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## Literary snapshots from Jerusalem

By Maya Sela

At certain moments during last week's International Writers Festival, which took place at Jerusalem's Mishkenot Sha'ananim, it seemed as if I had been stricken with Jerusalem syndrome. But my sync apparently stemmed not from being in close proximity to holy sites, but from being in close proximity to writers.

So at breakfast I had to hide behind sunglasses from Paul and Siri, Jonathan and Nicole. I even hoped writer Michael Rips would appear, hovering like a butterfly and stinging like a bee, and ask about a place to get falafel in Jerusalem. But Rips slept late.

Facing the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, it was impossible not to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian on-stage conversation with British writer Simon Sebag Montefiore, Amos Oz said that someone in Jerusalem should perhaps have found a way to transfer all the sites holy to the three monotheistic religions in their entirety, to Scandinavia for 100 years, and return them to Jerusalem when it calms down. Montefiore joked that perhaps Jerusalem should return the British mandate.

Several people in the audience got up and walked out demonstratively. They apparently did not like the idea of Jerusalem.

When I asked Oz afterward about his humorous remark and the audience protest, he said that he uses humor as an antibody against fanaticism. If I could create humor pills, he said, I would be a candidate for the Nobel Prize in medicine rather than literature.

Last chance

Against the backdrop of the Old City walls, it was also impossible not to talk about the Holocaust. "Ink and Blood: Contemporary Holocaust Writing" was the name of a panel moderated by Sarah Blau that included Daniel Mendelsohn, Adolfo Garcia Ortega and Nir Baram.

Mendelsohn talked about the story of Lot's wife and how looking back is paralyzing and dangerous. In his book, "The Lost," he does indeed look back.

"When I was in school, I was the most afraid of the story of Lot's wife, even more than the story of the binding of Isaac," he said. "There is wisdom in that story. On one hand, the past is important, and on the other hand, if all you do is look back, you become paralyzed."

Blau wondered about the growing interest in the Holocaust. Mendelsohn argued that this is the last time. "The Holocaust will become what the War of 1812 was for Tolstoy. It will turn into history. It is interesting to consider what this story will be like in another 1,000 years; I think it will be like the Passover Hagaddah that's okay. Time passes and other things happen."

Baram said it depends on the agents of memory: "In Israel, there is a clear connection drawn between the establishment of the state and the Holocaust, and that is an integral part of its existence. As long as the Holocaust serves us for saying things about the present, it will remain meaningful. It is a defining part of Israeli discourse. It is not seen as a part of history, but as an event that is outside history."

In the meeting between Ortega and writer Yossi Avni Levy, moderator Zvi Triger wondered why people so disconnected to the Holocaust - for example, non-Jews such as Ortega - nevertheless feel a need to talk about it. Ortega, whose book "The Birthday Buyer" is about the Holocaust, said it has been present in his life since he was a child.

Avni Levy noted that he is of Afghan and Persian descent. Yet the process of writing his book "Shirat Hahataim," which is also about the Holocaust, had a therapeutic element to it, he said: "I write about it because it's part of my internal identity card. I'm sure it's connected to the concept of the victim that I internalized during my childhood."

#### Writers at play

In the lobby of Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss played with their kids. They therefore looked less glamorous than Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt, who no longer chase after the kids. Sofi Oksanen, the Finnish writer, came back carrying lots of bags and said she got lost in the souk and couldn't find the way back, so she had no choice but to do some shopping.

The Argentinean writer Liliana Heker displayed a brooch she received from Mishkenot Sha'ananim director general Uri Dromi. She liked the brooch and put it on the collar of her blouse, but it was important to her to find out whether the lion etched over the word "Jerusalem" is a religious symbol, because she has no religious affiliation, although she is Jewish.

The lion is the symbol of Jerusalem, I answered. How can you explain the Israeli mix of religion and nation - the fact that the lion, which symbolizes Jerusalem's connection to the inheritance of the tribe of Judah, is one of the most common symbols found on Jewish religious objects and the drapes and doors of synagogue arks, according to the Jerusalem municipality's website? And how can you explain the fact that with every step we take, we are stepping on someone's toes?

