



POMELO KING

Shmuel Zvi Holzman is best known as the man who purchased the land that became the Etzion Bloc, but few are aware of his many globe-trotting ventures

// Tamar Hayardeni

Where land development and agricultural experimentation meet. Shmuel Zvi Holzman beneath the solitary, ancient oak marking the site of the Etzion Bloc

All pictures courtesy of the Kfar Etzion Archive unless otherwise specified

Shmuel Zvi Holzman is known as the father of the Etzion Bloc, the cluster of settlements just south of Bethlehem. He even named the area after himself, since *etz*, the first syllable of “Etzion,” means “tree” in Hebrew, as does *holz* in German. But Holzman’s purchase of the area in the 1930s (which proved to be almost the worst deal imaginable) is far from the sum total of his accomplishments. By age fifteen, he already had clear goals in life, and he spent the remainder of his days traveling the world to achieve them.

Young Man of the World

Shmuel Zvi Holzman was born on Rosh Hashana 1883 in Jerusalem’s Old City. His parents, Meyer Shimon and Esther Bayla (née Meshel), supported themselves in the Holy Land by means of sophisticated grape presses they’d brought with them from Belarus for use in the wine industry.

Young Shmuel Zvi was gifted beyond his years. Despite his almost total immersion in Jewish studies, he was fascinated by botany. With no room in the Old City’s Jewish Quarter for gardens, he grew his own small but impressive flower bed on the roof.

When Shmuel was fifteen, his parents sent him to an American rabbinical school, expecting their son to come back a communal leader. Yet the Jewish Theological Seminary was the last place he wanted to be. Roaming the streets of the land of opportunity, he wanted to make it big in business.

Hearing rumors that Australia was filled with gold, Shmuel packed his few belongings and sailed across the world. By age seventeen, he was running his own gold mine in Western Australia. Enjoying unprecedented success, Holzman invited his brother in Jerusalem to join him. They named their mine “Mount Zion,” reflecting their longing for home.

For three years, Shmuel’s brother managed Mount Zion while his elder sibling cut deals in New Zealand, South Africa, South America, and even Malaysia. By age twenty, Holzman was

fabulously rich, trading on his warmth, charm, and confident, professional appearance. Interviewing him some thirty years later, journalist Ouri Kessary wrote:

He was of average height, suntanned, and wore his white shirt sleeves rolled up, along with a wide-brimmed straw hat and spectacles, through which lively, intelligent eyes looked out, having already seen a thing or two in all manner of climes, times, and fates.

The introductions are quickly made, and we’re friends at once. It’s hard to be distant with Mr. Holzman. There’s something of the sailor’s familiar cheer in his speech. (Ouri Kessary, “An Inexhaustible Wellspring of Energy and Activity,” *Do’ar Ha-yom*, October 20, 1932, p. 2 [Hebrew])

Despite his success, Holzman was homesick, and by 1903 he was back in the Holy Land. Yet he seemed determined to bring some of the big, wide world with him; for the rest of his life, he invested all his fortune and energies in agricultural experiments designed to breathe a new spirit into dusty Ottoman Palestine.

