

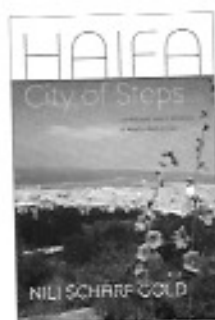
Hovering at Low Altitude over Haifa

The streets and slopes of the Hadar HaCarmel neighborhood of Haifa are etched into the soul of Nili Gold, whose *Haifa: City of Steps* (Brandeis, \$29.95) is a love letter to the city where she was born and raised. In each of the five chapters of this book, Gold writes about another part of her neighborhood, weaving together her personal recollections with the history of the city and the Hebrew novels and poems set on the very steps and street corners she chronicles. As such, this unusual book is part memoir, part history, and part literary scholarship, as well as a moving testament to the endur-

ing power of place in the human imagination.

Gold grew up on the "seamline" between the largest Jewish and Arab neighborhoods in Haifa, and she writes about the era of common Jewish-Arab coexistence that preceded the founding of the State in the year she was born, 1948.

Her father, who arrived in Palestine as an illegal immigrant from Vienna in 1939, owned a housewares store in the Talpiot Market, once the commercial hub of the city, and she attended a preschool near the Technion—the Technological Institute of Israel, completed in 1914—

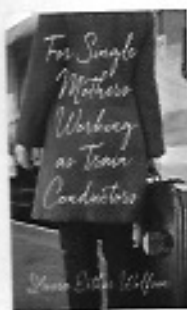


whose garden she played in nearly every afternoon with her mother, also a European immigrant. Gold provides an architectural history of the Technion, built by a German-Jewish architect who was determined to remain faithful to the region's indigenous style.

"In my nursery school days, it seemed to me, as to generations of Haifa children... that the Technion and its garden had been on that slope since the beginning of time... Even before I grasped its structure and design, the Technion area at the heart of Hadar seeped into my consciousness." This

The Book of Disaster

From *For Single Mothers Working as Train Conductors* by LAURA ESTHER WOLFSON



EVERYTHING BEGAN in Lithuania, of course. But where to begin in Lithuania?

I could begin with my own journey there, in 2007. It was then that I met Faina.

I'm in my seventies, said Faina. Nondescript and extremely thin. I'll wear a silk scarf. Bright red.

Faina pulled out a key on a string around her neck, and we found ourselves in a cramped living room with a china cabinet, a fake Oriental hanging on the wall, and matched sets of Chekhov, Pushkin, and the other guys in a case with a glass front. I'd seen so many places like this one across the former USSR; even if I'd never set foot there, I could still describe it, right down to the souvenir tea set from Uzbekistan in the china cabinet.

By then, Faina was pretty much over her astonishment at meeting an American who spoke Russian.

I had learned that Faina was a retired professor of education who volunteered at the local Jewish Museum that had risen from the ashes of the Soviet Union. She was racing against time to interview Jewish survivors of the German occupation while a few of them were still living. She was no trained historian, almost nobody at the museum was, most of them women in their seventies or eighties like her, retired

from other professions—engineering, medicine, academia—who had thrown themselves into this work just as soon as the Soviet Union dried up and blew away.

For decades, she said pensively, we lived in silence with the knowledge of what had happened during the war, to our community, to our families.

...You see, she said, my parents were Litvaks, Lithuanian Jews, but they went to Birobidjan, which is where I was born. I was born in the thirties. In the Soviet Union. Of all the centuries and countries to be born into!

It would have been better to be alive during the Spanish Inquisition, she said. We would merely have been stripped of everything we had and forced to leave the country, which would have been better than being stripped of everything and forced to stay, as we were. Strangely, though, I had a happy childhood. Stalin was our kind, jolly Soviet father.

You've heard of Birobidjan, of course?

I nodded.

It was supposed to be our alternative to Palestine, she said. A Jewish homeland, right here, tucked inside the Soviet Union. So...we spent the war years there—and when the Nazis retreated, we set forth for Lithuania, Mother and I.

We stopped over in Yalta. My father's parents had fled there during the war. My mother knew the address by heart. She knocked. The door opened a crack. It was chained. An elderly woman peered out. "Wait," she said. She stepped away,

blend of architecture, history, and memory also characterizes her reflections on the Alliance School, the first Jewish school in Haifa, which Gold attended from the third grade on; the Central Synagogue, where she accompanied her father for prayers until his death when she was 10, at which point she was told that she was a woman and could no longer enter; the Struck House, built by the Technion's architect in the 1920s as an artist's residence and studio for a German-Jewish painter; and the Itzkovitz House, where her parents were married in 1946.

