

## “Memory of a vague longing”: reflective nostalgia in Lea Goldberg’s wartime poetry<sup>†</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Among the modern Hebrew poets, Lea Goldberg is perhaps one of the few who not only wrote nostalgic poems about the homeland that was left behind and destroyed in the Second World War and the Holocaust, but was also aware of the historicity of her own nostalgic discourse. While explicitly acknowledging the permanence of the absence of the past, she reflected on the meaning and even the legitimacy of nostalgia in her writing. Building on contemporary theories of nostalgia, this essay traces the development of a nostalgic discourse in Lea Goldberg’s lesser known poems written between the years 1939 and 1945. It argues that Goldberg’s nostalgic poems composed during the Second World War should be divided into two periods: from 1940 to 1942 and from 1943 to 1945. It suggests understanding the crucial poetic difference between the nostalgic modes present in each period through the prism of recent theories of nostalgia. Such a hermeneutic approach enables us to reveal the moulding of nostalgia as a “regime of seeing” in Goldberg’s wartime poetry.

### KEYWORDS

Lea Goldberg; Hebrew poetry; memory and nostalgia; Second World War; representation of holocaust

At the end of the 1950s, Lea Goldberg prepared an extensive collection of her poems that encompasses and concludes more than two decades of her lyrical writing. While selecting poems for the publication,<sup>1</sup> she added an entire cycle to the poetic volume “Mibeiti haya-shan” (“From my old home”) which was written during the Second World War and published before the end of the war, in 1944. After the publication of the first addition, a new lyrical cycle, which was given the laconic but telling title “Siyum” (“The Ending”), appeared in various collections of Goldberg’s poems as if it were an inherent part of the volume rather than an addition to something that was originally written more than a decade earlier. If the reader is unaware of this historical information, the poems of “The Ending” might create the deceptive impression that they were composed concurrently with the wartime poems. However, when Goldberg decided, over two decades after her immigration to Palestine, to compose these new poems in which she revisits her Lithuanian homeland and the past related to it, she did not seek to deceive her readers about the historical gap between the composition of “The Ending” and the rest

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<sup>†</sup>In Memory of Svetlana Boym

of the poems in the volume. Instead, she strove to summarize her own nostalgic endeavour and perhaps even put it to rest, at least temporally.

In the past decade nostalgia has received renewed interest from historians, literary researchers and cultural theorists.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on the subject, written against the backdrop of earlier scholarship that interpreted nostalgia either as an idealized form of recollection or as a dangerous manifestation of cultural amnesia, view nostalgic discourse as a critical tool for understating modernity. The American historian Peter Fritzsche argues that the study of nostalgia can reveal changes in temporal structures that occurred after the French Revolution. These changes severed the connection between past and present. For Fritzsche nostalgia does not signal ahistorical idealizations of the past; on the contrary, it marks the rising of modern historical subjectivity: “Nostalgia not only cherishes the past for the distinctive qualities that are no longer present but also acknowledges the permanence of their absence. It thus configures periods of the past as bounded in time and place and as inaccessible” (Fritzsche 2001, 1592).

Among the modern Hebrew poets, Lea Goldberg is perhaps one of the few who not only wrote nostalgic poems about the homeland that was left behind and destroyed in the Second World War and the Holocaust, but was also aware of the historicity of her own nostalgic discourse.<sup>3</sup> While explicitly acknowledging the permanence of the absence of the past, she reflected on the meaning and even the legitimacy of nostalgia in her writing. This essay traces the development of a nostalgic discourse in Lea Goldberg’s lesser known poems written between the years 1939 and 1945. It argues that Goldberg’s nostalgic poems composed during the Second World War should be divided into two periods: from 1940 to 1942 and from 1943 to 1945. It suggests understanding the crucial poetic difference between the nostalgic modes present in each period through the prism of recent theories of nostalgia. Such a hermeneutic approach enables us to reveal the moulding of nostalgia as a “regime of seeing” (Boym 2001, 28) in Goldberg’s wartime poetry.

