Local Photography

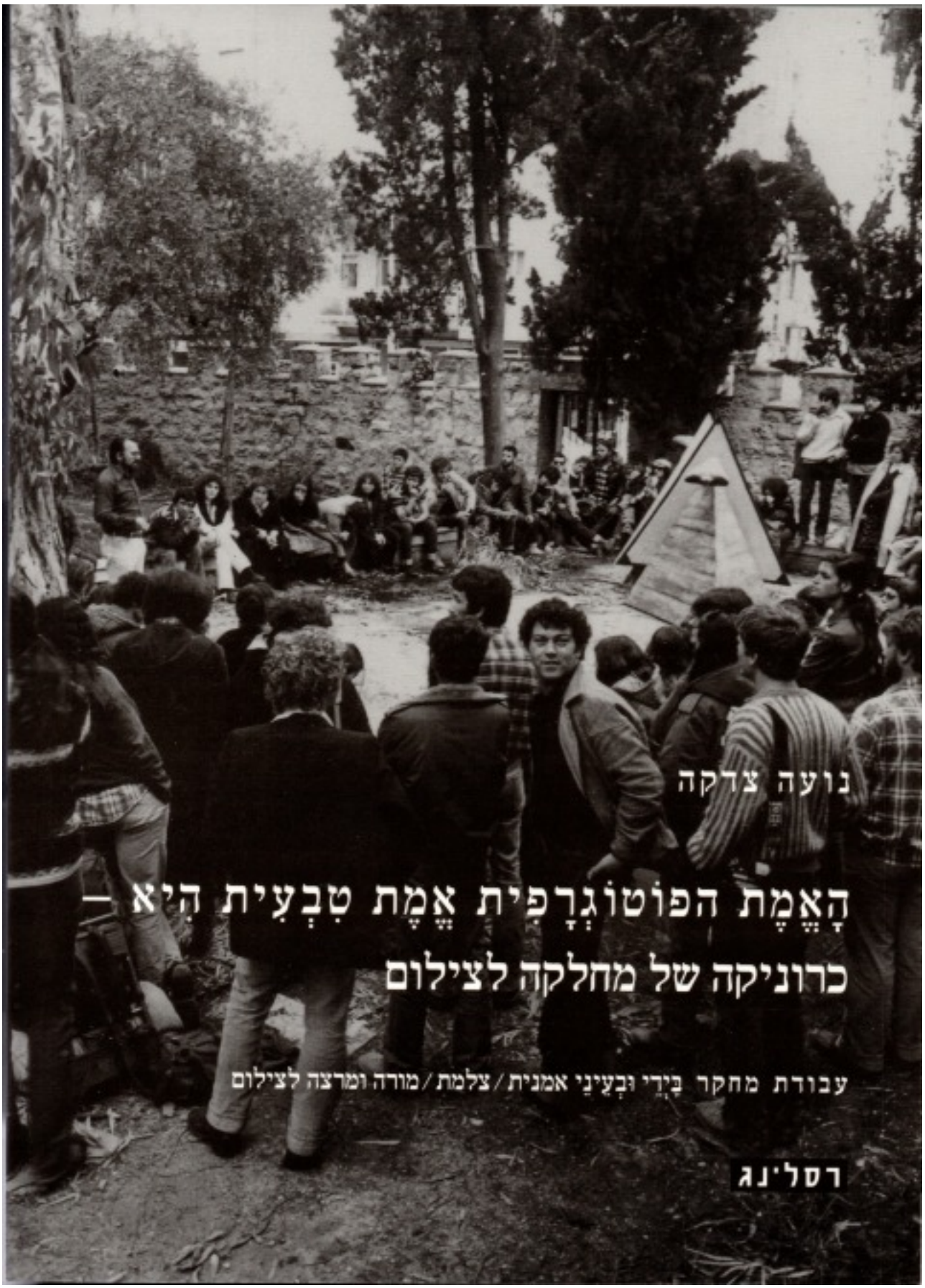
Why wasn't the work of local photographers being taught at Bezalel Academy's photography department, in its various iterations over the years? Did local photography, dealing with the connection between people and place, exist? Hagai Ulrich examines the history of local photography following the publication of Noa Sadka's book, *Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*.

