HAARETZ

Books

Remember Me and My World!'

"Yemima (Avidar) Tchernovitz: Secret Diaries," edited and with notes by Rama Zuta, The Yemima Center for Literature for Children and Youth, Beit Berl, and Dvir Publishing, 216 pages, NIS 74.

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A well-known Israeli author once complained to me that modern technology has deprived him of one of his greatest pleasures as a writer. Instead of receiving letters from readers, he gets phone calls that, in the best case, survive for a little while on the answering machine, but they never attain the eternal life of letters. Those who deal with the study of social and cultural history share this writer's sorrow and, moreover, feel they have been deprived of one of the important sources for their work. Diaries and letters have provided research with a veritable treasure trove of source material that, in the nature of things, was of more primacy and was more authentic than official documents. But this treasure is vanishing.

Diaries, especially unpublished ones, often provided a peek into the more intimate and familiar realms of social history, and as such they offer information that is difficult to find everyone who deals with the social and cultural history of the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) knows just how rare such diaries are - especially the ones that are not intended for publication, but were kept private by their authors and discovered only after their death. Such diaries teach much about the life of the period, and particularly about those aspects of life that are difficult to reconstruct: voices, colors, passions and feelings.

All of these can be found in plenty in the diaries of Yemima Tchernovitz. Tchernovitz (1909-1989) is known to every child who has grown up in Israel, thanks to her classic children's books, and it is enough to mention here "Shmoneh Be-Ikvot Ehad" ("Eight on the Track of One"), "Ehad Mi-Shelanu" ("One of Ours") and "Kushi Ve-Nushi" ("Kushi and Nushi").

Rama Zuta, Yemima Tchernovitz's daughter, describes in her introduction to the diaries - discovered only after her mother's death - the storm they aroused in the family and the amazement at the fact that her mother, despite her openness, had never mentioned them: "Perhaps she was embarrassed by these sins of her youth, and if so - why didn't she destroy them? And perhaps this was a clear intention, as if to say: `When I am no longer with you, remember me and my world!'"

From reading the diaries, as they have been published, it is hard to understand why Tchernovitz kept them secret, but in light of the decision to publish only portions of them, we will not know whether the answer can be found in the diaries themselves, or whether perhaps the writer's daughter is right in saying: "It is a riddle and it will remain a riddle."

Lost in the editing

The editing of these fascinating diaries, which was not carried out in accordance with the principles of "scientific editing," is the greatest flaw in their publication. The reader has no way of knowing what has been eliminated and what has been published. According to Zuta, she changed standard spelling to modern spelling, and even corrected spelling errors, which is a pity. Some of the scientific value of diaries and also part of their charm lies in the careful preservation of their fullness and authenticity. Following the rules of scientific editing would have served the diaries better, but even in this version, they provide a wealth of fascinating testimony about the life of a Hebrew girl, the daughter of one of the important families in the Yishuv, who had the luck to be born and to grow up in a period when history was being made every day and she, thanks to her family status, was right there at the cradle.

The portions from the seven notebooks that have been published (originally there were apparently eight, the fourth of which has disappeared) encompass an entire life. They begin in 1919 with the exchange of gunfire in Kiev, in the midst of the Russian Revolution, continue through the journey to the land of Israel, through her schooling, first at the Hebrew Gymnasium in Jerusalem and then at the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv, to her trip to Paris and her studies in Berlin and Vienna, and on to her return to Tel Aviv, where the sections from the diaries end with accounts describing the kindergarten she ran in 1936, in the midst of the disturbances.

As in every personal diary, private life here mingles with public life in a mix of the trivial and the sublime - but which is which? Is the sweet pain of first love less sublime than listening to the lecture by Dr. Schwabe on "the essence of youth," or than reading the poems of Shaul Tchernikowsky and Zalman Schneour, or than listening to Nahum Sokolov's speech that was aimed at heartening the thousands of listeners at Beit Ha'am

Tchernovitz writes: "With my own pain came a great pain, the pain of the homeland. Mother Earth is crying and blood soaked." The pangs of her first love are mentioned in a single breath with her concern about the replacement of the high commissioner: "At home, mother talks about how I will fall in love with him, but he is completely distant from me. In the land of Israel we now face a new era. The new high commissioner, Lord Plumer, arrived in the land last week."

`Temple for the Jews'

Indeed, what endows these diaries with their vivacity and their power is above all this mixture of the private and the personal with public and the national, which derives not only from the fact that, by their nature, personal diaries mix these realms, but also to a larger extent from the fact that Tchernovitz perceives events on the public and national plane in a personal way. On the eve of the family's journey to the land of Israel, the young Yemima writes: "The land of Israel, O holy and beautiful land! When shall I get to see you! ... I aspire to go to the land to live the life of a farmer." Elsewhere she writes: "Oh, God, let me live for a while in the land of Israel and die there near the tombs of our holy patriarchs."

Later, at the age of 16, she describes with huge excitement the opening ceremony of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which she calls "a temple for the Jews": "I was present at the opening of Hebrew University, which took place on the 7th of Nissan. God in heaven! How wonderful this scene was! Tens of thousands of people sitting in a round arc, before them the Dead Sea and the mountains in the distance, the stage glorious and on it representatives of all the kingdoms ... O, how wonderful all this was. Is there any sight more beautiful than a sea of hats raised into the air in honor of Lord Balfour, or music more lovely than tens of thousands of people crying `hurrah'? I wept with joy ... To open a Hebrew University! Is this not all a dream? Is this not the building of a temple for the Jews? ... Mount Scopus ... is again as it was in days of old, when people came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem on Sukkot and Mount Scopus displayed to the congregation all its beauty."

