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# ***Vera Europa vs. Verus Israel: Modern Jews' Encounter with Europe in Light of Lea Goldberg's Encounter with a Poet***

*I woke up one day and knew I was a European* (Emmanuel Levinas)<sup>1</sup>

## **1 “Do we have the right to forget?”**

On April 30, 1945, mere days after American and Soviet troops had met on the banks of the Elbe at the heart of Germany, and as Berlin's encirclement was being completed and concentration camps liberated one after the other – Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, and Dachau – the poet Lea Goldberg published an essay in the Hebrew socialist newspaper *Mishmar*. Titled “Your Europe” (*Eropa shelakhem*), this essay by the most European woman poet in modern Hebrew poetry was a poignant reckoning with Europe and its culture. Despite what the readers would surely have expected, the Holocaust, whose scale was starting to be widely acknowledged by this time, was not explicitly referenced in the essay. Instead, the essay opened with a discussion about the constant tension in European culture between adherence to and violation of form, and went on to lament the continent's spiritual destruction; it ended with a comment on the Jews' belonging to European culture.

Goldberg presented herself as a member of the generation that had grown up in the shadow of the Great War, a generation that, despite the terrible devastation it had experienced, still believed in the “great and enlightened world” (Goldberg 1945, 6). This was why, she explained, she and her contemporaries – “born in the semiconscious backwaters of Eastern Europe, captives of the Jewish *shtetls* in the broadest sense of the term” (Goldberg 1945, 6) – wandered to the “great centers, to gain erudition and knowledge,” in the spirit of the pioneers of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) some one hundred and fifty years prior.

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1 Malka 2006, 9. I thank Ofra Yeglin for bringing this quote to my attention and Karma Ben-Johanan who introduced me to the scholarly discourse about Verus Israel.

What was Europe for us [at that time]? – Dante and Giotto, and Michelangelo, Goethe, and Flaubert, and Mozart, and Stendhal, and Verlaine, and Rilke and Rodin, Cezanne, and Stravinsky and James Joyce... Names, names, names, all with different meanings and values, that contradict one another [...] This was “the whole,” that was the intellectual, spiritual atmosphere, that was the special scent of a world, the special light of that world, in whose forests stood ancient oak trees, in whose suburbs the parks autumn leaves would fall and cover the ground with gold, on whose mighty rivers unnamed architects have spent centuries building arched bridges of such beautiful balustrades... This was the first love despite it all, regardless of it all, regardless of the memories flowing in our Jewish blood, of slaughter, of burning at the stake, of pogroms.... (Goldberg 1945, 6)

Goldberg’s essay opens with a debate between artists in which one lashes out at the other: “This is your Europe.” It ends with the statement that implies that World War II (and maybe even the Holocaust) are nothing but another recurring episode in a long and tormented history of relations between Europe and its Jews:

The snare is broken, and we have escaped.<sup>2</sup> Do we have the right to judge? Do we have the right to forget? [...] And we shall not forget thee, the wounds of the lover and the wounds of the hater we will not forget. Until the day we die we will carry it within us, this immense hurt whose name is Europe, “your Europe,” “their Europe,” but apparently... not “our Europe,” even though we were hers, very much hers. (Goldberg 1945, 6)

In what follows I focus on the cultural-historical topos to which Goldberg’s essay alludes: the sense of profound identification of Jews with the culture of Europe, despite or perhaps precisely because of their alienation from it, and despite or because of the historical events which had marked them as aliens and therefore as a target for repeated persecution. This topos, which has multiple representations, is thoroughly and beautifully elucidated in Jehuda Reinharz’s and Yaacov Shavit’s book *Glorious, Accursed Europe* (2010). Following their discussion, I would like to cast light on a specific trope of this topos which hasn’t yet been explored, which I will call *Vera Europa*.

The *Vera Europa* trope, I argue, is modeled on the concept of *Verus Israel*. In the classical *Dialogue with Trypho*, St. Justin Martyr coined the term *Verus Israel* – “the true Israelites” – to refer to the Christian Church as having superseded the Jews as God’s chosen people: “For the true spiritual Israel [...] are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.”<sup>3</sup> This idea already appears in the New Testament, but it is Justin who imposed on this substitution the categorical

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<sup>2</sup> See Psalms 124:7: “We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; The snare is broken, and we have escaped” (all biblical quotes are from the English Standard Version, ESV).

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho* 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:200.

distinction between flesh and spirit. He thereby laid the groundwork for supersessionism or replacement theology, which lies at the heart of Christianity's self-definition vis-à-vis Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the theological significance of the church's supersession, Justin paved the way to a new paradigm: the authenticity of identity is no longer dependent on the flesh, but on the spirit. In other words, identification is more important than identity, and the substitute may be more authentic than the source, by virtue of sincerity.

