

Appendix

The Correspondence between Lea Goldberg and Tuvia Rübner: Selected Letters

DOI 10.1515/naha-2016-0008

Translated from the Hebrew by Amy Asher

[From Lea Goldberg to Tuvia Rübner, January 22, 1953]

Dear Tuvia,

A thousand apologies for having been so slow to answer you. The days are passing by all too quickly given my heavy workload and the grief and depression that rain down on our heads from the leaders of the political world up above,¹ and it is simply impossible to devote one's attention to any decent undertaking. As soon as you feel that you have recovered your strength somewhat and that you are back on your feet, you find yourself perforce falling and kneeling and facing the darkness. It is hard, very hard, these days to maintain that which is most precious – human relationships.

In the meantime, I have been visiting Ludwig [Strauss] every Monday and his condition is improved. He is at home and gets out of bed for two hours every day, and is happy for that. His mood is good, better than I could have expected, and I feel [that] he does not let matters liable to truly distress him get too close to him! I'm so happy that he can do this now! To tell you the truth, when I came to Jerusalem last time I was very anxious for him concerning the political situation,² and also keen to talk to him. But everything seemed to have been swept away as I sat in his room. We talked about literature as we do all year round, and it was good.

Eva³ also feels a little better. She has help and now she is “only” a nurse. However, since Ludwig is faring better, she possesses that fine radiance that does everyone around her good.

¹ It appears that this refers to the so-called Doctors' Plot in the USSR, a trial of Jewish doctors accused of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders, which began a week earlier. The doctors were exonerated in March, after Stalin's death.

² Strauss was a communist, and understandably, the Doctors' Plot forced him to reconsider his political convictions. In her diaries, Goldberg wrote that they had political disagreements.

³ Strauss' wife, Martin Buber's daughter.

Your poems are very good. The best of all that you have written in Hebrew, and, as a reader, I enjoyed them very much. Clearly, you must publish them. Only “your country” is confusing,⁴ and of course you cannot use this, you must find another way out, and I believe that won’t be too difficult.

Kindest regards and to Miriami⁵ many blessings, and please forgive me yet again for my long silence.

Yours, Lea

And kind regards from mom as well.

[From Tuvia Rübner to Lea Goldberg, Merchavia, January 31, 1953]⁶

Dear Lea,

I have received your letter – thank you – and although there are many sad things in it, its lines also convey much joy: Ludwig is doing better, Eva is constantly by his side. And what else do we have in this world whose mind is lost to savage logic, if not this or that little joy? Thus unlike you, *precisely* because the sword dangles above our heads once again, precisely because of all the terror of the nights and the horror of the days and the vicinity of death, I am devoted completely to that which is “most precious,” human relationships, and am far more attentive and receptive to every person who is close to me than ever before. Indeed, those frail threads that tie one being to another are much more enduring than the dread that fragments and separates and are even stronger than death, because their knot endures beyond death, a knot that lies in that stillness which brings forth new life every minute. And as long as I am *alive*, a look in the eye and a kind word mean more to me than all the declarations and prophecies about humanity – a concept that I cannot even begin to grasp. Precisely because everything around us quavers so, there is no greater terror than the loneliness of the “self,” because within it the quavering is all the more powerful. And therefore, poetry as well (I mean that which we ourselves seek to kindle) actually does not accompany us right up to that last boundary between life and death. Because in truth, even poetry is nothing but the echo of our voice. And what can be more beautiful than hearing the other’s voice talking to us! – In *King Lear* we read:

O gods! Who is't can say “I am at the worst”?
I am worse than e'er I was.

4 In Hebrew, “אָרֶץ”. Perhaps Goldberg put the word in quotation marks because she found it too flowery and full of pathos and patriotism. It is unknown which of Rübner’s poems Goldberg is referring to here – probably an unpublished one.

5 Rübner’s daughter.

6 A day after his 29th birthday.

And worse I may be yet:
The worst is not
So long as we can say “This is the worst.”⁷

Isn't that a great comfort?

After terrible days and nights I am calmer again. Come what may, as long as I'm alive, *I shall live*.

