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Book Reviews

Yehuda Amichai

Elaine Feinstein | Winter 2008 - Number 212

Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* (Brandeis, 2008, £29.95)

Yehuda Amichai is one of that great generation of Israeli poets who shattered traditional forms and used the materials of daily life and the language of the streets. The voice in his poetry is unapologetic, wry, matter of fact. It was very much the voice of the man I first met in Jerusalem at a party given by the theatre director Arieh Sachs. Amichai was then in his forties, short and compact,with an amused shrug I thought peculiarly Israeli: that is to say, less weary than an Eastern European shrug, but acknowledging equally the awkward unpredictability of events.

Amichai was a courageous soldier who ran guns for Haganah in 1948 and fought in all Israel's subsequent wars. Like most Israelis then he recognised a human dignity in fighting, after so many European Jews had found the limits of putting their faith in law-abiding passivity. But he didn't like soldiering, and he never forgot the murderous cost of war.

> The bereaved father
>
> has grown very thin:
>
> he has lost the weight of his son

Two decades later, when I met him again in his refurbished home in Yemen Moshe, I remembered his poem about the impermanence of any building in Jerusalem where the stones of the mountains roll down at night towards the stone houses 'Like wolves coming to howl at the dogs/Who have become the slaves of men'. The last time I saw him in London he had just been given a literary prize in Egypt and was uncharacteristically glum. When I asked why, he said simply: 'They hate us.'

The man I knew is not much present in this book. This is partly because it is not in the ordinary sense a biography, though it illuminates much about Amichai's life I did not guess. It is a scholarly exploration of his German childhood, a painful early love affair and the years before the state of Israel was established. Nili Scharf Gold was given access to a box of letters, sealed in 1948, by Ruth Z, — as she is named in the book — in New York, after Amichai's death. This is a treasure trove of 98 love letters written by Amichai to Ruth Z after she left Israel for the States.

They were written in the months after the United Nations vote on 29 November 1947, which recognised the right of the Jews to a sovereign state in Palestine.

Read alongside jottings in two hand-bound notebooks from Yale's Beinecke Library, the letters serve as a journal of the period before Amichai became a published poet. The material chronicles far more than Amichai's youthful emotions at the end of a love affair; they also record, invaluably, the details of his daily life, his early ambitions to become a poet and his determination to build a life in Palestine. The letters resurrect the voice of a boy whose proud Hebrew surname, Amichai — 'my people lives' — was chosen for him by Ruth Z. The name was eminently suitable to an Israeli poet, whose aspirations were already clear to the poet himself. Sadly, as Amichai wrote in a poem 33 years later:

> she fled to America
>
> and left me with my new name

Our attention is held because Amichai writes as if every feeling he has will be of interest to the woman he loves. So it is he reveals openly his memories of growing up in Wuerzberg, Germany, a city of bridges, statues and cobblestone alleys, surrounded by a Bavarian landscape wholly different from that of Israel. Ludwig, as he was called in those years, lived in an orthodox Jewish home filled with books and music, in which Shabbat was a special day, but not an oppressive one. His father was much loved by his children, and his love filled the household. The Torah service was familiar to the young boy.

His girlfriend in his school days, before the Nazi threat led the family to leave for Palestine, was Little Ruth, who was also Jewish. In December 1934, after some childish argument, Little Ruth rode off angrily on a borrowed bicycle and was pinned so seriously between two cars that one of her legs had to be amputated. Amichai felt some responsibility.Their friendship did not come to an end, however, and Amichai remembers an occasion when they were both attacked by boys from Hitler Youth, and the sound of the thugs beating Little Ruth's wooden leg continued to haunt him. He always felt remorseful at failing to write to her after his family left Germany. The girl died in the Holocaust.

The letters give a memorable picture of Amichai as a young man who was a teacher by day and a soldier by night. It wasn't the life he wanted. But the letters show him as an obedient if reluctant soldier. They describe his first encounter with gunfire on 11 December 1947 while on guard duty — to which he took a bag of books — his first battle, and his blowing up of the Arab houses from which gunfire had come. His own wish to be out of the conflict is expressed in a refrain running through one of his most famous poems:

> Like slits in a tank, their eyes were uncanny
>
> I'm always the few and they are the many.
>
> I must answer. They can interrogate my head.
>
> But I want to die in my own bed.

The sketches of daily life in these letters are invaluable. These are days that many Israelis and most of the outside world has forgotten, days when the outcome for Israel was far from certain: the daily risks palpable, the details vivid and surprising. For instance he describes the special scent of

children's fear: 'sweat and wool wet with urine'

. All this is fascinating, but the driving thesis of Nili Scharf Gold's book is her contention that he needed to cover up the depth of his involvement with his German childhood and particularly his love of German literature in order to become a good Israeli citizen, and even more so to become a national poet. I was not altogether convinced by this. I find his wish to bury that part of his life less surprising than she does. Memories of Germany were raw, and fugitives from European murders customarily shed more than their names. The brilliant novelist Aharon Appelfeld, who survived in the forests as a young child, abandoned his native German speech altogether when he reached Israel. Amichai's family of course arrived in what was then Palestine not long after the Nazis took over, and so made a less brutal transition. Nevertheless, there were many reasons other than ambition to make the young Amichai reluctant to identify with the European world he had left.

Scharf Gold has discovered in these papers a part of Amichai's development which she insists he has decided to erase. If this were so, would he have used similar material in his novel Not of this time, not of this place? She makes much of his reverence for Rilke, but is there any European poet of that period who did not feel the power of Rilke as a poet?

There is genuinely new and useful material is this book. Scharf Gold modifies Amichai's account of Israel's War of Independence as the trigger for his own poetic aspirations, and shows that his emotional situation in 1947–48 was far more complex. She finds that Amichai's important poem, 'In the Public Gardens', was intended as a birthday poem for Ruth Z. But Amichai wanted to become an Israeli even more forcibly and with stronger reasons than immigrants to the United States wanted to become Americans. He wanted to write in the present about the world around him. He was not unreasonable when he pointed out in a poignant lyric: 'Jerusalem is full of used Jews worn out by history.'

He was not insensitive to the conflicts within his homeland, but unlike, say Natan Zach, he was compassionate rather than indignant, more sad than angry. In his poem, 'Jerusalem 1967', he wrote memorably, as he looked at an Arab's hole-in-the-wall shop selling buttons and zippers and spools of thread close to the Damascus gate,

> I told him in my heart that my father too
>
> Had a shop like this, with thread and buttons.
>
> I explained to him in my heart about all the decades
>
> And the causes and the events, why I am now here
>
> And my father's shop was burned there, and he is buried here'

Nili Scharf Gold is an impressive scholar, and her reading of Amichai's poems is enormously valuable. She presents us with a vulnerable and charming young man, as good looking as the young face on the cover of this book. The portrait is not much like the man I knew, but then I never knew Amichai as a young man, and this is a peril all biographers have to confront. I remember him as less desperate, more affectionate, warmer. He was always Israel's best ambassador whether on a public stage or in a social gathering, and that is the memory that will endure. But Nili Scharf Gold has given us fresh look and an important book. .