### **“The last mercy of the remembering hour”**

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Lea Goldberg had only been living in Mandatory Palestine for four years. Her second poetic volume, *Shibbolet yerokat ha'ayin* (Green-eyed ear of corn), which appeared in October 1939, did not seek to represent the experience of the recent immigration of a young female poet. The volume therefore did not operate with the repertoire of tropes characteristic of modernist émigré poets (Fritzsche 2001, 1609), such as reflection on the exilic condition or the use of nostalgia. It is in her short lyrical cycle, *Et haboker haze* (This morning) written only a few months after the beginning of the war, that Goldberg, for the first time, touched upon the nature of an elegiac recollection of the past. This early cycle, which was originally published in the daily newspaper *Davar* on 25 January 1940, but which Goldberg did not include in her subsequent collected volumes, testifies to the direct relation between the origin of Lea Goldberg’s reflective nostalgia and the outbreak of the Second World War. In my analyses of Goldberg’s poems, I draw on Svetlana Boym’s concept of reflective nostalgia developed in her seminal book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Boym suggests differentiating between two types of nostalgia, the reflective and the restorative; these should not be viewed as absolute types but rather as cultural tendencies, or as “giving shape and meaning to longing” (2001, 41). Whereas nostalgia of the first kind, “puts

emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps,” reflective nostalgia “dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (Boym 2001, 41). Both Boym and Fritzsche stress the connection between nostalgic discourse and wars (Boym 2001, 28), emphasizing that historical cataclysms “invited proliferate self-reflection about loss in the present and remnants of the past and a consideration of history as catastrophe” (Fritzsche 2001, 1609). Even though Goldberg’s poems written after the outbreak of the war do not refer explicitly to the political context in which they were written, they should be interpreted as an early stage of her self-reflection on loss.

אֶת הַבֶּקֶר הַהֵזֶה, הַקָּטָן, הַכוֹרֵעַ  
בְּשִׁלְהֵי הַפְּרוֹר הַהוֹזָה  
אֶת הַבֶּקֶר הַהֵזֶה עִם סוּסָיו  
עִם פְּדֵי הַחֶלֶב-  
נִכְאֵי עֲגֵלָה וְשִׁירֵיהָ  
אֶל תְּשֻׁכָּה,  
אֶל תְּשֻׁכָּה אֶת הַבֶּקֶר הַהֵזֶה-

אִם הָיָה בּוֹ אֵף הַד, אֵף קָמִץ שֶׁל אֶפֶר  
מִנֵּי אֶמֶשׁ – אֵף קָטָן הַהֵדִים  
עֲמוּסֵי יְלֻקוּטִים מוּל חוֹמַת בַּיִת-הַסֶּפֶר  
בְּלַחֵשׁ דְּבָרוֹ יְלָדִים.

(This morning, the small one, the kneeling one/on the margins of a dreaming suburb/this morning with its horses/with the milk jugs/the gloom of the cart and its songs/don’t forget, /don’t forget this morning – /If in it there was even an echo, even a handful of ash /of last night – even the smallest echo/loaded with satchels in front of the school wall/ children spoke in a whisper.)<sup>4</sup>

The poem’s pathos, strengthened by anaphora-like repetitions, is unusual among Goldberg’s work. Why is it so important not to forget this particular morning, which seems to be just one of many? As we can see, already in the first part of the cycle, which is addressed to a lyrical “you,” it is clear that the starting point for the lyrical subject is not remembering but, on the contrary, forgetting. In his *Forgetful Memory* (2009), Michel Bernard-Donald argues that memory and forgetfulness are “facets of the same phenomenon of understanding” past events that gradually become inaccessible once they are represented in language (2009, 3). The ethical impetus of Goldberg’s short cycle is to recover a fragment of the past that was already forgotten. In this sense the use of the deictic word “this” is purposefully misleading: it does not refer to the present morning, rather it denotes that the morning belongs to another time and place, to a sleepy morning in the Eastern Europe of Goldberg’s childhood. This part of the cycle recalls surprisingly minor details: the horses, the milk jugs, and the carriage, or in other words, the fragments of the everyday. However, the second strophe of the same poem reveals Goldberg’s complex understanding of the function of literary memory. If this morning, exclaims the speaker, had “even an echo, even a handful of last night’s ashes – even the tiniest of echoes” (159) it should not be forgotten. Which is to say that the recollection of this moment from the past has a double value and a double function: it is a scrap of childhood, remembered in a nostalgic

