My Desert Is Hotter: The Poetry of Rivke Basman Ben-Hayim

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Born in 1925 in Wilkomer, Lithuania, Rivke Basman spent two years in the Vilna ghetto before being sent to a work camp. While in the camp, she and two others decided that each would do something every day to lift the spirits of the women in the camp: each day, one sang a song, one danced, and one recited a poem she had composed that day. Rivke Basman, then a young teenager, composed and recited a poem every day. (She refers to this obliquely in her poem “Remembrance”). When the camp was liquidated, she rolled her copy of these poems under her tongue and so managed to rescue them. She says of them now that they are "not sublimated enough" to be considered good poetry. She plans to leave them to Yad Vashem, where they will serve as a historical document.

After the war, Basman spent two years in Belgrade (1945–1947), where she married “Mula” Shmuel Ben-Hayim and helped him run the Belgrade Berihah (Heb. “flight”) stations for moving Jews out of Eastern Europe towards their illegal immigration to Palestine. Upon arrival in Israel in 1947, the couple became members of kibbutz Ha-Ma’apil, where they lived for sixteen years. When Israel’s war of independence was over, Rivke studied at a teachers’ seminar and received a teaching diploma. She taught kibbutz children and simultaneously published poetry. In the 1950s, she was a member of the Yiddish poets’ group, Yung Yisroel.

From 1963 to 1965, when her husband was Israel’s cultural attaché to the Soviet Union, she taught the children of the diplomatic corps in Moscow. At the same time she furthered clandestine contacts between Soviet Yiddish writers and the outside world. Before she returned to Israel, she studied English literature at Columbia University. After her husband’s death, she added Ben-Hayim to her name.

While it is true that the Holocaust was the great trauma of her life, Basman never openly mentions the war, the Nazis or her personal experiences. All references to that experience are oblique.

In the following poem, Basman addresses wooden toy-camels, and slyly brags that her “desert is larger”, her “desert is hotter”. These mocking line, though, are followed by the more sobering lines: “My desert burned up/Its fata morgana”. Those who survived the Holocaust had illusions (of a caring world, for one thing, of the survival of loved ones, for another) that “burned up”, and like the mirages of the desert, these turned out to be nothing but delusions:

איר קעמלען פארוויינבע
מיין מידבר איז גרעסער
מיין מידבר איז הניסער
אלע זיויט ניט מוקאנא

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Excerpt from “Kemlen”, Camels

Ir kemlen farveynte, You teary-eyed camels
Mayn midber iz greser My desert is larger
Mayn midber iz heyser My desert is hotter
Un zayt nit mekane And don’t be jealous
Farbrent hot mayn midber My desert burned up
Zayn fata morgane. Its fata morgana. (mirage)

In the following poem, the situation is reversed. Here it is not the poet who lords it over inanimate objects, but living creatures who have an advantage over the poet. They, unlike her and her fellow Jews of the Holocaust era, have an innate sense of danger. They know that a sudden move can bring injury or even death. Unlike them, the poet and her fellow Jews had to learn to be in that ever-watchful state known only to the hunted.

Excerpt from “Yam Feygl”, Water-birds

Gekukt oyf aykh baym breg fun yam, I looked at you on the water’s edge
Ir vaser-feygl oyf di dine fis, You water birds on thin legs,
Vos veysn, az a trot tsu makhn stam Who know that taking a thoughtless step
Meynt: oys mit zun un bli, meynt: oys, gevis. Means: no more sun and flower, means:
gone, for sure

Before she taught children on the kibbutz, Basman helped tend the kibbutz farm. When she speaks of that time in her life now, she says that “watching things grow was therapeutic”™. Here is an excerpt that speaks of that experience:

Metz Funleld
Metz Netzunsetzer Funleld
In Jewish tradition, one puts pebbles atop a grave-site when one visits it. However, Basman has no graves to visit; her family and friends simply vanished in the Holocaust. Accordingly, she takes stones away from empty grave-sites, and speaks to them “in silence”. It is important to note here that this short poem is entitled “Stones Bloom”. Written in the early years of Israel’s independence, it is reasonable to assume that we have here a reference to the Zionist dream of doing the impossible and making even stones bloom.

Excerpt from “Bliyen Shteyner”, Stones Bloom

Ikh hob shtyendelekh geshlept  I dragged small pebbles
The above selection of poems was written between 1959 and 1982. Since then, Basman has continued to write poetry. She now lives in Herzylia Pituach and serves as the head of the Yiddish Writers Union, located at Bet Leyvik, in Tel Aviv. Some of the poems she has written lately have not yet been incorporated into a new volume.

More often now her poems are about the passage of time and the frank realizations that self-reflection brings. Of the following three poems, the first “On the Way Home”, deals with time (“approaching evening”) that “swallows/A step and a poem and a tear”, the second, untitled but preceded with a *, frankly admits that the complaints of the elderly are rooted in their own deficiencies (“Look into your eyes/That complain about glasses/Take a look at your feet/That complain about shoes”), while the third, also untitled, and also preceded by *, is an admission that while the void continues to be painful, the poet remains assertive and resilient.
Taking the road for some light,    Adurkhgeyn dem veg nokh far likht,
Let a flower not become darkened  Nit nakhtik zol vern a bloom,
Let a stone not be found awry.    Nit tref a shteyn umgerikht.

