

MISZELLE

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Biografien jüdischer Frauen: Lea Goldberg (1911–1970)

The events commemorating the centennial of Lea Goldberg's birth took place in 2011 amidst a flurry of publications that included renewed editions of formerly published texts as well as recovered materials, letters, diaries and essays. At the same time, renewed critical and scholarly interest in the poet, who died in 1970, had been growing steadily. Research addressed not only her poetry, which had become exceedingly popular in Israel, partly due to the many sung versions of her verses, (including, for example, "White Days" and "Songs from the Land of my Love") but also her complex intellectual legacy, aesthetic, cultural and personal struggles, biographical history and diversified writings. These included, besides her prominent poetical oeuvre, theatrical plays and reviews, translations from several languages and literary traditions (notable among them is Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), literary essays, novels and children's literature. Besides being a prominent poet and critic, she founded and headed the Comparative Literature Department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.



Picture 1: Lea Goldberg (1946), National Photo Collection of Israel

Goldberg was born in 1911 in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), and grew up in Kaunas, Lithuania. World War I traumatized her childhood and led to the mental deterioration of her father after he was detained and tortured by border officials on his way back home to Lithuania at the end of the war. This event, depicted in Goldberg's semi-autobiographical novel *And This is the Light* (1946),¹ had a lasting impact on the life of her family and resulted in her estrangement from her mentally ill father, enhanced by her own fear of developing a mental illness throughout her life. Goldberg, who felt stifled in the provincial, Eastern European small-town Jewish community, and who dreamt of the cultural capitals of Europe, left to pursue higher education in Berlin in 1930, after a year at the University of Kaunas. She completed her master's degree at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Her diaries record her experiences of the city, which offered her access to the cultural treasures of Europe, but also fostered a sense of loneliness and alienation. In 1932 she began writing her Ph.D. in the Oriental

¹ All the titles of Lea Goldberg's works are translated from Hebrew.

Seminar in the University of Bonn, under the supervision of Prof. Paul Kahle. Her dissertation studied the Samaritan translation of the Bible, and she was awarded a Ph.D. in 1934, despite restrictions on Jewish students in Nazi Germany.² The historical circumstances compelled her departure from Europe and permanent move to Pre-State Israel in the following year of 1935. Her emotionally laden parting from Germany and Europe is depicted in her debut novel *Letters from an Imaginary Journey* (1937) – a fictional literary travelogue laid out as a series of imaginary letters addressed to a forsaking lover. Her troubled relations to Europe and strong commitment to its cultural traditions of Humanism and Romanticism remained a vital force in her poetic oeuvre. It is also the subject of her 1938 essay "The Courage for the Mundane," in which an aesthetic debate on Realism and Romanticism in the context of the tide of Fascism threatening Europe and Western Civilization transforms into a discussion of the importance of both the mundane and the sublime in an individual's life and work.³

Goldberg's clear and accessible poetical mode, which is deceptively simple and unassuming, had been somewhat undervalued by her contemporaries, but is now seen as the key to her cultural endurance.⁴ Her modernistic poetry emphasizes the concrete, the ordinary and the everyday, and is wary of the fiery extremities of expressionistic passion, or visionary transcendence. Her first poetry volume, *Smoke Rings*, appeared in 1935 upon the poet's permanent move to Eretz Yisrael, and describes images of solitary confinement within the reflective and reflexive space of the poet's bedroom, amongst the evening shadows, in the wake of a forlorn love. As Giddon Ticotsky points out, the volume's emphasis on the personal and sentimental rather than the political and social and its distinctly European settings set it apart from the conventional Hebrew poetry written in 1930s Pre-State Israel. Goldberg's first years in Eretz Yisrael were a time of transition during which the poet experimented with various genres before reclaiming her poetical voice in her new homeland.⁵

Goldberg's second volume of poetry, *Green-Eyed Spike*, came out in 1939. In this volume she merges the natural landscapes of her native Lithuania with those of Eretz Yisrael, focusing on rustic scenes and characters and naïve experiences of childhood. Her next volume, *Song in the Villages*, from 1942, returns to Eastern European folklore, and as described by Tuvia Ruebner⁶, indirectly expresses Goldberg's first reaction to the horrors of World War II, alongside more direct references to current events in her journalistic essays. The following volume, *From My Old Home* (1944) famously depicts Goldberg's sense of duality, epitomized in the phrase "the pain of the two homelands" from the poem "Pine," in which she compares herself to the pine trees of Jerusalem: "Like you I was planted twice / and my roots are in two different landscapes."⁷ The poetry volume works,

² See Weiss, Yfaat: *Lea Goldberg: Lehrjahre in Deutschland 1930-1933*, Göttingen 2010.

