

Classics in a Hot Climate

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I have been asked to tell you how I became a classicist specializing in Greek. I am afraid I shall have to start many years earlier in order to sketch the vicissitudes of my way towards what had not been my goal and still became a most significant factor in my life.

I was born in Vienna in 1923 to ardent Zionist parents. My father was a journalist working for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. From the late '20s he kept asking to be transferred to Palestine, and ever since I can remember I studied Hebrew and waited for the opportunity to realize the dream. But Palestine did not interest world Jewry enough for the JTA to open an office there before Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933. Finally, in the last week of January 1935, we set out from Trieste and made our way by boat to the Land of Promise. We were to land off Jaffa which did not yet have a port deep enough for ships; we and our luggage were to be carried to the shore by Arab porters wading in the normally shallow water. But when we were close to Cyprus a bad rainstorm hit the area. After being tossed by violent waves for what seemed an eternity we changed course and arrived in Haifa. Here we were stuck for nearly a week as both the railway tracks and the single bus road to the capital had been flooded. As soon as they were repaired we proceeded to Jerusalem and moved into a flat on the fourth and last floor of a new building in what is now Hillel Street. There were only a few houses in that neighbourhood, all of them much lower. Our building had no elevator but the view was magnificent; we could see every ridge in the mountains of Moab. I was even more impressed by the real camels in the kind of parking lot for transport animals between us and King George Street which was already paved but along which there were only very few buildings. There were hardly any cars in Jerusalem. The milkman came from Neve Ya'aqov riding on his donkey; carts drawn by mules brought the kerosene for cooking, washing and heating. — Then came summer and the water in the pipes of the only recently introduced running water system did not reach the top floor; it was also very hot under the flat roof. The following Muharram, when leases automatically terminated, we moved to the brand new development area of Rehavia 'B', south of Ramban Street. I do not think that there were yet more than 20 houses in 'our' Ben Maimon Avenue; all of them were small, and in the front of some of them flowerbeds and saplings were being planted.

Less than a week after our arrival in Jerusalem we started school (which was not only not free but expensive). The principal brought me to my class, and the teacher interrupted whatever he was doing and told the pupils to rise from their seats. The principal said, 'I am bringing you a new pupil' and asked me to say my name. I said proudly, 'Ra'anana', accenting the last syllable. After a few seconds of dead silence roars of laughter broke out. One girl nearly choked and turned her chair upside down, and the teacher told her to leave the room. I was perplexed about what I had done to cause this laughter. By the end of the school day I came to the conclusion that I had

pronounced my name differently from what was done here and from that day on for over 50 years I gave my name as Ra'anAna, with the accent on the last-but-one syllable. I felt self-confident enough to return to Ra'ananA only when I was about 70 years old. Not long afterwards I was invited to the Golden Wedding reception of an ex-classmate. On the way there another ex-classmate said, 'How cruel we were to you new immigrants! Do you remember how we laughed because you wore such a funny dress?' What I remembered about this particular girl was that she had pricked me with a sharp pin when she overheard me saying some words in German to another ex-Viennese classmate. 'Here you speak only Hebrew', she said while a drop of blood oozed out of my leg. I never spoke another word of German at school. I was not angry with her. This was 'my country' and I was watching its ways without criticizing. I had come in order to be part, so I had to learn, and I was all tuned in to do so.

My school, the Gymnasia Ivrit, was the first Gymnasium-type co-ed middle and high school in Jerusalem. The classes were quite small, the pupils from different backgrounds and different communities; most of those born in Palestine (the much envied 'Sabras') were children of people who had arrived one generation earlier. There was also a steady trickle of new immigrants. Nobody stayed a newcomer for long — the next new arrival made the preceding one an old-timer. Our teachers too were a varied lot. Practically all were men. Most came from different European schools. Only one teacher was from the 'Old Yishuv' — Hebron-born Mr. Mani who taught Arabic. The higher maths teacher's Hebrew sounded Russian and the top class English teacher's English sounded anything but English. All the teachers considered educating the young generation their great challenge.