I am happy you like my poems. Perhaps I'll publish them one day. My sea poems are about to be published in *Masa*.⁸ And Aharon Meged wrote to me and suggested that I do away with the second stanza (In blue radiance/a sound of dance/waves did touch/the dream of sands), since its rhyming is reminiscent of a children's poem, thus diminishing its import. (And indeed, Miriami knows it by heart). I answered him that if the rest of the poems seems adult enough to him, I would ask him to remember the kindness of my childhood as well.

[...] Miriami has grown a lot of late. It's nice to be with her. When a child of her class observed that I had but little hair on my head, she answered: “Yes, he took them here,” and pointed at my beard.

I share your joy at the recent publication of *War and Peace*.⁹

Here is another invitation to the photography exhibition, which includes some of my photographs.¹⁰ For some reason, a good photograph makes me prouder than a good poem.

All the best to you and your mother,

Yours, Tuvia

P.S. Now you really don't have to fear David Hanegbi and our “Mecca” anymore.¹¹ How nice it would have been to walk together, now of all times, in the green fields, would it not?

⁷ Edgar's words in Act IV, Scene 1. (English in the original letter).

⁸ A highly considered literary supplement in Israel in those days, edited by the novelist Aharon Meged.

⁹ Lea Goldberg's translation of Tolstoy's novel was published in 1953.

¹⁰ The *Kibbutz in the Lens* exhibition was shown by the National Kibbutz Association at a gallery in Tel Aviv in February 1953.

¹¹ David Hanegbi (1905–1988) was *Sifriat Poalim*'s first editor-in-chief and general director. At the time the letter was written, he had a falling out with Goldberg following her translation of *War and Peace*. She believed that the poet Avraham Shlonsky had edited her translation too aggressively, and felt that *Sifriat Poalim* was deliberately delaying the book's publication. “Mecca” refers to Kibbutz Merchavia, where the publication's headquarters were located at that time.

[From Tuvia Rübner to Lea Goldberg, summer 1961]

Hello, Lea,

I was glad to receive your letter. I chanced to Jerusalem again, to visit Agnon, and this time I knew it would be pointless to try and distract you from your work.¹²

This time, my meeting with Agnon was more pleasant than the first. Perhaps he was more easygoing, less aggressive towards others, perhaps he was more candid, because he even said that he was cross with Hebrew literature, indeed this statement was only slightly tainted by some conceit, and emanated partly from a sort of pain laced with astonishment, or a sort of astonishment laced with pain. I gave to him the translation of “The Oath,” and he didn’t let me budge until I completed it. I was there from 10 AM to 6 PM. After lunch (fruits and vegetables), he laid on the couch for a while, said he had to do it – doctor’s orders – just as he now had to start his meal with fruits, despite having been used to eat them for dessert, by order of his wife, and so he said he had to lie down, and that his cot had to be perfectly straight, no section of it should be raised, not even by one centimeter – he laid down and suddenly he said: I am a disturbed man, first of all I’m disturbed by myself, I’m a chatterbox, I stand and chatter everywhere. And you know, a man pursues females, while at the same time every man is half male, half female, and he pursues the female within him and she wants to be cosseted, to have good words said to her, to be praised, to be caressed. These two scamper about within a man and disturb his peace, a man needs to be all male, steel, impartial. Then he is peaceful. Sometimes I have such a moment of peace, and then I’m disturbed by guests. But let’s not philosophize now, it’s time to work, go on reading.

My translation pleased him (and happily for me, also his wife, at least those chapters she had heard me reading) to such an extent, that he poured me one glass after another of his superb cognac, until I emptied about half a bottle. While at first he asked me to drink it bit by bit, to savor the taste since it was a very expensive cognac, he later forgot his warning and invited me to pour for myself without drinking at all himself! He complained several times about guests who disturb his peace, for instance a group of teachers from Agudat Yisrael¹³ who came to ask his advice, since their textbooks cannot contain any secular literature, and yet they found it appropriate to include some of his stories, but did so without naming the author, and others keep coming and pester him and he cannot find enough time to work. He rises early to the

¹² This was at the time when Goldberg resided in Copenhagen, for the purpose of writing her book about Dostoevsky.

