

# A LITERARY LIFE

By **Aviva Lori** | Photo by **Ilya Melnikov**

Prof. Hamutal Bar Yosef had a late start on her academic career, but became a leading figure in the field of Hebrew literature. Now, having published her first book of prose, she talks about a childhood in the shadow of bereavement, her failed marriage and the son who committed suicide. She says it is possible to surmount even the worst tragedies in life

**T**he meeting with Prof. Hamutal Bar Yosef took place several days before Rosh Hashana. In the Jerusalem air, gradually recovering from the summer, one could sense the pre-holiday activity and the atmosphere of the approaching Yom Kippur fast: a time of summing up and soul searching. Bar Yosef's modest home, almost like a student's apartment, which she shares with her partner of seven years,

Aryeh Gazoli, is surrounded by a small garden, creating an intimate self-contained space that is separate from the city.

In our conversation, Bar Yosef, in her precise language, engages in a kind of soul-searching about her life and her long-term activity in the field of Hebrew literature. Before the meeting, she provided impressive background material in the form of a 38-page resume full of achievements, which makes the reader slightly dizzy. Bar



Bar Yosef. 'I wouldn't have believed it would happen to me, that I would be able to say that life is good.'

Yosef has published 14 books of poetry, 12 books of research, dozens of translations from Russian, French and English, encyclopedia entries, articles of criticism and commentary, literary works and professional articles. She has won 13 prizes for books of poetry and fiction, 10 academic prizes and research grants. She has done professional consultation; taught courses and lectured; participated in scientific conferences, and more. A slice of life that would be enough for three people working full time.

Bar Yosef is not amused. She considers her achievements quite reasonable, an integral part of her active personality. She is 72 years old, but most of her activity has taken place in the past three decades. She completed her doctorate in Hebrew literature (about metaphors and symbols in the work of Uri Nissan Gnessin) at the age of 44. "I had time for creative work only after the children grew up," she explains.

A few weeks ago, her first book of prose, "Music," was published (by Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Safra books), a collection of stories that received the Hebrew Writers Association in Israel award for 2012. Some of the stories were published in the past in magazines and literary supplements, and new stories have been added. "Just as a retiree suddenly begins to collect his photos and put them in albums, I decided to collect my stories. I didn't believe that anyone would want to publish them," she says.

Most of the stories in the book are autobiographical: They are about daily life, people she met at home, in the backyard, at a conference or a lecture. There are stories about human weaknesses, small events and great tragedies within a supposedly banal reality, which cause the passing moment to become unforgettable. The prose is written in lean, precise and unpoetic language. The point of view is factual and critical rather than emotional, sometimes distant and hard to digest. Some of the stories recall the atmosphere of 1948. A childhood in the shadow of the establishment of the state and the atmosphere of the 1950s.

## 'LIFE BECAME HELL'

Bar Yosef's biography is interwoven with that of the country: immigration, deprivation, kibbutz, moshav, wars, bereavement and survival. Her parents, Avigdor and Monya Burstein, immigrated to Israel in 1936 from Rovno, Poland (today Ukraine) with their six-year-old son Menahem. They settled on Kibbutz Ayelet Hashahar, but had to leave after the collective enforced its authority. "My mother was a kindergarten teacher, and when my brother contracted scarlet fever, they forbade her to see him for three weeks because they were afraid she would infect the kindergarten children. But she went to visit him, and apparently they were thrown out because of that."

Bar Yosef was born in 1940 on Kibbutz Tel Yosef. "From there we moved a year later to Kibbutz Beit Alfa, then to Tel Adashim, and when I was three to Beit Zera. Afterward we moved to Kfar Warburg, and when the War of Independence broke out they evacuated us. During one of the evacuations, when we were living in Jabalya [a Jaffa neighborhood], my parents were informed that their son, my brother, had been killed in the War of Independence. He was not yet 18."

Bar Yosef was almost eight years old when her brother died; her mother told her of his death in the Tel Aviv zoo, in front of the deer cage. In the story "Mastik" (chewing gum), she describes the moment: "She gave me a banana and I peeled it and started to eat, and then she said: 'Why don't you ask me why my eyes are red?' So I asked, and she first said that my big brother, who was now in the Palmach [the elite commando force] had been wounded. And I asked when he would recover, and Mother said that he would never recover, because he had died from his injury."

