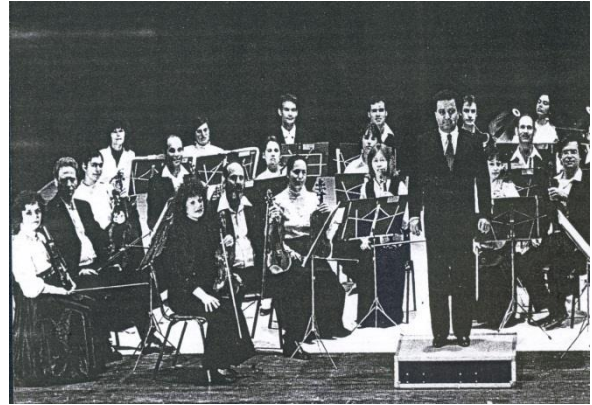


Unexpected Journeys: How accepting a 'Trempe' (hitching a lift) in Israel led to PhD research into a Jewish Farm and its refugee inhabitants!

I count myself privileged to have had the opportunity to spend nearly a year in Israel, working as a violinist in the Kibbutz Chamber Orchestra (1987- 1988). After the initial shock of the stark contrast between my point of origin (two and a half miles outside Thaxted, in rural Essex) and the small kibbutz community of Mishmarot near Pardes Hanna, I began to drink in the rich culture, the multi-layered history and above all, to try to take on board the deeply impacting personal stories of many of my musical colleagues and kibbutz 'chaverim'. Having spent the previous two years working in a Christian centre of reconciliation in Northern Ireland, I had learned a little of what it means to 'listen' to the pain of the past as expressed by others, and to appreciate the resultant complexities of the present. This chance to experience living and working alongside Israelis, many of whom were Holocaust survivors, continued to open up pathway, but also brought with it a whole load more than I had bargained for!



My working week on the kibbutz was as follows: every Tuesday morning at 7.a.m. a taxi would arrive to transport me and fellow (Dutch) violinist Liesbet to Kibbutz Shefayim north of Tel Aviv for two days of orchestral rehearsals. Usually, a further one or two days per week were taken up with concert performances throughout the country, mostly in kibbutzim – a truly unique way of seeing the country!



When not playing with the orchestra, my usual kibbutz job was ironing shirts for seven hours a day! From this I was mercifully released for one day per week to give piano lessons to members of the kibbutz. A couple of my adult students spoke very little English, so the kibbutz management decided that I should receive Hebrew tuition (one hour a week) from an elderly Russian immigrant, Rachel Tal. Thus began my love of the Hebrew language which continues to this day.



After a few months in the orchestra, I was encouraged to join a fledgling baroque ensemble in Jerusalem (today the Jerusalem Baroque Orchestra). Transport was not provided, however - I had to brave a number of public buses. It was during one of these return journeys from Jerusalem to Mishmarot that I had an unexpected encounter.

It was a dark winter's night – December 17th, 1987, to be precise - and due to the outbreak of the First Intifada, there was a troubling sense of tension and unease in the air; I was dreading the prospect of walking the two kilometres from Pardes Hannah bus station to Mishmarot on my own in the dark. There were no street lights back then, and the lane passed by a cemetery and was straddled by densely planted

orchards. Since I hadn't enough money for a taxi, I had no choice but to set out with my violin strung over my shoulder, heart in mouth, praying very hard!

I must have walked about 200 metres when I heard a vehicle approach from behind and slow down to a halt beside me. My heart began to pound heavily as a host of fearful thoughts flooded my mind.

"You want a lift?" a man called out.

He had a marked accent, but to my relief, a European-ish one. I tried to assess the situation. Was he genuine? The man appeared to be mature – in his fifties at least, as far as I could see, so I decided to take the risk. "Yes, to Mishmarot", I replied.

I made my way over to the passenger door, opened it and gingerly clambered in, placing the violin between myself and the driver – an attempt at forming a barrier, should it be needed.

"Where are you from?" he asked in a very direct manner.

"England", I answered hesitantly.

"Ah, I worked in England for a number of years. Whereabouts in England?"

"Do you know an area north-east of London called Essex?"

"Yes, of course! That's where I used to go. Where *exactly* do you come from?"

At this point I wondered if he was making up this story to gain some kind of rapport with me, so I cagily mumbled something and returned to a state of defensive silence. However, he was having none of this, he continued,

"This is really important to me – I *must know exactly* where you grew up!"

I hedged around the issue by saying, "I'm sure you won't have heard of the village – and anyway, we didn't even live in the village, we lived two and a half miles outside. The village is called Thaxted".

At this point he got very excited, exclaiming, "Well, I never, that's exactly where '**The Farm**' was!"

He then proceeded to relate how, during the war, a Jewish organisation called **Bachad** (Brit Chalutzim Dati'im – the Alliance of Religious Pioneers) purchased a farm near Thaxted – the Thaxted Lodge Farm. I knew this farm well; I could see it across the fields from my bedroom window. He went on to explain that this farm served as an agricultural training institute for young Jewish men and women, most of them refugees from Nazi Europe, furnishing them with agricultural skills prior to them making 'Aliyah' – emigrating to Palestine – later to become Israel. I was flabbergasted! I knew nothing of this history, and so close to my family home, too! I remained incredulous. He continued,

"Do you know Mr. Stanley Tatum?"

"Yes, I know the name, but I don't know him personally" I replied.

At last I could relax a little – there was no way he could be making all this up if he knew Mr. Tatum!

"Mr. Tatum was our 'pig man'!"