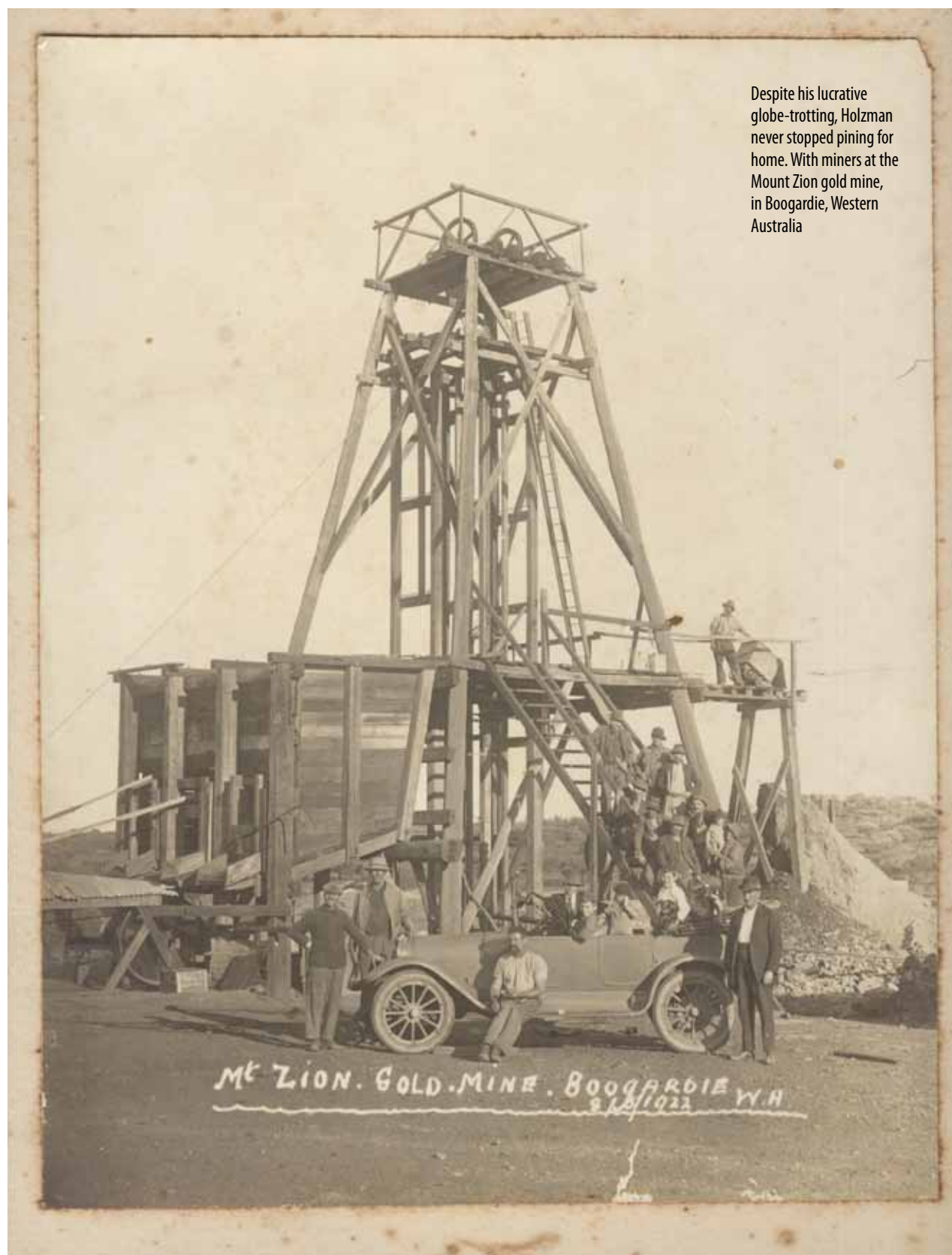
Holzman began with an exotic orchard, hoping to show that the land of Israel could grow more than oranges and clementines. Four years in the making, the project included a sprinkler system that was the marvel of farmers for miles around, drawing a steady stream of curious onlookers.

Special Species

Holzman was extremely friendly with another Zionist associated with agriculture – Avraham Ze’ev Gordon. Part of the first wave of Zionist immigrants, Gordon had settled in Rehovot, then bought a farm in Rishon Lezion and built a magnificent home there (which later became the London Hotel). In 1905, at age twenty-two, Holzman married Gordon’s pretty daughter Ayelet (Hinde), and two years later the couple set out for the Far East. They collected a hundred tropical and

Young Shmuel Zvi packed his few belongings and sailed across the world. By age seventeen, he was running a gold mine in Western Australia

Despite his lucrative globe-trotting, Holzman never stopped pining for home. With miners at the Mount Zion gold mine, in Boogardie, Western Australia



Stranded in Australia by World War I, the Holzmans didn't hurry back to Mandate Palestine. Shmuel Zvi and his wife, Ayelet, with two of their children (at right) and his brother's son and daughter

FRAMING
WORDS

POMELO

Originating in the Pacific Islands, the pomelo was brought to China some two thousand years ago and then spread throughout Southeast Asia.

