



# ***A Handful of Leaves***

***In memory of***

***Leah Stupniker***

***For the first year anniversary of her death***



***Produced by the School for Girls in Jaffa – 1924***

***Translated by Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, 2011***

*Very soon this blue sea will cause a separation between me  
and the Land of Israel. L. S.*

Contents: \*\*\* – Y. Yehieli – From her Journal – From her Writings –  
In Memory of our Friend – Yochebed Ben-Meir, Rachel Tsabari.

## Preface

This remarkable booklet first came to my attention thanks to a serendipitous email sent to the Judaica Library from Leah Stupniker's nephew, Stephen Isard. Stephen had borrowed the booklet through the inter-library loan system and wanted to know if he could photocopy it. As its contents comprised in part a childhood journal written by his aunt, Leah Stupniker, it was probable that his family owned the copyright anyway, but Stephen was asking for permission as a courtesy.

I was intrigued from the outset by this booklet which told the story of an immigrant child who had died on Ellis Island from tuberculosis at the tender age of 14. Some of my own relatives had not made it past that port of entry and so this story struck a chord. Furthermore, when I discovered that the booklet was one of the Price library's scarce holdings (there are only 3 copies available in U.S. libraries), I was rather concerned for its safe return!

I realized, however, that not only did Stephen have a genuine need to keep a copy of its contents, it could have potential interest for a wider audience, and so I deemed it a perfect candidate for digitization. Upon receiving the booklet back, it became apparent that the Price Library copy was a preservation photocopy; the original having deteriorated beyond repair. Fortunately, the copy held at the Klau Library in the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati was an original and, thanks to the generosity and foresight of its librarian, Laurel Wolfson, we were able to establish a collaborative partnership to digitize their copy of the booklet at the University of Florida. The original can now be consulted on the internet through both the Klau Library and the UFDC websites.

Exchanging emails with Stephen and Robert Isard (the sons of Leah's twin sister Sonia), and with George Gould (the son of Leah's older sister Alia) about the background to this story, I realized that it was even more fascinating and more heartrending than I had at first realized. Reading Leah's first few paragraphs, I was immediately impressed by this little girl who, having recently moved to Palestine from Russia, could write Hebrew with such a high level of sophistication, and I was saddened by this child who was clearly suffering distress at the thought of being uprooted from her new life there.

My deepening interest in Leah's story and a feeling of growing personal attachment to it, led me to undertake a translation of the booklet. I hereby offer a tentative translation of Kometz 'Alim (A Handful of Leaves) with the sincere hope that it manages to provide a first outlet for Leah's poignant and perceptive voice. I am confident, however, that the reader will be as impressed as I am by this talented young girl with the mature mind, and as moved as I was by her ups and downs, her hopes and longings, her self-chastisement and attempts at self-improvement, her humor, her unique poetic expressiveness, and the awful sadness of a story that ends with her tragic death, not to mention the untold story of the family left to mourn her.

The booklet should also prove to be of great interest to historians and linguists, and with this in mind I have appended footnotes to the text where possible. There is much to be gleaned here for historians of the Zionist movement in Palestine, particularly the way in which Zionist principles and ideas manifested themselves in the early school system. The contents of the booklet can show how the Hebrew language was taught in pre-1948 Israel, and how it was absorbed by the first waves of immigrant children in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kometz 'Alim is also an immigrant story, providing a glimpse into the trials of immigrant life in general and the ways migration affected children in particular. Moreover, this booklet serves as an important example of the many long, arduous and emotional journeys taken by thousands of Jewish immigrants as they crossed oceans to find a more secure life, and it is a stark reminder that there were many who did not make it.

Rebecca J. W. Jefferson  
Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

***By producing this small booklet, the School for Girls in Jaffa<sup>1</sup> is fulfilling a sacred obligation to one of its dearest students, who within two and a half years permeated it with a spirit of refinement, loyalty, and pure honesty. We offer here a few fragments of her imagination, fragments of her childhood reflections, dreams, awakenings, longings and aspirations, and from the thoughts stirred by her encounters with nature, the force of life, and its complex questions and hardships. A tender child still, almost a baby, yet perceptible from her writings and the manner in which she expressed them, it was clear that a defined spirit and a firm literary talent had already materialized. Unusually for someone of her age did this young soul know how to feel, to criticize, and to convey; unusually for one her age did she delve into the questions that one encounters in life and in books. Life and the role of man within it, moral courage for the purpose of life, dedication of the spirit to one's people – these were always first in her thoughts and in her dreams. And how much she loved the Land of Israel, this new homeland that she discovered so unexpectedly! As though she were parting from life, she parted from this land and boarded the boat bound for America. As though the silence of death awaited her there outside the borders of her beloved country, as if her heart had prophesized that her life would be ended with the severing of the tie between her life and the life of her homeland.***

***This soul, Leah Stupniker, of blessed memory, was born in Volhin, in one of the Russian villages near to the city of Lyubar,<sup>2</sup> at the start of the year 5670 (1910). From when she was very small, it was clear that she had a prodigious talent, her questions and her way of speaking were astounding. With an intense thirst, she would listen to the Mother's tales, but more than this she loved to tell stories herself. She had almost completely taught herself to read in Russian and with great delight read Russian stories for children. "When she was a child of seven – the mother writes***

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<sup>1</sup> The School for Girls was first founded in the late 1890s by the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris and headed by Rosa Yaffe. Gradually, Yaffe substituted French in favor of a Hebrew curriculum, which outraged the Alliance. In 1903, the Girls School was transferred to the authority of the Hovevei Zion movement in Odessa. A year later, the Odessa committee sent Yehiel Yehieli – with a reputation as an outstanding teacher - to boost the school's teaching program. Yehieli's name eventually became synonymous with the school which was often referred to as the "Yehieli Girls School". A new building, financed by a philanthropist in Siberia, was located in Neve Zedek in Jaffa; it was considered the pride of the community. In 1989, the building was renamed the Suzanne Dellal Dance Center (see: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Education/early.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Lyubar is a city in the Ukraine near to Ostropol (Leah is buried in the Ostropol section of the cemetery).