Zionist involvement was part of the curriculum. We participated in the demonstrations against the White Paper and came back from planting trees with blisters on our hands. A great part were members of youth movements — the majority were Scouts; some belonged to the Left Mahanot ha-Olim, only I to 'Betar'. Debates were heated, but friendships crossed lines. World War II broke out when we were about 16. Apprehension was growing and supplies were getting scarce, but life went on. Some secretly joined Underground organizations. Now ideology overruled friendships and the girl I liked best began avoiding me. Decades later she told me that her commander in the Hagana had ordered her to do so. Five of my class — about 10% — fell in action before the British left in 1948. But this was already later.

I graduated from high school in 1941. The Germans were closing in on us from the NE and the SW, but life went on and I started my higher education. My first choice would have been medicine, to help people, but there was no medical school in Palestine. My second choice would have been the history of the Second Temple period. This was considered THE period of Jewish heroism, but it was not taught at the Hebrew University. So I had to do it on my own. At the time there was no BA, and for the MA one had to take 3 subjects, one main and two secondary ones. I registered for Ancient History (main), and Jewish History and Bible (secondary). For Ancient History I had to take 2 years of both Latin and Greek which were not taught in high school. I started Latin in my first year and Greek in the second. In the middle of that academic year I also got engaged to my commander in the Irgun Tsva'i Le'umi underground — 'Irgun' for short.

The romance had begun when I was in the last year of high school, but my father had said that nobody was to ask for me until I was twenty. So we got engaged on my 20th birthday and the wedding was fixed for the summer vacation.

The Greek prep was given by Professor Moshe (Max) Schwabe. At the end of the academic year he approached another girl student and me and suggested that we study the second-year course of the prep on our own during the vacation; if we passed the exam, he would allow us to attend his seminar on Greek Lyric Poetry as guests; if we did well it would be counted as full attendance. I had not intended to study Greek poetry, but at that time one took pride in doing much more than one was officially obliged to do; a student who completed his studies fulfilling merely his duties was looked down upon as one who was interested only in getting a degree. Schwabe's offer was both a compliment and a challenge. The two of us worked hard throughout that summer of 1943 in the middle of which I got married. The work for the seminar during the following academic year was even more demanding and no less gratifying.

In the meanwhile the political situation had changed. On the one hand it was already clear that the Allies would be victorious; on the other the horror of the Holocaust had become public. When the war broke out in 1939 the Irgun had stopped its anti-British activities in order not to harm the war effort against Germany; in 1941 the chief commander of the Irgun, David Razi'el, had been killed in Iraq while on a British military mission. Now the Irgun demanded the opening of the gates of Palestine to the remnants of European Jewry and decided to renew actions against the British if they refused. The CID Headquarters in Jerusalem were attacked in February 1944. Attacks on other British strongholds followed. On March 31 the British arrested practically all the upper echelon of the Irgun. My husband was one of those arrested.

I was called to the CID a few days later and put under 'Home Arrest', which meant that I had to report at the police station close to Jaffa Gate mornings and evenings, was not allowed to be outdoors between sunset and sunrise and forbidden to leave Jerusalem. When I inquired about my husband, I was told, 'Forget about him. You will be old and grey before he comes back'. I had just turned 21.

I was devastated. There was nothing to live for. Many years later, when I read Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle*, I thought that I would have envied the young woman whose husband was sentenced to 10 years because she could plan what to do with herself in the meanwhile. My husband was detained 'at His Majesty's pleasure'. The detention was renewed periodically and could last all his life. The British probably never guessed what they did for me when they obliged me to report every morning — I might not have got up at all. Now I continued from the police station to the university, but in class I could not think of anything else and the tears were running down my cheeks.