Competing with the evening which tinges  In farmest mitn ovnt vos molt
With darkness the greenness of grass   Oyf tunkl di grinkayt fun groz
Before the night which hides        Nokh eyder di nakht vos farshtelt
From gazes the blue and the rose.  Fun blik dos bloy un dos roz.

Competing with time which swallows  In farmest mit der tsayt vos farshlingt
A step and a poem and a tear       A trot un a lid un a trer
And hears not the heart where there’s singing  Un hert nit dos harts vi es zingt
And in evening- yet more.      Afile in ovnt nokh mer.

(15/07/2008)
I have two watches.  
One is fast.  
The other is slow. 
The one that’s fast, always has to wait, always loses. 
How can you match up watch and time? 
Look into your eyes that complain about glasses, take a look at your feet that complain about shoes, and beg of the paths, don’t be so far away, then you will have the watch that matches the time.

Ikh hob tsvey zeygerz.  
Eyner loyft  
Der tsveyter shpetikt. 
Der vos loyft 
Darf keseyder vartn, 
Der vos shpetikt, 
Der farlirt.
Vi zhe nemt men a zeyger tsu der tsayt?
Blik arayn in dayne oygn
Mit taynes tsu di briln, 
Gib a kuk oyf dayne fis 
Vos hobn taynes tsu di shikh 
Un betn bay di vegn 
Zayt nit azoy vayt,-
Demolt vestu hobn 
Yenem zeyger
Matches time. (29/06/2008)  

A doctor once told me  

"There’s nothing there that should hurt you" -  

And he did not understand  

That what hurts is the NOTHING.  

The doctor was a good one  

He prescribed drops with a sunny name,  

The drops are long since gone,  

The doctor once told me  

"There’s nothing there that should hurt you" -  

And he did not understand  

That what hurts is the NOTHING.  

The doctor was a good one  

He prescribed drops with a sunny name,  

The drops are long since gone,  

A doctor once told me  

“Dort iz nito vos zol dir vey ton” -  

Un er hot nit farshtanen  

Az mir tut vey der \textbf{N I T O}.  

Der doctor iz a gutter geveyn  

Un hot mir tropns mit a zuniknomen farshribn,  

Der tropns fun lang shoyn nito,
Only the sun has remained. Der zun iz farblibn.

So I take the sun every morning Nem ikh di zun ayedn frimorgn

Drowned with a steady hope Fartrinkt mit bitokhn

I am one of those whom Ikh geher avade tsu di, vos

Even a doctor has not broken. (20/06/2008)vi Afile a doctor hot nit tsebrokhn.

Basman composed her first book of poems while she was still a member of Kibbutz Ha-Ma'apil; the rest, after she had left the kibbutz. While he was alive, her husband designed and illustrated every one of her books. After his death, she continued to include prints of his art work in her books of poetry.

Basman is the only living Yiddish poet who has collaborated with an Israeli poet to produce a dual-language Hebrew-Yiddish book of poems. The Hebrew-language Israeli poet, Roni Somek asked Basman to translate his Hebrew poems into Yiddish. She did so, and in 2008 the two of them put out the jointly produced, dual-language book.viii

Basman Ben-Hayim has won many prizes: the Arie Shamri prize in 1980, the Fichman prize in 1983, the Itzik Manger prize in 1984, the prize awarded by the chairman of the World Zionist Federation in 1989, the David Hofstein prize, 1992, The Beith Sholem Aleichem (Polack) prize in 1994, the Leib Malakh prize (awarded by Beit Leivick) in 1995, the Mendele prize of the city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa in 1997 and the Chaim Zhitlowsky prize in 1998

By the early twenty first century, not only was the Yiddish world aware of Basman's work, even the Hebrew-speaking Israeli public was aware of her work. In 2008 she was invited to an international poetry festival held in the Galilee. A reader of (the Hebrew language daily) Ha-Aretz complained: "It is especially unfortunate that [the Ha-Aretz reviewer] ignored the moving appearance of the great Yiddish poetess, Rivka Basman Ben-Hayim, who captivated the audience with her clever poetry.ix

In 2009, as part of the centennial celebrations of Tel Aviv, the municipality sponsored an evening of "the sounds of Yiddish in the first Hebrew city", and dedicated a session of the celebrations to Basman and her poetry.x It was an acknowledgment of the Hebrew speaking world that Yiddish poetry in general, and Basman in particular, deserve a place of honor in the history of the state of Israel and of Tel Aviv.

While Basman has been the subject of much critical attention in the Yiddish world and some of her poetry has been translated into Hebrew, very little of her work has been translated into English. Unfortunately, the great body of her work remains available to Yiddish readers only.xi

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i Personal communication
These poems may well make it into Basman Ben Hayim’s next book of poems. She and I discussed my translations before I presented them to English-speaking readers.

The book has a dual title. In Hebrew it is “Ani Iraqi-Pijama”, while in Yiddish it is called “Ikh bin an Iraker-Pidzame”.

These celebrations took place in the Crown Plaza hotel from September 10-12, 2008, and the poet Rafi Vaykhart spoke about Basman and her poetry.

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