way, but remembered precisely because due to its nostalgic value it might bear in it traces of the past. In other words, these nostalgic flashbacks should be remembered because they signal forgetfulness and the irrevocability of the past. This decisive idea about the nature of nostalgic memory is developed further in the last poem of the cycle. The poem switches from the apostrophic mode of the first poem to the first-person perspective:

לילותי הרהוקים, זה גבולכם הלכן  
 חומתכם הבצורה באור-  
 זה מותכם הלכן, לילותי הרהוקים  
 פה קרוב, פגר של יזכר.

(My distant nights, this is your white border/your wall is fortified in the light/this is your white death, my distant nights/as close as the candle of Yizkor)

In the present time of the poetic utterance, the past is unreachable; it is blocked by the wall of forgetting – “לוי ידעתי שכך נגמרים מרחקים” (had I known that these are the ways distances end), she exclaims, if she had known that the past would be unattainable because of war and death, she would have tried to retain more of it. But now that it is lost forever, the remaining option is to hold on to those fragments of the past that can be reached through nostalgia.

At this early stage of her preoccupation with the loss of her Eastern European home, one can already see that Goldberg makes a connection between nostalgia and liturgical tradition when she employs the simile of the candle of Yizkor.<sup>5</sup> The comparison of the proximity of the end of those nights and the light of the memorial candle allows Goldberg to stress the false appearance of memory as something easily attained. The memorial candle does not embody memory; however, its function is to symbolize the act of remembering. Through metaphoric language the cycle hints at the existence of an analogy between the function of the memorial candle and nostalgic discourse, they both deflect forgetting. Goldberg will develop this preliminary thought, or poetic intuition, if you will, into a systematic lyrical approach over the following four years.

Only a few months later, Goldberg published in the newspaper *Hashomer hatza'ir* the poem *Lifnot erev* (Toward the evening), in which she explicitly points to her old home as the subject of her longing. The poem opens with the following lines that clearly state the loss of her old home: “מביתי הישן לא נותר עוד / אלא זכר פמיהה עמומה” (From my old home nothing remained/but the memory of a vague longing). However, the poem already switches to the present tense in the third line. It is a snapshot, or rather a cinematic image that does not necessarily represent an event that actually occurred. Rather, through the description it attempts to evoke a certain atmosphere (*Stimmung*), which functions regardless of the scene’s historical veracity. In the late summer evening, female servants sit on the doorsteps of the house singing. One of the young women stops singing, runs to pick a ripe pear from the tree and tries to hide it from the landlord who is walking in the garden. Her friends continue singing the sad melody as if to assist her in hiding the stolen fruit. When the landlord playfully catches the young woman, their singing breaks into laughter. At first sight, the relationship between the poetic statements at the beginning of the poem and the lyrical situation itself might seem almost contingent. However, precisely through this relationship Goldberg continues to explore a number of fundamental questions – namely, what kind of temporal identity can nostalgic discourse reveal and construct? What can be remembered in nostalgic poems written during the war?