¹³ A leading non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox movement.

synagogue, and then one comes and asks his advice about a new prayer shawl, and another wants to know about some precept and yet another seeks clarification about a religious controversy, he needs to go to a wedding, tonight for example, and all sorts of people come all the time, and there's no time left for work. He opened a tin cabinet and showed me a row of some ten bindings with pages within them and said that this was his new book, a very important book, which he couldn't complete.¹⁴ And he also told me that he had written a novel which he may simply call *Arzaf*,¹⁵ in any case *Arzaf* is the protagonist and because he loves animals so much, he himself gradually becomes an animal.

From time to time he interrupted my reading and called out: how wonderful (he meant the original of course), or how true, or it's true, this is how people say it, it's very profound.

When I reached the passage: "We are no longer toddlers at play, indeed we are adults burdened by many years. It is a pity, a pity we are not joyous"¹⁶ – he said: indeed such words bring tears to one's heart. And at that moment tears glistened in his eyes.

As the elderly often do, he spoke of people five or ten years his senior as if they were extremely old and had to be treated with extreme caution, since they tended to take offence for absolutely no reason. He had received a letter from Rabbi Maimon¹⁷ who asked him something. Since he declined him, he had to spend an entire day writing a reply of five or six lines.

In the end he walked me to the bus stop, not before giving me a pair of socks, because I had a slight cold and in the warm morning hours I had come to him wearing sandals with no socks, while by the evening when I left him, the Jerusalem air was already chilly.

The evenings are now chilly in Merchavia as well, and while the daylight hours still exude all the summer's accumulated heat, that same pent-up heat that seeks to prove its entire might for the last time before perishing, the light is already filled with hints of autumn as is the wind, which while it is still bright and plays with lights and chases the shadows away, already alludes to something dark, something that lies beyond this blinding summer, which has so violently suppressed every eye over the past month. I do not know if the upcoming month will be kinder to me and grant me poetic verses once more, for I do not recall an extended poetic drought such as the one I'm experiencing

¹⁴ Presumably the posthumously published novel *Shira*. Rübner's translation thereof won him the Paul Celan Translation Prize in 1999.

¹⁵ The taxidermist in Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday*.

¹⁶ Jacob's words in his imaginary conversation with Shoshana in "The Oath."

¹⁷ Presumably Yehuda Leib Fishman Maimon (1875–1962), a religious Zionist leader.

now. The last poem I wrote now seems as though separated from me by eternity (literally). It's called "Blurring Traces," and here it is:

In the room, the circle of the lamp
A butterfly has fallen victim to the light.
Exempt of vow you are, daughter of night,
Totally free we will stay and cross over.

Over there?... I do not know. Not forever.
Sweet are moments together.
And the happiness that injures
You are hunted and I with you.

Are you comfortable?... Yes, I am... Last evening yet
We weren't, and now we are racing.
In our eyes the sun has just set,
And there beyond it blazes.

Love, your shadow a flapping fowl
Sliding from a nest in my hands that are thicket.
The nestling of the night! Morning is already out loud.
Whereto? Wherefrom?... Too late.

Last night such a huge and yellow moon rose over the houses of Moshav Merchavia, so sad that you could almost touch it. And perhaps it wasn't sad at all. Only very astonished. I don't know.

That is a difficult feeling that you describe, I do not think it is bad. The lines of your letter were so reminiscent of the lines of your poems, in their portrayal, in the atmosphere, even the meter to a certain extent, that I am fully confident that your spirit is in a mood of creative encounter with the world and its visions are etched in you perhaps more deeply than all that you have previously *seen* and it has filled you with joy and gratitude. Indeed there is loneliness in the world. There is destructive loneliness, there is total loneliness (do you recall Mephistopheles' words as he warns Faust against descending to the Mothers?).¹⁸ And there is also creative loneliness, where one's distance from any particular thing brings her closer to the heart of the world, "wrapped in the mantle of oblivion."¹⁹ I believe that it is *thus* that you are now staying in Copenhagen.

¹⁸ Towards the end of Act I, in Part II of *Faust*.

¹⁹ A line from Avraham Ben-Yitzhak's poem "Blessed Are They Who Sow and Do Not Reap...," *Collected Poems*, edited and with an afterword by Hanan Hever, trans. Peter Cole (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2003), 42.