Review / Hagai Ulrich August 30, 2019

Noa Sadka, *Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department,* Resling, Tel Aviv, 2018. 364 pages (Hebrew).

Noa Sadka’s book, P*hotographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*, recounts the story and history of Bezalel's photography department since the school's founding in 1905, by Boris Schatz, and describes its various transitions, from a section supplying photographic services to the first graduating class in 1984. The book’s subtitle (an unofficial one, appearing on the cover perhaps as a sort of illustration), *A study by and through the eyes of an artist-photographer-teacher- photography lecturer*, emphasizes that this is not only a research project seeking only to relay a historical tale, but an indication of the author's involvement and critical stance.

Noa Sadka, Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department (Resling, Tel Aviv, 2018). 364 pages.jpg



[1]The book cover of Noa Sadka's Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department, Resling, Tel Aviv, 2018
Courtesy of Noa Sadka

The book's four chapters are dedicated to the figures that have led the department over the years. The first three, which comprise the first half of the book, are concerned with the period prior to the establishment of the photography department: the first section focuses on Yaakov Ben Dov, who in 1910 was appointed head of the photography department (also known as the "light-painting department", which was active in promoting the ideas of Zionism through art, and viewed photography as an aide in preparing illustrations and etchings at the "old" Bezalel (1906-1929). The second is about Lou Landauer, who in 1941 founded the "photography section", sometimes also called the "department of photography" or the "photography branch."1 The third section features Avraham Hauser, Behira Eden, and Efraim Degani, who in the years 1962-1972 taught photography classes in other departments at the academy.2 These chapters present historical documents, examples, references, and personal items (notes, photographs, text fragments, receipts, letters) accompanied by Sadka's reactions: comments, personal questions, speculations, emphases, reflections on the feelings of the characters in the book, and more.

The fourth chapter focuses on the photography section's becoming an academic department with the right to award a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, and on its founder, Hanan Laskin. The chapter comprises mostly interviews with department lecturers and students, alongside their curriculum vitae and brief descriptions of their work. In this chapter, Sadka indirectly frames the secondary narrative, the critical one, through repeated questions addressed at her interviewees: has local photography been taught at Bezalel at any point, and if not, then why not? Why were there hardly any women teachers at the department? And why didn't they teach about contemporaneous local photographers?

Laskin came in 1972 to teach photography at the art department of Bezalel. Among other initiatives, he introduced videography to the department. He recounts that the painting and sculpture teachers have disputed the status of photography as an instrument for personal expression, which had caused many difficulties with the teaching of photography. In 1977, with the support of the Senate, he decided to leave the art department and start an interdisciplinary photography and video unit, which would serve as a pilot for a future photography department. He brought artists and lecturers who had studied in the USA, such as Yosef Cohen and Simcha Shirman. In 1980, the Minister of Education and the Higher Education Council approved the establishment of a photography department – the first in Israel to award a BFA degree in photography – with Laskin serving as its head until 1995.

Work critique, with Hanan Laskin and John Byle,.jpg **[2]**



[3]Work critique, with Hanan Laskin and John Byle, head of the art department, 1976
Photography: Hadasa Ben Zvi

From: *Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*, page 338. Courtesy of Noa Sadka

Sadka writes that from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Laskin has been perceived in Israel as the spokesperson for photography as an art form.3 According to the book, he wished to teach photography as a means for personal expression "in a linear, clear, serious, and sensible manner," and to emphasize technology and theory. During his tenure, the department focused on the history and theory of Western photography, which promoted straight, puristic photography, as demonstrated by American photographers such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Walker Evans, as well as certain European photographers like Eugène Atget. Other photographers mentioned as having influenced the department were Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, Eugene Smith, Robert Frank, and others.

