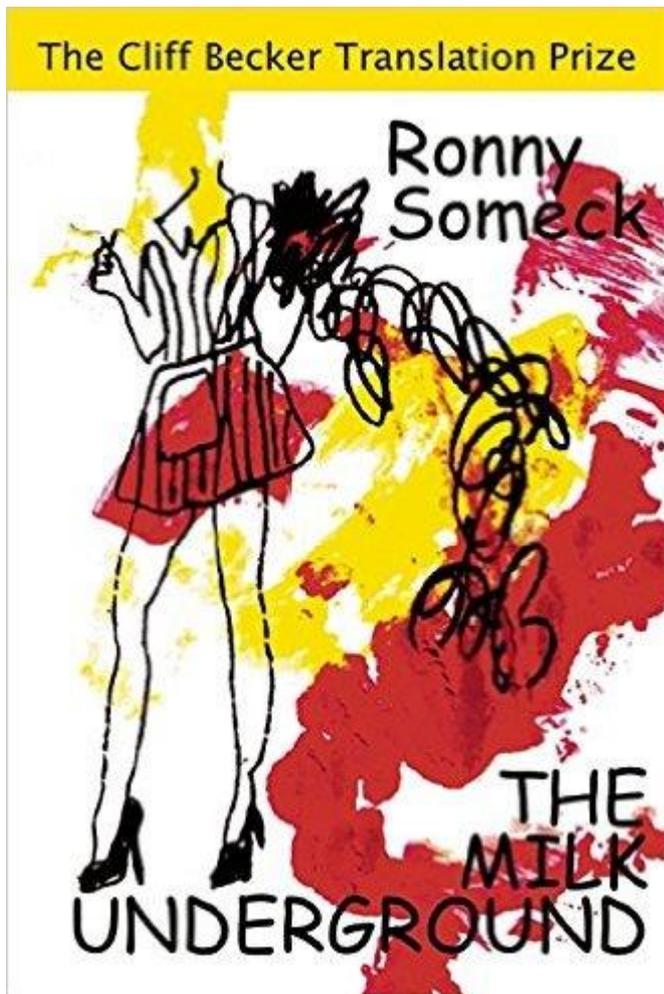


18 November 2015

The Milk Underground: Two Translators Spill Their Secrets

Millicent Bórges Accardi



Poetry collection 'The Milk Underground', recently received the Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation and features poems by Israeli writer Ronny Someck, translated by Hana Inbar and Robert Manaster.

Born in Baghdad and immigrated to Israel when he was a young child, Someck studied Hebrew literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University as well as drawing at the Avni Academy of Art. His published work includes eleven volumes of poetry as well as two children's books (with his daughter Shirly). His books have been translated into 41 languages, including Arabic, French, Catalan, Albanian, Italian, Macedonian, Croatian, Yiddish, Nepali, Dutch, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese and English.

Christopher Merrill states that "Someck is one of the most inventive poets around. . . and "The Milk Underground possesses the clarity we associate with the films that shape our lives. He is the auteur of angst, the director of a cast of characters destined to haunt our dreams, the one who knows

best how to frame his, and our, experience."

A recipient of the Prime Minister's Award, Yehuda Amichai Award for Hebrew poetry, the "Wine poem award" in Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia, 2005 and Hans Berghuis prize for poetry 2006

at the Maastricht International Poetry Nights, the Netherlands, Ronny Someck is a highly regarded international writer. He has worked with street gangs, and currently teaches literature and creative writing workshops.

For this interview with Poets' Quarterly, translator Robert Manaster responds to questions about Someck's work, the careful process of translation, and how he and co-translator Hana Inbar worked together as a team to translate *The Milk Underground* from Hebrew into English.

Millicent Borges Accardi: How did you come to translate Ronny Someck's work?

Robert Manaster: In the summer 2001 when I was attending Ropewalk Writers Retreat, Ellen Bryant Voigt suggested I try translating.

That was in the back of my mind when one day in 2005 after a Saturday morning Bible/Torah study, I asked Hana (Inbar) if she wanted to try translating with me—just for fun.

