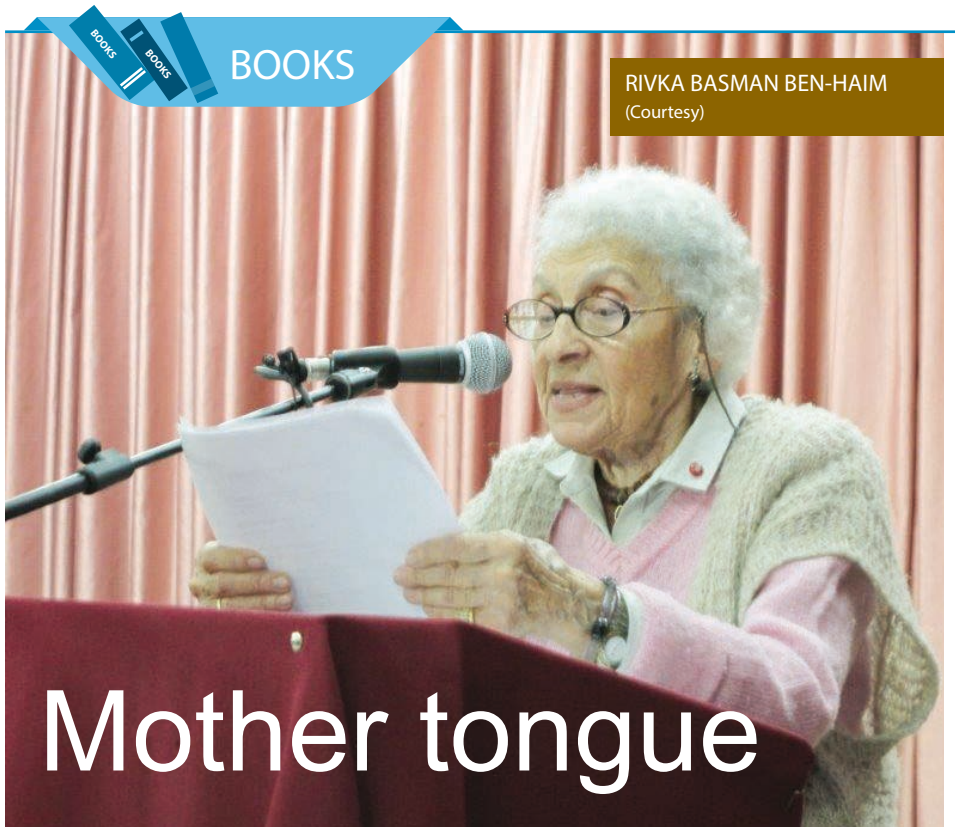

RIVKA BASMAN BEN-HAIM
(Courtesy)

Mother tongue

ZELDA KAHAN NEWMAN
(Courtesy)

Rivka Basman Ben-Haim's intricate Yiddish poetry is now presented alongside an English translation

• BARRY DAVIS

Yiddish is the most expressive, aesthetically and emotionally evocative of languages. It offers the Yiddish speaker and writer an inherent juiciness, an almost elemental grittiness, that exudes street-level nous, yet also incorporates the full spectrum of emotions – from unspeakable torment to cloud-nine joy – with not just a little tongue-in-cheek insight in the linguistic mix, too.

Rivka Basman Ben-Haim appears to have cornered the aforementioned expansive spirit, and conveys the verbal nuts and bolts succinctly in the self-explanatorily titled poem "Yiddish Words." In it, the nonagenarian poet proffers the idea of the intrinsic value of language and, in particular, her beloved mother tongue.

"Yiddish words," she muses, "in an empty world, words walk instead of people. They walk from place to place, from far to far. They have eternity, they have time. They have a word – God – and they pray to him to protect them in the empty world. And bless them. So words become eternal as people."

On the back cover of Basman Ben-Haim's The Thirteenth Hour, celebrated Yiddishist Yitskhok Niborski notes that the poet "is one of the very last representatives of the golden age of Yiddish poetry," adding that linguist Zelda Kahan Newman's translations "are very fine and sensitive."