*– at the time when, after the Russian revolution, the Ukrainian peasants began to behave in a rowdy manner and destroyed everything that came to their hands, Leah, who was always listening to the grown up conversations, once turned to me with a question: Mother, what do you think, what would Socrates say now, were he to rise from his grave? It is certain that he would be very sorry indeed to see what men do with freedom!”*

*In the wake of the uprisings in Russia, Leah and her family moved to the city of Ekaterinoslav.<sup>3</sup> There she studied in a Russian Gymnasium and became very connected to the institution, to her friends, and to her Russian surroundings. Even after they left Russia, her soul was filled with longing for her “step-homeland” she was also embarrassed by her feelings for this “alien homeland” and she tried to uproot them from her heart.*

*She came to Israel with her family in 5681 (1921). Leah together with her sister entered the School for Girls. Apart from mechanical reading, they did not know a word of Hebrew so the teachers tested them in Russian. In spite of this, they were accepted into the sixth grade. Just a few weeks passed, and the children already began to understand their lessons in Hebrew and to engage in them. In a short while, Leah was top of her class, especially in the Humanities. Her compositions, which were written in the first weeks in Russian, soon became Hebrew compositions perfect in content and structure. Her large clear eyes which were always a window to her soul expressed great attention and thought. Modest in all her ways, she was adored and cherished by all the girls in the class who loved her with a profound love.*

*An incalculable process of development and understanding passed over her during that short period when she was in the Land of Israel. Strong creative powers were awakened within her, they progressed and grew and progressed and fermented until ... until cruel reality came along and gave everything to God.*

*Because of the material hardship that prevailed in the Land of Israel in 1923,<sup>4</sup> her family, who had come to the Land of Israel in order to settle there, was forced to be uprooted again and migrate to America. Leah did not want to leave the country under any circumstances and devised stratagems in order to stay here alone without the help of her parents. These were childish and desperate*

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<sup>3</sup> Ekaterinoslav in the Ukraine was named for the Tsar Catherine. The Jews of Ekaterinoslav formed the third largest ethnic group by 1889. The Jewish population was involved in trade, industry, the free professions and services. By 1913, there were 90 Jewish schools there. The city became an important center of Jewish political activity, particularly Bundism and Zionism (see: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dnipropetrovsk>).

<sup>4</sup> Baruch Stupniker, Leah's father, also had a heart condition which was exacerbated by his physical work involving the transportation of building materials by camel.

*devices fused together in a place distant from reality. But in the end she agreed to bear the whole family's fate, and with a wish to return in another few years, left the country on the 29<sup>th</sup> Av. "More depressed than any of us –writes the Mother – was, of course, Leah. Her huge eyes were full of such great sorrow."*

*She caught a cold on the ship and developed a fatal disease that put an end to her life and dreams. What appeared to be the start of a regular cold with passing fever was tuberculosis. In all the days of her illness she did not cease to meditate upon the books of the Bible, and in her final moments she recited passages from it. Sick, close to death, they took her to the "Island of Tears". There she died after 24 days on the 7<sup>th</sup> Heshvan, 1923; she was buried in Brooklyn.*

*May her pure soul be blessed!*

*Y. Yehieli<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Yehiel Yehieli (1866-1952) taught at the Jaffa Girls School from 1904 and was its Director from 1918 to 1952. He came from Russia where he helped pioneer the method of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew. He published articles on language acquisition as well as one article that became the cornerstone of Jewish kindergarten education. In Palestine, he helped form a uniform curriculum for all elementary schools. He served on committees for the Cities of Jaffa and Tel Aviv; a street is named after him in Neve Tzedek.

## From her Journal

I love words, words that have in them at least something vital and of the imagination; mathematics is so dry and simple. Bathsheva<sup>6</sup> takes great pleasure in solving puzzles, but for me it is just a lesson. Compared to this, how much I love essay writing! --- Tomorrow, if it is a beautiful day, there will be a trip to the Garden City.<sup>7</sup> But I have no desire to go. It is a shame to have to forgo composition class. If only it would rain tomorrow.

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The situation has been very bad lately. There is no work and the little there is considerably hard. Father ... has proposed ... he will travel ... to America, and we will stay here for 7-8 months. We will finish school during this time, and then we will come to him. Yet I do not want this. I think that I should do as follows: when I've finished school ... I will request a place at the Seminar...<sup>8</sup> it is certain that they will give me work in some place, I don't care even if it's in the back of

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<sup>6</sup> Leah's twin sister, Sonia (Hebrew name: Bathsheba). Sonia went on to complete a medical degree in Philadelphia. She was primarily a family doctor who also specialized in allergies and published numerous papers on this subject. Upon her retirement she was honored by the College of Physicians in Philadelphia with the unveiling of her portrait and the presentation of a collection of her writings. The Sonia Stupniker Isard Lecture at the College of Physicians was endowed by her husband.