In our study sessions I found Hana had superb knowledge of Hebrew, attentive to its nuances. Also, she responded to questions or other comments as one who intimately knew how story, language, and spirit weave into a coherent whole. Even though she's not a writer, she's an attentive reader, and I later found out she's also the [Israeli] writer Yossel Birstein's daughter.

MBA: How did you decide what to translate?

RM: That was up to Hana. She asked a friend to stop into one of the major bookstores in Jerusalem and clear a whole shelf in contemporary poetry! Then send the books to her. One of the books was Ronny's. He was not as steeped or invested in allusions to Israeli or Jewish culture. Ronny is so much more international.

So, we translated for fun, randomly picking out poems from the book. At first, we also did a poem or two outside of this book.

MBA: Did you consult with the author? To verify translations?

RM: We loved translating his work. After we did a handful of poems, we decided why not do the whole book and perhaps I'd send out a few poems to journals for possible publication.

Hana said she would contact Ronny to let him know what we would like to do. We figured we needed to get his permission. Perhaps we could show him a few poems as well and gauge a little how we were doing with his poetry.

Out of the blue, she called him, and he knew of Hana's father and loved his work. Ronny was generous and was open to seeing some of our translations. Hana emailed him some poems, and he called back within a half an hour. He loved our translations. It took us about a couple of years to finish all the translations in the book. Occasionally, we would send poems to Ronny, and he would infrequently suggest a change or two. Mostly, though, he trusted our work.

MBA: As translators, who did what?

RM: I'm the poet here who sculpted the work in English. Hana gave the work its foundational form from the Hebrew into English. I helped guide her genius into the English form. I don't personally know a writer in English who knows English as well as Hana knows Hebrew. And that's saying a lot because I know many writers! She knows Hebrew inside and out.

MBA: What was your translation process?

RM: It was very much verbal. When Hana was living in the Champaign (Illinois) area, we met face-to-face once or twice a week at Pages for All Ages (a local bookstore). When that closed, we met at Espresso.

On infrequent occasions, some of Hana's friends sat with us as we translated, and they would on occasion talk about a word here and there with Hana, who was open to hearing conversation about language.

MBA: How did you begin?

RM: First, Hana read the poem in Hebrew. I listened to her cadence and the rhythm and sounds, noting emotional nuances in the poem, of which I had a copy and marked on. Hana then did a rudimentary, literal translation of the poem. This initial, verbal translation helped us grasp a sense of what the poem was about and where the poem was headed. Since I knew some Hebrew I was also able to follow her translation along and get more of a sense of Ronny's lines. So far, no lines of translation were written down.

After this pass, we went along line-by-line. This time Hana gave more of a poetry-aware translation. I transcribed, wrote on a notebook with a pencil. I asked a lot of questions to get at the crux of possible meanings-- moving toward Ronny's intentions and noting Hana's interpretation.

MBA: What were some of your questions?

RM: They were context-dependent, of course. Some of them were like the following: Is this higher language or conversational? Is this word X part of a Hebraic saying? How would you use this word X in other contexts? Why didn't Ronny just use another word Y? We discussed differences in language, how the Hebraic sound and rhythm affected the poetic choice of words, etc.

After we had the whole poem pseudo-translated, we were done with that poem's initial pre-draft. Away from our sessions, I would type in a Word document my notes and the possible variations of our translation. Then, on my own time, I would create a first draft of the poem. I would make decisions on which phrases worked best and occasionally change lines even more.

In future sessions on the same poem, I'd read the draft for Hana (occasionally I'd send a draft via email). Then we'd go line-by-line with Hana paying close attention to the Hebrew in the poem as the English made its way along and with my being more aware of the English poetry as the Hebrew loomed in the background. We'd discuss with passion and respect. We both listened to each other's points and in general were very open to change what we had. Anything for the poem, anything to make it better translated. While flowing in the English current of our translation, we've always wanted to stay hooked to Ronny's Hebrew poetry.

MBA: Is there a difference in style between the poems in both languages?

RM: While Hebrew seems more syntactically compact than English, we preserved the Hebrew style in English. Ronny writes in a conversational tone and cadence. The real power in his poems, which we hope is brought out, are in his poetic movement and energy as he juxtaposes various "worlds"—whether it be through image, wit, theme, or language.