Gold, a professor of literature at the University of Pennsylvania, previously published a literary biography of Yehuda

Amichai, who figures prominently in this book. Although better known as a Jerusalem poet, Amichai lived in Haifa between 1947-48, a period in which his beloved girlfriend Ruth Hermann left him to study in New York City. Amichai did not know that she would never return to him, and he spent his months in Haifa teaching in the Geula elementary school (where Gold studied just a few years later) and writing Hermann love letters that Gold would discover in 2003, after the poet's death. Gold quotes frequently from these letters and from the poems Amichai wrote in the very same Haifa cafés that Gold visited as a young girl with her mother. She quotes, too, from the poetry of

Dahlia Ravikovitch, who grew up in various foster homes in Haifa, and from the novels of Sami Michael, Yehudit Katzir, Yehudit Hendel, Esty Haim and A.B. Yehoshua, taking us with her on a literary tour of the parks and intersections where various lines and scenes are set, and showing us how geography takes on an emotional quality in these authors' works.

These literary excursions will be of most interest to those familiar with the works she is chronicling. I found myself racing past her discussion of other novels to get to Esty Haim's *Corner People*, which I had recently read and loved. In any case, the most arresting moments in this book are not Gold's reflections on

then returned and thrust a bundle of letters through the narrow opening.

That was my sole glimpse of my paternal grandmother.

My mother didn't seem much surprised by her mother-in-law's reception. Decades later, when I found out about my father, I understood: we carried a vile contagion.

I was in college when Khrushchev gave his Secret Speech, Faina continued two days later.

We were in a small office at the museum. Two cups of tea steamed on the table.

That was when we learned, officially learned, she said, though there had been whispers before, that Stalin was not our kind, jolly father. Our instructors wept and so did we.

Let me tell you what we heard at the college today, I said to my mother when I came home. Did you hear what Khrushchev said?

I heard nothing new today, my mother said with preternatural calm. She bit her lip. Then she covered her face with her hands. She sat that way for a long time.

You know, your father did not die a natural death, she said finally, looking up.

I wanted to change the subject. But there was no other subject.

He was executed, she continued. As an enemy of the people. Why did you never tell me?

I wanted you to have a happy childhood, she said, the tears coming now. I always meant to tell you. Always. But not yet.

She gripped my sleeve. She begged my forgiveness.

Mama, I forgive you everything, I said again and again.

The whole story, everything she knew, came spilling out. It consisted mainly of gaps and conjecture. She was certain that he was guilty of nothing. He'd been accused of sabotage and wrecking, something like that, like millions of others. Maybe he'd told a joke about Stalin. Which would have been unbelievably foolish. But still.

A few months after they took him, my mother told me, she received a letter saying that he'd been sentenced to 25 years. Everyone knew what that meant: he would be executed, perhaps already had been. Then the mailman returned the possessions she'd hastily gathered and thrust into his hands as his new keepers led him over the threshold and away. Return of the prisoner's possessions was also widely understood as a death announcement.

Faina paused.

Many decades later, after the end of the Soviet Union, I went to the government archives to see my father's records. The file contained his execution date, which was just a few days after his arrest. The person who had denounced him would, a few years later, become my beloved first-grade teacher. My mother was long dead by the time I read the file. She never knew who was responsible. She had cordial relations with that person, met with him for parent-teacher conferences.

My father had been a teacher at the high school. Maybe the man wanted my father's job?

But he didn't get it. He stayed back in the first grade.

I saw Faina several more times during my remaining weeks in Lithuania. She did not return to her life story, but it was with us each time we met, like a third person at the table. ■

From *For Single Mothers Working as Twin Guardians* by Laura Esther Wolfson, awarded the 2017 Iowa Prize for Literary Nonfiction. (University of Iowa Press, 2018)

other works of literature, but her own nostalgic memories—of running by the thick-trunked eucalyptus trees on her way to school; of Friday afternoon bus trips to the pool by the sea at Bat Galim, “symbol of a lost childhood in the literary and memorial writings of poets and authors from Haifa”; of Saturday afternoons spent playing on a neighbor’s terrace while all the adults relished their *schlafstunde*, their afternoon nap. The book suffers from occasional repetition, as background supplied in one chapter is reiterated in the next, but this may also be owing to the nature of memory, especially when hovering at such a low altitude, to borrow an image from Dahlia Ravikovich. Our memories come back to us unbidden, latched each time to a different associative thread.