In the Pacific, the fruit is generally known as a *jumbola* or *jabong*. In English, it's a shaddock, named for Captain Shaddock, who shipped its seeds to the Caribbean in the 17th century.

Holzman sought no such honor, marketing the tangy treat under its European label, which varied: the Dutch called it *pamplemousse*, meaning "lemon pumpkin," which the Italians and French shortened to pomelo.

In modern Hebrew, it's a *pomela*, or *pomelot* (accent on the middle syllable) in the plural.

subtropical species, including various types of bananas, for acclimatization in Holzman's nursery in Rishon. Most came from Singapore, but a few Thai saplings introduced the land of Israel to the pomelo.

Holzman loaded all these goodies onto a ship customized with a built-in watering and climate control system – extremely advanced for its time – to keep his delicate plants alive all the way to Jaffa. When the vessel finally docked there, however, Ottoman officials quarantined it indefinitely to protect indigenous species from imported crop diseases. Bribery proved useless, and Shmuel watched in despair as his vegetation wilted.

Five weeks later, Holzman was finally allowed to move his precious flora to Rishon Lezion, but only a third had survived. He planted these saplings in his experimental orchard and fought fiercely to maintain each and every one. His dedication paid



off: in just five years, his pomelos were all over the Holy Land and even exported to Europe. Some botanists insist that the bananas growing throughout the region today were also "descendants" of this historic shipment.

In 1912, Holzman developed a new fixation – raising ostriches for the Egyptian fashion industry, whose ladies' hats required frequent re-feathering. Having briefly owned a profitable ostrich farm in Capetown in 1899, Shmuel set off for the Dark Continent to bring back some young specimens, only to discover that South Africa had outlawed all such exports. He turned instead to Sudan, acquiring eleven baby ostriches, which he housed at first at his in-laws' in Rishon Lezion. The local children loved their new neighbors, but Holzman soon transferred the brood to his experimental plantation, where they doubled as a form of ecological weed and pest control.

Yet ostriches can be vicious when



Holzman's experimental orchard was moved to Rehovot, and some of its transplants still bear fruit today. The self-styled mining engineer and botanist examining a fruit tree

Private enterprise comes to the aid of Zionist agriculture. Holzman and son Ben Ami on muleback in Rehovot
Private collection



Holzman and his wife toured the Far East, bringing back a hundred tropical species for acclimatization in his Rishon Lezion nursery

annoyed – as Holzman found out after narrowly escaping death in a pitched battle with one of his flightless charges. Furthermore, the birds had trouble adapting to the Middle East, and within a few months, half had perished. Fortunately, the rest proved hardier, providing their delighted owner with both plumage and eggs galore, and

Holzman proudly added “ostrich-breeder” to the title of “horticulturalist” already gracing his calling card.

Tangelo, Anyone?

In 1914, the Holzmans and their three young children toured Australia, where Shmuel sought additional exotic species for transplantation. World War I broke



Neglected during the war, the ostrich farm Holzman had so carefully nurtured fell apart. On the farm in Rishon Lezion, 1912
Private collection

World War I trapped Holzman and his family in Australia, where he soon entered public life, serving in a range of impressive capacities

out just weeks later, stranding the family on the other side of the globe. Holzman's workers scattered, and his farm fell apart. The ostriches died, the trees withered, and the fruit rotted.

Shmuel channeled his frustration into developing the enormous yard of his temporary home in Perth. When the time came, he hoped, he'd bring every root and shoot back to the Holy Land and replant his orchard. Meanwhile, the family settled comfortably into the Jewish community – so much so that when the war finally ended, Ayelet preferred to stay in Australia at least until the kids were a little older.

Her husband agreed, especially as he'd been elected to the city council, the steering committee of the local hospital, and the Australian Agricultural Council, among other impressive positions. At forty-one, Holzman even became a justice of the peace, though he had no legal training. Shmuel put all these connections to good use when he founded Western Australia's first Zionist Association.