Accordingly, the concept of *Vera Europa* – the true Europe – I claim, also encapsulates a fundamental substitution: the modern Jews who have arrived in Central and Western Europe from its provinces (be it geographical or cultural, real or imagined), often considered themselves the true Europeans, charged with safeguarding the continent's glorious humanistic legacy, especially the demise of this heritage (from World War I on). The idea of *Vera Europa* therefore extends beyond cultural or civic emancipation through education; it signifies not only the longing to belong (as in the case of many German Jews who tried to "out-German" their fellow Christian Germans) but also a passion to promote and advocate European values which had already been forgotten or disrespected.

Thus the idea of *Vera Europa* has certain spatial and temporal dimensions. It is useful to think through this concept about European Jews in times of crisis and especially after the Holocaust; and it may explain how Jews who lived on the margins of the German cultural circle (*Kulturkreis*) and adopted this culture as "outsiders," became passionate delegators for it even after that culture had been completely transformed and those Jews immigrated out of Europe. By that they could perceive themselves as "insiders" – in a culture that in many senses no longer existed.

In this article I explore the concept of *Vera Europa* through the writing of Lea Goldberg, specifically her book *Encounter with a Poet (Pgisha im meshorer)*. My choice of Goldberg (Königsberg, Prussia 1911 – Jerusalem 1970) is informed by her central position in modern Hebrew literature as a poet, cultural hero, and a kind of ambassador of European culture within pre- and post-statehood Israeli culture. As for the book, it is a memoir, published in 1952, that commemorates the poet Avraham Ben Yitzhak (Sonne; Przemyśl, Austro-Hungary 1883 – Ramatayim, Israel 1950) – one of the most European poets in Hebrew literature.<sup>5</sup> In the reading

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<sup>4</sup> For more on *Verus Israel* and its iterations, see Pelikan 1971, Vol. 1; Ruether 1974, Chapter 3; Simon 1986 [1948].

<sup>5</sup> Avraham Ben Yitzhak was Sonne's nom de plume. In her book, Goldberg ascribed to him a decisive role in Hebrew literature: "He was the first Hebrew poet the hands of whose watch did not show just the specific Jewish time, but the hours and minutes of contemporary world literature" (Goldberg 2009, 73).

suggested here, the figure of the poet and the memoir as a whole become a metaphor for a simultaneous encounter with and departure from Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Ben Yitzhak and Goldberg both came from the periphery of the German *Kulturkreis*, from what may be even considered as “Halb-Asien.”<sup>7</sup> Although Goldberg was born in Königsberg, she grew up, from her very early childhood on, in Kaunas (Kovno), then part of the Russian Empire and later a city in an independent Lithuania. She excelled in German and Russian and moved to Berlin when she was 19 years old, in 1930, to study philology and Semitic languages at Friedrich Wilhelm University (today The Humboldt University of Berlin). In 1935 she immigrated to Mandatory Palestine. Ben Yitzhak was born to a traditional Jewish family in Galicia. He arrived to Berlin and Vienna in his late twenties, in the late 1900s or early 1910s, and lived in Vienna for many years, until immigrating to Mandatory Palestine in 1938, due to the *Anschluss*.

## 2 Ben Yitzhak and *Encounter with a Poet*

*Encounter with a Poet* was written, Goldberg remarked, “with the modest hope that perhaps I would manage to convey some of the spiritual greatness” of Ben Yitzhak (2009, 5). Already as a boy, Ben Yitzhak wrote poems in German – the language used by the local educated class – as well as in Hebrew, which was emerging as a modern spoken language. By age twenty-five he had published his first Hebrew poems, which won him great acclaim in the emerging Hebrew literary republic, whose center at the time was Berlin. The poems offered an innovative and daring poetic alternative to those of the father of modern Hebrew poetry, Hayim Nahman Bialik. However, over the course of his life, Ben Yitzhak’s oeuvre never exceeded a dozen poems and therefore remained unfulfilled.

