

The Story of Beit Hankin

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Moshav Kfar Yehoshua was established in 1927 in the Jezreel Valley (Emek-Yisrael) by members of the second and third Alyia, and was named after Yehoshua Hankin. The founders worked towards creating a new and reformed society that would combine the strengths of both the individual and the collective. "To cultivate it, guard it, and enjoy its fruits, was the goal of the Israeli nation in exile, and was realized in the fulfilment of the settlement in Israel", says Eliyahu Amitzur¹ – one of the village founders. The new national culture, crystalized in the novel Jewish settlements in Israel, aimed at being native and Hebrew to differentiate itself from the Jewish culture in exile, and aimed to develop an awareness of a "national mission". The village's educational system had an important role in trying to establish a new identity, both private and collective, and to construct a "native culture" based on a new array of national symbols, knowledge of the surrounding nature, geography, history, and culture.

During the late 40s of the 20th century, according to the will of Yehoshua Hankin, the teacher and nature enthusiast Menahem Zaharoni started the establishment of the "Regional Institute for Nature and Homeland Studies" – Beit Hankin, in the very heart of the working settlement, in the Kfar Yehoshua School. The cornerstone was laid in 1949. Behind the establishment of Beit Hankin were educational-cultural ideas based on the glorification of the Hebrew village as a new form of society and economy. The education of the younger generation was developed with nature and work as the foundations for an esthetic and moral spiritual life. Beit Hankin was used by the school community and by teachers from around the country, who came to further their education in nature and the geography of Israel.

The structure encompassed a multidisciplinary exhibition hall – Beit Hankin, a chemistry and biology lab, a storage room, a small observatory, a petting zoo, and a botanical garden. Three years later the agricultural hall "Yad Michael" was added in memory of the village member Michael Kafri, which added another exhibition/lecture hall. The compound architectural style and interior decoration had elegant and urbane undertones, a rare sight in the Jezreel Valley and the village in those days.

¹ Amitzur. E. (1982). Society and organization. In: R. Porat & M. Amitay (Eds.), *Kfar Yehoshua jubilee*, p.100. Tel Aviv: Poalim .

Even though more than 60 years have gone by, the locals still remember the sense of mystery and magic that characterized the place; the entrance hall with its pillars; the staircase; the feeble rays of light coming through the high windows; the gallery with its creaking floor; the smell of formaldehyde, and the gaze of the mounted animals. The museum measured up to museums of the time, and had its share in creating the cultural capital, and an unrelenting educational message.

Zaharoni, an avid devotee, dedicated himself to developing the place. The basis was his own private collection, and over the years many additions were made by him, the local community, and his successors. Archeological finds discovered during plowing; plants, animals and stones collected in the fields or during hiking, were displayed in a "Cabinet of Curiosities"². The collection of the archeological, zoological, botanical, and geological finds by Zaharoni and the locals, and the presentation in a secular sanctum - the museum and the school - were further steps in creating the Zionist meta-narrative.

Zaharoni's figure and his unique achievement reflect the essence of Beit Hankin in the 50s, and have become an integral part of the narrative of the museum and the village. After 10 years of intensive activity, he left the place due to ideological and financial disagreements, and was succeeded by Noga Heruveni. In 1969 a fire broke out, and the museum was closed for a few years. In 1974 Ilan Tal took upon himself to renovate and manage the place. With the help of Bill Ferguson, a painter and a scholar, the display was redesigned with an ecological narrative; the collection was sorted, dioramas were added and Beit Hankin was revitalized.

Over the years ideological, social, and cultural shifts combined with lack of budget and interest by the community and its establishments, caused the activity in Beit Hankin to gradually slow, until it was closed altogether.

Over recent years, there is a growing voluntary activity by the locals to restore and develop Beit Hankin, and to create a roadmap for its future. As part of this roadmap, alongside

² "Cabinets of Curiosities" were display-cabinets popular among the European aristocracy between the 16th and 18th centuries, in which a vast amount of various objects without categorical boundaries from diverse contexts and disciplines were displayed.

developing and updating the place to current standards, its historical and ethical uniqueness will be maintained by preserving the structure and the permanent exhibition. Alongside this display, changing art exhibitions will take place in the "Yad Michael" hall, which will serve as a space for contemporary art. The exhibitions will have a critical and current reference to the museum, its exhibits, and its content. Throughout the year, during school hours, Beit Hankin will be used by the local and regional schools. On holidays and weekends it will be open to the public.

The show "Ministry of Information" by the artist Tomer Sapir, on display in the renewing "Yad Michael" hall, resonates the complex subtext of Beit Hankin, sheds a new light on the collection, and offers new ways to its understanding.