Ansel_Adams_-_National_Archives_79-AA-T10.jpg **[4]**



[5]

Ansel Adams, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, 1941 [6]

There are profound differences amongst these photographers, all considered masters of Western photography, but all of them have used mostly straight photography with no printing manipulations, and they all sought to describe reality through control of the camera and framing. They all share technical mastery of camera and printing techniques, an understanding of framing, the meaning conveyed by an angle, and separating the subject from its context – elements that are absent from photography as conceptual art or as documentation of performance, which were prevalent in the 1970s local Jewish-Israeli art scene. According to Yosef Cohen, "there were no [local] masters, and it was the department's responsibility to achieve world-class photographic scene."4 There were several "wonderful photographers," he said, like Alfred Bernheim, or Degani as a portraitist, and others who had worked for the Jewish Agency prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, such as Shmuel Joseph Schweig and Shlomo Narinsky, but "in terms of art photography…there was really nothing."5

חנן לסקין, החשמונאים פינת אחד העם, התצלום סרוק מהספר הרחוב והסביבה, צילומים מתל אביב, 1982..jpg **[7]**



[8]Hanan Laskin, Hahashmona'im, corner of Ahad Ha'am street
Scanned from the Street and Environs, Photographs of Tel Aviv, 1982

From: *Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*, page 232.
Courtesy of Noa Sadka

Coca-Cola_shack_in_Alabama_by_Walker_Evans.jpg **[9]**



[10]

Walker Evans, Coca Cola Shack in Alabama, December 1935 [11]

The influence of American photography is associated not only with the photographic language but also with the way of documenting social life and the place as the photographer's unique and personal vision, expressed in specifically photographic visual forms. Yigal Shem-tov, who has studied at the photography department and gone on immediately to teach there, carries on Cohen's argument – that there existed no photography as a form of art – and claims that there was no photography "by those who seek to comment on their surroundings or on their inner world… no independent, autonomous photography in the tradition of Stieglitz or documentary like Evans's. There was no local photography linkage, a linkage between man and place."6 Similarly, Yaakov Shofar, another former student, asserts that "there is no photography without social engagement."7 To create this connection, as expressed in the American masters, the department started to teach photography to youth gang in the Katamon section of Jerusalem. The project came to be identified with Shofar, who had also started to teach socially-oriented photography at Bezalel, as well as conducting a workshop on art in a local context.

Elizabeth_and_Ida_Ruth_Tengle,_Hale_County,_Alabama.jpg **[12]**



[13]

Walker Evans, Elizabeth and Ida Ruth Tengel, Hale County, Alabama, Summer of 1936
[14]

Yaakov Shofar, from Natives, 1979-1983.jpg **[15]**



[16]Yaakov Shofar, from Natives, 1979-1983. Collection of the Photography Department, Bezalel archive

From: *Photographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*, page 239. Courtesy of Noa Sedaka

However, despite the wish of Shofar, Shem-Tov, and Cohen to create a linkage between man and place, according to the book, none of the department's teachers taught about the work of past or contemporaneous local photographers, excluding Simcha Shirman, who used to organize annual seminars with the purpose of "understanding photography as a medium that operates within a larger realm."8 These seminars, several of which were accompanied by exhibitions, also extended invitations to "Israeli photographers, to talk about their work."9

Sadka highlights a sentence by Yigal Shem-tov, who, while searching for an association between photographer and place and striving to establish a local photography, also says about himself that "the history of my photography is the history of American photography."10 Among the people interviewed in the book, only Nissan Perez, founder and curator of the photography department at the Israel Museum, who in 1980 started also to teach a history of photography course at Bezalel, claimed it was important to teach the history of local photography since photography had existed in Palestine/Israel before the 1980s – a different kind of photography. Perez doesn't expound on the topic, and neither does the book, but Sadka mentions a booklet Perez has intended to produce as a study aide for teaching the history of photography at the department, but in the end had not used it in his course (the book does not give the reason why). The booklet included information regarding Christian photographers who began to come to Palestine in the 1840s, Jewish photographers who emigrated at the end of the 19th century, and a bit of information about the state of photography after the establishment of the State of Israel.11 Eyal Onn, who taught at the department between the years 1980 and 1983, also studied, curated, and published books on the Christian photographers

who were active in Palestine. In the years 1982-1984, he was curator of the Gallery of Photographic Art, in Tel Aviv, but local photography had not been a part of his teaching at Bezalel.12