Years passed, and Holzman expanded his business dealings and contacts, traveling to America and South Africa and collecting seedlings and plant

samples all over the world. In 1927, he dragged his family back to what was by now British Mandate Palestine. An Australian liner brought the Holzmans home, along with almost two hundred strains of fruit, vegetables, and grasses never before seen in the Middle East. This time, thanks to Holzman's standing – and his Australian citizenship – he breezed through customs. The ship's contents were carefully transferred to Rehovot, which had grown from a small colony to a rising star in agricultural research. (A decade later, the Hebrew University's Agriculture Department opened there.)

In addition to pomelos and exotic bananas, Holzman's sprawling new experimental orchard boasted pecan trees from Texas, Asian pistachios, and tangelos – a tangerine-pomelo hybrid he'd acquired in Florida.

Holzman was soon famous nationwide, and Ouri Kessary dubbed him "the pomelo king." The reporter even likened his subject's botanical wizardry to that of Dr. Serge Voronoff, a French surgeon renowned for using glandular transplants sourced from animal organs to rejuvenate humans.

In 1933, to mark Hayim Nahman Bialik's sixtieth birthday, Holzman named a tangelo species after the national poet. Kessary seized the occasion to dedicate his weekly column, "Ten Minutes with..." to his favorite citrus grower:

If I could give out titles to the celebrities of the Jewish community in Mandate Palestine, I'd award the honorific of "Most romantic yet practical" to S. Z. Holzman. His entire life story has been a rare combination of dreaming and action. An outstanding businessman but a sensitive soul. A fearless fighter and achiever, yet with the aura of a romantic. (*Do'ar Ha-yom*, December 5, 1934, p. 3 [Hebrew])

For five years, Holzman toiled in his orchard and scoured the world for plants to be grafted in order to diversify the

Pioneer's Progress



local species. He published in scholarly journals as well as popular magazines. And despite his interest in making money, he gave away seeds and cuttings to other growers, disseminating his discoveries for everyone's benefit.

Mountain Man

In 1932, Holzman invested all his savings in founding El Hahar ("To the Mountain"), a company aiming to buy land in the Hebron Hills and build Jewish agricultural settlements there. Holzman assumed that with so much citrus being grown on the coast, the market would soon be saturated, and fruit prices would tumble. He therefore sought to develop a new branch of horticulture, growing deciduous fruit trees well suited to the Hebron area's rocky soil.