<sup>7</sup> Tel Aviv – Tel Aviv was originally founded in 1909 as a garden suburb of Jaffa.

<sup>8</sup> There were two Teachers seminaries in Jaffa. The Ezra Hebrew Teachers Seminary founded in 1903 and the Levinsky Teachers Seminar founded in 1913.

beyond, even if it's in Trans-Jordan. I don't need much: food, a place to sleep and three lira a month. If only I could get a position like this!

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Again they are speaking about the journey, oh dear, oh dear, what will I do? I will not travel, but how shall I stay?

Mother will not let me stay, and even for me it would be difficult to do so.

I said to Mother that I could work and I suggested my idea to her, for which I have about three pounds.--- Mother laughed at this. Why? I don't know. When I told Esther my decision, she said that she was afraid that my morale would fail. Well, there is nothing to fear about that! I feel myself to be strong enough in morale, perhaps even more than in the physical sense. I think I will slowly save money and in addition to this Mother can leave me the cost of my ticket and the cost of the remainder of the journey. In this way I can finish the Seminar, and I will be a teacher ... and I will devote my life to children. ---

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The journey is almost decided ... but I will not travel. I do not want to ... I do not want to ...

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Recently I read “The Tiny Spark” by Lydia Tsheraskia.<sup>9</sup> How beautifully this author writes! How natural are the descriptions of a poor girl who traveled from her home to study in the big city, and there died from tuberculosis! How greatly she suffered the first time she stayed without her mother ...

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I know: I too will suffer and suffer greatly, but if that is all then it is not all bad. There are many who are suffering in the world; I will become one of them with my sufferings. I know that I will long for my home, for my family, for it is very difficult indeed for me to be alone ... however I feel myself to have enough strength to suffer everything – if only to stay in the Land of Israel.

... how much I love my Mother ... oh, how hard it is to have to separate from her ...

[At this moment I have arrived at a another way of thinking, only who knows if it is good. I have devised a new solution. Is it for the best? 15<sup>th</sup> Tammuz]

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We are going to Jerusalem, Jericho and Hebron – for a whole week. I am so happy that I can barely write. I will take my journal and note down everything. ---

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<sup>9</sup> Reference unknown

And so for the first time, I will leave our home for a whole week. If I miss it and if I am very sad, it will be a sign that I will suffer greatly should I stay behind.

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### **Rosh Hodesh [1st] Nissan (March-April), 9pm**

Here we are already in Jerusalem. --- I cannot isolate my many impressions --- The Mosque of Omar – that stands in place of the Holy Temple. How beautiful it is; how sacred! We took off our shoes in order not to defile the Temple ...

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the Jews could not recover its scattered pieces and rebuild it; the Arabs would need to help them. --- But my heart is stirred with jealousy at the sight of such opulence that belongs to a stranger and is not ours. Only one thing remains for us, and that is the ruins of “the Western Wall”. We went there too. Barren gloominess all around; sorrowful to the point of tears. Yet not everything about the Temple is destroyed, for the wall remains. And this surely serves as a reminder of what comes of a nation’s vanity. --- Not every holy thing needs to be on display for the curious. ---

From “Bezalel” we walked to the School for the Blind. --- What if my eyes were suddenly shut forever and I could not see anything anymore, not the wide world over, not the shining sun, not my family nor my friends! How terrible that would be; what if I even forgot my Mother’s face!

And it is not fair, for the blind suffer so much, they also have to tolerate visits from curious tourists too.

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### **Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> Nissan**

We traveled to Hebron --- we saw the ghetto. Awful! How filthy and narrow! How can the people live? Rather, to be more correct: how do people live *there*? ---

I am a little tired from the journey. And because of my sore spirits. Perhaps Jericho will dispel the bitterness and the gloom. ---

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### **The Sabbath, sundown, 7<sup>th</sup> Nissan**

I am already writing at home. --- On the fourth day we visited the graves: the graves of the kings and the graves of the Sanhedrin. What majesty and awe is in these dark caves!

To “Kalba Savua”<sup>10</sup> we descended with candles. There I gave everyone a fright ... I entered first and lay down upon the dark grave. Tamar approached me and placed a candle near my foot and cried: “behold the remains of a dead body!” The girls jumped. Esther nearly fainted ... --- I am not at all afraid of darkness or the dead. Death is not terrible like life. There

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<sup>10</sup>The grave of Rabbi Akiva’s father-in-law, the wealthy Jerusalemite.

is more to fear from coercion than the quiet refuge of death.

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The journey to Jericho was wonderful... a soft wind refreshed our spirits ... yet suddenly we developed home-sickness. Shoshana was the first to get home-sick --- and soon after her, me.

I did not cry like she did, but I felt myself to be very sad indeed. The dark bitterness overcame any remaining vigor and any remaining strength. I ruminated all the way. --- We came to the Dead Sea. I sat upon the stones facing the sun with my eyes closed and felt pure pleasure. The rays passed over my eyelids as though they were kissing my eyes. It was good for me. ---

Even after I got up and sat down in the motorcar it was as though my irritation had been removed by the sleight of a hand. It was as though the bitterness and dejection had sunk into the Dead Sea.