Like many Galician Jews, Ben Yitzhak studied at universities in Berlin and Vienna. He did not graduate, perhaps because he was lured away by Zionist activism. After a short stay in Palestine in 1913, he moved to Vienna and soon became a prominent figure in the local Zionist community. After World War I he

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<sup>6</sup> The book is divided into two parts, the first personal and the second scholarly. This article refers mostly to the former, which has been fully translated into German but not yet into English. See Goldberg 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The term “Half-Asia” or “demi-Orient” was applied by Karl Emil Franzos to refer to Galicia, which he described as “these lands placed between cultured Europe [*gebildete Europa*] and the barren steppe across which the Asiatic nomads move.” Franzos located this region outside the borders of civilized society and European Enlightenment. See: Wolff 2010, 242–243.

was appointed to several positions in the Zionist leadership in London, and after a year was promoted to become Chaim Weizmann's political advisor. However, the two had ideological disagreements, which prompted Ben Yitzhak to return to Vienna and put an end to his public career. In Vienna he befriended several major artists and authors, including Arnold Schönberg, Robert Musil, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, and Richard Beer-Hofmann. Many of them admired and even referred to him in their works, whether indirectly, for instance, as a character in Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil*, or directly, for example, in an extended episode in Elias Canetti's *Das Augenspiel*.

Ben Yitzhak's transition to Mandatory Palestine in 1938 represented the twilight of his life. The tuberculosis from which he had suffered in secret for years grew worse. He maintained very few social contacts; he met primarily with the German Jewish elite of Jerusalem, including Werner Kraft, Leopold Krakauer and Georg Landauer, and continued to be admired by his acquaintances. It was at this time that he became Goldberg's friend and mentor.

Due to the relative scarcity of information about Ben Yitzhak, and thanks to the extraordinary literary qualities of *Encounter with a Poet*, Goldberg's book became a key source in virtually every study about Ben Yitzhak, contributing immensely to the buildup of the mythical aura surrounding his name in Israeli culture. Her monograph became an invaluable resource, despite the fact that, like most memoirs, it deliberately emphasizes certain episodes in the protagonist's life (his years in Israel) at the expense of others (such as his adolescent years in Galicia) and is biased by the subjective perspective of its author. Nevertheless, *Encounter with a Poet* served as a biographical and historical source for Hannan Hever's comprehensive monograph on Ben Yitzhak published in the early 1990s (Ben Yitzhak 1992; Hever 1993), as well as for many of the articles in the special 2013 issue of *Naharaim* journal dedicated to the study of his life and works.<sup>8</sup>

Goldberg's book also attracted attention as an important piece of writing in its own right from almost all of her commentators. These include especially Tuvia Rübner (1980) and Ofra Yeglin (2002), who have emphasized Ben Yitzhak's unique contribution to Goldberg's development as a poet. Anat Weisman has interpreted the book not as a gesture of admiration but, on the contrary, as a subtle polemic between Goldberg and her erstwhile mentor, and as a text with which she sought to break free of Ben Yitzhak's powerful influence (2002, 2013).

Here I would like to shed a different light on *Encounter with a Poet*, and read it not merely against the backdrop of Ben Yitzhak's and Goldberg's lives and works

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<sup>8</sup> The issue included articles by Anat Weisman, Natasha Gordinsky, Maya Berzilai and Paul Michael Lützelzer.

but mainly as a forum for grappling with European heritage after the war in the newly established State of Israel. According to this reading, the book transcends the two poets' lives and times and may be reinterpreted as a text which reflects the feelings of many members of their generation regarding the encounter of young modern Jews with European culture in the first half of the twentieth century – and particularly the Jewish-German cultural encounter.

### 3 The Poet as Metaphor: Ben Yitzhak and Petrarch

*Encounter with a Poet* (hereafter, *Encounter*) is Goldberg's final prose work. In a certain sense, it is the twin to her first novel, published in Mandatory Palestine in 1937, *Letters from an Imaginary Journey* (*Mikhtavim minsiyah medumah*; hereafter *Letters*); at the same time, *Encounter* is also its mirror image. In the two books, it seems Goldberg is parting with Europe – first on the eve of and then in the aftermath of World War II – with the allusion to the (future or past) catastrophe lurking in the background. The two books are based on a dialogue with an absent presence: in *Letters*, Ruth, Goldberg's alter ego, writes letters to her lover Immanuel, while in *Encounter*, Goldberg converses with the late Ben Yitzhak in a dialogue which, as in the former book, is actually a monologue. The novel's voyage through space has been substituted in *Encounter* by an imaginary voyage in time, to the "World of Yesterday," but while *Letters* depicted this dying world with a pinch of sarcasm, after its total collapse it was easier to reminisce it with nostalgia, particularly the heroic period of European modernism, which Goldberg had missed by a decade or two.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore no coincidence that Goldberg includes among the reasons which motivated her to write *Encounter* the understanding that Ben Yitzhak personified "the essence of a generation, the essence of a period and its refinement in a single personality. [...] He had something in common with the generation the days of whose youth had been experienced in the previous century. That 'Europeanness' of broad horizons, of people who saw countries aplenty, for whom all borders were wide open" (Goldberg 2009, 10, 18). Thus, as much as it is dedicated to describing Ben Yitzhak as a real-life figure, the book also presents him as an icon (hence Goldberg's choice to call it *Encounter with a Poet* and not "Encounter with Avraham Ben Yitzhak").