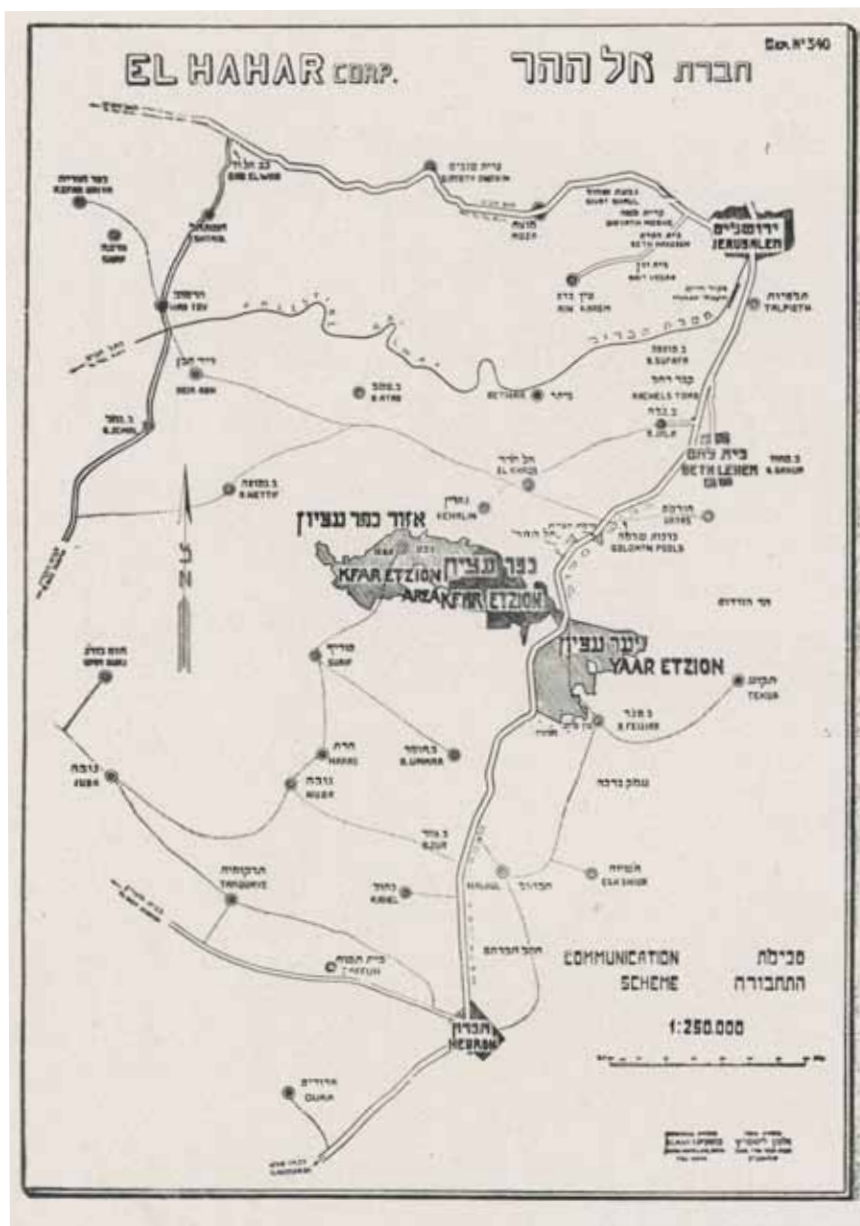
Aside from his profit motive,

Holzman saw the settling of the hilly backbone of Mandate Palestine as the only correct Zionist response to the Arab riots of 1929, which had wiped out Hebron's ancient Jewish community as well as Migdal Eder, a tiny outpost established in 1927 on the steep plateau between the city and Jerusalem.

On September 25, 1933, amidst

Holzman's commercial image didn't sit well with the socialists of the Zionist establishment. The entrepreneur with a truck bought for Kfar Etzion, his first settlement





Holzman's company sold land for development as agricultural settlements and holiday homes. Map of the Etzion Bloc from an ad by El Hahar Co., c. 1930

the high holidays, El Hahar purchased five thousand acres, including the ruins of Migdal Eder. In honor of his fiftieth birthday, Holzman named the area Etzion, after himself (as mentioned, *etz* = *holz* = tree).

Well aware of the power of promotion, he placed state-of-the-art ads in the Jewish press and ran regular tours of the location for prospective buyers. Banking on the "Rehovot millionaire," many purchased plots in Kfar Etzion, the company's flagship colony. It was to overlook Etzion Forest – yet unplanted, but slated to be a major tourist attraction.

Shmuel even persuaded his son Meyer Shimon, a well-regarded surgeon in England, to open a clinic in Kfar Etzion.

Holzman's hopes of foreign investment were dashed when hostilities between Italy and Ethiopia developed into outright war in 1935, preventing the safe transfer of money by sea. Efforts were also made to resettle German Jews in the Hebron Hills as part of a transfer agreement between the Jewish Agency and the Nazis, but to no avail. (See "Ha'avara Ltd.," p. 61.)

Public or Private?

Adding to all these difficulties were clashes with Zionist institutions in the land of Israel, whose socialist leanings made them suspicious of private enterprise. After a settlement attempt by two Hasidic masters in Kfar Hasidim (see "It Takes a Hasidic Village," *Segula* 47) had saddled the Jewish National Fund (JNF) with responsibility for the pioneers' continued subsistence, the Zionist establishment was understandably reluctant to allow further would-be entrepreneurs onto its turf.