Indeed, ever since the invention of photography in 1839 there had been massive photographic activity in the region. Guy Raz, in his *Photographers of Palestine / Eretz Israel / Israel (1855-2000)*, reports that many European photographers came here, whether as pilgrims, as part of scientific expeditions, or as tourists. They photographed the locality as a representation of the holy places, and showed the landscape as devoid of people. In addition, there were British photographers who had settled for a while, the photographers of the American Colony who documented many events and places, and Felix Bonfils and his family, who opened a photography shop in Beirut, "Maison Bonfils". They resided there between 1867 and 1894, and photographed in Palestine the landscapes of the Christian mythology.13 Moreover, according to the photography scholar Issam Nassar, a census of the Ottoman empire showed that as early as 1877 there had been local photographers in historical Palestine.14 Dor Guez also mentions in his book *Pre-Israeli Orientalism: a Photographic Portrait* that the Armenian Patriarch Yessayi Garabedian had started a photography studio in 1859, at the St. James monastery, which functioned as the first professional photography course in Jerusalem.15

Jaffa_gate22_(cropped).jpg **[17]**



[18]

Felix Bonfils, Jaffa Gate, 1860-1880 [19]

1200px-thumbnail.jpg **[20]**



[21]

Felix Bonfils, Kidron Valley and Mount Olives, 1880 [22]

"Local photography" is a controversial term. Nassar claims that local photography is one that records the local people and surroundings, while being involved. According to him, the European photographers who had come to Palestine throughout the 19th century, and had photographed the Holy Land, should not be defined as local photographers, as well as the Zionist photographers who had made a concerted effort to describe the Zionist settlement in the land, since their photographs did not document social life in Palestine and the photographers were not involved in the community in a manner that created association or linkage, since it was “the context in which images were produced, exchanged, viewed, and assigned meanings that must be placed at the core of our attempt to discern what is local about them”.16

However, Nassar mentions a number of photographers who have operated in Palestine in the early 1900s and who matches the definition of local photography, in his view. He names Garabed Krikorian and Khalil Raad in Jerusalem,17 Issa Sawabini and Daoud Sabonji in Jaffa, and Fadil Saba in Nazareth. He asserts that, in addition to their involvement in social life, their photography's style and characteristics had been different from the Europeans', in a manner unique to the locale. While the portrait photographs of the Europeans who came to Palestine attempted to disregard and hide the individuality of the subjects, who were described as types of people from the Holy Land, in early Palestinian photography the photographed persons were always the subjects, and had a significant influence on the final appearance of their likenesses.18 This is evident in the work of Karimeh Abbud, who is considered the first local woman photographer.19 Abbud, one of two Palestinian photographers mentioned by Sadka (along with Raad), has invented a special type of portrait representation for herself, according to Nassar, turning away from the European style of giving the subject a kind of halo. Instead, her photography presented the subjects simply, spontaneously, in their normal daily life before the establishment of the State of Israel.20 Abbud also used to go outdoors and shoot landscapes, "a highly unusual sight at the time."21 Hanna Safieh was also exceptional in that unlike other Palestinian photographers, who at that time did portraits, weddings, and social events, he engaged in what might be called landscape and ethnographic photography.