Verity's home bottom left, Thaxted Lodge (former Bachad) Farm near the top

He chuckled, going on to explain that of course, being a Jewish farm, there were definitely no pigs, but that Mr. Tatum was employed to make sure the milking could continue on Shabbat!

As he pulled up outside the kibbutz entrance, I thanked him sincerely for his kindness. He admitted that he had been concerned to see a young lady out walking on her own and that since he had business to attend to at the Tal Wood Factory next to the kibbutz, he was all too pleased to help. He made a point of mentioning his name and the means by which I might remember it – his family name, Sharon, was the same as the then leader of the opposition, Ariel Sharon, and his first name, Yitzhak, happened to be the same as that of the then prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir. With that, he proceeded on his journey to the factory.

The whole incident left me in a daze – how incredible it was that the one and only time I had ever accepted a lift in Israel, I should be brought into contact with a man, who, thirty or more years before, had spent time less than a mile from my home, some two and a half thousand miles away! I felt comfortably reassured.

The remainder of my stay in Israel continued to leave its indelible mark on my life, but as I could not afford to continue in my volunteer status beyond the summer of 1988, I felt it was time to get back home to start looking for work. So it was with a heavy heart I left for the UK to return to sleepy, rural Essex.

The return home was almost as fierce a (reverse) culture shock as that accompanying my entry to Israel. I had left part of myself there. Each morning I was greeted by the same familiar pastoral view and in the distance, yes, the Thaxted Lodge Farm. Although I wanted to find out more of its hidden history, it just was not practically possible. I had to busy myself straight away with applying for jobs, and consequently forgot about the 'trempe' in Israel and the farm connection. The years flew by – three in Somerset, nearly five in Kent and then a job-relocation brought me to Cosham, Hampshire (1996), where at last I found a Hebrew teacher and began attending lectures at the Parkes Institute, Southampton University – I was determined to keep learning.

Sadly, by 2010 my late father was suffering from dementia. As I was searching Google for items connected to Thaxted to help stimulate his memory, up popped an amazing image entitled '*Morning prayers at Bachad Farm Institute, Thaxted*'! And with it, the memory of the 'trempe' came flooding back!



I began searching in earnest! Firstly, I found the memoirs of a former trainee at the Thaxted farm (Robert Bar Chaim – formerly Robert Heilbut). But I was later astounded to find a copy of the farm’s prospectus in Southampton University Library, along with copies of Bachad’s journal, Chayenu!

Late in the summer of 2012, my mother and I were visiting relatives in Essex, so a visit to the farm was arranged - now owned and farmed by non-Jews, Colin Magness and his son, Tom. Our visit happened to



coincide with that of a group of young gentlemen from Bnei Akiva in London, so I was able to show them the copy of the farm prospectus which I’d borrowed from the library. They were delighted! We were also amazed to see some Hebrew in one of the sheds - Shalom Aleichem – Peace be to you! Back in the early 1950s, these words had been painted on the wall of a shed as a ‘welcome back’ message for the farm’s manager who had been away on a long study trip. For years, it was the first thing you would have seen upon approaching the farm. The shed has since been extended, so today, the writing is on an inside, rather than on an external wall.

To cut a long story short, farmer Tom supplied me with an email address of one of the farm’s former managers, Max Kopfstein, now a 95-year-old resident of Jerusalem. For the next two years, Max and I exchanged occasional emails, and then in October 2014, he and his wife Sarah (who was, incidentally, born a few miles from where I now live, in Portsmouth!) invited me to their home, where I met a total of ten people with connections to the Thaxted farm! Many reminiscences were shared over tea and cake. It was as overwhelming an occasion for me as it was a joyful reunion for them.



A Hebrew Lesson with Rabbi Herschel Zinger at Thaxted, c.1947

This was followed by visits to Kibbutz Lavi, Haifa and Massuot Yitzhak, where I met a further ten former Thaxtedians.

As the information about the farm grew, I began to ask myself what I should be doing with it all. It seems that Bachad and its Hachsharot had received rather scanty coverage in the historical literature to date; no thorough account of this history appeared to have been written. Following a recommendation, in September 2016, I was accepted as an MRes (Masters in Historical Research) student at the Institute of Historical

Research, London University, under the supervision of Professor Lawrence Goldman, who was very enthusiastic about the project. The MRes involved an intensive year of study, and as someone coming to the art of history-writing later in life, it helped to address some of my deficiencies and lack of confidence. It also provided the support I needed to research and write a thesis, which focussed mainly on Bachad's work in the UK, especially Thaxted. I paid further visits to Israel, where contacts multiplied, leading to many more meetings and interviews with former Bachad 'chaverim' (members). Sadly, I did not get to meet Yitzhak Sharon – the man who had given me the lift – before he died. But I did get to meet his son and daughter-in-law, which was special. Without his kindness, I would still to this day be living in ignorance of this important history.

To my delight, I was awarded a Distinction for the MRes and various people then said, 'You should take this further – why not do a PhD!'. In September 2018 I began a three-year full-time PhD program at Southampton University (with a Presidential Scholarship) under the supervision of Professors Tony Kushner and Joachim Schlör. Thankfully, I was able to fit in a number of research visits to Israel in 2019 to conduct further interviews before we all were put under 'lock-down' due to Covid-19. Writing-up is in progress!



Verity with former trainees at the Bachad Farm Thaxted, Shmuel and Irene Manns, Israel, April 2017

To contribute further information about Bachad and its hachsharot in the UK or elsewhere, contact:

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