After some weeks Prof. Schwabe called me to his room and told me to prepare a Greek play and to come to him after a fortnight to discuss it. This was my first Greek tragedy and in order to master it I had to work extremely hard with dictionaries and grammars and commentaries. That was in addition to my regular courses, and I was now also doing odd jobs as I needed money. But I enjoyed every minute spent on the text. When I had to stop I was already looking forward to the next occasion.

The colloquium went well. Professor Schwabe opened my eyes to additional points and aspects. When I expressed my true thanks and got up to leave, Professor Schwabe told me to prepare another play for another colloquium after another fortnight.

This process was repeated until the end of the academic year. Life was now full of meaning and time was flying. It was not only the great satisfaction of being able to do it: when I got married I passed from the authority of loving parents to that of an admired commander. I had never been prepared to make decisions, and now, suddenly, I had to. In Greek tragedy people debate serious problems in order to make moral choices; as I read 'my' plays I watched the heroes doing just this, and, while studying the texts, I also learned to reason out my own problems. Thinking back now, my work on Greek tragedy at the time answered a need of mine of which I myself had not been conscious.

It answered also another need: my husband's arrest had left me terribly alone — as a suspect I could neither contact nor be contacted by other IZL members who might have supported me morally. Moreover, the 'dissidents' and their friends and relatives were as good as excommunicated by the Jewish authorities: members of the IZL were kidnapped and handed over to the British, and employers were told to discharge relatives of detainees. Even more difficult than the social isolation was that I had to lie and officially deny what I believed in: this was the only chance for my husband's release. In the Department of Classics politics were out of bounds, and the relations between teachers and students (many of whom had left their families in Europe), and among the students themselves, were intimate and supporting. Gradually I came to love the subject and the department so much that at the end of that year I gave up Jewish History and the Second Temple Period and took Classical Studies instead, and that as my major subject.

Still, my study of Classics was not always as pleasant, although, with Professor Schwabe teaching Greek and Dr. Levy teaching Latin, we used to maintain that at the Hebrew University Classics were studied '*cum Suavitate et Levitate*'. I am referring to the seminar on Lucretius given by Dr. Yochanan (Hans) Levy who was a timid, relatively young man and a brilliant scholar.

I have to start by describing the situation. In spite of the restrictions on immigration there was a special entrance-to-Palestine arrangement for students (it may have been due to the '*numerus clausus*' in many European Universities). With neither Latin nor Greek taught in the high schools of Palestine, only very few of our school graduates took Classics at the University, and the bulk of the small department consisted of students from Europe. When World War II broke out this human import was stopped; furthermore, by the time I joined the department of Classics the Jewish Brigade had formed and the numbers of male students in all departments had dropped dramatically. The seminar on Lucretius was held at Dr. Levy's home. We were 4 students — 3 girls from Rumania who had 8 years of solid high school Latin behind them and myself whose Latin base was the 2 years prep. I prepared long hours for every meeting trying to anticipate the questions which might be asked. As even my colleagues knew only part of the answers, the shame of failure was mostly shared by the four of us. But then Mara's parents came from Rumania and she joined them in Tel Aviv, Viorika disappeared — rumors said that she had got entangled with a married University professor — and Rhea had to stay in bed due to a pregnancy complication. I was the only one left, but Dr. Levy did not cancel the Seminar. For 90 minutes at a stretch, week after week until the end of the

academic year, I bore all alone the humiliation of ignorance exposed. On my way home I would enter the nearest doorway, cry, dry my tears and walk on to the next doorway, and so on until I got home. — I was never able to repay Dr. Levy's investment in me as he died suddenly of a heart attack in the summer of 1945. After that I studied only as much Latin as I was obliged to in order to get my degree. I resented every replacement.

By late spring 1946 I had passed the final exams in my two minor subjects and went on with Classics only; there was a fair chance that after one year or so I would start writing my MA thesis and prepare for the final examinations. And then, suddenly, my husband was released and returned home.

