

Book Review

Amia Lieblich. *Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer*. Translated by Naomi Seidman. Edited by Chana Kronfeld and Naomi Seidman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

This is an unusual book of imaginary conversations between Amia Lieblich, a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University and the resurrected figure of the first modern woman writer, Dvora Baron (1887-1956).

The book is unusual not only because biographies on women Hebrew authors are rare but especially because this is a fictional biography, an imaginative reconstruction of biographical and historical data filtered through a contemporary feminist sensibility. Fact and fiction, history and interpretation, literature and biography all blend here in such a way as to blur the conventional boundaries of all these disciplines. This postmodern attempt to understand the important period of the early decades of the century that revolutionized Jewish European women's lives is what inspired Naomi Seidman, the co-editor of this work to undertake the massive job of translating this work into English.

In a further move toward blurring fiction and biography the book concludes with the short story "Fradl." The story about the unhappy wife of an indifferent businessman ends with divorce and remarriage, and to some extent raises questions about Baron's own unhappy marriage, a subject she refuses to discuss in the imaginary conversations. By placing the story at the end of the book, the editors and the author seem to imply that some of the unanswered questions in the fictional biography may very well be found in the fictional story. On the one hand, Baron's husband, Yosef Aharonovich, an activist and the editor of "The Young Worker" was a devoted husband and colleague who encouraged Baron to publish her work. Yet, Aharonovich was often absent and unavailable, busy with his activities in the leadership coterie of the early Yishuv.

Lieblich suggests through her resurrected or invented medium that Baron became ill and began to live a secluded life after her return in 1918 from exile to Egypt. It would seem that this was the turning point that transformed Baron from an active and creative pioneer and writer to a bed-ridden social pariah. The question of Baron's mysterious illness and social isolation is raised in one way or another in many of the twenty-four encounters. The answer to this question, however, remains ambiguous. At one point, Lieblich suggests that it was the epileptic Zipporah, Baron's only daughter, who was behind Baron's decision to live in isolation. She even suggests that Baron wrote tragic stories about marriage in order to comfort her daughter whose medical condition doomed her to celibacy. Another possible reason for Baron's withdrawal from public life was the economic hardship that befell the couple after they retired from *The Young Worker*.

In contrast to the later harsh years in Palestine, Baron's memories of the Shtetl are suffused with fondness and longing. She seems to be indebted for the early education in Hebrew and Jewish texts to her father, a Rabbi, and seems to be grateful as well to her brother, Benjamin with whom she shared a bond of friendship. Despite the nostalgic evocations of the Shtetl, Baron does not

sentimentalize the fate of the married as well as the divorced women who often fell prey to abusive husbands and an unfair system. Later in her life Baron rejected her early stories. One can speculate that the author internalized the critical judgment of her Shtetl stories, a judgment that was based on the belief that young Hebrew authors in Eretz Israel should write about the new society and the process of national revival. It seems to me that Liebllich could have emphasized this point, as it goes to the very heart of the question of silence of women authors during this and subsequent literary periods. Liebllich presents Baron's withdrawal from public life as a riddle but it could very well be that the author did not receive the kind of critical acclaim to which she aspired.

The book is especially creative in its offering biographical details and psychological insights into the life of the author, Amia Liebllich, who refuses the traditional stance of the objective biographer. Liebllich reflects on the loss of the men in her life, notably her husband, yet she does not provide a satisfactory response to the question: why she undertook this particular project. The book begins with a prologue focusing on Liebllich as a child contemplating volumes of books in her father's library, among which she notices Dvorah Baron's book. But this impressionistic recollection is hardly an explanation for the massive analytic and creative enterprise of the book. The riddle of Dvorah Baron is mirrored and duplicated in the riddle of Amia Liebllich writing about Dvorah Baron.

Liebllich's writing reveals an astonishing creative ability, and perhaps more than it reveals about Dvorah Baron as a person and an author, it exposes Liebllich's desire to link up with an important Hebrew woman writer by way of perhaps legitimizing her own decision to write. The book is a valuable resource for Baron scholars, yet its greatest value may lie in the book itself as a work of a critical imagination. Baron emerges from the book as both an intriguing character, and it is indeed her character rather than her writing that is at the heart of Liebllich's investigation. Has Liebllich "resurrected" or "reconstructed" the figure of Dvorah Baron, or has she invented her? It will be up to future generations of scholars to judge and decide. For now, what is clear is that the relative critical silence about the origins of female Hebrew writing - a subject that has begun to be studied only in the last decade - is finally broken.

Liebllich writes that "It was serendipity, or perhaps the spirit of the times, that led me to writing a biography in which subjectivity and identification were proudly announced, rather than being concealed" (p. xi). But in addition to the feminist challenge to traditional (male) objective biography, and in addition to her "search for a 'good' research subject" Liebllich has been seeking out a literary mother, one through which she could assert her own right to speak and write - with a difference.

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