



# THERE IS NO OTHER ENDING

Kibbutzim were once a core part of Israeli identity. While that is no longer true, kibbutz membership has recently been swelling. Now, the events of 7 October 2023, have placed these settlements at the centre of the country's consciousness. **David Leach** speaks to the residents of two kibbutzim near Gaza to explore the role of the kibbutz today and hears how one survivor of the attacks is using photography to find meaning amid the devastation



In 2010, I completed a circuit around Israel to research a book about the founding ideals, hundred-year history and slow decline of the kibbutz movement. These 270 or so rural communes, dreamed into reality by young Jewish pioneers as a fusion of socialism and Zionism, had marked the borders of the future state and shaped many of its leaders and artists.

On a bright June morning, I drove through the western Negev and stopped at a café outside the gates of Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Surveillance balloons hung in the distance; the Gaza Strip lay beyond. I was greeted by Sofie Berzon MacKie, a 26-year-old Israeli photographer. She'd been born on nearby Kibbutz Be'eri, where her parents had met, and was raised in London, only to return to Israel when she was seven. Her mother had died of leukemia soon after, and she had grown up on Be'eri, the largest kibbutz in the region. She was renting an apartment on Kfar Aza while she studied in Tel Aviv.

with a cheap plastic Holga camera and photographed the fieldscapes and military artefacts. The grainy, black-and-white images held a haunted translucence. "I'm trying to show this silence – that it is very unnatural," she said. "That's the strange thing about living here. You go along with life and nothing's happening and all of a sudden – bam! – you're in the middle of a war and rockets are landing..."

We exchanged goodbyes. She finished her degree. I finished my book. She started a family, moved back to Be'eri and became director of its renowned art gallery. Life was interrupted, now and then, by mortars and rockets issued from Gaza and the cacophonous retribution from Israeli forces. The 'tzeva adom' (colour red) of the alerts would drive families into fortified safe rooms – or off the kibbutz – until the quiet resumed.

Under the dawning Shabbat light of 7 October 2023, that eerie silence was once again shattered.

More than 1,200 killed in attacks by waves of Hamas terrorists. Thousands wounded. Hostages dragged into Gaza's labyrinth of tunnels. Kibbutzim burned to ash. And a spiralling death toll of Palestinian civilians crushed in the rubble of the unfolding war.

Words cannot do justice to the horrors unleashed on 7 October.

And yet we must try.

Berzon MacKie insists we do. It's why – after huddling with her family for more than 18 hours in a safe room, as more than 100 of her friends and neighbours were slaughtered and others abducted – she keeps speaking out.

"What does it mean when [we say] 'there are no words' to describe what happened?" she asked me when we spoke over Zoom, five weeks after the attacks. Her easy laugh had been extinguished. "I felt like we met this inhuman force and they took my humanity from me. And now I don't even know the way back into humanity, into the language. And that was an insufferable feeling for me. Art is a way to give the images, to give the voice, to give this harrowing experience the words – to integrate it into the story of humanity."

A tenth of her community was killed. Kfar Aza and Nir Oz suffered similarly grievous or worse levels of loss. A month after the attacks, the lists of the dead kept lengthening as missing members were identified among charred remains. Be'eri's survivors had been scattered in exile: many to Dead Sea hotels, the wounded to hospitals, families of hostages to Tel Aviv to

lobby for their release. Berzon MacKie had returned briefly to her evacuated kibbutz to grab items of sentimental value. Bullet casings and broken glass lay on the floor of her house; the tang of gunpowder hung in the air.

"Everything was covered with some sort of residue," she recalled, "so there was nothing to take but photographs. That's it." Therapy and medication have helped to quell the panic attacks and nightmares. "The body repairs itself," she said, "and the soul repairs itself. But on other levels we are still living that day."

The day she keeps reliving begins abruptly at 6.29am with a screaming across the sky that she knows, deep in her body, is not a typical rocket attack. Usually she tells her daughters to walk carefully to the fortified safety of their brother's bedroom; this time she yells: "Run!"

Huddled with her partner, Tal, and three children – Anna, 12, Thomas, nine, and Danica, three – she reads messages on a WhatsApp group for Be'eri mums: Terrorists are in Israel. Terrorists are in the kibbutz. ("It escalated very, very quickly... Utter, utter terror.")

By eight, they hear shooting in their neighbourhood. ("We understood that the kibbutz was conquered and there was no army coming.") More texts and voice messages: Our house is on fire! They're throwing grenades at our safe room!