What remains uncertain is whether Jerusalemites were excited by what was happening in their city - by the fact that so many distinguished guests honored them by coming to visit. It is possible that by now, they are fed up with people who come to marvel at all their troubles.

#### On the map

While the International Writers Festival in Jerusalem was taking place, the Palestinian International Festival of Literature opened. Its events were held in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus and Ramallah, and participants included Taha Muhammad Ali; British writers Susannah Clapp, Geoff Dyer and Adam Foulds; photographer Jillian Edelstein; Palestinian-American writer Suheir Hammad; Swedish writer Henning Mankell; attorney and writer Raja Shehadeh; writer and critic James Wood and others. But there was no connection between the two events.

The only one to mention this silence was writer Nir Baram, who in his speech to the audience at the Israeli festival's opening event last Sunday, said that over the past decade, Israelis have been barricading themselves behind walls and denying the geopolitical space in which they live. His remarks were made just after Culture Minister Limor Livnat said that the festival puts Israel and Jerusalem at the center of the map.

People shifted uncomfortably in their seats - not when Livnat said what she said, but when Baram talked about reality.

The next day, the Italian writer Paolo Giordano said that he was very impressed by Baram's remarks, but he feels Baram's demand that writers take a political stance on Israel's situation is exaggerated. Giordano said he has no ability to say anything about the situation. He came to visit, and the fact that he is a writer does not mean he has well-formed opinions or that he has the right to talk about subjects he is not familiar with.

#### Summit meeting

Two days later, Kobi Meidan, with due gravity, moderated the summit meeting between Paul Auster and David Grossman, who approached the festival tent as if they were rock stars. Meidan asked questions such as what comes first, the plot or the characters.

Auster said writing resembles acting: An actor tries to portray someone else; a writer has a pen

or a computer and also tries to be someone who is not himself. It is a mysterious process that is akin to the concept of being a child again. Grossman said that just like actors, he too, when he writes, has to know the character's physical traits.

Be that as it may, Auster said he is currently unemployed, having finished writing one book and not yet started the next one. What does an unemployed writer do? "I try to read a lot, to pay attention to what is happening around me," Auster said.

Grossman said that a few months ago, he started writing something new, but he still does not know what it will be, a novella or a play or an opera. "I like not knowing," he said.

It is not entirely clear what readers are looking for when they come to an event with their favorite author - apart from stardust, of course. Perhaps they are looking for a solution to riddles, or perhaps to touch the hero of a book that moved them, hoping they will encounter him personified in the writer. Sometimes it seems that they want, without intending to do so, to dissipate some of the magic.

Fortunately, even at the end of the event featuring writers Yoel Hoffman and Michael Rips, the mystery was not solved. The mystery remained intact, and the spell was not broken.

Back to the swamp

The discussion of literary awards, and of how and to whom they should be awarded, moderated by Oded Ben Ami on the last day of the festival, was thoroughly Israeli. All the internationalism disappeared and the discussion reverted to the usual Israeli hysteria.

Hysteria is apparently an important element of Jewish identity, but shouts of "woe, the town is on fire!" do not help to clarify the issues being raised. Everything is fateful: the Holyland corruption scandal, the Iranians, the Syrians, the Big Brother television show and the Sapir Prize for literature are all equally important, and all may destroy the Jewish people, Zionism and Hebrew literature at any moment.

The writer Amir Gutfreund was the only one who did not sound worried. Perhaps because he already won the Sapir Prize, in 2003, and perhaps because he lives in the Galilee, far away from this atmosphere of gloom and doom out of all proportion.

"Money is an important thing, because without it, there is no envy and no prestige," Gutfreund said. "If there are no scandals, something is messed up. It is human nature."

"But it's too bad for the people who came here to hear all the mud being dredged up," he added, taking pity on the audience. "It does exist, but besides that, we also have a rich literary world."

The event certainly succeeded in bringing its audience back to the normal world of Israeli pettiness: It escorted them on their way back to real life. It forced them to forget Paul and Siri, Jonathan and Nicole, the American Colony Hotel, and that nice writer from an Arab country, who asked to remain anonymous. Look, we've come home, to the humidity of our literary swamp.