According to Nassar, he may be called an artist, since his photography was documentary, as a personal comment on the place in which he was living, including documentation of the demolition of the neighborhood of el-Musrara in Jerusalem, in 1948. He did this while working with various institutions and government agencies.22

Karimeh Abbud. Photograph of an anonymous young woman, from Issam Nassar private collection, gift of Ahmad Mrowat, the Nazareth Archive.jpg **[23]**



[24]Karimeh Abbud, Photograph of an anonymous young woman
From Issam Nassar's private collection, gift of Ahmad Mrowat, the Nazareth Archive

Courtesy of Issam Nassar

FadilVirginsFountain1.jpg **[25]**



[26]

Fadil Saba, Nazareth, circa 1925, scanned postcard [27]

Abbud27A.jpg **[28]**



[29]

Karimeh Abbud, Nablus, 1925, scanned postcard [30]

Abbud.front_.jpg **[31]**



[32]

Karimeh Abbud, Kafr Kana, circa 1920, scanned postcard [33]

Jewish immigrants were also involved in photography in the early 20th century in Palestine, taking pictures for Zionist propaganda institutions, which together creating the image of the New Jew, the warrior, returning to a vacant land. Among them were Isaiah Raphaelovich, Yaakov Ben Dov, Shmuel Joseph Schweig, Shlomo Narinsky, Avraham Soskin, and many others. Some are mentioned in Sadka's book, but not as photographers-artists developing a personal expression or showing an association between man and place. These photographers do not belong in the category of "local photography" according to Nassar, but, to my understanding, many of them have documented their locality and have been involved in it out of ideology that they adopted personally as well, unrelated to their work within the Zionist propaganda machine. For instance, several of the photographers, with Soskin as the lead, are described by Dor Guez in his book as participating in a photographic genre unique to the place and time, which he called "Orientalist photography in the pre-Israeli style."23 Their photography sought to create an image of a New Jew, and for that purpose they used costumes and props, often in a sloppy and illogical manner, in a fashion that resembled performance art, as I had demonstrated in another text [34].24 Guez also mentions Tzadok Basan (referred to also by Sadka), who, in addition to his work for Zionist institutions, had also photographed the old Orthodox Jewish communities. According to Guez, he is less familiar since photographs of rabbis and religious schools resonated with the diasporic image the Establishment had been trying to eliminate by creating the new image of the Jewish Warrior.25

PikiWiki_Israel_52539_soup_kitchen_1920.jpg **[35]**



[36]

Tzadok Basan, Soup Kitchen, Jerusalem 1920 [37]

In addition to ignoring early Palestinian photography and pre-Israeli Jewish photography, the teachers at the photography department fail to mention the German influences of the 1920s, which arrived in Palestine, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s, through Jewish media and advertising photographers who, alongside their other work, have created personal photographic languages, sometimes employing straight photography. Rona Sela, a scholar of contemporary photography in Mandatory Palestine in those years, mentions many of them: Errell (Richard Levi), who has made a name for himself in the 1910s with montages combining photography and typography, in the spirit of the New Photography in Germany; Alfred Bernheim (also mentioned in Sadka's book), who was influenced by the New Objectivity and made close-ups that preserved the essential forms of the object isolated from its surroundings; Alfons Himmelreich who, in addition to his commercial work, and influenced by the Bauhaus, photographed "mostly little flowers and cacti with special properties, in which the plant is removed from its natural environment;" Yitzhak Kelter, the creator of many typological series, much valued in the architectural circles of his day but not by the fine arts people, even though his work contained "an element of an innovative, modern perception of photography;"26 and Shalom Sebba, who experimented with photography under the inspiration of new photographic trends from Germany, and investigated problems of perspective distortion, to give new interpretations of time and space, as Sela writes.27

Alfons003.jpg **[38]**



[39]

Alfons Himmelreich, Cactus Cereus Grandiflorus (Queen of the Night), 1940s, Silver print, collection of Silver Print Gallery, Ein Hod [40]

Angel_house.jpg **[41]**



[42]

Yitzhak Kelter, Engel House, Tel Aviv, probably 1940 [43]