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Even the Jordan River, is not beautiful like they say. Narrow. We passed over the bridge to Trans-Jordan on the East: "outside of Israel". Only in one place is the Jordan beautiful: at the point where it spills forth into the Dead Sea. ---

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### **9<sup>th</sup> Iyar (April-May), Wednesday**

I haven't written for some time. After the trip I became sick. And even now I am half-sick. At least, Mother will not let me go to school.

How everything wearies me! Life – already holds no worth for me.

My hopes – I already know – will not be fulfilled, and after this is it worthwhile living? Things are bad for me, bad ...

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### **10<sup>th</sup> Iyar, Thursday**

All day yesterday I lay down. I had a small fever during the night. Well it is nothing: it will pass. What vague feeling is pressing down on my heart? It's as though desolate tears strangle my throat. Sometimes I have the desire to die, to go to sleep and that's the end.

Occasionally, I have a wish that a happy spirit will wake up within me, that I will want life, so that I may give something to every depressed and low spirited person. I have a desire to dry up all their tears. --- But suddenly I remind myself that this thing is impossible,

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for I am 13 years of age right now. Ah! How long will pass before I can do what I want!

What is wrong with me all the time – I don't know. The head and the heart ache. ---

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### **Sabbath eve, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sivan (May-June)**

Why did I write previously with such despair? I read it and was shocked. Yes, occasionally it is difficult to suffer, yet right now I am trying to conquer my mood. Hope is the most important thing in life. --- It is good to go forth in the battle of life! Only the faint-hearted run from the fight. Brave is the one who stays living and endures – who does not die before time. Do not despair! --- Patience, patience! ---

I questioned myself not long ago: truthfully, do I love my country more than my parents?

What could I answer? Even deep inside myself I do not know. The thing will become clear when the two magnets are pulled apart. If only they would not be separated; if only they would stay together!

And if indeed they will be pulled apart, I think, that my love for my country will become stronger. --- I am bound to feel a connection to my homeland. These longings were born with me, it appears. Perhaps pride is an element of this. I cannot overcome this thought: that I am a stranger, that they “tolerate” me with pity. ---

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### **23<sup>rd</sup> Sivan, in the evening**

Oh, but this day I will remember forever! Today I received a first pound earned for my hard work. I've been teaching a young girl for one month, a student from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

It should fare me well: in Boston there is a Seminar for Hebrew teachers. –

If so ... in another 5 years I can travel back to Israel as a teacher of Hebrew. ---

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### **25<sup>th</sup> Sivan**

Today Father and Rachel have gone.<sup>11</sup> In the morning the boat sailed off and that was that. What a strange feeling. A bitter juice stays in my heart and irritates me, irritation about everything. I am angry that things have played out this way, I am angry at myself, at the whole world.

Yesterday I was in a very bad mood, I cried in secret as well. Such a moment of weakness was this; no more – not one tear will come out from my eyes.

I wrote my last essay: "The first and last day in school". For the path is fixed and unending before me: to be a help to my

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel was Leah and Sonia's older sister, also known as Alia. Alia graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a Master's Degree in Social Work. She eventually became the head of all child welfare in the City of Philadelphia.

people; but even this I say, is a narrow group. A help to the world through my people: this is the right way to say it. My people need to cause the noble aspiration of thousands of years to be realized.

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“Traitor”, “turncoat” this is what you hear everywhere about those who leave the Land of Israel. “Let’s call them what they are, let us shake our hands over them, to banish the evil near us! – cries the “pamphlet” – they are lost to us, dead and will not be resurrected!”

Lies, lies! First, this person is not a traitor. No one wants to leave here willingly. Secondly – the travelers are not lost. They will come back and even a short time is not lost, for they can also work in exile.

But in spite of this my heart aches: to ascend to the land is a small step; to leave in exile is great... The anguish already penetrates the heart, and who knows, what will be the end? ... And perhaps in truth I have already erred in my thoughts, for do I *have* to go? ... ---

### **21<sup>st</sup> Av (July-August), Sabbath eve**

Today is the last day of my studies at school. How long have I anticipated this day, and now – emptiness in my heart and

nothing more. There was a place in my heart that the school filled. Now it has been emptied out and nothing will fill it. ---

It is not good to arrive at what one waits for in life, not good!

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“Above happiness there is no happiness and underneath it hides disaster” (Shneur).<sup>12</sup> I want to die before I sense that my work is at an end, before I feel that there is nothing more for me to do, or because I cannot do any more. But, I got sidetracked from “the last day” – to what point have I arrived!

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### **Tuesday, the hour I don't know, on deck**

It's already the second day that we've been travelling and all around us is just sky and sea, sky and sea. The sea is beautiful, wild and free. In Israel I learned to love the sunshine and the sea. It too absorbs the heat, the cold; it is full of zest. How beautiful it is now, for example: sparkling, shining from the rays of the sun, a small white wave revolves here and a small one there. It is as though a thousand wishes glimmer within it, and it is a live and roaring entity.

Completely different is nighttime: black, deep black, like the darkness itself; noisy and growling with rage. The waves race,

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<sup>12</sup> Reference unknown; perhaps a quote from Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), the founder of Chabad Hasidism, and the author of the classic Chasidic text Tanya which deals with questions of happiness.

chase after the ship, and in between the foam – it seems – the mermaids dance their wild dances.

And it seemed to me -for I saw them- that they were living in the foam. And it seemed to me, for I heard them between the soft sighs of the waves: “Come, Come! How long you have searched for peace. Jump to us and you too will be cold and happy like us.” And in the depths of my heart I replied to them: “It is different for you. I do not long for peace. I have not yet labored, and there is nothing from which to feel dejected. I will not consider being with you; I will live”.