"The most important book in my career is a book of poetry my brother wrote," says Bar Yosef. "My parents published it after his death, and there, among other things, are letters he wrote to me from the front. Long letters with detailed descriptions of the battles. We were very close. He was the center of my emotional life. 'I would like to describe for you the surrounding landscape, which is very beautiful,' he wrote. 'You should be aware that it is hard to describe very beautiful things. I'll try. I'm now on night guard duty. It's beautiful now at night ... At 7 P.M. look at the moon and say hello to it, and I'll look at the moon too.' My childhood fell apart after his death. My parents fell apart, and life became hell."

One result of Bar Yosef's trauma was the outbreak of a serious intestinal illness, from which she suffered for many years, and which included prolonged hospitalization in Tel Hashomer hospital under the supervision of Prof. Chaim Sheba. The illness disappeared when she left home and moved to Jerusalem. At the same time, her parents once again decided to wander, believing that a new place would soften the reality. ►



## BAR YOSEF'S BIOGRAPHY IS INTERWOVEN WITH THAT OF THE COUNTRY: IMMIGRATION, DEPRIVATION, KIBBUTZ, MOSHAV, WARS, BEREAVEMENT AND SURVIVAL.



Hamutal Bar Yosef in childhood and youth.

◀ The family moved to Moshav Ein Vered, but their dead son moved along with them.

"He was present in me all the time," says Bar Yosef. "I always felt him walking a few steps behind me. I dreamed that in another moment the door would open and he would enter."

In the story "Me'az lo kara davar" (Since then nothing has happened), the first story she published in Haaretz in the 1960s, she describes herself returning from school with her brother following behind her: "Every day on the way to school and back, among the orchards, via the forest and the cemetery, every day he would wait for her in order to accompany her from behind... And then she could permit herself to open the cracks in her face in order to suck the rhythmic sound of the steps behind her, at a distance of about 100 meters. She knows exactly how he looks and doesn't turn her head. A fixed distance separates them, like the distance of eight years in age."

### END OF A FANTASY

About 10 years ago Bar Yosef discovered that her brother did not die as a war hero, but apparently committed suicide. "The writer Dorit Silberstein told me about it. Her father was on the spot when it happened and told her before his death that she had to tell me. He was sitting alone in the tent, cleaning his rifle, and there had been some kind of quarrel beforehand. I don't know whether he shot himself or a bullet was ejected, and I don't feel any need to investigate. I assume my parents were aware of it, but thought I was better off thinking he was killed in the war."

Her parents moved to Ein Vered with only a simple Jewish Agency bed and a kettle, and slowly began to get organized. "They even bought me a used piano after I went on a hunger strike and didn't eat for two days," says Bar Yosef. "When I finished elementary school, my mother, who was very ambitious – for me as well – thought it was impossible for me to travel to Tel Aviv every week for piano lessons, and wanted me to study at a good high school and not in continuing education classes, as was customary at the time in the kibbutzim and moshavim. So we moved to Tel Aviv, to Kiryat Shalom, a terrible place. My father was a teacher, my mother was a kindergarten teach-

er. I studied at Ironi Hey high school, and when I finished at the age of 17 – I skipped a grade in elementary school – I went to study Hebrew literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem."

At the university, Bar Yosef met her husband, playwright Yosef Bar Yosef (son of the writer Yehoshua Bar Yosef), who had been married earlier to the poet Dahlia Rabikovitch ("My parents weren't at all pleased"), and married him. She worked as a high school teacher, and later in the curriculum department of the Education Ministry. At the age of 29 she was already the mother of four. Tzipori, now 52, a psychologist, lives in Ashdod; Racheli, 50, has a master's degree in psychology and lives in Mesilat Zion; Menahem, 47, lives on Kibbutz Harduf and teaches literature and drama. The youngest child, Avigdor, committed suicide 27 years ago, when he was 16.

The suicide was the final blow to Bar Yosef's fantasy of living a normal family life. "From the time I was in high school, the thing I wanted most in life was a large normal family that eats three meals a day, not in the children's house or in the dining room, and I failed in that project although I invested 20 of the best years of my life in it. I have wonderful children, nine delightful grandchildren, but the most important thing in life I was unable to do."