In her research, Sela also mentions a number of Jewish women photographers, who were active in media and advertising, but used their professional work for personal expression, thus making the most of the photographic language. Bettina Oppenheimer, for example, used still life in her search for new, unconventional ways to represent an object in the spirit of the New Photography;28 the typological work of the sisters Gerda and Charlotte Meyer, which marked an innovative kind of photography, included a focus on unflattering and unaesthetic aspects of the landscape. According to Sela, they would go out to industrial areas and to construction sites, under harsh conditions, taking pictures at angles that emphasized modernity. They produced clean, chilly, powerful images that recall the serial photography Hilla and Bernd Becher would develop later on.29 Sela wrote of Helen Orgel, who had only been active for a decade, that she tended to "choose to photograph the social 'others,' such as the mizrachi Jews and the Palestinians, who had been excluded from the Zionist canon of images;"30 many images by Hannah Degani contain a unique personal view "and the aspiration to examine the landscape in an unconventional manner and experiment with the material." From the end of the 1930s on she focused on subversive urban scenes.31

It is interesting to think of the depiction of the local landscapes and spaces in unflattering ways as a once-common expression that may have penetrated the work of Peter Merom, who documented the draining of the Hula lake, and was also mentioned several times in Sadka's book. In the first two decades following Israel's establishment, the number of photographers declined, since the goals of propaganda had been achieved. Photography had by then incorporated soft, romantic trends, but Merom continued to document the obliteration of nature and was considered a leading documentary photographer for many years. He published 30 photography books, including eight photography yearbooks, more than any Israeli photographer.32 He included many photographers in the yearbooks, professionals and amateurs. In the foreword to the first yearbook, published in 1964, he wrote that he had hoped that the yearbook would help set "an artistic standard in photography,

same as in painting, sculpture, and the other arts," and show the many and varied aspects of photography while constantly maintaining an overall standard."33