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<sup>9</sup> For more on that delayed arrival, see Yeglin 2002, 15.

The book's almost metaphorical name could easily have been the title of another piece Goldberg was working on at the time: a brief scholarly monograph on Petrarch, a selection of whose poems she had previously translated into Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> In February and March of 1951, when she studied the oeuvre of the "father of the sonnet" at the Warburg Institute of the University of London, she was preoccupied with the same issues discussed in her writing about Ben Yitzhak, who, like Petrarch, had contributed to the development of culture as part of a nation-building enterprise.

In both works, Goldberg traced the poets' biographical-historical personae in order to gain insights into *the ideal* of the poet – one who heralded a golden age of European civilization and another who symbolized for her its demise. "Usually, the figure of a great poet, a poet whose style leaves a deep mark on his period and transcends the limits of a single generation, is that of a person profoundly involved in most contemporary issues," she wrote of Petrarch (Goldberg 1953, 50). Similarly, in *Encounter*, she emphasized Ben Yitzhak's deep involvement in the contemporary issues of his own people. Before her were a poet who struggled to decide between two languages – Latin and Italian – each representing a different cultural choice, and another who also moved between different languages and cultures – German and Hebrew:

A poet or an author, who wrote in Latin, directed his writings to different peoples, to all *European scholars*, the language of Rome was their written language, while the one who wrote in Italian spoke directly to the masses in his country, and this two was not unappreciated by the intellectuals of that age. [...] Nowadays, we cannot fully understand the importance of that question, and the entire difficulty involved in deciding it. (Goldberg 1953, 67–68; emphasis in original)

Neither Petrarch nor Ben Yitzhak ever solved their bilingual (or multilingual, in Ben Yitzhak's case) dilemma, which actually defined their personal and professional identities. As Maya Barzilai points out, Ben Yitzhak self-translated his German poems into Hebrew and vice versa; moreover, in his notes he frequently mixed the two languages and sometimes used Yiddish as well (2014, 110). It is therefore interesting to read the footnote Goldberg added to the above

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**10** Goldberg began writing *Encounter* in September 1950, about three months after Ben Yitzhak's death (Goldberg 2005, 295). In December, major sections of the book appeared in print in the first issue of *Orlogin* literary journal, including most of the text subsequently incorporated in Chapters A, C and D and the end of the personal part. It seems that Goldberg delayed writing the scholarly part, as she waited to receive a copy of the poems from Ben Yitzhak's estate, which she obtained in October 1951 (Goldberg 2005, 308). In December 1951, the book was already set for print (based on the book's file in Sifriat Po'alim Publishing House's archive).

mentioned quote: “Nevertheless, it may be that some twenty years ago [in the 1930s] this vacillation between poetic language[s] would have been better understood by a Jewish poet faced with the choice of writing in either Hebrew or Yiddish” (Goldberg 1953, 67). With this comment, Goldberg actually compares the division between Latin and Italian in the fourteenth century to the one between Hebrew and Yiddish in the twentieth century; Latin and Hebrew are ancient, highly esteemed languages designated to the elites, while Italian and Yiddish, newer and seemingly deficient languages, belong to the masses. Choosing Italian over Latin, and Hebrew over German or Yiddish, was an ideological decision related to emerging nationalisms. Nevertheless, both Petrarch and Ben Yitzhak, even after composing poems in Italian and Hebrew, respectively, still believed they transcended nationality as *uomo universal*, a “universal man” who is familiar with all spheres of human knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, both Petrarch and Ben Yitzhak were proud poets who often paid a price for their pride, and both participated in the political lives of their nations until they retired from public life full of disappointments. (Petrarch supported Cola di Rienzo who sought to unify the Italian cities but became disillusioned after he had reneged on his ideals; Goldberg 1953, 125–147.) Goldberg concluded her monograph about Petrarch as follows:

Francesco Petrarca, who died in his study at age seventy,<sup>12</sup> having lived life to the fullest, left a tilled and planted land behind him. The reapers came after him. His life’s path was far from easy – the path of men of heart and character never is – but he knew how to walk through it, and that alone is an invaluable art of living. But he also knew more than that: to walk that path towards the future. (Goldberg 1953, 154)