I've worked a lot this summer and I'm tired. I've completed the translation,²⁰ I've edited my poetry book whose publication they want to delay once again,²¹ [and] I've finished the blowups for the photography exhibition marking Merchavia's jubilee, a sort of miniscule *Family of Man* of Kibbutz Merchavia.²² Galila is well, although she is already somewhat impatient: if you haven't yet heard, we are expecting, and hope all will be well and that the baby will be born in about 3–4 weeks' time.²³

Miriami's condition has been improving over the last few days after a long period of severe night terrors. Idan is an imaginative, graceful boy, it's a pity you don't know him.

This letter has grown too long, I have to finish it and all the other matters at hand, such as picking the apples, etc., we'll talk about them on another occasion. About our "literary and spiritual lives" you no doubt hear from another source. I'm not up-to-date (is that how you write this awful [new] word?) On the contrary, the more others advance, I slide backwards. Soon enough, no intelligent person will want to talk to me: I already see an *essential artistic* difference between a painting of the Madonna and a nature morte. So as not to alarm you anymore, I will sign off with a heartfelt bon voyage and wish you productive work, a sunny mood, and self-realization at home and wherever you may go.

Yours, Tuvia

Cordial regards from Galila.

P.S. The mail just brought me some sad news: the Ministry of Trade has not approved my order of three books²⁴ that I had asked *Sifriat Poalim's* Supply Department to buy for me. Perhaps you can buy them for me and I'll repay you in full once you get back? These books are not large, but they are extremely important to me. They are:

20 Of Agnon's "In the Woods and in the City," in: *Schalom: Erzählungen aus Israel, von S. J. Agnon bis S. Yishar*, hrsg. und aus dem Hebräischen übersetzt von Eva Rottenberg, Vorwort von Heinrich Böll (Zürich: Diogenes, 1964).

21 Rübner's second poetry book, *Poems Seeking Time* (Sifriat Poalim, 1961) (Hebrew).

22 In June 1961 the kibbutz celebrated the jubilee of the first Jewish settlements in the Jezreel Valley, in northern Israel. The celebrations centered on Rübner's exhibition and a play by Ya'akov Shabtai and Eitan Giladi. The exhibition was inspired by *The Family of Man*, an influential exhibition first held at MoMA in 1955, which highlighted the universal aspect of human existence. The blowups required extensive work, ten hours a day, in a stuffy room. The exhibition was later displayed also in Zurich, Toulouse and Rome.

23 Moran, his son.

24 Every import of goods to Israel was at that time subject to approval by the Ministry of Trade.

The first, P. Valéry: *Über Kunst*, published by Suhrkamp

The second, P. Valéry: *Windstriche*, by Insel

Th. W. Adorno: *Noten zur Literatur* (Suhrkamp).

[From Tuvia Rübner to Lea Goldberg, November 9, 1965]

Dear Lea,

I thank you for the letter and the various good news it brought me. First of all I congratulate you on all the favorable comments you have heard about your paintings, and more importantly, for being able to enjoy this pursuit. What you find in painting is patently clear to me and I would have been happy had I also been able to say with line and color what I find increasingly difficult to say with words – increasingly difficult from day to day. For me, photography is no substitute, although it does divert me from time to time, when I don't take it too seriously. But I never "find myself" in it. And where do I? You are right in writing that our return²⁵ will not be easy. We will have to give up many things, both good ones and ones that are not so good. But what is in store for us? I fear the days to come; my heart is terrified. Sometimes I awake from nightmares. I am certain you won't share this with anyone, and so I am able to write all these things to you. My heart pines for the forest and river, the mountain and lake, the autumn and snow and the streets and buildings of Europe, and I know full well I shall never see this world again. Instead, I will be agonized once more by the noisy [collective] dining hall, that terrible democracy, without believing in a future in the kibbutz and without being persuaded by another ho-ho, and out of growing discomfort (and I will even dare whisper, out of fear) of the conduct of this country. Nevertheless I know that I am nothing but a guest here, and that I could not have been anything but one. And yet again: can I feel well-being, being nothing but a guest? I do not know yet what work awaits me, but I am already fed up with teaching literature and assume that you understand this well.

