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New book reveals lover who gave poet Yehuda Amichai his name

By Ofri Ilani

In the spring of 1947, Yehuda Pfeuffer was a young teacher who had just been accepted to the faculty of the Geula School in Haifa. As was the custom in some Jewish schools in those days, the principal asked Pfeuffer to change his name to a Hebrew one.

Pfeuffer returned from his meeting with the principal to his lover, Ruth. He thought about a literal translation of the German word *pfeuffer*, which means pepper - *pilpel* in Hebrew. But Ruth, whom Pfeuffer was planning to marry and settle down with in Haifa, suggested "Amichai."

"Yehuda Amichai - isn't that too bombastic?" Pfeuffer asked. "Yehuda Amichai is the name of a great poet," his lover answered. And that is how Yehuda Amichai, the best-known Israeli poet in the world, got his name.

The woman who chose it for him, Ruth Z., was his lover before he entered the Palmach, a pre-state militia. Their love affair, which was only hinted at in a few lines in one of Amichai's poems, ended in April 1948, a month before the state was established, because Ruth had moved to the United States. But Amichai eventually married twice, and wrote many love poems.

According to Prof. Nili Scharf Gold, an expert on Amichai, the poet's lost love made an indelible imprint on his poems and sheds light on some of his early work. In her biographical book "Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet," Gold devoted several chapters to the affair with Ruth, revealing 98 letters he wrote her in 1947.

For more than 50 years, the letters rested in a cookie tin in Ruth's home in New York. After reading them once, she did not dare open them again, she said. Only after Gold met her and gained her confidence did the letters see the light of day.

The book is being published in the United States; the letters themselves have been donated to Ben-Gurion University. According to Prof. Yigal Schwartz, chairman of the university's Hebrew literature department, "the letters Amichai wrote are a

treasure trove. They reopen the interpretation of his poetry and of Israeli culture in general."

Gold got to know Amichai about 20 years ago, when she wrote her Ph.D. on his poetry. "Every time he was in New York, we'd go out together," said Gold, who has been living in New York for the past 30 years. "In 1997, we were at a lecture at Columbia University. He suddenly nudged me and whispered: 'Do you see that woman? Her name is Ruth. I wrote the poem 'The rustle of history's wings' about her.'"

That poem, which appears in the book "Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers," speaks of a woman who "fled to America ... and left me with my new name."

In 2002, about two years after Amichai died, Gold ran into Ruth during a condolence call. "I remembered her face and name," Gold said, adding that the hostess, a mutual friend, introduced them by saying: "You two have something to talk about. You both know Amichai." Gold said that Ruth "almost fainted," but when Gold asked if she would meet with her, she agreed.

Ruth eventually told Gold her life story. She was born in England to a German family and served in the British army as a tank mechanic. "She took out an album and showed me her pictures with Amichai," Gold said.

Ruth told Gold that she met Amichai at a party in 1946, while both were attending a teacher training course for demobilized British soldiers. At first, Ruth said, she was not enthusiastic, but she found him "very interesting."

Gold said his overtures were rebuffed until he showed Ruth a story he had written. That changed her mind about him, even though "she did not think he was handsome or athletic." The two began to date.

Then, Gold related, one day after she and Ruth had finished lunch, Ruth told her: "I have letters."

The letters were written after Ruth went to the U.S. to study, in August 1947. "He wrote her almost three times a week," Gold said. And besides the love story they reveal, the letters to Ruth document young Amichai's transformation into a poet.

"It was always said that he began to write relatively late, at age 25, spurred on by the fighting," Gold said. "But here I see in the letters, and from the conversation with Ruth, that he was reading poems to her as early as 1946, long before the war broke out."

While he was corresponding with Ruth, Amichai had not yet

joined the Palmach; he was still teaching. "He wrote her that he had bought a little notebook in which he wrote down everything that came to mind."

"I am waiting for you and we will come together like two rivers," he wrote Ruth in December 1947. Gold said he begged Ruth to come back and wrote her much more often than she wrote him.

Out of the cookie tin also came a notebook on which was written, "Benyamina, 1947." It opens with the words "we loved here." Those same words were the title of a cycle of sonnets that Amichai wrote in 1955. According to Gold, "in an interview in the 1970s, Amichai said the whole cycle was a birthday gift for his first wife, Tamar. But I believe that many of the songs have to do with the love between him and Ruth."

Gold also believes the book "In the Public Garden" stems from Amichai's love for Ruth. "'In the Public Garden' is the story of his and Ruth's break-up," Gold said. "I discovered that he wrote the book in the summer of 1947, although he published it 12 years later. No one knew that these poems were written before the poems about the battles."

From letter to letter, the situation in the future state of Israel grew worse. One Friday in November 1947, while he was sitting in a bus going down Mount Carmel, the bus was fired on. "The man sitting behind him took a bullet to the stomach and was killed. His name was Haim Goldman, and this was Amichai's first encounter with death," Gold said.

After the United Nations Partition Plan passed on November 29, 1947, shooting incidents in Haifa became more frequent.

"Our little wounded school is dying," he wrote, during the period when he had begun training with another pre-state militia, the Haganah, and taking part in missions. The school closed in April 1948, and Amichai became a full-time soldier.

At the end of the War of Independence, Amichai wrote the poem "I want to die in my bed," which became a symbol of his anti-heroic poetry. In another letter, he admitted: "I don't want to be a general."

With time, the letters to Ruth became shorter and shorter. For her birthday, Amichai sent her a scarf and a book of poems by Heinrich Heine. But her letters to him became less frequent. Amichai blamed the inefficiency of the mail, but it seems he knew their love was coming to an end, Gold said.

On April 11, Ruth wrote to Amichai that she was going to marry a man she had met in the U.S., a refugee from Germany who had lost his family in the Holocaust. Later, Ruth's husband

became a spice merchant. "This was the worst period of the fighting in Haifa," Gold noted.

When the War of Independence broke out, Amichai joined the Palmach and fought in the Negev Brigade. In his last letter to Ruth, written in April 1948, he wrote that a chapter in his life, as a teacher and a lover, had ended. His friends were worried that his heartbreak would lead him to suicide. But he wrote that her engagement would not "destroy him," because he knew that he was "destined" to be a poet.

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