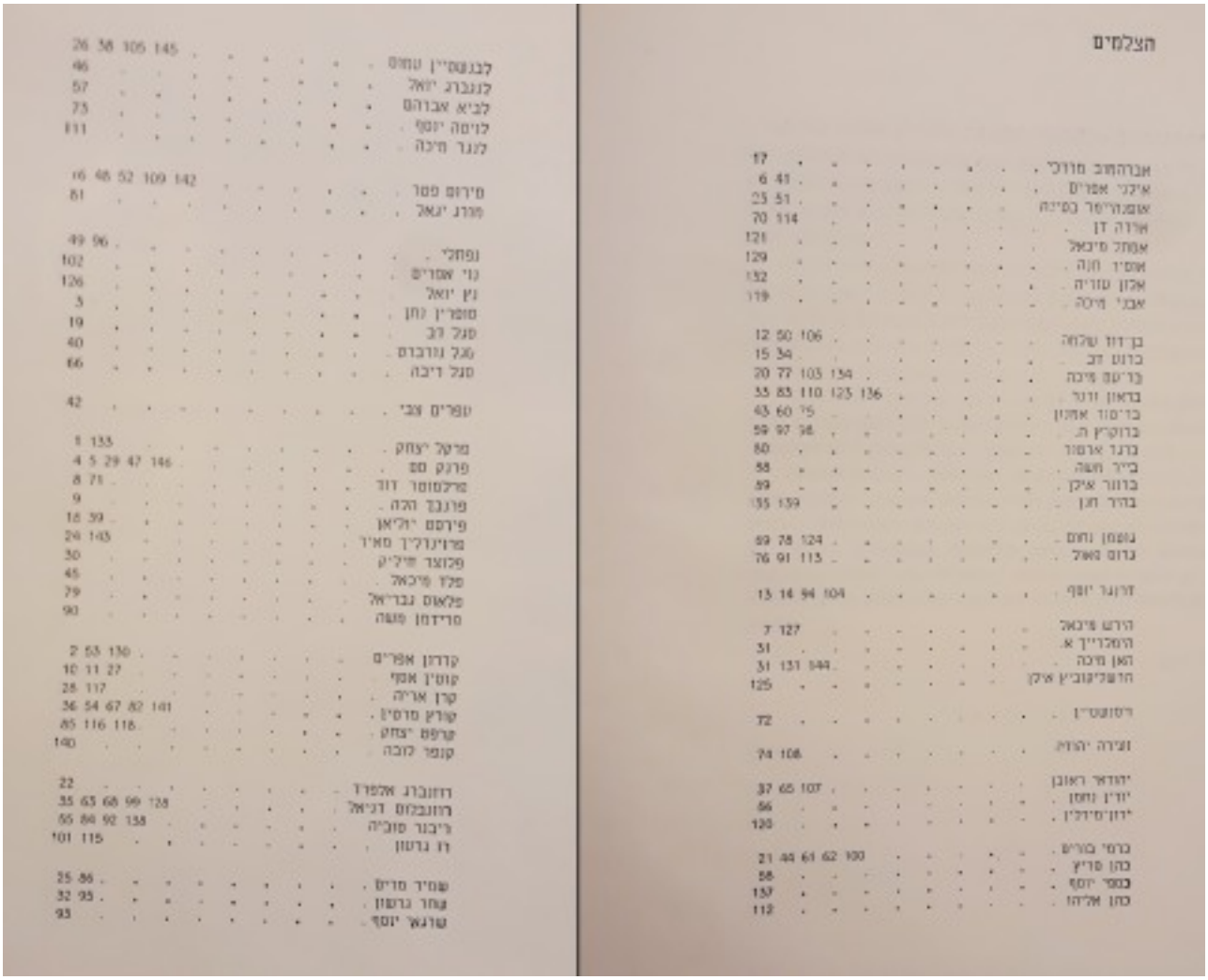
Peter_mirom_003.jpg **[44]**



[45]

Peter Merom, from: Song of a Dying Lake, Davar Ltd, Tel Aviv, 1960 [46]

[jpg.1964 1 שנתון צילום](#) **[47]**



הצלמים

[48]The names of the photographers who appear in the Table of Contents of the First Israel Photography Annual, Peter Merom (Ed.), Agam, Tel-Aviv, 1964 (Hebrew)
Scan: Hagai Ulrich, January 2019, the library of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

It appears that the claim put forward by several photography department teachers - among them Shem-tov, Shofar, and Cohen, that there never had been local photography with a personal expression, or a statement about the place – is unfounded. It just considers one kind of photographic expression – that which has been accepted by the Western modernistic language, mostly the American and the French. The criticism rings out also from the author's comments, her reactions, and her repeated questions. However, since Sadka does not present a clear counter-argument, she is leaving the matter as an open question, as happens as well in her book regarding other issues she raises, such as the almost non-existent hiring of women lecturers at the photography department at Bezalel, which she says is "a relevant and painful problem that has not yet been resolved,"[34] or the relationship between the Israel museum and Bezalel over the years and between the photography department and the museum in the 1970s and 1980s.[35]

The early photographers who were active in the region did not operate in the spirit of Bezalel's photography department. Most worked commercially, and they produced a small amount of work for a very short time. Still, it seems that the decision not to include them in the history of the local photography is odd. There are many 19th-century photographers in the history of Western photography who have been active for very brief periods, whose work was irregular or on commission. They entered photography's history, often a long time after they had been active.

It might be that the Bezalel lecturers, who got their higher education in the USA, were unaware of their local predecessors, as researches about them were done only in the last two decades. But it is fair to assume that they have at the least known about Helmar Lerski, a German photographer well-known for his high-contrast portraits, who had emigrated to area late in life and opened a studio, or Soskin, known as “the photographer of Tel-Aviv”. And even if they hadn't known about the early photographers, the question remains: why did they not teach the local photography of their own time? They had quite a few examples all around them.