Around nine o'clock, Hamas militants drag their next-door neighbour from her room, down the stairs and murder her. ("I heard that and I understood there was a very good chance I'm not going to get through this day alive.") She composes a final Facebook post and says goodbye to her family. Her son pleads: "Mummy, I don't want to die today." ("As a mother I felt like I had failed in the worst possible way, although I know it's not my fault.")

And, somehow, the shadow passes over them. A neighbour with a rifle wards off a van of terrorists.

Around 6.30pm, the army reaches their house, but the battle rages so fiercely her family is told to retreat into another safe room.

Only after midnight do soldiers return to lead them away. Her children are petrified. She tells them: "You were super brave for 18 and a half hours. We're going to make it. There is no other ending for our story." Bullets hiss and munitions explode as they rush towards the breached metal gates of the kibbutz. ("So many houses were on fire, and so many dead bodies and there was blood everywhere.")

That morning and that long day and that fiery night, looping endlessly.

**"I was photographing my home and now it is gone"**

Clockwise from top left: Sofie Berzon MacKie's photos: a mix of shots of her family's old home in London and her children and local animals at her home on Kibbutz Be'eri. The images will be part of a show of her work at Studio of Her Own gallery in Jerusalem in January

SOFIE BERZON MACKIE



Even before 7 October, few people understood the psychological tensions within the communities near Gaza as well as Dr Julia Chaitin. A social psychologist and peace builder, originally from Detroit, she has lived since 1973 with her husband on Kibbutz Urim, 14 kilometres from Gaza. She worked even closer, at Sapir College's School of Social Work, near Sderot, until retiring in 2020. After 7 October, few people can discern a glint of reconciliation. The 71-year-old lifelong activist has no illusions it will be an easy path to walk.

"From 7 October, everything changed," she told me, from her kibbutz. "I call it 'pre-history'. It seems like a different time. Most of the kibbutzim and the communities had to leave when Hamas destroyed their communities."

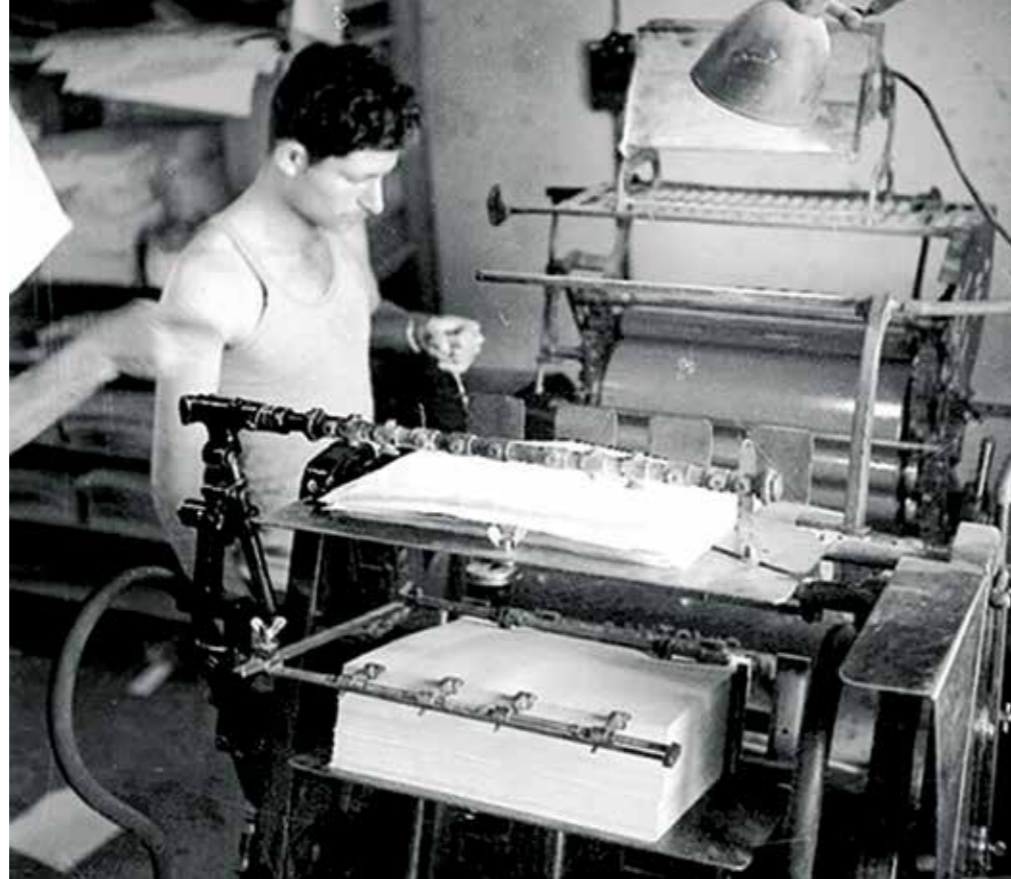
Families on Urim had been encouraged to leave, too. Only essential workers remained, like her husband, who helps run the textile factory. After a respite in Tel Aviv, Dr Chaitin returned to Urim. "I decided that if life was going to be unsafe, at least I'd be unsafe in my own home," she said. "We're physically fine. Emotionally – not so well."