The references to “a tilled and planted land” and “reapers” echo the lines of one of Ben Yitzhak’s most famous poems: “Blessed are those who sow and do not reap – / they shall wander in extremity” (Ben Yitzhak 2003, 43). These lines reverse the biblical verse that promises to see the fruit of one’s labors, “those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy” (Psalms 126:5). In his poem, Ben Yitzhak wishes to be freed of the teleological order embedded in this biblical verse (and in Western rationalism in general). Instead, he suggests a different approach: rather

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<sup>11</sup> Just as Goldberg wrote that “I could have expanded the discussion to refer to Petrarch the explorer, the archeologist, the paleographer, the geographer” (1953, 95), she emphasized the multifariousness of Ben Yitzhak’s intellect in the context of his era: “His world was so broad, his knowledge areas so rich and diverse [...] He mastered botany, technology and economics in its various aspects, had surprisingly precise knowledge of all theories, characteristics, histories” (2009, 13).

<sup>12</sup> Approximately Ben Yitzhak’s age at his death.

than privileging action and its future positive results, he renounces action, or at least acting with specific expectations. In this final paragraph, Goldberg defines Petrarch's endeavor with Ben Yitzhak's words and line of thought. She perceives the sowers who do not reap as a symbol of all poets, including Petrarch, Ben Yitzhak and maybe even herself; their deeds, which may seem futile – as poetry and literature seem to be – will be acknowledged only posthumously.

I have lingered on the parallels between Petrarch and Ben Yitzhak because I believe they were essential for Goldberg's attempt to portray the Austro-Hungarian Jewish poet Ben Yitzhak as *the* European poet of his time. In this way, she sought to establish a quasi-classical forebear for modern Hebrew poetry while simultaneously placing this Galician poet in the heart of a Central European literary tradition. She was not the only one who compared Ben Yitzhak to the Italian and Roman classicists. In one of his letters to Ben Yitzhak, Hermann Broch hinted that Ben Yitzhak had inspired him to write *Der Tod des Vergil*.<sup>13</sup> Wera Lewin (1910, Berlin – 1980, Tel Aviv), another acquaintance of Ben Yitzhak, wrote in her obituary of him: "People have often tried to guess why Avraham Ben Yitzhak had stopped writing poetry. When I read the conversation between Virgil and Augustus in *Der Tod des Vergil* by Hermann Broch – a close friend of Sonne – it seems as though the friend's image was before Broch's eyes when he wrote the novel" (Lewin 1955).

## 4 "Memory's not a historian, but a poet": memory and history in *Encounter with a Poet*

By virtue of its very genre, memoir, *Encounter* attaches central importance to memory. It seems, however, that it uniquely expands and refines that concept on two dimensions: horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, in that Goldberg seems to implant herself (and her readers) in the key junctures of Ben Yitzhak's life. His personal memories become her own – and that of her readers: "I remember many of the simple characters that he has depicted in his stories, *as if I have seen*

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<sup>13</sup> "Recently, a critic attributed to me Dantesque aspirations in my Virgil [...] And after reading this I dreamt the following night of Dante: He was travelling in Vienna's textile trade center, that is in Gonzaga Street, cane in hand, looking like a businesslike and elegant Jew dressed in a caftan [...] Why am I writing you this? Simply because your image has accompanied and adjoined what I have just described here." Letter from Hermann Broch to Avraham Sonne, October 8, 1947; Quoted by Hever in Ben Yitzhak 1992, 108 and by Lützel 2013, 167.

*them face to face* [...] The character of the soldier, the son-in-law of his mother's housemaid – *I remember him well*" (Goldberg 2009, 26; emphasis added).

Through Ben Yitzhak and his stories, Goldberg was able to experience herself as a citizen of the world, and especially as a *Westjude* ("West European Jew") who easily could converse with an Austrian cobbler (Goldberg 2009, 14), a guesthouse owner in the Tirol Mountains (11–12) or a Mother Superior (16–17). Goldberg, the East European Jew who appropriated a West-Central European identity – just like Ben Yitzhak – clings passionately to the shining example of the Galician Jew who has earned the respect of Vienna's literary café patrons. Perhaps this is also the secret of *Encounter's* enduring magic in the eyes of generations of Hebrew readers, to the point that it has become part of the *biographia literaria* of Israel's intellectual elite: it enabled Hebrew readers to feel part of the wider world, to feel at home in enlightened Europe, whose image had not yet been desecrated by the calamities of the twentieth century. This Europe was completely different from the Europe introduced to Israeli youngsters by the national education system and their familiar environment: a Holocaust-free Europe. Aharon Shabtai (Tel Aviv, 1939), one of Israel's leading poets and translators, once mentioned that it was reading *Encounter* that led him to study German in his youth, quite an unusual move at the time, when German culture was taboo in Israeli society, and that to this day, as he moves from one apartment to the next, he makes sure a copy of the book accompanies him (2009).