There were also disagreements about the viability of settling the country's hilly interior. Yosef Weitz, director of the JNF's Land and Afforestation Department, was initially impressed by Holzman's professionalism. Then Weitz began to feel El Hahar was too profit-oriented, exploiting potential pioneers to its own advantage. In an article in the *Davar* daily, he criticized the company's glossy, exaggerated advertising and resigned from El Hahar's advisory board:

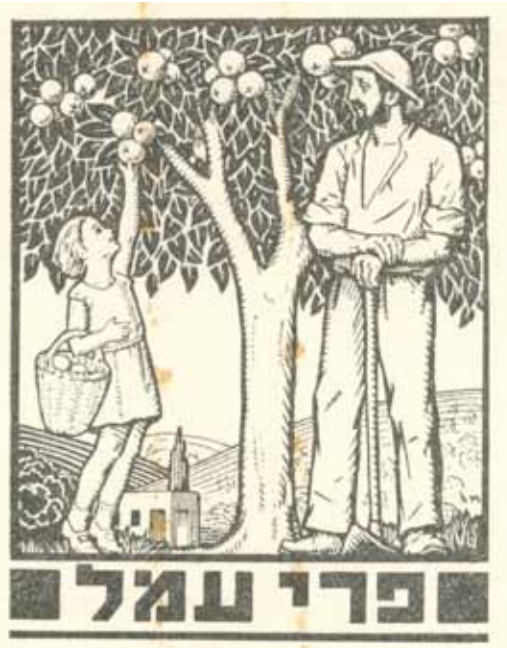
I'd like to present a chapter in the history of a creature that El Hahar Co. has spawned, which already has a name even though it has yet to exist – Kfar Etzion. It even has a younger brother, Etzion Forest, and an entire area in the land of Israel named after it – the Kfar Etzion region. Tourists in the tens of thousands have already visited it, and journalists glorify it; artists depict it, its agents

dance around it, and virtuosos praise it. [...] if this short column casts a shadow (as yet beyond the scope of [the area's] own trees) on the creature and saddens it, believe me, dear reader, I too will be sad – even more than you – for I've been nurturing the idea of developing settlements in these hills for the last ten years. I certainly don't want the plan to sink into oblivion just when it's on the brink of realization. That's why I must reveal the following. (Yosef Weitz, "On the Slopes of Kfar Etzion – a History Lesson," *Davar*, January 14, 1935, p. 3)

Weitz contrasted the company's promises of a forested paradise with the expenses involved; he also declared the plots vastly overpriced.

Holzman sued Weitz for libel but withdrew from active involvement in the company. His partners – Jerusalemites Avraham Epstein and Hayim Zvi Rakovsky – replaced him with Hayim Sugarman, an American businessman.

Plots were sold, and the Etzion Forest duly planted, but then the Arab Revolt broke out. Almost a million saplings were



Logo for a second planned settlement, Pri Amal (Fruits of Labor), which never got off the ground

Holzman invested his entire fortune in El Hahar, purchasing land in the Hebron area for Jewish agricultural development

uprooted in the 1936 uprising. Having somehow survived its lack of overseas investors and the tension between its directors and Zionist institutions, the firm finally collapsed.

In the early 1940s, the JNF kindly agreed to buy some of El Hahar's real estate, establishing Kibbutz Kfar Etzion in 1943.

Ha'avara Ltd.

In August 1933, the Jewish Agency and German Zionists negotiated an agreement with the Nazis, allowing some sixty thousand German Jews to transfer a portion of their assets to Mandate Palestine in the shape of German goods. This arrangement circumvented the Jewish boycott of German products. The transfer entitled these Jews to British investment visas and settlement in the land of Israel despite strict quotas on Jewish immigration. Transfers were underwritten by the Anglo-Palestine Bank. The agreement remained valid until Hitler invaded Poland in 1939.

Text of the certificate issued to German Jews by the Trust and Transfer Office (translated from German):

The Ha'avara ("Transfer") Ltd. Trust and Transfer Office places at the disposal of the banks in Palestine amounts in Reichmarks that have been deposited by Jewish immigrants from Germany. The banks will avail themselves of these funds in Reichmarks to make payments on behalf of Palestinian merchants for goods imported by them from Germany. The merchants will pay the value of the goods to the banks, and Ha'avara Ltd. will then relay an equivalent sum to the Jewish immigrants from Germany.

The import of German goods will thus serve to withdraw Jewish capital from Germany to the extent that local merchants make use of this arrangement.

The Trust and Transfer Office,
HA'AVARA LTD.





