunch in the nearby city of Afula, we stop at a small, unassuming field next to the Megiddo Airfield on the side of the road. The field is filled with visitors just like us, there to see the beautiful purple, pink and white *kalaniot* wildflowers growing. We look at the flowers, and I take a big breath in. It is my first time seeing *kalaniot* that are not red, and I am enamoured by them. The flowers are a welcome break after the impression left on me by *Nahal Oz Photographs*. I feel a bit of the heaviness lift, just for a few minutes. *Nothing is simple*, I think to myself again as we laugh and admire the flowers.