In this manifesto-like poem the fragmentary representation of her lost home is random precisely because of the contingent nature of nostalgia; nostalgic memory remembers the past sporadically.<sup>6</sup> Goldberg reveals a topic that will play a critical role in her wartime writings, recollections of the Eastern European home she left behind after immigrating to Mandatory Palestine. Later, Goldberg would collect some of these literary recollections for publication in her fourth collection of poems “From My Old Home,” published in 1944. Seen retrospectively, the first lines of this programmatic poem marked the beginning of a new poetic and philosophical development in her literary writing. This poem enabled Goldberg to formulate, in a condensed form, a statement about the nature of memory, a theme that she continued to explore in her subsequent poetry. Aware of the possibility that her old home would no longer exist, Goldberg writes that the only thing that remains of it is a memory of longing, not even nostalgia itself, but a remnant of nostalgia. “Nostalgia constitutes what it cannot possess,” asserts Fritzsche, and defines “itself by its inability to approach its subject, a paradox that is the essence of nostalgia’s melancholia” (2011, 1959). Goldberg’s double act of distancing the lyrical subject from her old home does not only signal its existence on the metapoetic level, but it also articulates the impossibility of evoking her homeland through the act of recalling. Hence, this poem does not attempt to present or to reconstruct the Eastern European home through the lyrical discourse; rather, it seeks to recollect traces of nostalgia for it. In other words, this is not a poem about Kovno; it is a poem about the recollection of longing for her old home.

Once Goldberg started reflecting on the possibility of nostalgia in her poems, she had to face an aesthetic challenge: how can the nostalgic discourse be prevented from slipping into a sentimental discourse, or how can it be made reflective? Already in her earlier work Goldberg dealt with the ambiguity of sentimental aesthetics. Even when she consciously chose to produce texts that evoke a certain sentimental dimension, she always took care to express her reservations about it. In other cases she even explicitly denied such a quality in her text, while at the same time evoking it.<sup>7</sup> One of the basic elements of the nostalgic discourse that Goldberg sought to avoid in her writing was the idealization of childhood; in this she saw a dangerous manifestation of a sentimental discourse. Such views on the representation of childhood are at least in part related to Goldberg’s biographical circumstances and her own childhood experience. In her prose work Goldberg does not mention her reasons for not being nostalgic about the past. The poet, who experienced the First World War as a child, viewed herself as part of a generation “without a childhood.” Already, before the outbreak of the Second World War, she addressed this subject explicitly in one of her most famous essays *Yaldut* (Childhood), published at the end of 1938. The essay starts with a critique of Tolstoy’s nostalgic view of childhood as a “Golden Era” (Goldberg 1938) and turns to the recollection of one of the most traumatic experiences of Goldberg’s entire life, the imprisonment of her father by Lithuanian soldiers and the repetitive staging of his execution.<sup>8</sup> At the end of this highly intimate text, Goldberg reflects on her decision to make something so personal public. The reason for this exposure, she explains, had to do with her feeling of moral obligation as a writer to address her traumatic memories openly in order to provoke a public discourse on the subject. Or as Goldberg puts it, she decided to tell her story not because she felt that her life was more important than somebody else’s life, but on the contrary, precisely because she knew that millions of people her age had similar horrifying experiences and just like her “they cannot forget them” (1938). Another reason for Goldberg’s

refusal to romanticize the memories of her home town had to do with her perception of Kovno as a provincial town in which the second part of her childhood and her coming of age took place. More than once she wrote in her diary and letters about her suffocating experience in her home town. The young Goldberg dreamt of leaving behind the provinciality of her cultural and social surroundings in Kovno at any cost.<sup>9</sup>

Coming back to the aesthetic challenges facing Goldberg, while keeping in mind these two biographical factors that permeated her literary work, I would like to argue accordingly that Goldberg sought to write nostalgic poetry without directly representing a sense of longing for her biographical past. As opposed to Immanuel Kant's famous argument, shared by many Romantic poets, that nostalgia should be understood as a temporal rather than a spatial phenomenon – that is to say, the nostalgic individual is not longing for his lost country, but for lost time<sup>10</sup> – Goldberg was not longing for the time of her childhood. Rather, she was longing for a lost space, which she wanted to represent in her poetry.