The memoir also refines the concept of memory vertically, in depth, by employing the memory-of-a-memory technique. This means that the book includes not only Goldberg's or Ben Yitzhak's personal anecdotes but also those of people acquainted with the latter. Such for example is the story of the elderly Swiss sisters in whose house Ben Yitzhak lived before World War I, who recall how, in the café they used to frequent with their father at a young age (i.e. in the mid-nineteenth century), "a small man used so sit and have tea, he was small and hunched and would always, always sit on his own, a tired and wan face was his. And he used to wear an old jacket, and never look at anyone, and nobody ever approached him. And our father told us, this is Professor Nietzsche" (Goldberg 2009, 39). Published in 1952, Goldberg's book is thus a treasure trove of reflections by people who lived a hundred years prior. These reflections are presented as lived experience, since the author does not conceal the fact that these are second- or even third-hand experiences (the sisters had told Ben Yitzhak, who told Goldberg, who tells the readers). In that sense, *Encounter* may be read as a relay station, able to receive radio waves from distant station that have already ceased transmitting, and to pass them on to the readers' present.

Beyond her expansion of the dimensions of memory as described, Goldberg made a conscious choice to write *Encounter* as a poet rather than a historian.

She therefore preferred to describe moods and impressions rather than dwell on factual details. As a disciple of the neo-symbolist school of poetry, Goldberg warmly adopted the following recommendation by French poet Paul G eraldly regarding photography: “Memory is a poet / don’t make him a historian.”<sup>14</sup> She repeated this message elsewhere (Goldberg 1939, 1944, 1958), including in a newspaper essay she published in January 1939:

The common aphorism, that our memory is a poet rather than a historian – does it truly allow us in this day and age to remember everything, as much as we wish? Does the title “poet” not charge us with heavier responsibility? The historian, the chronicler, may write as he will, as objectivity as his gifts allow him, and his texts – will be eternally debatable. Whereas the poet – it is he who sets the mood of his time, its background, that medieval golden set which “holds” the picture, the zeitgeist. But the poet does not create that mood, but also bound thereby. Poetry’s unique logic usually justifies its little caprices and over-sights. (Goldberg 1939: 5)

This conceptualization of literature’s unique ability to capture the tenor of the times even better than history – perhaps in the spirit of Schopenhauerian idealism – is a cornerstone of Goldberg’s poetics, also articulated in *Encounter*. The book’s avowed subjectivity – foregoing in advance any pretense of providing a comprehensive description of its subject – is what ensures its precision and “artistic objectivity,”<sup>15</sup> as paradoxical as this turn of phrase may sound.

Precisely because *Encounter* is a book by a poet rather than a historian, it describes a different (but not necessarily alternative) history of European modernism, one in which “we belonged to her [to Europe], very much so,” as Goldberg wrote in “Your Europe” – a history that describes the canon from the margins, from the point of view of the Jewish immigrant and later on refugee. In its subtle approach, the book seeks to establish Ben Yitzhak’s (and through him, many other Jews’) substantial belongingness to Central and Western European culture by glimpsing behind the scenes of modernity. Like the contemporary film hero Forrest Gump, Ben Yitzhak appears in various milestones of modern German and Austrian history as an absent presence—present enough to witness, but absent from official historiography.<sup>16</sup> A silent witness of various scenes, he rescues

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<sup>14</sup> In the poem “St er oscope”: “Le souvenir est un po ete / N’en fais pas un historien” (G eraldly 1939, 55).

<sup>15</sup> The expression is borrowed from Ezra Zusman (Odessa, 1900 – Nahlat Yehuda, Israel, 1973; Zusman 1952).

