Rona Yona, *Niheyeh kulanu ḥalutzim: tenu'at ha'avodah veha'aliyah mipolin 1923–1936* (Zionists without Borders: Polish-Jewish Pioneers and the Rise of the Labor Movement in Palestine, 1923–1936). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2021. 396 pp.

Whereas authors of various genres have engaged in recent years in depicting and analyzing the decline, fall, or demise of the Israeli labor movement, Rona Yona, as her book's title indicates, endeavors to trace the labor movement's rise within the Zionist movement and the Yishuv (the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine), and to assess the role played by Hehalutz and, more specifically, its Polish branch, in this process.

As Yona herself acknowledges, the story of Hehalutz in Poland has been explored by others, among them, Israel Otiker, Levi Arie Sarid, and Israel Oppenheim. Basing her work on Oppenheim's monumental two-volume work,[1] Yona offers new approaches and insights, intertwining political, social, and cultural history and utilizing comparative methods. Along with dealing with ideological and organizational matters, she presents "history from below," examining Hehalutz not only from the vantage point of ideologists and leaders but also as it was regarded by ordinary members. Depicting the day-to-day life of members in the movement's various branches and training farms (kibbutzim), Yona explores what factors made Hehalutz so attractive to thousands of young men and women, and what caused many of them to eventually leave it.

One of the main themes of the book is the mutual relationship between Hehalutz in Poland and the labor movement (in particular, the kibbutz movement) in Palestine. On a wider scope, the book contributes to our understanding of the Israeli nation-building process, by comparing the development of the Yishuv with that of the Jewish society abroad and in particular with the changes Polish Jewry went through. Originally, Yona explains, she had set out to examine how processes that were initiated in Poland influenced the Yishuv, but she gradually came to the conclusion that the influence of the Yishuv on Hehalutz in Poland was no less significant. She proposes a more general observation: "As much as it is important to understand the Yishuv society on the background of its relations with the diaspora, it is also important to comprehend the movement in the diaspora in light of its contacts with the Yishuv" (p. 338).

Thus, she presents these two entities, Hehalutz in Poland and the labor movement in Palestine, as mutually dependent parts of one system. Contrary to what might seem to be an agreed-upon convention, Hehalutz leaders in Poland did not passively subordinate themselves to the leadership in Palestine; moreover, while the Yishuv gradually became the center of Zionist activity, its existence depended on a constant flow of people and capital from the diaspora. At the same time, Hehalutz in Poland was short of leadership cadres, and thus needed reinforcement from Palestine in the form of *shelihim* (emissaries).

A few figures may help to illustrate the proportional size of the two sides involved in Yona's book. One set of figures relates to the volume of emigration: 50,000 Hehalutz members emigrated to Palestine in the interwar period, 43 percent of them from Poland, out of a total of 140,000 Jews who emigrated from Poland to Palestine during those years. The other set of figures is the relative size of the Yishuv and Polish Jewry. At the end of the Fifth Aliyah, which is the chronological end of the book, the entire Jewish population of Palestine (about 400,000) was more or less the size of the Jewish community in Warsaw, which accounted for approximately 10 percent of Poland's Jewish population.

Hehalutz was the main human reservoir of the kibbutz movement, enabling it to be a major force in the Yishuv. However, the majority of those who made it to Palestine did not settle on a kibbutz. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with Yona's noteworthy observation regarding the underlying tension within Hehalutz: on the one hand, it was meant to be a mass movement; on the other, as indicated by its name, it sought to be a pioneering avant-garde. Yona draws a distinction between the term *tenu'ah* (movement), which she applies to Hehalutz's hard core of devoted activists—those who prepared themselves for kibbutz life in Palestine—and *irgun* (organization), which comprised a mass of "ordinary" members who paid their dues and took part in cultural and social activities, motivated by national aspirations and the urgent desire to leave

Poland, but not necessarily drawn to communal living. Yona attributes the success of Hehalutz to the dynamic interchange between "the movement" and the "the organization," which allowed for maximum flexibility in adjusting the size of its membership, depending on how many immigration certificates were available. The figures are very clear in showing an expansion in the movement's membership following a growth in the number of labor certificates to Palestine.

A tragic theme runs throughout this book. As Yona makes explicit, many young people joined Hehalutz and went through years of hard work and adjustment to a kibbutz-style communal life even though it had become clear, by the 1930s, that only a small fraction of them would wind up on a kibbutz in Palestine. Mostly left implicit, until the conclusion of the book, is what today's readers know all too well: that those who stayed behind, as a consequence of restrictions on immigration to Palestine, were by and large doomed:

> In consequence of the limited quota of immigration certificates allocated by the British in the 1930s, most members of Hehalutz did not have the chance to immigrate to Palestine. Tens of thousands of them were left behind. Their hopes were dashed. The story of Hehalutz in Poland is just a small fraction of the tragedy of Zionism as a whole (p. 342).

I would offer a caveat to this conclusion. The limited certificates quotas allocated by the British in the 1930s cannot be exclusively, or even mainly, blamed for the small volume of immigration to Palestine in the 1930s. The immigration quotas were indeed officially determined by British authorities, yet their small size reflected the fact that Palestine did not constitute a typical destination for immigrants—it was small, poor, and lacking in natural resources; most of its land could not be cultivated using the available methods of the time; and the Arabs, who were a majority of its population, were opposed to Jewish immigration. In 1924, immigration options for Polish Jewry were drastically narrowed as a result of the new quota system introduced by the United States. It was in the mid-1930s that the new system's negative impact on Jewish immigration became apparent, and the demand for immigration to Palestine exceeded by far not only the supply of certificates but also the absorption capacity of Palestine.

Zionists without Borders is primarily the story of Hehalutz in Poland from the early 1920s to 1936. Nevertheless, its range of topics is wider than the title might suggest, making the book essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the nation-building process in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, alongside the history of the Jews in Poland in the interwar period.

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Note

1. Israel Oppenheim, *Tenu'at heḥalutz bepolin 1917-1929* (Jerusalem: 1982); idem, *Tenu'at heḥalutz bepolin 1929-1939* (Sde Boker: 1993).