The nationalist feelings do not stand in contradiction to her youthful high spirits and the sleepless nights that Yemima and her friends spent singing and dancing. The high spirits and fun characterize her life in Jerusalem as well as in Tel Aviv, "a city of good times, of constant life out of doors, of life for life's sake," as she says. Together with the undisguised pleasure and celebrations of the young people, Yemima does not spare her criticism of them: "The 12th grade arranged a party, an empty party, with cheap jokes, idiotic dances and not a trace of nationalism or the spirit of the land of Israel was in the air of that party."

The inner conflicts between national aspirations and personal desires are also not absent from the diary. Yemima worries over the question of whether to join an agricultural

And we? Nothing. As if we were living in an alien land. We live a life of laziness without any sense of responsibility for building the land, we live the phrase `eat and drink,' we pay no attention to the future, we just live ... They are heroic, they eat a dry crust of bread, they are building the land with their blood. We are parasites and nothing more."

With great honesty she analyzes her lack of desire to join the group of friends that is about to settle the land: "How I love the working land of Israel, but there are many reasons, and perhaps too little strength. Possibly, and I don't deny this - possibly I lack that strength that is necessary for breaking the ties with my family, with books and with the easy life and going to live a life of productivity and manual labor."

Culture heroes

It is hard not to admire the girl Yemima's knowledge of Hebrew, which was a second language to her even when she was still in Russia. She attended a kindergarten run by Yitzhak Alterman, had private lessons in Hebrew, and according to her father - in a letter to S. L. Gordon (from June 11, 1918) - they spoke Hebrew at home in Russia: "In my home Hebrew speech has prevailed for about four years now, and it is spoken also by my elder son who is a student in the third division of the science school, my daughter Yemima and my small, younger son."

It is a pity that in the diary there is no other evidence about the way Yemima acquired Hebrew and the extent to which it was used as a second language. In any case, the Hebrew in the diary is rich, vivid and contemporary. Yemima develops a strong emotional connection to the language and describes how she was moved to tears when she returned to this country and again heard Hebrew speech: "And when my ear heard Hebrew speech issuing from the mouths of workers nearby, my heart trembled." In the same spirit, she describes the death of Haim Nachman Bialik: "Today the glory of Israel was laid in his grave."

Especially interesting is the great openness to the world of Europe and European culture, contrary to the prevailing provincial image of the young Jewish people in Palestine. The deep familiarity with the Western world and its culture that emerges from this diary was perhaps characteristic only of the children of the elite families of the Yishuv, who often traveled abroad, but it is clear that Tchernovitz felt at home in European culture and was acquainted with its cultural capitals at the time: Paris, Berlin and Vienna. She was an almost-compulsive consumer of European culture, studied European languages (French and German) and read a great deal of literature, some of it in the original language (English and Russian).

The Tel Aviv of those days confirms the image of a city of "noise and revolution," as Tchernovitz says, a city of many political, [illegible] and cultural events. According to the

Ha'am here in Tel Aviv is the source of culture for the people. Last week Jascha Heifetz gave a concert at Beit Ha'am. About 7,000 people attended and all around there was a huge audience and all the roofs were full of people."

The diaries are populated by nearly all the culture heroes of land of Israel society: poets Bialik and Tchernikowsky, maestro Bronislaw Huberman and Zionist leader Haim Arlosoroff, scientist and political leader Haim Weizmann and publicist Ahad Ha'am. The writer's father, Shmuel Tchernovitz, was a Zionist activist who traveled abroad a lot and served as the chief secretary of the national Committee for the Jews of the land of Israel in Jerusalem (until 1925), and afterward as editorial secretary of Haaretz, for which he also wrote regularly.

One teacher at the Gymnasia - writer Yehuda Kadish Silman - makes comments about Yemima's essays; another teacher is none other than the writer A.A. Kabak, who also happened to be a relative of hers. Indeed, Yemima's family consisted of people who today would be called "the salt of the earth," who were connected to the very heart of the Zionist enterprise and to its various factions.

The last chapter of the book, in which there is the diary of the kindergarten that Yemima ran, gives firsthand testimony to the work that she feels must be done there: There are reflections on ceremonies such as the greeting of the Sabbath, or on bringing coins for the Jewish National Fund box, the selection of holiday songs and the elements of a national education. Some of the descriptions of the children's reactions to "the situation," sadly enough, read as though they had been written today. Tchernovitz writes about the fear and hatred that the children display toward Arabs: "How difficult it is to mend what goes awry in the days of disturbances. Every Arab is linked in their minds to bombs, killing and shooting. We shall have to work for years until we reach understanding on the part of the children."

The heart sighs upon reading Tchernovitz's diaries. Concepts that have vanished from the world, like love of the homeland, identification with the Zionist project, social solidarity and the feeling of partnership in the project, run like a leitmotif through the 17 years of the diary. The enchantment of reading it derives from the unique combination of Tchernovitz's family status and the historical events she experienced, with the writing ability of a talented individual, who even as a teenager published her stories in various journals. All this, combined with the intimate relationship that in any case exists between the reader of Hebrew and the person who wrote for him or her a goodly share of the stories of his childhood, makes the descriptions of the childhood and maturation of Yemima Tchernovitz the additional novel that never got written, in which the private and the public blend together in a single whole, illuminate each other and arouse in us longings and nostalgia for days that will never return.