<sup>16</sup> Such for example is the story about the birthday present Ben Yitzhak arranged to Jewish inventor and scholar Josef Popper-Lynkeus (Goldberg 2009, 49).

valuable memories from oblivion, whose value lies precisely in being anecdotal, which is often at least as important as being “historical.” For example:

Sonne met Joyce in person only once. It was in Switzerland. The three of them were sitting on the porch of some house – Joyce’s German publisher, Joyce and Sonne. Joyce remained silent throughout. This was in his final years, his illness having overcome him and his eyes almost sightless. Soon enough they were joined by a young writer who had previously probably read out some of his writing to Joyce. He wanted to hear what the author of *Ulysses* had to say about those texts, but he could not bring Joyce to say a word. Then – most probably to curry favor with the great author – this young wordmonger began saying that in order to write a novel today, one must be a cosmopolitan and be well aware of all that goes on in the entire world. And to be very familiar with the lives of all nations and lands and so on and so forth... Until Joyce’s lost his patience and snapped: “To write a novel these days, one must be well aware, especially of all that goes on in his little hometown.” (Goldberg 2009, 32–33)

Through the retelling of these ostensibly true anecdotes, a triple alliance is formed: Ben Yitzhak, Goldberg and the reader all share secrets to which no other, not even the non-Hebrew reader, is privy. In a way, this alliance builds up the sense of belonging, albeit belatedly, to a different Europe, historical and imagined at one and the same time—a humanistic civilization that provided Jews with modern identity and a feeling of being accepted, a culture that let Galician Jew (like Ben Yitzhak) or Lithuanian Jews (such as Goldberg or Emmanuel Levinas, who studied at the same gymnasium as she did) the aspirations to participate actively in that culture.

## 5 *Verus Israel vs. Vera Europa*

According to the reading proposed above, *Encounter* represents a site of conflict between individual and collective memories, between official historiography and anecdotes that seem as important as history itself, and between “historical” and “literary” memories. Moreover, it is the arena within which to grapple with the appropriation of memory as a way of establishing belongingness and identity. In the background of all these negotiations lies the idea of the Jews, and specifically those from the provinces of Central Europe, as *Vera Europa*.

While the Christian narrative of *Verus Israel* is basically optimistic (the supersession redresses the flawed past and almost enables its erasure), the *Vera Europa* narrative is more pessimistic because the flawed past – meaning mainly World War II and the Holocaust – is constantly in the background, persistently projecting itself on the narrative. To illustrate this point I offer a close reading of

an allegorical anecdote retold by Goldberg on Ben Yitzhak's behalf. As in other episodes in *Encounter* that relate stories from the distant past, this one reflects on the time of Goldberg's writing and illustrates a principle larger than the anecdote. Indeed, as much as this is Ben Yitzhak's story, its artistic design, steeped in Jewish scriptures, is completely Goldberg's:

I remember full well, how in a single day I saw the fulfillment of my complete happiness and its entire collapse. And I was only five years old at the time.

We were at a village summer house, and I used to see peasant children coming out of the woods, carrying a basket full of red berries: wild mulberries. And I too wanted to go out to the forest and pick berries like them. But I knew I could only do it very early in the morning, when everyone is still asleep, before those who pick berries for sale have left for the woods. I remember that in the evening they [maybe his parents, GT] washed me well and shampooed my hair, and on the chair next to the bed they placed a clean white shirt. And before I fell asleep I made up my mind to go out to the woods at morning by morning [בבוקר-בבוקר].

I woke up at the crack of dawn and wore my clean clothes, and even had a handkerchief, big and white. I took it, and left the house through the window, so as not to be noticed; the forest was nigh and I walked through it, first in a path I knew, and then ever further, where the trees were very tall and dense. At first I found nothing, but it felt good to walk the woods on a summer morning, when all the scents were still fresh, and the dew covered everything. And I was not the least bit afraid and did not feel alone and did not fear that I may lose my way and was only anxious that I may not find many berries. But then I arrived at this place, where there were fewer trees and the grass was green and soft, and I began finding berries, first few and not many, but then later I suddenly came upon this glade, almost all red with mulberries. I made four knots in my kerchief, as the peasant children would, to turn it into a basket. And I began picking and filling up the kerchief, until it was overflowing with ripe and juicy red berries, which gave off an excellent smell, and the forest was already fully awoken, and teeming with life. And in my hand was this treasure, only a short while ago the object of my fantasy, and now right there at hand.

So happy was I that I didn't notice how the sky became clouded, and the trees began bustling and rustling, and suddenly a great wind blew, followed by a terrible silence, and the first big drops fell on my head. Within seconds, it was raining with vengeance, and I felt lost and alone in the woods. And the rain waxed stronger, and before long all the berries in my kerchief became an ugly red mess. I stood under a big tree, trying to salvage whatever I could still salvage, and in my fear I pressed the kerchief and the berries to my heart, and my clean white shirt was all covered with red stains. I started running and I ran without knowing where.