Arab riots shattered Holzman's dream of coexistence. The clinic he built for his son the doctor in Kfar Etzion, before and after the uprising



Back to the Hill

The land between Bethlehem and Hebron might have slipped away from El Hahar Co., but two wars later, the Etzion Bloc still bears Holzman's name

After the land Shmuel Zvi Holzman had purchased was sold to the JNF, three religious kibbutzim were established there: Kfar Etzion (1943), Masuot Yitzhak (1945), and Ein Tzurim (1946). In 1947, a secular kibbutz followed: Revadim, near Ein Tzurim.

All four settlements bravely withstood repeated Jordanian attacks during the War of Independence, but on 4 Iyar, May 13, 1948, the day before the State of Israel was declared, Kfar Etzion fell, and its defenders were massacred. The next day, the Zionist leadership ordered the other kibbutzim to surrender.

All the buildings were destroyed and replaced by Jordanian military installations and refugee camps.

Kibbutz members who hadn't been evacuated or killed in battle were taken into Jordanian captivity, languishing for more than nine months until their return.

Masuot Yitzhak, Ein Tzurim, and Revadim were all reestablished on the coastal plain near Ashdod, while some survivors of Kfar Etzion founded Kibbutz Nir Etzion in the Carmel mountain range near Haifa.

After Israel recaptured Gush Etzion in 1967, seven years after Holzman's death, Kfar Etzion was rebuilt by the children of its original settlers. A new kibbutz, Rosh Tzurim, took over Ein Tzurim's land.

Today's Etzion Bloc numbers more than 35,000 Jews in sixteen major communities and several smaller ones. Holzman's vision of bringing Jews back to the Judean Hills has become reality.

Gold Again

Financially, Holzman barely recovered from his ill-fated settlement adventure. A letter addressed to the court of Rehovot in July 1938 by Yehuda Gorodetsky, chairman of the city council, makes Holzman's precarious position plain:

We hearby confirm that Mr. Shmuel Zvi Holzman, a resident of our village, has been reduced to difficult economic circumstances by a number of law suits incurred by the sale of his shares in El Hahar Co., and that he currently cannot pay the resulting legal fees. (Ze'ev Aner, "Holzman, the Man Who Gave His Name to Gush Etzion," *Gush Etzion from Its Beginnings until 1948* [Kfar Etzion, 1986], vol. 7, p. 61 [Hebrew])

Toward the end of 1938, on the verge of bankruptcy, Holzman and his wife moved in with their son the doctor in England. Shmuel found the climate miserable and wandered restlessly until early 1939, when he heard about rich lodes of gold on the shores of British Guiana (today the Republic of Guyana). Hoping to replicate his earliest success, he set out for South America. This time, however, his wife refused to join him.

Thanks to the legendary charm that had stood him in good stead ever since his youth, Holzman established himself between the Amazon and Orinoco basins. He became the owner of the Tikwah (Hope) Mine in Mazaruni and vice president of the Mining Association of British Guiana, serving on government cultural and agricultural committees too.

Alone in South America for twelve years, Holzman devoted his solitary evenings to a new hobby – writing. The short pieces he published in the local papers about life in British Guiana eventually filled four volumes, and he authored children's stories as well.



The threat of bankruptcy sent Holzman back to the gold mines, this time for over a decade in South America. Shmuel Zvi in later years

Bitter Believer

By the end of his life, Holzman was "a bitter old man," to quote Dov Knohl, historian of Kfar Etzion and one of the few who stayed in touch with him (Aner, p. 62). Resettling in Rehovot in 1951, he lived in a modest apartment and periodically penned articles on unusual fruit trees and the pros and cons of growing them in Israel.

Though Kfar Etzion had been conquered and destroyed by the Jordanians in 1948, the agricultural pioneer was sure it would bloom again. As he told Knohl, "I believe in God's help and in the words of the prophets, who promised that 'the children shall return to their border' [Jeremiah 31:16]" (ibid.).

Shmuel Zvi Holzman died on 20 Kislev, December 9, 1960, before seeing his vision of Jewish settlements in the Judean Hills fulfilled. Yet fulfilled it was, perhaps far beyond his dreams. □

Holzman's ill-fated settlement foray left him in dire financial straits



Tamar Hayardeni

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