Hamas had plans to infiltrate Urim but missed her kibbutz, even as they killed partygoers at the Nova music festival and assaulted communities further away. Urim's small security team had pistols. Only one in 10 apartments had safe rooms. "It's a fluke they missed us," said Chaitin. "If they'd come in, it would have been a massacre here."

In 2022, Chaitin co-published Routine Emergency: The Meaning of Life for Israelis Along the Gaza Border, a survey of the conflict's psychosocial impact on residents of the western Negev. Left-ish secular kibbutzniks and religious conservatives in Sderot and other towns talked about a 'heaven and hell' dichotomy: an Edenic landscape far from Israel's hectic cities that could erupt in a moment with the 'tzeva adom' of incoming rockets. All felt ignored by their government, media, fellow citizens.

"When there were what they'd call 'raindrops' – drops of rockets – people here would say: 'Why is it okay to be bombarded? What normal person would put up with this?'" said Chaitin.

That neglect felt embedded in the region's official designation: Otef Aza or the 'Gaza Envelope'. "What does that even mean?" asked Berzon MacKie. "It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?" Communities within the zone – up to 7km from the border – get tax incentives and security funding, but the name suggests they are "more a part of Gaza and less a part of Israel". For two decades, residents felt disregarded, even despised, as Benjamin Netanyahu's increasingly far-right coalitions consolidated power. "We had this



terrible feeling his government was going to be our downfall," said Berzon MacKie, "and we were correct."

"There is a lot of anger," said Chaitin of emotions after 7 October. "The government is incapable of running a corner store. Immediately, civil society started volunteering, organising clothes, food and school supplies. In half a day, they got things running."

When I first met Chaitin in 2010, she was finishing a collection featuring case studies on grassroots initiatives between

Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the fields of science, tourism and sustainable development. The book also reflected on her peace work with Other Voice, a volunteer group that brings residents from Gaza and Israel's border communities into increasingly rare personal dialogue.

On 7 October, as Israel's Defense Forces launched air strikes and a ground offensive, Chaitin remained in contact with a few civilians in Gaza. Their texts were brief: My house was bombed. I can't believe I'm still alive. One woman described a

COURTESY OF WIKIBIBLITZ – KIBBUTZ BE'ERI ARCHIVE; NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL

video claiming Hamas had committed no atrocities. Do you think I'm lying, Chaitin wrote back, when I have this list of people I personally know who were killed or taken hostage?

"I only get angry when there's denial," she told me. "But civilians are in survival mode. They are just trying to make it through the day."

I asked if she had lost hope. "The ideas I put forth over the years haven't changed in my mind – especially now," she said. "We know that people who have undergone such a terrible trauma need to have their stories heard." Her new book, *Striving for Peace through Personal Narratives of Genocide and War*, examines how personal stories from the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can address a question at the heart of intractable conflicts: How can you talk with those who deny your very experiences and dehumanise you as "the enemy"?

"Fighting over facts doesn't work, because you say your fact and I combat it with my fact – and it's a vicious cycle. We need to go deeper into the story to understand the person. When people feel they are being listened to, not judged or jumped on, there's a chance to build something."

So, after Hamas's long day of terror, what is the future of the kibbutzim and other communities in the western Negev, an archipelago of more than 30 settlements established in the years immediately before and after Israel's independence?

The plan is for new residences to be erected within a year for the exiled members of Be'eri, but it may take three years to rebuild the kibbutz as well as its

From top: Moshka, a Kibbutz Be'eri member, next to the kibbutz printing press, 1950s; mourners at the funeral of Yanat Or last October. Or was killed by Hamas at Kibbutz Be'eri during the attacks on 7 October 2023; Kibbutz Be'eri, 1950s



art gallery. Until then, Berzon MacKie is running exhibitions in exile in Tel Aviv. And if the threat from Hamas remains, many residents in the region may not want to return.