And my heart felt so good, as though some sort of heavy burden had lifted from it.

**Wednesday, from below deck, 9 in the evening, from the electric light coming in through a crack from the corridor.**

Boredom. Life here is so monotonous. When will it be the end already! When will I know my future? From the conversation with the waves I understood everything:

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all about beautiful dreams, about difficult battles, about crises that have passed, about the wound that healed over.

This is nothing. What will *be*?

I can't sleep. Can't sleep in these cabins. Aside from this, the waves don't let me rest. They whisper, rustle, bring my whole life before me. And I don't know, why I cannot find any respite in them. Dreams aplenty. Oh, how much I dreamed until the coarse hand of life woke me, until I met with cold reality ... There are those who love to dream, but they are few. All in all, I feel that my soul has strengthened, has fortified during this difficult time.

I will lie down on my pillow, close my eyes, perhaps I will sleep.

#### **Thursday, 8.30 pm, in the cabin**

Today the constant monotony dissipated a little. In the morning we saw Italy, Sicily and Stromboli. We came very close to the shore and the outlines were clear, particularly the beauty of Stromboli. An island entirely constructed from an extinguished volcano. Now, in the valleys and in the furrows where lie the frozen lava, plants grow and people live. Life is built among the remnants of death. One small crater still emits smoke. Woe betide the people should this mountain ever do to them what the volcano did to Pompeii.

Well, in spite of all that, it is good to live there: far from the folly of life and its corruption.

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At some other time, I would want to live there too, but right now it is not the time to seek tranquility.

Tomorrow we will see Corsica and also maybe Sardinia. The day after tomorrow – Marseille.

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### **Sunday, Hotel Grossman, in Marseille.**

We saw Corsica from afar. A diversion from the planned route was arranged in order to get to Marseille in the morning and not to stand all night in the port.

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### **Monday, 9 in the evening, in the hotel.**

You see we have not travelled for some time. We have stayed another month. They are not allowing travel to Cherbourg. For the first time in my life I have felt the deceit and hypocrisy of the other “society”. However this won’t trouble me anymore. I felt that sort of way before.

But a month of days in the middle of the journey! Far from the past and not close to the future! ... so very hard ... that sometimes I cannot even write. Most importantly – Mother is very angry and weak; already this tragedy has taken its toll on her. On the Sabbath and again today she was unwell. Must look after her.

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### **Tuesday, towards evening, in the hotel room**

This is the third day that I've been a little ill. Malaria, fever, or something like it. Completely ridiculous. Mother worries all the time.

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Here we are already at the start of the New Year.<sup>13</sup> What this new month will bring me— I don't know. So much ahead that is work and struggle. It is difficult to leave the house and to set outside again, because everything is so gray and cold for me. "For they will not see your face; not even the stones on the street, and the sky over your head will become alien to you."<sup>14</sup> It is so difficult to tolerate this after you have ceased to warm up from the heat of your homeland.

As I parted from Mr. T., he blessed me, saying: "Be tenacious!" How very so! Tenacity is a necessity, and in even greater measure than I already possess; apart from this, strength is also necessary. Without strength I won't have tenacity. Strength — I'm afraid — still eludes me.

What shape will my new dreams about my life in America take? Perhaps they will be shattered like my Israel dreams and only shards remain? And perhaps it will make me sigh to

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<sup>13</sup> Jewish New Year; 1923

<sup>14</sup> A quote (recalled from her memory) from Haim Nahman Bialik's poem "Mah Rav, Oy Mah Rav ha-Shimamon" (How great, O how great the desolation).

remember them and I will say as I often I say even now: how cruel and bad life is!

With all the preciousness, spirituality, beauty that is in man's dreams they end in nothing, without mercy ... but I am hopeful, that it will not be so.

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The first dreams did not depend on me; the final dreams are just within my reach. ---

In another three weeks – with any luck – we will be in America. In another three weeks my new life will begin for me in the new world. For the time being, I have lived a life passing between two worlds. Here it is autumnal and loathsome. To read and be creative is impossible here. Also my fever bothers me. It weakens me greatly. All the time it is though everything is designed to aggravate me. Firstly, Mother and Bathsheba will not go out of the house. Secondly, Mother has already spent 200 francs on me. Thirdly, we could have journeyed to Paris, but because of me we stayed. How little do I tolerate this condition.

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## **From her writings**

### **The Tale of a Stream**

From the first rain, whose drops fell like silent tears, born between the soft earth: a hasty stream. It opened its eyes and looked around and here were blue skies, trees and flowers. Very slowly, lovingly, with his gentle waves, he caressed those flowers, and they nodded to him with their small heads and told him tales of the mischievous winds. And how good it was to jump over the rock's pebbles, and to run along; one time with ease, another time with the tiny waterfalls.

At night, when all the world is tired and sleeping, our stream dozes too. Softly, softly whisper his lips as he sleeps. With compassion, as though in love, the moon peers down on him from above, pouring out her soft radiance. The stars wink at their reflections in the stream. And the stream, after his day of games, will rest, sleeping without disturbing dreams in the bosom of his beloved mother.