I immediately stopped everything I had been doing and helped him to restart from scratch. In April 1947 our first son was born. By that time I was not needed any more in my husband's office and when the baby was about half a year old I started planning to return to my studies. I discussed the subject with Professor Schwabe and arranged to take the necessary books home from the University Library in the first week of December. On 29 November the UN decided on the establishment of an Arab and a Jewish state in the territory of ex-mandatory Palestine; Arab attacks started a few hours after this decision was taken. Already on the following morning a sniper shooting from the Old City wall killed the husband of an acquaintance, the mother of a baby the age of mine, while he was opening his shop in the centre of Jerusalem. When I came to the University a few days later to get 'my' books, I joined those helplessly watching from Mount Scopus as the (Jewish) Commercial Centre (close to the King David Hotel) was burnt to the ground. I got back safely, but the next bus was shot at and one student was killed and another seriously wounded — the siege on Jewish Jerusalem began long before the British left. Soon we were without water, without electricity, without fuel, without food, and neither people nor vehicles could move safely on the streets. Shortly before Passover a convoy with food managed to get through and supplies were distributed to the population. Every person got a few eggs, and all the members of the family gave me theirs for the baby. It was a warm spring. I buried the eggs in the soil of our small garden so that they would keep longer, and for about a month I fed the child 2 eggs weekly. Then on 14 May the British left. By that time everybody physically able had joined the military forces. Now we were also shelled day and night, and different Arab armies attacked us from all directions. My husband was wounded when the (Jordanian) Arab Legion invaded Jerusalem from the North. He lost (i.a.) the sight of one eye and, as the second eye was in danger unless he rested uninterruptedly, he was sent home from hospital to stay in bed. The washing of his bloody sheets soon consumed all the reserve water in the bathtub which we had been ordered to fill when the Arabs demolished the pipes supplying Jerusalem — a reserve which in our case had been earmarked for diapers. — The fighting and shelling went on for weeks, then there was a ceasefire, and then fighting began again. The second ceasefire became the armistice. Very slowly life started again, with severe rationing of the extremely little food and other vital necessities at the disposal of the newborn State of Israel. By that time our daughter had been born. She was a sickly baby and needed much care, with almost daily tests in hospital and shots in the Health Centre, and special rations of special food, for each item of which I had to stand in a different queue. And once again my husband was

starting from scratch. At the same time Professor Schwabe began to reorganize Classical studies. We had lost the road to Mount Scopus and with it access to the University and the library, and Schwabe went from house to house asking people he knew to have studied Classics in their youth to lend him the books they had brought with them from abroad. The University hired rooms in several buildings in the city, and as soon as a few students and teachers returned from wherever they had been fighting, courses started. Schwabe also organized evening lectures and debates for a wider public. The latter I attended from time to time. One day he invited me to his home and asked me to return to my studies and complete them in the course of the coming year — he was sixty now, and he wanted me to relieve him of the ‘Greek for Beginners’ course. I turned the offer down on the spot — life was still very difficult, and I had two small children, one of them seriously ailing. I returned home without giving the offer a second thought; nor did I tell anybody in the family about this conversation — in the circumstances the very idea was absurd. Some days later I dropped in at my parents’ and found Professor Schwabe sipping coffee in their company. My eyes must have been big with astonishment, as the explanation was volunteered both by my benevolently smiling father and by my just as benevolently smiling professor before I had formulated a question: Schwabe had explained the situation to them and they had agreed to help me so that I would be able to complete my studies in the course of the coming year. A very strenuous year later I started teaching at the Hebrew University by giving the Greek prep and the exercise accompanying the introductory lecture on Greek literature taught by (at the time still) Dr. Yehoshua Guttman. I went on teaching there until my retirement, most of the time as a language teacher as I started my doctoral thesis only after the youngest of my four children graduated from high school. By that time I was already a grandmother.

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