

# Rachel Bluwstein

by Marian Benjamin Fritsch

**Rachel Bluwstein**, born in the Russian Empire in 1890, arrived in what was then Mandatory Palestine at the age of 19. On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, she learned agricultural skills in the spirit of Zionist pioneering. Rachel wrote poetry in Russian in her youth, but turned to Hebrew after her arrival in Israel. Her language is rooted in both biblical and modern, everyday Hebrew. Despite its great emotional depth, her poetry is characterized by linguistic clarity and simplicity—a simplicity that Rachel consciously chose and which she confidently reflects in her work (“Word,” “Scramble”).

In her poems, Rachel primarily deals with her own fate. Her verses are carried by hopeful feelings such as love, longing, and hope, but at the same time also by loneliness, loss, and the proximity of death. In addition to biblical figures with whom she relates (“Rachel,” “Michal”), the motif of the landscape of the Sea of Galilee, which was her home for many years, appears repeatedly.

The wistful memory of the beauty of the landscape of her pioneering years and of the agricultural work at the Sea of Galilee, her love for the land of Israel and for the Zionist labor movement have left a deep mark on Israeli society: Today, the last two lines of one of her poems about the Sea of Galilee (“Perhaps the whole thing is a lie?”) adorn the Israeli 20-shekel banknote, together with her portrait. But the memory of happiness and belonging during her years at the Sea of Galilee is always mixed with a wistful tone of irretrievable loss and sadness.

Around 1919, Rachel fell ill with tuberculosis – at that time an incurable disease. She had to leave her kibbutz Degania and eventually settled in Tel Aviv. There she spent her last years in modest circumstances before dying at the age of only 40 in a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients in Gedera, south of Tel Aviv. The painful experience of having to leave her home shaped her later work, which bears witness to her longing for the past, loneliness, and feelings of alienation.

This unfulfilled longing ultimately found expression on the poet's gravestone. Engraved on it are the last lines of her poem *Mineged* (“Opposite”), in which she refers to Mount Nebo – the place from which Moses saw the Promised

Land, which he himself was not allowed to enter. The poet herself hinted at Rachel's significance for posterity in her last poem, "My Dead," which she wrote in 1931 shortly before her death. She prefaced her verses with a quote from the writer and journalist Yaakov Shalom Katzenelbogen, which had appeared in the Hebrew literary magazine *Hador* shortly before his death: "*Only the dead will not die...*"

Rachel's own immortality in Israeli literature and her significance for Hebrew-language poetry are reflected to this day in the epithet given to her in Israel: *ha-Meschoreret* ("the poetess").

This volume—supplemented by a transcription into the Latin alphabet and a German translation—presents Rachel's Hebrew poems in Yiddish translation. The aim was to give Jews outside Israel, who often did not speak Hebrew, access to the country's poetic culture.

The translation into Yiddish was undertaken by Salman Shazar, who later became the third President of Israel. Rachel met Shazar a few years after her arrival in the Land of Israel and also had a romantic relationship with him. His translations are partly freer, partly closer to the original text, and thus inevitably bring about a change in melody, nuances, and imagery. Since the German translation is based on Shazar's Yiddish version, these deviations from the Hebrew original were partially adopted in order to reflect the experience of a Yiddish-speaking audience when accessing Rachel's poems.