And it was day and the stream kissed his mother, the green lowland, for the last time, and he ran on over the hills. For the first time, he looked with amazement all around him; for apparently the same blue skies and the same radiant sun

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there, with his mother, are here too; yet surely this was a new world before him: grey stones, burning hot, with little grass, without delicate flowers. And it seemed to him, that not before long he would be suffocated within these dead walls. And so he begged to leave this prison; his waves sighed, the foam rose but fell back without strength. And he determined to fight again and he made a strong effort, but it was in vain. And he turned over, to take within him, without speaking, everything that the mountain winds would sweep away: dust, stones, dirt, even precious stones came into him, and occasionally, he wished to be filled with them and slowly, slowly submerge into a hole.

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Suddenly he woke up. The days had turned to Spring. From the snow capped mountain tops ran young brooks: impetuous and enthusiastic, with songs of freedom in their mouths. And they incited the stream to rebel: who crowned you by placing these stones upon you; who permitted them to seal you up? Will you not grow with us? Take courage, gather your strength, and rise up!

The stream listened to their words from within his slumber and whispered with a sort of inward stirring. And his energy roused up inside him and he opened his eyes again to see, and indeed there were rocks, rocks all around him; how I am sick of them, how I hate them, he thought in his heart. And the silent mountains had not sensed the agitation of the

many brooks: what is happening to us, we monarchs, and to the subordinates bursting out before us?

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- And you - add a rock to that stream! You, don't you dare listen to them!

All the same, the stream could not endure any more. He rallied his remaining strength and heaved out the mounds of dirt within him and jumped, yelling over the rocks – you try to make a mockery of me?! Here, I will break down your walls, take heed you insolent ones! And he began to work in secret. He began to lick at the foot of mountain so as to undermine it and make it fall. Quietly he worked, but just occasionally a small wave would burst out and rush with a lion's roar, and he would silence it immediately. Those giant lords were not aware of what was happening within the souls of their servants. He is excited, they thought when they listened to the stream's boiling rage, but we know how to subdue him. With pity they watched the stream, and scoffing derisively from within their craggy faces: "this one dares to meddle with us? We do not fall at the first contest!"

And the stream strove hard. And the great day arrived when he broke through the barrier of his grey cage. The mountains were outraged, but it was already too late: the stream was gushing so far outside of them that even waves of fresh air approached him, absorbing the free light from the sun. The intoxication of happiness and the victory of deliverance molded dirt and gold together. What did it matter to him and

what did it matter about old ideas! Would not life begin again now!

Many days passed. The stream tired, exhausted, many of its waves lay broken with despair on the rocks. Many of his hopes had been dashed. There was nothing more heard from the additional young waves. Just one, who requested: rest.

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And he discovered her – lying in a grave. Then one day, at last, he joined the great river and together they fell into the sea. And in the midst of all that clamor and noise the sea did not know that it had received into it another living soul.

### **On Life and Death**

Noon. And all were cast outside. As though the world had fainted from the heat. The intense hot air does not move. Not even a light breeze can mischievously tempt the soul to recover from its tiredness. Everything sleeps in a deep lethargy. But behold a small black dot appears on the horizon, at the head of the rocky cliff. It moves and grows; it moves and its outline becomes clear. It is an eagle, proudly spreading its wings, soaring with confidence and energy above everything. Its eyes are inclined upwards, towards the sun. Courageous might shines within them. He flies onward, onward towards the light. He arrives at his target. With glory he raises his head as though a golden crown were upon it

and everything bowed before him. "He will be the king of the world!" Indeed it is so: he is king and life his kingdom.

Happy is he who lives like this!

Evening approaches. The cold air infuses a gentle longing for the dying sun. The west burns with fire as the sun leaves and hides. The lake too; slowly it moves its red waves. Suddenly foam appears on the water and a pure white swan comes into view. He stretches his neck out towards the dying sun and – a song of death is heard coming from within his heart.

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It is full of longing and remorse for transient life. But it is also strong: what has been determined shall be! Let us die now with honor and not with vain entreaties!

And so it seems: the whole world beneath is listening to the song of the king of death.

Happy is he who dies like this!

14<sup>th</sup> Iyar, 1923

## **Extracts from her writings in a book of friendship**

**composed at the end of school, a short time before she left the  
Land of Israel.**

To E-R

What shall I write to you E-R? Shall I bless you with days of wealth and happiness, calm and rest? That you will fulfill all your wishes and live in peace? That you will never know worry or sorrow? No! Not for you such a blessing! It's good to live and feel! For that is living, to live and struggle in life, not to give up until the last drop of blood, to live life devoted to breath until the very last beat of the heart. ---

To R-H

What shall I write to you? I don't know. Were you satisfied by my love and loyalty to you? If this is true, does your heart not know then without words? Shall I ask you to remember me? Those who love in their hearts never forget. Shall I write to you about waiting for you in life's stormy sea? Yes, but you know that. ---

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To S-H

I have written these lines just for you. Will you remember me? Will you remember those days in which we learned, played and dreamed together? Of course you will remember.

You will remember me without having to leaf through your notebook. What the heart forgets, words will not bring to mind.