Even in writing about other authors, Gold’s own love for her city comes through, infusing her prose with a lyricism unusual for academic writing: “The language of steps is the secret language in which the residents of the city express their love to this slope on which they live...Haifa is [Yehudit] Mendel’s city of steps, to whom she made love with her feet and whom she serenaded with her pen. The heroes of the streets of steps are all the people of Haifa, those who live among them, and those who climbed them up and down, like me, on the way to the store from Herzl Street.”

This deeply personal work of scholarship is a reminder that often the most powerful literature emerges from those who are unafraid to write, with the discerning eye and sensitive ear of a critic of the highest order, about that which they love most.

ILANA KURSHAN’s book *If All the Seas Were Ink: A Memoir* came out last year.

How to Appreciate Being Mortal

My grandmother, who was born in Jaffa, then part of Syria, in 1906, lived to be 103 years old. She outlived her younger and older siblings, her husband, and nearly all of her friends. She had a full life, but by

the end she’d had enough life, thank you very much.

I couldn’t help but think of my grandmother as I read the fifth novel by Dara Horn, *Eternal Life* (W.W. Norton & Company, \$16.20), a novel of ideas that is also a fantastical tale of time travel, romance, and immortality. Horn’s 2000-year-old protagonist, Rachel, is ready to die, but she can’t because she made a bargain with God during the Second Temple. In order to save her first son, she and the child’s father, Elazar, agree to eternal life. This may not sound like a bad bargain to many. Google “eternal life,” and all kinds of life-prolonging vitamins and supplements appear on your screen. Initially, Rachel doesn’t consider the bargain unfair, but by the time we meet her, she’s exhausted from living so long and, more importantly, from watching almost everyone she has loved die. The novel moves between

**Rachel is ready to die,
but she can’t—
because she made a
bargain with God.**

Rachel’s current life as a businesswoman and widow and her pasts, from suburban America to Roman-occupied Jerusalem.

In an interesting take on immortality, Rachel doesn’t live a single life for 2000 years; she has what looks like many lives, but her consciousness remains the same. She calls each life a version, “a *musach*, the liturgical term, like a melodic variation on a theme.” In each version, however, Rachel is a woman and a mother, allowing Horn to focus on her central concern: motherhood. At one point, Rachel thinks back on her time caring for her children: “she tried to estimate how many thousands of times she had nursed an infant, how many meals she had cooked for others, how many spoons of medicine she had raised

to other people’s lips...the sacrifice was bottomless, heavy labor cast into a void.” While Rachel has had hundreds of children over the years, mortal mothers will relate to her sense of endless servitude, the many repeated tasks and duties of motherhood. Horn, a mother of four young children, tells Publishers Weekly that the concept for the novel was born out of “ten and a half continuous years of changing diapers.” The oft-heard lament, “It goes by so fast!” didn’t apply to her, though it seems only to apply in retrospect for any mother: in the midst of all that caring and worry and responsibility, time can feel as slow as the ages. Horn is at her best—witty and tender—as she illuminates the challenges of mortal motherhood. Attempting to understand her current son’s business interest, for instance, Rachel thinks, “as it had been true for centuries, she had no idea what her child was talking about.”

Another and related concern of the novel is the generational resistance to the knowledge of our elders. When Rachel tries to explain her situation to her children or grandchildren, or in one instance a psychiatrist, she is dismissed as crazy. The psychiatrist prescribes lithium, and her 21st century granddaughter Hannah, posts: “My grandmother just told us she can’t sign off on her will because she CAN’T DIE. #crazyold-lady.” But Rachel isn’t crazy; remarkably, she is pretty well-adjusted given all she’s been through. Still, nobody can hear or appreciate her wisdom.

And Rachel is also wrong about some key events, especially as it pertains to her sons’ actions. With both Rocky, her current troubling son, and her very first son,

Yochanan, she is a harsh critic, though others see them as geniuses. Yochanan, after all, saves the Torah during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, thereby preserving Judaism. Rachel doesn’t exactly admit that she’s wrong about these things, but she does have this to say about the limitations of knowledge and specifical-

