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Tuvia Ruebner: Life and death coexist in an ever evolving house of meaning

On the edge of the abyss

The centrality of loss permeates the poet Tuvia Ruebner's work
By Robert Hirschfield

THERE IS a late poem by Tuvia Ruebner titled "A Question":

*How many years can one
maintain one's balance on
the edge of the abyss?*

It could serve as the guiding question of his life and work.

Born January 30, 1924, in Slovakia, Ruebner made *aliya* in 1941, settling in Kibbutz Merhavia in the Jezreel Valley. The following year both his parents and his kid sister Litzi perished at Auschwitz. Eight years later, Ada Klein, his wife, was killed in a bus accident, in which he was badly burned. His second marriage to his present wife, pianist Galila Jizreeli, in 1953 produced a second son, Moran, who

after fighting in the First Lebanon War, made his way to South America and was never heard from again.

So, it is not surprising that Rachel Tzvia Back writes in her introduction to "Illuminated Dark," the first collection of Ruebner's work to be translated into English, about the centrality of loss in the poet's work. She begins with his lines "Testimony," the book's opening poem, which first appeared in the volume "Poems Seeking Time" (1961):

*I exist in order to say
these are the crossbeams and chronicles
of my parents, coal,
ash, wind*

*of my sister in my hair blowing
back and back, a night wind*

In his early poems, and even in some of his late ones, we find along with loss, the sepulchral shadow of negation, loss's dour sister. We find it in "My Little Sister," which appeared in his first published book in 1957, one of his many poems about Litzi, to whom this book is dedicated:

*In the roar of the wind rushing toward
where
is my sister the slow-moving one
I could not find her.
Among the olive trees on the path ascending
is my sister a cloud
I could not find her.*

Here negation travels from the place of Jewish death to the place of Jewish rebirth as a force to contend with in life and refine in art.

It is part of Ruebner's profound interior journey, a journey in which life and death co-exist in an ever evolving house of meaning. Fifty-seven years may have passed from "My Little Sister" to "After Beckett," the final poem in this volume, but the two works are linked by the umbilical cord of negation. What separates them is tonality. "After Beckett" dances with its mimicry of the avant-gardist.

*Do you write?
No. Not me.
Then who writes?
How would I know?
Then who if not you?
Why me?
Is there anyone else in this room?
I can't see.*

The author of 15 volumes, Ruebner, who was awarded the Israel Prize in 2008, is a phenomenon: a poet in the Hebrew language for whom Hebrew is a second language. (Lea Goldberg, Dan Pagis, Abba Kovner, Agi Mishol, among others, were all cut from this same strange cloth.)

"Hebrew, My Love," funny and wryly sardonic in its intimacy, is about this pilgrimage from language to language. The poet addresses his adopted language as a lover with whom there have been quarrels. The issues may be minor, but Ruebner wrestles with them wholeheartedly, the way he wrestles with everything.

*I turned my back on you.
You turned your back on me
though we still pulled towards each other
like magnets to the pole
like the moon and the tides.
I conjugated at your will, I accepted your
grammared sentences
I queried your roots,
I stuttered, became silent, I begged and
whispered,
and you, turning inward, saw nothing.
Until suddenly, you opened up wide like a
field in the wind
and your voice burst forth from my throat.*

Ruebner's first language was German. Rilke was an early influence. He has translated his Hebrew poems into German, and some of his early German poems into Hebrew.

The main reasons for his adopting Hebrew, according to Back, were that his second wife, to whom he's now been married for more

than 60 years, spoke no German, and that his two Israeli mentors, the writers Ludwig Strauss and Werner Kraft, urged him to make the transition. She also mentions, significantly, that German was the language of his "lost beloveds." A two-pronged instrument of intimacy, being both the language of his family and the language of its annihilators.

Ruebner, at the request of Bernhard Albers, his German editor at Rimbaud Verlag, first wrote his memoir, "A Short Long Life," in German. Rimbaud has published most of his 15 volumes. It will also be publishing a collection of essays by 30 German literary critics on the poet's life and work.

The poetry in this book reflects a man who refuses to be pinned down either nationalistically or ideologically. Take the poem, "Soldier's Memorial Day," a theme familiar to Israelis.

It begins conventionally enough:

*They stand among the stones/ as though
not knowing where to turn./ The fathers,
their faces melting, memory-weary/ like
broken branches hanging from the trees.*

Then, suddenly, we find ourselves hacked away from the expected. The old poet flexes his primal aversion to history's burden.

*Oh, beautiful country, pursuing
us from one end of the world to the other
in yellow and green fields in cloud shadows.
Even with thorn and thistle, with nettle and
briar, you seduce*

In the following stanza, more in sorrow than anger, he wraps his prophetic voice around the pain of his people:

*What a terrible love, year after year, this
ceaseless memory
always tearing open the wound until it
blooms again and again.*

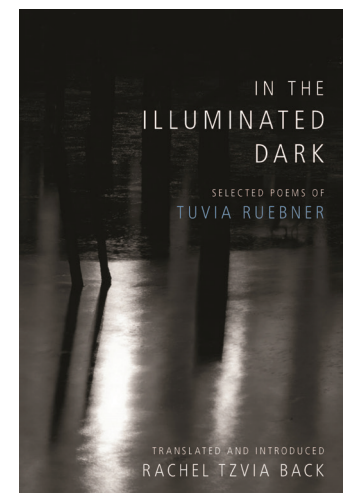
The poem concludes with the three words sewn into that day: *Oh, my son*. An allusion perhaps to his vanished son Moran.

To fully appreciate the scope of Ruebner's poetry, turn finally to his poem "Transformations," a title that detonates deep and unknowable echoes. What netherworlds must be passed through for that word to be uttered by this poet?

"Transformations" is about heaven, with a Ruebneresque caveat:

*How the sun couples with a cloud!
How the wind shifts the shape of the trees!
There's the fragrance of rain in the air!
Oh, all this joy!
Even after me.*

AMONG THE
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IS MY SISTER A
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