For Y-D

For the day will come, my sister,  
When you have grown tired,  
When you have wearied of the hard road,  
Scornfully disdaining life,  
When you seek a path of truth, but none shall you find –  
Then come to me, my sister, come to me!  
We will dream together as we did in childhood.  
What will you need once we are as we were!  
Our childhood is a lovely light in our lives  
The memory of which shall please us in old age.  
Gentle are the longings, if you teach your soul to yearn -  
Come to me, my sister, come to Leah

5<sup>th</sup> Sivan, 5683 [1923]

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To R-L

Were we friends? This I shall not know. I do know just this: that I always loved you. For me it was always lovely to look at your quiet face and your deep blue eyes. For me it was always nice to pour out my conversations to you, even if you weren't listening. ---

Behold, now we are separating. Each one will go her own way. We will be dispersed along different paths, perhaps even opposed this one to that. Perhaps we will be divided by

a different purpose of being and in spirit. But in spite of this ... do not ever forget our childhood and our friendship. ---

To M-L

M-L! Will you not remember the final exam, the first test of your school days ... Here you are, one bright morning, coming to school; suddenly in class, a promise: a Bible exam! And you “whistle”, at the news: “of course, of course, a test!” – “Good, come in, see ...” You go in. Oh no! In the classroom - upheaval: a long green table, cups for the teachers – all set out for the exam. For a moment you stood dumbfounded, and suddenly in anger: “with whose permission? Why did they not inform us, why?”

And you attacked the poor table in a fury, turned it over, hurled off the tablecloth and threw down the cups; afterwards, tired from your emotional exertion, you fell on a stool and began to cry. “How is this possible, how?” How would you remember Ezekiel, Job ...” The vexation was complete; it was all a great humiliation ...

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But here was the bell. The girls got into order and piled noisily into the classroom. After a moment – silence. The teachers sat. With a shaking hand you held out your number “one of the last ones!”

Time moves on. Questions upon questions, it seems as though they will never get to you, when suddenly: “M-L. M!”

You go up with a shaking, beating heart. In front of you the encouraging faces of the teachers and the whispers of the girls accompanying you “be brave and strong!” They ask you

questions. "This is so easy!" And with great happiness you answer their questions. "You can sit down." – "Well done!" "Excellent!" - decide the girls. The teachers smile. Your smile returns. Well, where did all that fear and anger go? A feeling of joy and gratitude floods your heart: you withstood the test!

Soon, M-L, you will be divided from all this, and you will take your place in the stream of life. Many "tests and trials" await you. You will have to tolerate much in life's furnace. I hope that you withstand all of these trials in the same way you stood up to the test of your childhood!

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## **In Memory of our Friend**

### **1**

It is many days since the day of Leah and Bathsheva's departure and yet I remember the event as though it were today. I still remember her before me, Leah, so pale, giving me a last kiss – a long kiss, nervous and mumbling: "succeed, succeed in everything you do!" ... And on the sail boat, I would not see her face again: she hid her face in her mother's bosom in order not to see us.

The days pass, and still the pain and sorrow do not lessen. The opposite: they increase.

I remember the day they came to our school. I entered and saw two new students, girls of about 11 or 12, wearing identical clothes - blue coats and velvet hats. Immediately I recognized that they were Russian. I approached them and asked them for their names and where they lived. Immediately the little one hurriedly answered me as if she feared being interrupted: "My name is Sonia, but in Hebrew they call me Bathsheva, and she is – Leah ...". But Leah stopped her: "Sonia, there is no need to speak Russian; for when we will learn to speak Hebrew, we will explain everything, everything ..." Immediately it became clear, that Leah was self-possessed.

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And from then, until now, until they left for America, we studied together, for nearly three years. We all admired

Leah; we all felt that this child, with the doleful eyes, was from another world, a loftier and more exalted world.

Once, and this was just two months after they came, the department arranged a trip to the Judean *moshavot*.<sup>15</sup> Leah was, in spite of her tiredness, happier and more cheerful than usual, and every fresh green hill and every blooming garden brought her close to excitement. We stayed in Gedera overnight in one of the school rooms on beds made up for us by the members of the *moshava*.<sup>16</sup> My sleep was disturbed. It was the first time that I had seen a Hebrew farm and Jewish workers. In any case, I turned my head and there was Leah sitting on the bedding, her head propped up on her knees. She was not asleep. “Leah ...”, I muttered in a whisper. She lifted her head and when she saw me she came near me. I made a space for her next to me and we began to talk. And so she told me how she had passed her early childhood far away in a Russian village. “There I felt myself to be – she said – an anomaly. How happy I am now ...”

We talked about much, much more that same night; into the early hours of dawn. I told her what I knew about the founding of Gedera, about the “Biluists” and their sufferings.<sup>17</sup> I also told her the story of “The Men of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Moshavot* (s. *moshav*): unlike the communal settlements of the *kibbutz* and *moshav*, the *moshavot* were privately owned farms.

<sup>16</sup> Gederah, a *moshavah* in the Coastal Plain of Israel was founded in 1884 by members of the Bilu movement from Russia. It was the only *moshavah* that did not depend on Rothschild’s support (see: <http://www.allgedera.co.il/>).

<sup>17</sup> The Bilu movement (the word is derived from the initials of the Hebrew verse in Isaiah 2:5: ‘House of Jacob, come ye and let us go’) was a group of young Russian Jews who pioneered the idea of the modern return to the Land of Israel. The movement grew out of a reaction to the 1881 pogroms in Southern Russia. They experienced a great deal of economic hardship through lack of support.

Fields” by Buki Ben Yogli.<sup>18</sup> She did not know how to rein in her enthusiasm “How true!” – she called out deep in thought, and “How unfortunate!” she added in sadness. And she fell silent.