Through the development of a reflective lyrical nostalgia, Goldberg found a partial solution for creating a non-sentimental nostalgic discourse. According to Svetlana Boym, reflective nostalgia, instead of emphasizing the *nostos* (the return home), constitutes itself through *algia*, the ongoing process of longing and the recognition of loss. The reflective nostalgic, suggests Boym, uses the nostalgic discourse to cope with the imperfection of human memory and acknowledges the irrevocability of the past. Instead of being preoccupied with rebuilding her lost home through the process of literary representation, nostalgia of this type orients itself toward an individual narrative that “savors details and memorial signs” (Boym 2011, 49). Through the precise reading of literary works by Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, who examined in their texts the meaning of longing, Boym reveals the basic characteristics of reflective nostalgia: its necessary fragmentation, the temporalization of space that occurs during the process of the representation of a lost home town/country, as well as the critical, and sometimes even ironic, look of the nostalgic upon his/her own act of longing. However, Goldberg's exploration of nostalgia offers a new perspective for Boym's theory. Boym developed her theory studying modernist writers who were forced into exile and lost their homes under radically different conditions than Lea Goldberg's. I argue that Goldberg's poetry synthesizes reflective nostalgia and Jewish literary tradition. By combining liturgical and modernist literary aesthetics, she constitutes a new form of lyrical wartime nostalgia.

As we will see in the following pages, most of the mnemonic and literary techniques through which, according to Boym, the reflective nostalgic operates can be found in Goldberg's poems. Firstly, as we have already seen, Lea Goldberg declares her poetic disentanglement from a yearning for the past. It is not the desire to return home that is represented in the poems, but a memory of longing and loss. Secondly, the recollections of her old home are always fragmentary. They appear as a result of a temporal gap between Goldberg's biographical time (the time of her immigration to Mandatory Palestine) and historical time (the outbreak of the war). In addition to that, the process of a partial temporalization of space will gradually take place in Goldberg's nostalgic poems. In many of her poems, Kovno is represented through the lens of time, coloured by the hours of the day and described through its relation to the seasons of the year. Building on Fritzsche's suggestion to view nostalgia “as a regime of seing” (2002, 64), I would

like to demonstrate that Goldberg developed a certain mode of seeing in her wartime poems that goes beyond modernist reflective nostalgia.

### “Memory of a town”

Already in her second lyrical cycle dedicated to Kovno, Goldberg concludes that reflective nostalgia for her old home could enable her to long for the lost space without being nostalgic for the past. In this way Goldberg utilizes the representation of nostalgia in the poems as a bridge to the past without idealizing it. On 16 July 1940, Goldberg published four poems about her home town in *Hashomer hatza'ir*. The appearance of these poems at this particular period of time was a direct response to a political event, one that had an extremely personal meaning for her. In June 1940, the Soviet Union invaded Lithuania and other Baltic states (Snyder 2010, 190–193). During the following month thousands of Jewish refugees tried to flee occupied Lithuania (Snyder 2010, 204–218). Written shortly after the annexation of Kovno (Kaunas) by the Soviet Union, Goldberg's poems should be read in light of their immediate historical reality and as a poetic articulation of a “fundamental break with the past” (Fritzsche 2002, 65). If in the first poem of the cycle Goldberg offers a panoramic gaze on Kovno, looking at it with a bird's-eye view, in each of the three following poems she explicitly gazes on important sites in her home town that are located on her autobiographical mnemonic map: “The green hill” (Žaliakalnis), the district in which she used to live, the city park and the market.

In the first poem of the cycle, *Le'ahat he'arim* (To one of the towns), Kovno serves as the lyrical addressee. The title of the poem is telling – even on this occasion the poet preserves her ambiguity towards her home town by stressing its ordinariness. It is dedicated to a town among others, not to *the* town. Goldberg does not only raise, in her characteristic direct style, an essential question about the function of nostalgic feeling, she also provides the reader with a fundamental answer to it. In the opening lines of the poem the lyric speaker turns to her home town and wonders about the idealizing power of memory: “וּמִזְהָר לֹא אֶהְיֶה! אֵיכָה עָלִית לְפָתֵעַ / בְּיַפְרוֹן סוּלָה” – “not a beloved one!/how did you rise suddenly in forgiving and illuminated memory” (Goldberg 1986, VI.1, 233).