In brief, all that I see before me is a dead end. When I left, I ran for my life, I thought that I would perhaps find a bridge – perhaps everything would seem better to me from a perspective. Now the entire perspective is mine: the tedious human landscape in Merchavia and the few exceptions do not change the rule, they too tend to fade when encountered too often. Total dissatisfaction, lack of spiritual arousal, and worse of all: lack of a valve.

Alright, enough moaning. I was asked to write a review on *The Art of the Short Story*²⁶ and so I did. I should be very happy if the book is indeed

²⁵ From Switzerland.

²⁶ A scholarly book published by Goldberg at that time.

translated and published. I have finished writing a brief essay about Agnon as a postscript to a collection of his stories to be published by Manesse publishing house in Steinschneider's translation, a somewhat dry translation.²⁷ My opening words at a reading night dedicated to Israeli literature were published, but what may have been appropriate to listen to at that time and place now seems too superficial for me to consider sending to you. Moreover, my translation of "The Oath"²⁸ was also published in aesthetic form, and I have received some favorable comments on the language of the translated text, but have yet to see any reference in print. I have taken some more photos of beautiful landscapes.

I don't know if I've already told you, but we bought a used car and I became a driver and was even told: a pretty good one (after failing two tests) and this is a source of pride for me. So we traveled:²⁹ to Säntis with the Krafts on an unusually clear day so that we saw the mountain ranges one behind the other to a great distance and the Bodensee and the Rhine Valley from here and each and every mountain and its shape and I need also add, its fate. And we saw the Bergdohlen [Alpine choughs] glide with the descending wind and heard their cries and climbed up a narrow and steep mountain path and then we drove all the family together to Kyburg and stopped in a forest whose trunks were particularly thin and tall and all in the shades of autumn and hiked in a forest near our home and again we journeyed through it and climbed up to the top of the Üetliberg and from day to day the colors changed (now most of the trees are bare and those that have not yet shed all their leaves have a rusty shade) and we drove to the Schwarzwald which is true to its name because within the trees it is as dark as night and hardly a sunray manages to penetrate and we found the red "fly mushroom" with the white dots, which despite being highly toxic is used as a home and shelter for dwarves and in general we found many entrances to their palaces. We also visited Tübingen and went up to the castle from which Hölderlin overlooked the Neckar and the pointed roofs and the smoke that rises from their chimneys in the mists of autumn and visited the Stift [monastery] and that same rounded room rebuilt in its original shape after having been

27 Shemu'el Joseph Agnon, *Im Herzen der Meere: und andere Erzählungen*, Übersetzungen aus dem Hebräischen von Karl Steinschneider und Max Strauss, Nachwort von Tuwia Rübner (Zürich: Manesse, 1966).

28 Agnon's novella originally titled *Shevuat Emunim*. See: Shemu'el Joseph Agnon, *Der Treuschwur: Erzählung*, aus dem Hebräischen von Tobias Rübner (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1965).

29 From this point, Rübner's syntax virtually lacks punctuation marks.

bombed, where [Ernst Zimmer] the carpenter housed the mentally ill poet. (It is a 3½-hour drive from Zürich to Tübingen). And we spent two whole days hiking in Wallis [Valais], which is particularly beautiful in its upper part with the source of the Rhone and its Arven – [Swiss] pines, the only ones that also turn yellow in the autumn. Can you imagine those ochre-orange-tainted yellow forests set against blue skies and white mountains covered with fresh snow? And we found tiny and shiny silvery lakes strewn with silver hairs, and what not? We were in Saastal, where we spent the night and the next day we climbed a mountain and reached an altitude of about 2,600m. From there we drove to Sion, the capital of Wallis. We returned home late at night. We drove again through the Grimsel Pass that we had visited, the three of us: you, Joshua³⁰ and me – do you remember the end of the world which we saw from there beyond a small lake called Totensee? By the way, Joshua has written electronic music for a play (“Victor”)³¹ and was tremendously successful. And Galila has played at a memorial ceremony for Buber at Schauspiel-Haus and was also tremendously successful. Kraft spoke at the ceremony and spoke very well, leaving a deep impression on the great majority of the attendants. And we all managed to identify from a distance the various types of forest berries, after the lesson we had learned from your nose and eyes. We will see the snow fall and experience all the tranquil peace of a snowy landscape only once more. We will be happy to see you again in the summer, but please let me know when you intend to come because we will be done by the end of August and during the last 4–6 weeks we would like to take a tour of Europe and maybe my relatives will also come and maybe also Ozer and Ruti.³²

