
A Little Bit of Family History

(Selections)

Hamutal Bar-Yosef

Translated from the Hebrew by Kathryn Hellerstein and Hamutal Bar-Yosef

I

My grandmother Dvorah supported the family by boiling soap and
plucking feathers.
My father was the first son who survived, after two freckled daughters
And baby boys who died in all sorts of epidemics.
For a whole year, she kept him at home, wrapped in a feather comforter,
And refused to open the windows.
My mother always argued that he was and would forever be spoiled,
Even when he scrubbed her underpants on a washboard.
She told how grandmother Dvorah would immediately throw away
any tea with milk
That was not to his taste and prepare a new cup of tea.
I never heard a single word from my father about his mother.

III

My father's father was known by the name, "The Honest Jew,"
Which is why they entrusted him to distribute certificates
Permitting the quota of Jews to enter Palestine.
His eldest daughter, the most freckled,
Received a certificate in 'twenty-three,
And, after a year of hunger, illness, and the earthquake in Palestine,
Immigrated with her family to Argentina.
His beloved son, his daughter-in-law, and his grandson stood in line
until 'thirty-six
And almost missed their chance.

V

In nineteen thirty-nine, my grandmother Rivka, once a rich merchant,
 Wrote to my mother the kibbutznik, her eldest daughter:
 Maybe it would be worthwhile for me to make aliyah to Palestine?
 It's not worthwhile, my mother wrote back to her,
 You will not find any servants here.
 When she told me about it, there was no remorse, or anything else,
 in her voice.

VI

In her last days, in the old age home,
 When her brow and jaws were covered with brown stains,
 And she despaired of taking care of the ill
 And of supervising the hat-knitters,
 When it became clear that there was no reason to be proud
 Of the Russian she had learned in the *Gymnazia*,
 My mother began to study Esperanto.

Only then did I realize:
 Along with leading the Zionist youth movement
 And discussing Schopenhauer,
 Esperanto had excited her
 More than seventy years ago
 In her half-Jewish town Rovno.

Now she's speaking Esperanto
 With the angels, sure
 That all the others there—
 Who can speak only Yiddish—
 Are envious.

Hamutal Bar-Yosef teaches at the Department of Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University in Beer-Sheva. Since 1971, she has published eight collections of poetry, the last of which is Mazon (Food), as well as short stories, a children's book, and a collection of poetry translations of the Russian poet Olga Sedakova. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Akum Prize (1978), the Tel-Aviv Prize (1984), the Jerusalem Prize for poetry (1997), and the President of Israel Prize for poetry (2002). Her poems have been translated into English, French, German, Russian, Ukraine, Arabic, and Yiddish.