with a cheap plastic Holga camera and photographed the fieldscapes and military images held a haunted translucence. "I'm trying to show this silence – it is very unnatural," she said. "That's the strange thing about living here. You go along with life and nothing's happening and all of a sudden – bam! – you're in the middle of a war and rockets are landing...”

We exchanged goodbyes. She finished her degree. I finished my book. She started a family, moved back to Be'eri and became director of its renowned art gallery. Life was interrupted, now and then, by mortars and rockets issued from Gaza and the cackophonous retribution from Israelis living near the border with the Strip. The 'teva adm' (colour red) of the alerts would drive families into fortified safe rooms – or off the kibbutz – until the quiet resumed. Under the dawning Shabbat light of 7 October 2023, that eerie silence was once again shattered.

More than 1,200 killed in attacks by waves of Hamas terrorists. Thousands wounded. Hostages dragged into Gaza’s labyrinth of tunnels. Kibbutzim burned to ash. And a spiralling death toll of Palestinian civilians crushed in the rubble of the unfolding war.

"Words cannot do justice to the horrors that we met this inhuman force and they took my humanity from me. And now I don’t even know the way back into humanity, into the language. And that was an insufferable feeling for me. Art is a way to give the images, to give the voice, to give this harrowing experience the words – to integrate it into the story of humanity.

A tenth of her community was killed. Kfar Aza and Nir Oz suffered similarly grievous or worse levels of loss. A month after the attacks, the lists of the dead kept lengthening as missing members were identified among charred remains. Be’eri’s survivors had been scattered in exile. Many of its leaders and artists. And, somehow, the shadow passes through the battle rages so fiercely towards the breached metal gates of the kibbutz. (“It escalated very, very quickly... Utter, utter terror.”)

By eight, they hear shooting in their neighbourhood. ("We understood that the kibbutz was conquered and there was no army coming.") More texts and voice messages: Our house is on fire! They’re throwing grenades at our safe room! Around nine o’clock, Hamas militants drag their next-door neighbour from her room, down the stairs and murder her family. Her son pleads: "Mummy, I don’t want to die today.” ("As a mother I felt like I had failed in the possible worst way, although I know it’s not my fault").

And, somehow, the shadow passes over them. A neighbour with a rifle wards off a van of terrorists. Around 6.30pm, the army reaches their house, but the battle rages so fiercely they are told to retreat into another safe room. Only after midnight do soldiers return to lead them away. Their children are petrified. She tells them: “You were super brave for 18 and a half hours. We’re going to make it. There is no other ending for our story.” Bullets him and munitions explode, as they rush towards the breached metal gates of the kibbutz. (“So many houses were on fire, and so many dead bodies and there was blood everywhere.”)

That morning and that long day and that fiery night, loosing endlessly,
Even before 7 October, few people understood the psychological tensions within the communities near Gaza as well as Dr Julia Chaitin. A social psychologist and peace builder, originally from Detroit, she has lived since 1973 with her husband on Kibbutz Urim, 14 kilometres from Gaza. She worked even closer, at Sapir College’s School of Social Work, near Sderot, until retiring in 2020. After 7 October, few people can discern a glint of reconciliation.

The 71-year-old lifelong activist has no illusions it will be an easy path to walk. From 7 October, everything changed, she told me, from her kibbutz. “I call it ‘pre-history’. It seems like a different time.”

Families on Urim had been encouraged to leave, too. Only essential workers remained, like her husband, who helps run the textile factory. After a respite in Tel Aviv, Dr Chaitin returned to Urim. “I decided that if life was going to be unsafe, at least I’d be unsafe in my own home,” she said. “We’re physically fine. Emotionally not so well.”

Hamas had plans to infiltrate Urim but missed her kibbutz, even as they killed partygoers at the Nova music festival and assaulted communities further away. Urim’s small security team had pistols. Only one in 10 apartments had safe rooms.

“Only Yocheved has been released,” said Berzon MacKie, “and we were correct.”