As my own knowledge of Yiddish is pretty limited, I am perfectly willing to take Niborski's word on that, especially as Moti Didner, associate artistic director of the New York-based Folksbiene National Yiddish Theatre offers "kudos" to Kahan Newman "for bringing these gems to both Yiddish speakers and non-Yiddish speakers with keen insight and sensitivity."

The book title is intriguing and one which Kahan Newman surmises infers the poet's sense of the sands of time ebbing away and that it was time to get some more of her work into print – to non-Yiddish speakers too. The translator was just as keen to widen Basman Ben-Haim's readership.

"I felt it was past time that she should be recognized by English speakers," she said.

Those who are conversant in the mamma loshon may very well have read some of the poet's works over the years. Her first-published tome, Doves at the Well, saw the light of day back in 1959, with a further 13 books published since then, the last of which, The Smile of a Tree, came out only last year. Basman Ben-Haim – who was born Basman and only added her husband's name following his death – also made her works available to a wider local poetry-loving hinterland when she joined forces with 65-year-old Iraqi-born poet Ronny Someck to produce the humorously titled Hebrew-Yiddish volume I Am a Pajama Iraqi, which came out in 2008. That was followed, a couple of years later, by a Hebrew translation collection of some of her work, called On a Chord of Rain.

Basman Ben-Haim has had her fair share of pain. She was born in Wilkomir, Lithuania, and her father and brother were killed by the Germans. She spent around two years in the Vilna ghetto, and was subsequently sent to the Kaiserwald concentration camp in Riga.

She started writing poetry at the camp as a way of boosting her fellow inmates' morale, and managed to smuggle some of her poems out in her mouth. After the war, Basman Ben-Haim lived in Belgrade for a couple of years, and it was there that she met and married Shmuel Ben-Haim. Together they helped to smuggle Jews out of Europe and past the British naval blockade to Mandate Palestine.

The Holocaust is an ever-present element in Basman Ben-Haim's works, sometimes only alluded to and other times front and center. The latter is clearly the case in "Remembrance," in which she relates how others in Kaiserwald "remember how I used to write poems, crying poems, silence poems on the red cobblestones. Remember me at the barbed fence, my young skin tattooed from barbed points, to see a teeny-thread of sunset, of my own setting in the last sun."

The writer dredges up images from the most painful episode in her long life, but also addresses the anguish that necessarily comes with revisiting those darkest of days. That comes across in the starkest of terms in "To Tell."

"To tell, means to set out on the path and to come in to the chasm of yesterday's days," she notes in unequivocal terms. "To tell means to go into a blind swoop and remain with the wound and with sleepless nights."

The translating work was clearly a labor of love for Kahan Newman, and she is enamored with the source writer.

"I am in awe of her, and not just because of her talent," says Kahan Newman. "She is funny and smart, she's wise. Her poems sing."

Translating any written work, and particularly poetry, is a very tricky business. That must be doubly true when the original material is in a language such as Yiddish, and the difficulty of transposing the emotional syntax that is inherent to Yiddish into English, which is a very different cultural and linguistic kettle of fish.

The two women often collaborated to make sure the translation hit the nail on the head. Kahan Newman was at least as careful as the poet to ensure that non-Yiddish readers got more than just the gist of the Yiddish lines.

"Sometimes we'd discuss a word and I'd suggest a word, and she'd say that's fine," notes Kahan Newman. "But I'd tell her we shouldn't go with the word just yet, and we should make really sure it fits."

The Thirteenth Hour is more than just a fine collection of poetry – it is an all-too-rare opportunity to appreciate the intricacy of Yiddish verse that manages to convey the deepest of emotions with the most delicate, but fundamentally tactile, of paintbrushes. ■

THE THIRTEENTH HOUR
By Rivka Basman Ben-Haim
Translated
by Zelda Kahan Newman
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