Goldberg's usage of the Hebrew word “Eikhah” in the first line of the poem evokes the act of wailing, *Megilat Eikhah*, in which each lamentation opens with the same exclamation – “Eikhah! How can it be that she sat alone/the city so great/.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas in the Book of Lamentations Jeremiah mourns for destroyed Jerusalem,<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, in her poem, reverses the vector of mourning from the sacred to the profane. She does not long for Jerusalem after the destruction of the First Temple, but for Kovno after its occupation by the Soviet army. In doing so, she reactivates a longstanding Jewish literary tradition of mourning that was explored by David Roskies in his seminal book *Against the Apocalypse* (1984). Roskies argues that the moderns reinvented a tradition “out of earlier scattered traditions that were made manifest, reshaped into canonical form, and given a secular sanction quite apart from their original place within the culture as a whole” (1984, 12). This is precisely the case with Goldberg's poem, by merely using a single word, “Eikhah,” she evokes the whole tradition “resurfaced in secularized form as a flashback to the historical Jerusalem” (Roskies 1984, 12).

But her poetic endeavour does not end there; she does not only strive to remember her home town in its misery. This is where her formulation of nostalgia as a form of memory

with a certain amnesiac dimension comes into play: nostalgia can assist in making the past illuminated.<sup>13</sup> However, in this case her partial amnesia reveals an ethical function: rather than idealizing the past, it assists the lyric speaker in the process of forgiving. It is the act of lyrical nostalgia that enables Goldberg not only to depict the ruins and miseries of the past but also the beautiful aspects of the city: its melodies, its streets, its landscapes and the various traces of its everyday life. This is exactly the point at which Goldberg also departs from the Jewish literary tradition, or seeks to mould it with her modernist way of seeing. It is the temporality of the everyday that she is eager to recall. After recollecting different fragments of her home town, Goldberg continues to reflect directly on longing; nostalgia is now possible precisely because her home town is not the same anymore, since its Jewish life and culture have gradually been destroyed by the Soviet army.

“For many displaced people from all over the world,” writes Svetlana Boym, “creative rethinking of nostalgia was not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming” (Boym 2001, xvii). Indeed, in this cycle Goldberg acknowledges for the first time the impossibility of her own homecoming: “קִטְנַת הַצֶּעֶר, / שְׁלֹא תָשׁוּב אֵלַיךְ לְעוֹלָמוֹאֲתָּ וְיָלְדוֹתַי” (“and you and my childhood, of little remorse,/that will never return to you” (1986, v.I, 233). By disassembling the word nostalgia into two separate words, from which, as we remember, this Greek neologism originated, and translating them into Hebrew as remorse “צער” and return “שיבה,” Goldberg performs, in fact, a sort of linguistic realization of metaphor, again stressing the impossibility of return, as well as the poetic nature of her nostalgia. The use of longing enables her to rescue and preserve fragments of everyday life within the lyrical space.

Most of the poems in both lyrical cycles discussed above (*Mibeiti hayashan* and *Le'ahat he'arim*) focus one way or another on a certain aspect of nostalgia, namely, the acoustic. Goldberg's poems present a whole symphony of urban life: be it the song of the female servants, the laughter of boys, the “soft singing” of the samovar, the noise that a paddle makes, the voice of an old beggar, the buzz of a sewing machine or the melody coming from the music box. In all of these poems the acoustic motif is one of the main channels for representing and manifesting nostalgia. The voices of the town are themselves sorts of nostalgic acoustic capsules. By connecting melody, or music in a broader sense, to nostalgia in her lyrics, Goldberg calls forth the romantic tradition.

In his study on the history of nostalgia, Jean Starobinski refers to Rousseau's concept of the “memorative sign” that he coined in his *Dictionary of Music*. Rousseau used this concept in order to describe the main effects of the melody of a *ranz des vaches* played on the horn by the Swiss Alpine herdsmen. Starobinski understands the function of the “memorative sign” as a partial presence which causes one to “experience, with pleasure and pain, the imminence and the impossibility of complete restoration of this universe which emerges fleetingly from oblivion [...] The image of childhood reappears through a melody, only to slip away” (Starobinski and Kemp 1966, 93). Moreover, Starobinski argues that the conjunction of the themes of exile, sad memories and “golden visions of childhood” not only lead to the “acoustic” theory of nostalgia, but also to “the formation of the romantic theory of music and even to the definition of romanticism” (Starobinski and Kemp 1966, 93). The echoing of the romantic tradition assists Goldberg in stressing, as it happens, the partial and urban character of acoustic nostalgia in her lyrics.