Throughout this collection, for instance, he's putting side-by-side a world of people (e.g. Arab & Israeli, elite & lower classes in Israel, foreign & Israeli cities, Greek myth & biblical stories, etc) or a world of objects (as in "Another leaf to sweeten the sardine's funeral awaiting us / In the mouth" or

"a cocoon potato into butterfly fries"). We purposefully did not use any footnotes. We knew the poems stood on their own and we felt the footnotes would detract from the essences of Ronny's poetry—that of being conversational, juxtapositional, and internationalist.

MBA: What was your goal in this translation project, why did you take it on?

RM: Simply, we were translating for fun.

I'm doing it to learn and to continue to hone my craft as a poet. I love the challenge. I love working with Hana. I love being connected with language more and discussing these connections with Hana. I love getting our translations out so that Ronny is more known in the English-speaking world. He's a gifted writer, an internationalist, and a generous human being as well.

Hana started translating because she was living away from Israel and wanted to keep connected. In translating, she got in touch with Hebrew in a different way. She was getting in touch with more of the deeper aspects of Hebrew when having to verbalize to me what these words mean and what are the nuances in the context of a particular poem.

MBA: Alik Barnstone says Someck's poetry has a "wide-ranging, horrified and loving vision" What is an example of his vision? Perhaps a line which illustrates this analysis?

RM: Ronny Someck is a bridge builder. As we were translating, as we got to know Ronny through his poems more, we were more drawn into this vision of connectedness and interrelatedness of dissimilar (as well as similar) people and images. In the title poem, "The Milk Underground," for instance, he connects the pure/innocent (kids, cream, trees, birds, sun, etc.) with the impure/corrupt elements in our world (trash cans, darkness, the underground, etc.), implying that this purity exists and underlies the impurity of our world— this truth ultimately connecting us in the broadest possible sense, connecting us to the milky way on earth, the milk (or milky) underground.

In his first poem, "A Patriotic Song," he blends various origins into Israeli society. And he likewise expands, juxtaposing this society with different world societies and myths, and explicitly with the universe (the "Milky Way") until no one (including the speaker) can be characterized solely by his or her origin. We're all interconnected. As we say in the book's introduction, Ronny's work is one of juxtapositions between "high" and "low" culture, the sweet and violent, artificial and natural, personal and national, etc. He's self-effacing and witty. His language is plain-spoken, his rhythms direct and bold. He refrains from judgment, his vision is as his writing goes along: with compassion and care.

A Patriotic Poem

I'm a Pajama-Iraqi, my wife's Romanian
And our daughter the thief from Baghdad.
My mother's always boiling the Euphrates and Tigris,
My sister learned to make Perushki from her Russian
Mother-in-law.
Our friend, Morocco the Knife, stabs
Fish from the shores of Norway
With a fork of English steel.
We're all fired workers taken off the tower
We were building in Babylon.
We're all rusty spears Don Quixote thrust
At windmills.
We're all still shooting at gleaming stars
A minute before they're swallowed
By the Milky Way.

The introduction in the book gives a more detailed answer to this question of his poetry and places him and his poetry in the context of Israeli poetry:

The poems throughout *The Milk Underground* give a cohesive voice to Ronny Someck's oeuvre in Israeli poetry. He is a bridge builder. He is of the East as well as West. In an interview he explains, "I'm not looking for roots. I never lost them. Baghdad is the East and it is planted in the garden of the mind next to the tree of the West. Two trees that are two languages, which the mixer of my mouth has turned into one language."

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Hana Inbar is a native Israeli and the daughter of Yossel Birstein, a noted Israeli writer. She and Robert have also co-translated a book of Yossel's flash fiction stories, *And So is the Bus, Jerusalem Stories* to appear in early 2016.

Robert Manaster is a poet as well as co-translator. His own poems have appeared in many journals including *Rosebud*, *Spillway*, *Image*, *International Poetry Review*, and *The Literary Review*. Currently he is an Assistant Editor for *Fifth Wednesday Journal*.