So, after Hamas’s long day of terror, what is the future of the kibbutzim and other settlements in the western Negev? Left-of-center kibbutzniks and religious conservatives in Sderot and other towns talked about a ‘heaven and hell’ dichotomy. An Edenic landscape far from Israel’s hectic cities that could erupt in a moment with the ‘tsu’a adom of incoming rockets. All felt ignored by their government, media, fellow citizens.

When there were what they called ‘randoms’ – drops of rockets – people here would say: “Why is it okay to be bombed? What normal person would put up with this?” said Chaitin.

“Kibbutzim felt emboldened in the region’s official designation: Ofet Aza or the ‘Gaza Envelope’. ‘What does that even mean?’ they asked. ‘And what are the real numbers?’” said Chaitin.

Communities within the zone – up to 7km from the border – get tax incentives and security funding, but the name suggests they are “more a part of Gaza and less a part of Israel.” For many residents, the feeling was disregarded, even despised, as Benjamin Netanyahu’s increasingly far-right coalitions consolidated power.

“We had this terrible feeling his government was going to be our downfall,” said Berzon Mackie. “And we were correct.”

Chaitin felt Chaim Peres was a ‘tsu’a adom’ to the kibbutzim’s gripping press. In 1990s, when he was the minister of agriculture at the funeral of Yosef Dvir last October, he was killed by Hamas at Kibbutz Bnei Brak during the attacks on 7 October 2023, Kibbutz Bnei Brak, 1950s.

Urim’s small security team had pistols. Only one in 10 apartments had safe rooms. Urim’s small security team had pistols. Only one in 10 apartments had safe rooms.

The plan is for new residences to be erected within a year for the exiled members of Be’eri. But it may take three years to rebuild the kibbutz as well as its art gallery. Until then, Berzon MacKie is running exhibitions in exile in Tel Aviv. And if the threat from Hamas remains, many residents in the region may not want to return.

“There are people who want to come back, and there are people who are keeping quiet,” said Chaitin. A couple she knew abruptly left a kibbutz near Gaza. “They say they don’t want to be living in a kibbutz,” the woman said she wasn’t going back.

“Before 7 October, any nostalgia for kibbutz life probably existed more strongly among the generations of international coexistence groups, such as other Voice, the founders of Nir Oz and Peace Now members who include Sacha Baron Cohen, Boris Johnson and me. That free spirit has been repressed by foreign guest workers, such as the dozens of Thai workers killed or captured by Hamas. Jewish Israelis are likely to recall the importance of Deganya, the first commune, founded in 1918 on principles of radical equality. Maybe they remember the pivotal battle at Kibbutz Mishmar Ha’Emek, in the Galilee, during the war of 1948. Peretz (Per) Meir visited Kibbutz Sde Boker, to which prime minister David Ben-Gurion retired in 1953. Some kibbutzniks might unite a gripping nation. ‘Now everybody in the country knows Kfar Aza. They knew Be’eri.’ said Chaitin. “People from Tel Aviv are walking around with T-shirts reading ‘I am from Nir Or.’ The names mean something to them. Now people talk about kibbutzim with empathy. People want to help with the rebuilding. They see it as a national project.”

In the years before the attacks, Sofie Berzon MacKie had been taking portraits of her living room on the kibbutz, as she’d done for a past project about her old family house in London. In January, she will exhibit the new series in Jerusalem. “It’s a bizarre coincidence that I was photographing my home and now it is gone,” she said. “Not only the building – the whole concept of my home and all its contents.”

“Now and then I can reconstruct something emotionally and carry it with me, so it’s not completely gone.”

David Leach is the author of Chasing Utopia: The Failure of the Kibbutz in a Divided Israel (ECW Press). Sofie Berzon MacKie’s exhibition, Silvery Water and Starry Earth, runs at Studio of Her Own Gallery, Jerusalem, from 12 Jan – 31 Mar. For more details and information visit studioofherown.com. David Leach, Sofie Berzon MacKie and others in an online event on Israel’s kibbutzim on 21 Feb at 7pm. See p65.