Please convey my sincerest regards to your mother, and to Dan³³ and his twins, to [his wife] Ada, to Zvi³⁴ and even to the Shaked family³⁵ [...]. There is so much more to see! Such much Italy and England and South-of-France and Spain and how are we to choose?

Yours, Tuvia

³⁰ Yehoshua Lakner, a musician, Rübner’s friend from the time that they immigrated together from Slovakia.

³¹ Probably Roger Vitrac’s *Victor, or Power to the Children*.

³² Israeli poet Ozer Rabin (1921–1999) and his wife.

³³ Israeli poet and scholar Dan Pagis (1930–1986), who would later join Goldberg’s Poets Club.

³⁴ Zvi Zohar (Sonnenschein, 1898–1975) – educator and writer, a founding member of Hashomer Hatzair and Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek, one of the founders of kibbutz education and a member of *Sifriat Poalim*’s editorial board.

³⁵ Literary scholars and critics Gershon and Malka Shaked.

[From Lea Goldberg to Tuvia Rübner, November 28, 1965]

Dear Tuvia,

I thank you for your beautiful letter and I'm writing back quickly because you may still add in the proofreading the years of Agnon's stay in Germany:³⁶ these are usually indicated as 1914–1924. This is also what is stated in the title of a doctoral dissertation currently being written here [at the Hebrew University] about "Agnon's German Period."³⁷ But in the meantime Werses³⁸ has provided me with all the details and I'm attaching his letter to mine. Perhaps it's already too late but in any case it's better that you have it.

When passing by a bookstore I saw "The Oath" in your translation in the window; that is, I assume it's your translation because it is published by Fischer. If it is – congratulations!

Your letter is in three parts and one of them made me a little anxious. I'm afraid our situation seems to you from a distance more terrible than it really is. And yet I understand most of your concerns. I spoke to Dan [Pagis] today and we both considered the possibility of moving you from the kibbutz to Jerusalem. Dan says that teachers are in huge demand here in the seminars, and had we known your intentions better, we would perhaps have been able to "take the pulse." I don't know if one can offer advice in such cases, but would like you to consider it.

And the other part of your letter gives off the smell of mountain flora and I had the feeling I was once again travelling on those wondrous heights where the air itself makes one younger. It is nice that you are able to venture to these distances now, and please don't write "for the last time." Nobody ever knows when the last time is: it is like the first and last rains – the first rain [*Yoreh*] can always be identified because it is first, but which rain is the last [*Malkosh*], nobody can ever be completely certain before July.

You have yet to reach your July [*Tammuz*].

I've met Ms. Kraft and she told me a little about your meeting and the trip and the Buber ceremony. I was happy to hear of Galila's success.

As for my painting, I'm afraid you've misunderstood me: I too cannot use it to express what I do in words. It is an entirely different matter and therefore I still believe I find in it what you do in photography. I wish my paintings were

³⁶ In a previous letter Rübner asked Goldberg if she happened to know when exactly Agnon had stayed in Germany, so that Rübner could indicate the dates in the afterword to his translation of "The Oath."

³⁷ Judith Halevi-Zwick, *The German Period (1914–1924) in S.Y. Agnon's Oeuvre*.

³⁸ Shmuel Werses (1915–2010) – literary scholar and Hebrew University professor.

comparable to your photographs. The thing is, however, that I don't find the need for words nowadays. I seem to have nothing to say with words. Therefore, I find all my joy in something else. And it helps me be completely at ease with the fact that I have no need to write. That's it.

I'm writing briefly because I'm very preoccupied right now. The academic year has begun in full steam. I must say this is also quite pleasant, because my students are very good and cooperative. But there are also many other issues that concern me at the university.

Warm regards to Galila and the children. Mother also sends her regards.

Yours in friendship, Lea