³ See Weisman, Anat: "After all of this, I will have to muster all of my 'courage for the mundane': On Leah Goldberg's Paradigmatic Temperament, in *PROOFTEXTS* 33:2 (2013), pp. 222–250.

⁴ See Ticotsky, Giddon: *Light Along the Edge of a Cloud: Introduction to Lea Goldberg's Oeuvre*, Tel Aviv 2011 [in Hebrew], p. 2; Bar-Yosef Hamutal: *Lea Goldberg*, Jerusalem 2012 [in Hebrew], pp. 11–22.

⁵ See Gordinsky, Natasha: *In Three Landscapes: Leah Goldberg's Early Writings*, Jerusalem 2016 [in Hebrew].

⁶ Ruebner, Tuvia: *Lea Goldberg: Monography*, Tel Aviv 1980 [in Hebrew], p. 69.

⁷ Goldberg, Lea: *Sooner and Later*, Tel Aviv 1979 (1959) [in Hebrew], p. 182. My translation.

as Ruebner⁸ observes, to resurrect the lost past, home and mode of being that have all been utterly obliterated.

Goldberg's next poetry volume, published following the novel *And This is the Light*, which further explores the author's conflicted relationship to the lost world of Eastern European Jewish life, was *On the Blossoming* (1948), in which the response to World War II is processed and shaped through a vegetation myth, in images of growth and renewal, beauty and hope, alongside hopelessness, demise and death. One of the iconic poems from this volume, entitled after its first line "Will the Days Come," describes the desire for healing through immersion in nature and a reestablishment of the Humanist perspective in the wake of violence and destruction. The volume expresses the strong Italian influence on Goldberg, who was the translator of Petrarch's sonnets into Hebrew. These influences are evident both thematically and stylistically, with the reliance on the poetical forms of the Italian Renaissance. According to Ruebner,⁹ the choice of these closed poetical patterns mirrors the desire for stability and reassurance in the wake of the war, and it is further developed in her next volume, *Morning Lightning* (1955), in which the form of the Italian sonnet is prominent. This volume includes a pseudo-historical sonnet cycle titled "The Love of Therese du Meun" written from the perspective of a seventeenth century French noblewoman and describing a platonic, metaphysical love affair.

In 1959 Goldberg collected her poetical work in the anthology *Sooner and Later*, making various changes, omitting some of her earlier poems and adding verses to others, as well as an entirely new section of poems, entitled "Final Words." The comprehensive summary of her poetical oeuvre was received with mixed reactions: alongside praise by her many supporters, two prominent reviewers, poet Natan Zach and literary scholar Dan Miron, criticized the poet's overall poetic mode and devalued her contribution to Hebrew poetry. Goldberg's final poetical volume, *With This Night* (1964), conveys the bitterness of this rejection and an overall atmosphere of demise characteristic of the poet's final years. In 1970, she died from cancer at the age of 59; posthumously, Ruebner edited a volume of published and unpublished poems from her final years, which came out under the title *The Rest of Life* in 1971.

Several other non-poetic works have become an inseparable part of the poet's oeuvre, extending and enriching her cultural connotations. *A Meeting with a Poet* (1952) is a memoir recounting her acquaintance with the Hebrew poet Avraham Ben Yitzhak, which developed into a personal and intellectual friendship as well as a one-sided infatuation. This complex text lends itself to discussions of genre, gender and aesthetics.¹⁰ Of her plays, the most popular is "The Lady of the Castle" (1956), in which a count hides a young Jewish girl in a historical castle in order to save her from the Nazis, but keeps her captive and oblivious to the fact that the war had ended. The play brings to the foreground the fundamental tension between the appeal of the Romantic and timeless and the demands of historical reality. Finally, Goldberg's wide range of writings for children, which includes song lyrics and books which have become classics (for example, *A Room for Rent*,

⁸ Ruebner, Tuvia: *Lea Goldberg: Monography*, pp. 75–78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁰ See Weisman, Anat: *The Memoire as a Polemic Debate: Lea Goldberg's image in Meeting with a Poet*. In Kartun-Blum, Ruth/Weisman, Anat (eds.): *Meetings with a Poet*, Tel Aviv 2000 [in Hebrew], pp. 74–97.

1959), has established her as a popular children's author and contributed to her mainstream position in Israeli culture. She received the Israel Prize in 1970, and her portrait is featured on the 100 NIS banknote. Today, Goldberg enjoys an iconic status in Israel, unmitigated, and perhaps enhanced, by her many complexities and contradictions.

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About the author Yaara Keren's doctoral dissertation, from the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, explores the hermeneutical and metapoetical patterns in Lea Goldberg's long prose. Her research interests also include English and American Literature. She works as an English translator and editor, and as a lecturer of English for Academic Purposes at Sapir College in Israel.