
Reviewed by Leora Freedman, Toronto, Canada

Although the Hebrew version of Shulamit Lapid’s *Valley of Strength*, originally published in 1982, has attained the status of a contemporary classic in Israel, the 2009 English translation deserves to be more widely read. Lapid’s subject in this work of historical fiction is the world of the First Aliyah agricultural pioneers of the 1880s, which she portrays in a richly detailed, complexly structured novel. The book’s artistry involves multiple leaps both backward and forward in time, as well as unexpected illuminations of corners of the large canvas the author has sketched. These techniques are fitting to the layers of Jewish experience that drive the novel, and they also deliver a sense of the deep, almost mystical understanding that motivates many of Lapid’s characters.

The novel’s protagonist is Fania Mandelstam, a sixteen-year-old girl who has fled Europe for Ottoman-ruled Palestine. Also included in the book’s sweep are many actual historical figures, like Laurence Oliphant, an early Christian supporter of a reconstituted Jewish homeland, and the poet Naftali Herz Imber, author of *Hatikvah*. The fictional characters interact with these historical figures in convincing scenes which dramatize the obstacles to Jewish agricultural settlement in a land that “consumed her inhabitants” through disease, hunger, and despair, and also sent numbers of them fleeing abroad or at least back to town. The novel documents the excruciatingly labyrinthine and corrupt Ottoman rule, as well as the intricate and often venomous Jewish politics of the day. The stories of what the communities working the land were forced to endure veer between comedy and horror.

At the heart of the novel is Fania’s memory of the pogrom she survived in Russia, during which all her family members were murdered in their home while she was raped on her parents’ bed. The rape produced her blond, blue-eyed baby daughter Tamara, whom she grows to love despite the flashbacks that plague her and her initial inability to tell her husband the truth about her past or relate to him sexually. As a poverty-stricken new immigrant, she enters a “marriage
of convenience” with Yehiel Silas, whose wife has died and who has two children she cares for along with her own baby; she goes to live with him in Gei Oni, the settlement that preceded Rosh Pina. Yehiel, a native of Safed, is of mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi descent, and Lapid often seems to be trying to show symbolically the Zionist role played by Middle-Eastern Jews, as well as the parallels in the histories of Sephardim and Ashkenazim. The novel brings to the forefront the experience of Jewish women who were raped during pogroms at many points in history, not only in Europe and Russia but in the Middle East as well. Upon her arrival in Jaffa, Fania muses about how apparent it is that the Middle-Eastern Jews have Arab “blood,” much as her daughter also descends from a gentile. Symbolically, her neighbor Riva in Gei Oni is a native of Safed and is the only survivor of an Arab pogrom in which the rest of her family were murdered.

Both the landscape and its varied inhabitants are rendered with care and an absence of sentimentality. Lapid weaves into her narrative the spectrum of Jewish attitudes toward the local Arab peasantry as well as the nomadic Bedouin, along with the uneasy relationship between the peasants and the Bedouin. The role of ideological commitment in motivating the few Jews who have remained in Gei Oni during the drought is presented in moving scenes, which are never over-romanticized. Fania’s growing idealism provides the link between her past losses and present hardships, and it also provides a counterpoint to the unremittingly harsh circumstances she faced in Europe and continues to face in the Land of Israel. Her discovery of her love for the land and her willingness to die for it if necessary are rendered through emotional but visually precise descriptions:

They climbed along the channel of Ayn Abu Halil, drawn by threads of enchantment towards the summit. The sound of their footsteps as they trudged through the dust of the mountain was the only sound they heard. How she loved this wild landscape! The bare hills dotted here and there with an ancient olive or a lone terebinth, the chilly peak of faraway Hermon, the chalk cliffs crisscrossed by rivulets of lava. A pair of eagles circled in the sky, descending a short distance and then soaring up again. (60)

As in Agnon’s work (one can’t help but think of Yitzhak Kumer, the young Second-Aliyah era immigrant in Only Yesterday) the characters reveal themselves both through dialogue and long interior monologues, though Lapid’s technique is more contemporary and concise. Lapid’s female protagonist is ahead of her time: she has a genuinely egalitarian relationship with
her husband, with whom she eventually falls in love; she travels independently; starts her own school for girls, and runs her own business. Yet she fits within her historical framework, as there were real Jewish women who did all these things. Importantly, Fania does them with a degree of inner conflict, which lends depth and believability to her character. Her consciousness of all this is rendered in interior monologues that often seem like meditations on the nature of marriage in a radically changing world:

It wasn’t often that she stopped to reflect on the form that their shared life had taken, and now, immersed in her worries, she saw their life as it really was. Absolute freedom he had given her. She was free to pursue her business activities, travel the roads, stay away from home. He respected her right to lead a life separate from his. Not one of the women she knew, not even Helen Leah, was allowed to behave as she did. Yehiel never said anything to imply that this freedom was a gift from him, or that her actions were unacceptable. She was part of the new society he aspired to create; did he see this as another sacrifice he had to make? (312)

Unlike the historical fiction in which authors attempt to prompt readers’ identification with the characters by attributing to them motives that are more typical of our era, Lapid respects the limitations of what we can know of another time, and she wisely avoids making Fania too similar to a present-day protagonist. Fania is cultured and introspective, but she does not think or behave according to our mores. Even in her moments of greatest terror, she displays a kind of nineteenth-century psychological and emotional restraint; she does not allow herself to think too much about the past, and she does not confess all her feelings either to her husband or to her women friends. As such, her character illuminates the particular style of tenacity and resilience that enabled at least some Jews to remain and build the country under such difficult conditions. The novel’s tone, which is slightly formal and elegiac, also conveys something of the spirit and linguistic cadences of Fania’s era.

Interestingly, Valley of Strength details the intensely religious nature of many of the earliest pioneers, along with the conflict between the ideologically-driven agricultural Zionists and the old, settled Jewish communities in the towns and cities of pre-state Israel. The role of traditional Jewish observance in motivating Zionist development of the Land of Israel as well motivating its opposite, which was more akin to a replication of life in the Jewish diasporas of Europe and the Middle East, is explored through many interactions between the farmers of Gei

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Oni and the townspeople of Safed and Jaffa. The novel thus delivers a deep view of Israeli history, the threads of which are nicely interwoven with the story about Fania, her family, and her friends.

Philip Simpson’s translation from the Hebrew is for the most part clear and readable, with only occasional infelicities of diction. The change of title from *Gei Oni*, which in Hebrew means *Valley of Poverty*, may have been the publisher’s attempt to appeal to an English-reading audience looking for strong female characters, which can certainly be found in abundance here. However, the new title doesn’t seem as apt as the original one, which seems to better encapsulate the realities of the three-year drought; the hillside filled with rocks; the dried-up stream; empty food containers; murderous bandits; and the children and adults who are skeletal with starvation and dying of malaria. *Valley of Poverty* seems more in the style of the pioneers of this era as Lapid portrays them—outspoken, grimly aware of the odds against them, but even in the midst of struggle and deprivation, not without irony. Through the association with “valley of the shadow of death,” the original title also situates the novel in Jewish tradition, which above all else informs the lives of Lapid’s characters.