When finally I came out of the woods, my family members approached me, having looked for me everywhere. But I was not at all glad to see them. I was wet and dirty, and in my hand was a stained kerchief, with a bit of that red sticky porridge still in it. And it was as though I had seen a big, beautiful and happy world that had collapsed into rubble and ruin before my very eyes. (Goldberg 2009, 28–29)

Is this not an allegory of Ben Yitzhak's path – and perhaps that of many modern Jews in general – through European culture? The Jewish Ben Yitzhak envies the Christian peasant children and wants to pick the coveted fruit, which is akin to the fruit of the tree of knowledge “morning by morning [בבוקר-בבוקר].” Here, Goldberg uses the biblical Hebrew expression that appears in the description of the Children of Israel gathering manna in the desert “morning by morning.”<sup>17</sup> The allusion gestures at what comes next: just as manna melts in the heat of the sun in the desert, so is this fruit bound to rot by noon, destroyed by the rain in the European woods. “Morning by morning” (or in other translation, “early in the morning”) was also the time when Abraham took Isaac to Mount Moriah, to be slain (Genesis 22:3), and it is at this time that Avraham Ben Yitzhak (literally, Abraham son of Isaac, a reversal of the biblical dynastic order) goes out to the woods.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Goldberg emphasizes the child's cleanliness, as if he were purified in preparation for some terrible ordeal, as well as the clean shirt, which for Hebrew readers readily evokes Joseph's robe (or coat) of many colors (Goldberg's “shirt” and the biblical “robe” are both the same word in Hebrew, כְּתוֹנֶת, given to him by his father, Jacob son of Isaac, also called Israel, as a token of being the favorite, chosen son. Before his envious brothers threw him into the pit, they had stripped him off his robe, and then dipped it in goat's blood so that they could show it to their father as evidence that “a fierce animal has devoured him” (Genesis 37:33). And here: “my clean white shirt was all covered in red stains.” Finally, the great wind that passes through the woods is also a biblical reference: God hurled such a wind at Jonah's ship to prevent him from escaping to Tarshish.<sup>19</sup> It is also a great wind that destroys Job's house and kills his sons.<sup>20</sup>

Reading this allegorical tale illustrates the sophisticated artistic design of *Encounter* and highlights the storyteller's meticulous styling, as opposed to this memoir's seemingly associative structure, which is inherent to the genre to begin

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17 “Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted” (Exodus 16:21). This phrase recurs in the Hebrew Bible in reference to the time of sacrifice (Leviticus 6:5; Ezekiel 46:13–14), and elsewhere.

18 Tuvia Rübner commented to me on the reversal inherent in Avraham Sonne's nom de plume (personal conversation in Kibbutz Merchavia, March 2013). This name had been used by at least three Hebrew poets in various periods prior to Ben Yitzhak (see Ben-Yishai 1950, 21).

19 “But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up” (Jonah 1:4).

20 “And behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you” (Job 1:19).

with. Goldberg wove into the fabric of her story both European motifs (Little Red Riding Hood) and Jewish motifs (such as the biblical stories of Eden and Joseph, and the Talmudic story about the four rabbis who entered the *pardes*, or orchard, only one of whom survived).<sup>21</sup> These allusions portray the young Ben Yitzhak as a prophet on the run, a modern-day Job, as Joseph who nearly died but would later attain greatness, or an Isaac spared from slaughter. His personal story can therefore be interpreted as an allegory of the Jew saved from destruction by the skin of his teeth, and in Goldberg's modern context – the destruction of the Europe with which he was so enamored and which nearly executed him by executing itself: “And it was as though I had seen a big, beautiful and happy world that had collapsed into rubble and ruin before my very eyes.”<sup>22</sup>

Preferring allegories and allusions to direct representation, and offering the *Vera Europa* narrative instead that of *Verus Israel*, Lea Goldberg addressed the open wound of the war and the Holocaust in *Encounter with a Poet*. She sheltered the world created in this book (as in all her writing), to prevent it from being destroyed by external events – by “history” – as well. Next to the traditional Jewish vow, spoken in the first person singular – “*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!*” (Psalms 137:5) – she placed her own, in the first person plural, “*and we shall not forget thee,*” Europe – which, in spite of everything, did belong to her, to them.

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<sup>21</sup> Four men entered *pardes* – Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher (אחר, Elisha ben Abuyah), and Akiba. Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma looked and went mad; Acher destroyed the plants (became a heretic); Akiba entered in peace and departed in peace (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 14b: 1).

<sup>22</sup> A poem published by Goldberg in September 1944 uses the same expression, “rubble and ruin,” to allude to the war and the Holocaust: “Rubble and ruin, blood and ashes, / years, years like void they weigh / ‘tween lightheaded school fancies / and my heavy adulthood today” (“First Love,” Goldberg 1986, Vol. 2, 82).

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