*Did it depend only on you?*

"That was my big mistake. I was accustomed to thinking that if there's something I want, I have to do it. That what others can't do, I will. But there's a moment in which, when you want to attempt a project, you have to know how to create cooperation around you. It's a talent I lack. I'm unable to infect people with my ideas and enlist their help. It's a lack of a certain wisdom. I assume that it's an art that depends on all kinds of give and take that I don't understand."

*For example?*

"At the age of 40 I wanted to change my lifestyle. To stop being a teacher and an official in the Education Ministry and to begin an academic career. To do a doctorate. It's a tremendous effort that can't succeed without the support of the family. And I didn't know how to prepare the family for that and get them to help. Although I had no support, I began my doctorate in 1980 at the Hebrew University. I had a dream of teaching there, but I didn't succeed in that either.

"In 1984 I finished my doctorate. It was a period of many layoffs at the university and the only option for getting work was with a Yigal Allon Fund grant [for distinguished young researchers]. The condition for the grant was that the scholar be no older than 40, and I was 44. I remember that Prof. Dov Noy, head of the folklore department, told me: 'You wasted your time on a family and children and now you're seeking an academic career; what are you talking about?' It was very hard for me to hear that. I taught in the department of comparative literature, I tried to fight for my place, and I didn't succeed. In 1986 I was dismissed from Hebrew University."

*Were you insulted that they let you go?*

"Yes. But now I understand that maybe the decision-makers had considerations that were not necessarily related to the level of my achievements, such as the matter of chemistry, for example. I wasn't very nice. I'm a pathological arguer. Everything I hear, I see that there's also a chance to say the opposite, and I don't keep it to myself. It's quite foolish. Just like in the family, at work too you have to create an atmosphere of trust, affection and a desire to help you. People do it spontaneously, and I'm not good at it. Maybe I have inner objections, too, but had I known at the age of 40 what a high price I would pay, I would have done those things despite my objections."

*What, for example, would you do differently?*

"I realize that I made every possible mistake in terms of human relations. I was so naive. I thought there was some absolute scale, and that if I did my work well I would succeed. It turns out that although such successes are foam on the water in my opinion, things don't work that way. Today I understand the mistakes and where I had no sense."

*And maybe you couldn't go against yourself?*

"I can't accept the fact that people say 'I had no choice, there was nothing to be done.' You can always do something. Usually you don't because you make a mistake or you don't understand the possibilities or you're unaware of the price you will pay."

### LATE DIVORCE

While Bar Yosef was struggling over the doctorate and an academic career,

her personal life was gradually disintegrating. "I had no support at home. My then-husband hated the academic world. He didn't understand why I was fighting so hard for this stupid thing. And apparently I didn't know how to explain why it was important, and the children didn't understand what had happened to Mom the cook, and I was living under tremendous tension and pressure. When I brought home my doctoral degree the only one who said: 'Mom, I'm proud of you,' was Avigdor."

*And why didn't you receive support at home?*

"I was tough on the children. A mother who sets boundaries and demands discipline. Yossi sat at home and played the mischievous one against Mom, who would cause her problems. That was the hard part. Because he was home all the time and it was impossible to demand that they do things. In effect I had five children, and one who thought he had a right to tell me what to do and what to buy for the children and on what to spend money, although he didn't bring in money and didn't function as I expected a father to function.

"He conveyed a type of nonconformism to the children. I remember that when she was a year old he taught our eldest daughter that when people asked her 'How are you?' to answer 'shitty.' That was the politics in which I was involved. On the other hand, I wanted a patriarchal family. I wanted a home in the traditional sense of the word, a home in which the children are obedient and a man recites the Kiddush. I taught the children that a father has to be obeyed, but that's not what he conveyed to the children about me. It was quite a mess."

Amid all that chaos of a dysfunctional family and a struggle over the job at the university, in December 1985 her son Avigdor committed suicide. "I returned home in the evening from a lecture at Bar-Ilan [University], all the lights in the house were on; the older children no longer lived at home, Yossi wasn't there and I found Avigdor on the rug. He had shot himself with a pistol that belonged to his brother who was serving in the army. The pistol was tossed on the floor, his glasses were on the other side, and he was still gurgling. I called an ambulance, I don't know how I had the strength, and they arrived and did all kinds of things and took him to a hospital and he was fading away all night and in the morning he