- 1. See, Noa Sadka, P*hotographic Truth is a Natural Truth – a Chronicle of a Photography Department*, Resling, Tel Aviv, 2018, p. 85, (Hebrew).
- 2. See, Ibid, p.139.
- 3. See, Ibid, pp. 185-186.
- 4. Ibid, p.205 (trans. by Tohu).
- 5. Ibid (trans. by Tohu).
- 6. Ibid, p.230 (trans. by Tohu).
- 7. Ibid, p.240 (trans. by Tohu).
- 8. Ibid, p.258 (trans. by Tohu).
- 9. Ibid (trans. by Tohu).
- 10. Ibid, p. 228 (trans. by Tohu).
- 11. See, Ibid, pp.272-273.
- 12. See, Ibid, pp.263-266.
- 13. See, Guy Raz, *Photographers in Palestine / Eretz Israel / Israel (1855-2000)*, Map - Mapping and Publishing & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel-Aviv, 2003, (Hebrew).
- 14. See, Issam Nassar, *Familial Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers* [49], History & Memory, Volume 18, Number 2, Fall/Winter 2006, pp. 139-155, p. 144.
- 15. see, Dor Guez, *Pre-Israeli Orientalism: A Photographic Portrait,* Resling, Tel-Aviv, 2015, p, 54, (Hebrew).
- 16. Nassar, supra note 14, p. 144
- 17. Rona Sela curated exhibition of Khalil Raad works at Nachum Gutman Art Museum (June - September 2010) [50]. See, Rona Sela, *Chalil (Khalil) Raad, Photographs 1891-1948*, Helena Publishing House and Gutman Art Museum, Tel-Aviv, 2010, (Hebrew).
- 18. See, Nassar, supra note 14, pp. 146-148.
- 19. See, Ahmad Mrowat, *Karimeh Abbud Early Woman Photographer (1896-1955)* [51], Jerusalem Quarterly 31, pp.72-78. P.75.
- 20. See, Issam Nassar, *Early Local Photography in Palestine: The Legacy of Karimeh Abbud* [52], Jerusalem Quarterly 46, pp.23-31. P.30.
- 21. See, Rona Sela, "Women Photographers in the Private Arena, Women Photographers in the Public Arena", from: *Women Artists in Israel, 1920-1970*, Markus Ruth (ed.), Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House and Tel Aviv University Publishing House, Summer 2008, (Hebrew, trans. by Tohu).
- 22. See, Issam Nassar, *A Jerusalem Photographer: The Life and work of Hanna Safieh* [53], Jerusalem Quarterly File, pp. 24-28.
- 23. See, Guez, supra note 13, pp, 84-95.
- 24. See, Hagai Ulrich, Obvious Artifice *[34]*, Tohu, April 21, 2018.
- 25. See, Guez, supra note 13, pp, 109-110.
- 26. Rona, Sela, *Photography in Palestine in 1930s &1940s*, Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House and Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000, p,227, (Hebrew, trans. by Tohu). The book came out following the exhibition “Photography in Palestine in 1930s &1940s” at Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (May-August 2000. Curator: Rona Sela).
- 27. Ibid, p. 231.

- 28. See, Rona Sela, *In the Footsteps of Forgotten Women Photographers, The era of Zionist Photography, from the 1930s to the 1960s*, Studio Art Magazine (113), 2000, pp 40-41 (Hebrew).
- 29. See, Sela, supra note 21, p, 118.
- 30. Ibid, p. 123 (trans. by Tohu).
- 31. See, Sela, supra npte 26, p. 38.
- 32. See, Sadka, supra note 1, p. 291.
- 33. Peter Merom (Ed.), *Israel Photography Annual 1*, Agam, Tel-Aviv, 1964, (Hebrew, trans. by Tohu).
- 34. See, Sadka, supra note 1, p. 283 (trans. by Tohu).
- 35. See, Ibid, p. 26.

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[8] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/%D7%97%D7%A0%D7%9F%20%D7%9C%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%9F%2C%20%D7%94%D7%97%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%90%D7%99%D7%9D%20%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%AA%20%D7%90%D7%97%D7%93%20%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%9D%2C%20%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%A6%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9D%20%D7%A1%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%A7%20%D7%9E%D7%94%D7%A1%D7%A4%D7%A8%20%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%97%D7%95%D7%91%20%D7%95%D7%94%D7%A1%D7%91%D7%99%D7%91%D7%94%2C%20%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9D%20%D7%9E%D7%AA%D7%9C%20%D7%90%D7%91%D7%99%D7%91%2C%201982._0.jpg
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