"There are people who want to come back, and then there are people who are keeping quiet," said Chaitin. A couple she knew abruptly left a kibbutz near Gaza. "They saw such horrors on the road as they were leaving, the woman said she's never going back."

Before 7 October, any nostalgia for kibbutz life probably persisted more strongly among the legions of international volunteers who worked on one – alumni who include Sacha Baron Cohen, Boris Johnson and me. That free labour has been supplanted by foreign guest workers, such as the dozens of Thai workers killed or captured by Hamas.

Jewish Israelis are likely to recall the importance of Degania, the first commune, founded in 1910 on principles of radical equality. Maybe they remember the pivotal battle at Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek, in the Galilee, during the war of 1948. Perhaps they've visited Kibbutz Sde Boker, to which prime minister David Ben-Gurion retired in 1953. Some know their morning milk comes from the desert dairies of Kibbutz Yotvata. Others recognise the imprint of Be'eri Printers on official documents. Many have holidayed in kibbutz guesthouses, from the slopes of Mount Hermon to the Red Sea.

Israel's dwindling left might remember kibbutzniks' early vision of a binational state for Arab and Jewish workers, or how many members were and still are ardent peaceniks, including the late writer Amos Oz (from Hulda, in central Israel), co-founders of Nir Oz and Peace Now members Oded Lifshitz and his wife Yocheved (the pair were abducted by Hamas but only Yocheved has been released), and Women Wage Peace organiser Vivian Silver (killed in Be'eri). Fewer recall how kibbutzim, after 1948, dispossessed land from Palestinian refugees or how they were the first settlements built in the occupied territories after the Six-Day War: secular kibbutzim in the Golan Heights as well as Kfar Etzion, a religious kibbutz destroyed by Arab forces in 1948 and revived in the recaptured West Bank. "The kibbutz lived these conflicts very deeply," Joshua Sobol, the Israeli playwright and ex-kibbutznik, once told me.

The Likud victory of 1977 shattered the political grip of Labor's kibbutz-raised leaders. The economic crisis of the 1980s broke kibbutzniks' finances. In the 1990s, the flight of younger generations accelerated the process of 'shinui' – the process of privatisation, where hard

socialism transitioned to soft capitalism. The last 'children's house' for communal child-rearing closed in 1997. Urim privatised more than five years ago and welcomed an influx of young families.

This pattern has been repeated across Israel – where kibbutz membership declined dramatically from the mid-1990s but rose to 193,000 by 2021. Following Covid, waiting lists to join kibbutzim grew for the first time in 30 years. Be'eri remained communal but had been debating changes before the attacks. "That is our strength now," said Berzon MacKie. "Knowing how to take care of each other, not leaving anyone behind and having a sense of identity bigger than yourself."

Nearly a decade ago, I'd concluded that the original kibbutz movement had lost its force as an institution and national symbol. The rural kibbutz of the original pioneers had faded into the footnotes of the long chronicle of Jewish life. New kibbutzim had ideals that lay elsewhere: in small urban kibbutzim of educators and activists (like the Tel Aviv commune where Chaitin's adult daughter lives), as high-tech hubs or coexistence groups, such as Other Voice, that unite Israeli Jews and Palestinians.

And yet, in its tragic return to history, the kibbutz might unite a grieving nation. "Now everybody in the country knows Kfar Aza, they know Be'eri," Chaitin said. "People from Tel Aviv are walking around with T-shirts reading 'I am from Nir Oz'. The names mean something to them. Now people talk about kibbutzim with empathy. People want to help with the rebuilding. They see it as a national project."

In the years before the attacks, Sofie Berzon MacKie had been taking portraits of her living room on the kibbutz, as she'd done for a past project about her old family house in London. In January, she will exhibit the new series in Jerusalem. "It's a bizarre coincidence that I was photographing my home and now it is gone," she said. "Not only the building – the whole concept of my home in Be'eri. I have this archive of three years of my life in my living room, since my daughter was a tiny baby, up until a week before that horrible Saturday." She paused to consider that creative leap from a fragile past into an irrevocably altered future.

"And now I can reconstruct something emotionally and carry it with me, so it's not completely gone." ■

David Leach is the author of *Chasing Utopia: The Future of the Kibbutz in a Divided Israel* (ECW Press). Sofie Berzon MacKie's exhibition, *Silvery Water and Starry Earth*, runs at Studio of Her Own Gallery, Jerusalem, from 12 Jan – 31 Mar. [studioofherown.com](http://studioofherown.com). Join David Leach, Sofie Berzon MacKie and others in an online event on Israel's kibbutzim on 21 Feb at 7pm. See p65.