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I thought she’d fallen asleep, but immediately I was convinced that I was wrong. “What are you thinking about?” I asked her. “How unfortunate and sad the matter is – she replied – that we have so many storytellers and poets that write Hebrew, and yet our young people do not know them at all. Even me, if I had not come here, I might have only known the names of the writers. And even now, even with an enormous will to read all of the writings of every one of our writers, it is not within my grasp because I do not have a command of the Hebrew language.”

Nevertheless, after a few months had passed, Leah could read freely the writings of Peretz,<sup>19</sup> Sholem Aleichem and even Mendele Moykher Sforim.<sup>20</sup> She loved the folktales of Peretz. Once I heard her telling the wonderful story “The Three Gifts”. I had never felt the full depths of this story until this time. Leah stood up with blazing eyes and with colorful description told the tale of the modest maiden who set forth in innocence from her father’s house, and of the sudden disaster and her tragic death ... then the last gift ... the subjugated Jew, with all his possessions stripped from him

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<sup>18</sup> The pseudonym of Judah Leib Katzenelson (1846-1917) – Katzenelson’s story *Adnei ha-Sadeh* is about a wanderer who comes upon a race of men tied to the soil by a living cord; the wanderer is envious and yearns to belong to them.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915): known as one of the three classic Yiddish authors and the founder of Yiddish modernism. He also wrote in Hebrew.

<sup>20</sup> The “triumvirate of Yiddish classic masters”: all three authors wrote in Hebrew too; although Leah may have read their stories in Hebrew translation.

and just one small legacy remaining, the hope of returning to Zion. For the sake of a small bag of earth from the Land of Israel, the man was willing to sacrifice his life! Pale and angry Leah finished her story. I thought that she would cry, but no, her eyes were just defiant and resolute. This raised the question: from where did this child of the Diaspora get such a deep love of her land and her people! For this was the loftiest of ideals to work for the good of the land and the people.

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But fate prevailed upon her to leave Israel... Anyone who did not see how much this child suffered in those last days before the journey has never seen suffering in his life. She distanced herself from all her friends. In the breaks between lessons, she would stand by the corridor windows with a view of the Judean hills in the distance. Little by little her head would stoop and tear after tear would well up in those deep eyes. All our efforts to console her were as nothing. She refused comfort. Whoever did not know Leah could not understand how much her heart ached, the heart of a 14 year-old child. She – who had always hoped that her small hands could make her worthy of being a member of our established life here – she would escape the arrangements being made for her!

At that time, when a secret longing awoke in her heart, she would find solace in reading the books of the Bible and in the poetry of H. N. Bialik. In his national folk songs she would find an echo for her despondent voice.

Oh, how much I would love to escape, she told me one time during those days, to one of the far off, remote places in our

land and to work there ... it would be a relief for me, and I would find peace for myself ... there, among the cornfields my worries would not bother me ... but it is upon me to leave the country and to spend the days of my youth in exile! It was not enough the suffering that I had to endure in the horrible Ukraine; now I must return to our state of emptiness and degradation. My only remaining hope is that I can come back one day to the Land of Israel and that I will never leave her again for the world!

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The tears choked her and she couldn't speak any more. I saw her cry a lot in those last days, yet she would not cry like that again. She would fling herself at my neck and the two of us would cry together.

*Yochebed Ben-Meir*

## **2**

An image of her floats before my eyes and my ears hear her quiet voice speaking:

“I must tell you ... I cannot rest .... look, I am leaving our country and will not see it again ...”

Tears filled her eyes and quietly she continued:

“But you will not have to do this. For you were born here. What has happened to me will not happen to you.”

And I was silent and I did not know what to say to her. What would help comfort this deep sorrow? So I said nothing to

her. I did not speak even as tears poured down from her eyes.

More I remember: the days were days of summer, the last days of school. The heat was stifling all around and an oppressive sadness spread over everything. There was no desire to study; just a wish to sit and dream. And I remember holding her hand as we walked in the gardens and quietly, quietly listening to the soft moans of her broken heart:

“No! I will stay here! Everyone else can travel, they can leave me, and I will stay here. I will buy a tent and I will live here. I will work and live on the fruit of my labors ...”

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She left me; she walked away to the stairs crying.

And after that, when she had calmed down, and her first agitation had passed and a sort of quiet after the storm settled upon her, I took her hand and in a beseeching voice she said:

“In any case I want to establish a connection with the Land of Israel. I’ve thought about it a good deal, how and in what way, and in the end an idea has come into my mind: we will produce a newspaper between us. It will be issued one time in America and another time in the Land of Israel. The material will be shared, between here and between America: you, as a member of the stalwart society here, and me in the circle that I will acquire there. One time you will copy it and send it here to us, and another time, I will copy it and send it there to you...”

Pity then welled up in me. I wanted to gather her up, to hug her. She so badly wanted to keep a connection, so much so that any link, even if it were a weak one, would do; so much so that it came to her mind to even try this idea. She had no doubt spent entire nights thinking about these ideas and entertaining them in the last days.

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Oh, if only she had died here, at least, among her friends ... If only it had been possible to wet her grave with tears ...

*Rachel Tsabari*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It is probable that this is MK Rachel Tsabari (1909-1995). Tsabari was born in Tel Aviv and studied at the Girls School in Neve Zedek; she would have been Leah's age. After school, Tsabari attended the Levinsky Teachers Seminary in Tel Aviv and then the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She was active in the Haganah (the Jewish Defense Forces) and later gained a seat in the Israeli Knesset as a member of the Mapai party.