Already during the last months of 1940, Goldberg sharpened the function of acoustic nostalgia in her lyrical representation of longing. She gradually discovered how crucial the epistemic link between sound and memory was for the constitution of her nostalgic discourse because it could assist her in emphasizing the irrevocability of the past. This new understanding of acoustic nostalgia appears for the first time in the fifth poem of the cycle *Al hapriha* (On the blossom), dedicated to Abraham Ben-Yitzhak (Abraham Sonne).<sup>14</sup> Unlike the other poems in the cycle, this *terza rima* avoids the use of symbolist language.<sup>15</sup> Instead, it relates explicitly to the historical political condition of war, relating her autobiographical experience of the First World War with her first representation of the Second World War, dissolving the distinction between the present and the past.

איך רכבות הלכו! זמזם בלי הרה  
 פיסוף-פסים בזכר מולדות,  
 נשכשוך של מים ומשק של חרב.  
 נגעו בליל עינים בודדות  
 של הנוסעים המובלים אי-אנה.  
 צל ענפים, חשמל וחרדות,  
 ואצבעות חורות בשחור תגענה  
 ומישהו ספר בקול קשוב  
 על בן, על בית הצופה הגנה ...  
 איך רכבות הפליגו לבלי שוב.

(How the trains passed by! Silver tracks/hummed long and longing in memory of homelands, /waters splashing, a sword's slash. /They touched night the lonely eyes/of passengers being carried off somewhere. Shadows of branches, electric sparks and fear,/and pale fingers touching the dark, and someone in the listening voice telling,/of a son, a house facing the garden.../How trains sailed by, never to return) (Goldberg 2005a, 64).

Goldberg's use of *terza rima* in this poem, which is the first in the entire cycle, led to the appearance of a new aspect of her acoustic nostalgia – this time nostalgia itself is represented acoustically through the rhythmic chain of the three tercets. The mirroring of this rhythmic phenomenon on the discursive level of the poem stresses the acoustic nature of nostalgia in the poem, since Goldberg creates a semantic relation between the sounds of the trains and nostalgia. Here the trains, not the human beings, remember homelands and give voice to longing. But unlike the previous poems in which the representation of longing played a decisive role in the constitution of their lyrical subjectivity by invoking the individual memory of an autobiographical lyric “I,” in this poem Goldberg addresses, for the first time, the other pole of nostalgic discourse: its relationship to collective memory. By avoiding the presence of the lyric “I,” Goldberg stresses the common experience of dislocation and the irreparable loss caused by the war, which is embodied in the poem by the never returning trains carrying thousands of passengers who share memories of the past with each other.

The importance of collective memory in shaping her nostalgic discourse becomes more present in Goldberg's writing during the second half of the war. Between 1943 and 1945 her nostalgic poetry underwent a radical change, which was directly related to an existential and lyrical crisis that she experienced during the two preceding years. As I previously showed, between 1942 and 1944 Goldberg almost entirely abstained from writing poems;

during this period she published only eight poems.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, her poetic silence had to do with her refusal to represent in lyrical poetry the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War, since she perceived such representation as an act of aestheticizing suffering and the murder of European Jewry. On the other hand, in these years Goldberg temporarily lost the ability to pursue her personal moral assignment: to preserve in her poems the universal humanist values of poetry.

Goldberg dealt once again with Kovno in one of the very few poems she wrote during that period. She later included this poem in the aforementioned poetic cycle *Le'ahat he'arim* ("To one of the towns").<sup>17</sup> However, this time she no longer addressed a town occupied by the Soviet Army, but rather a town occupied by Germans.<sup>18</sup> The poem was published in September 1943, its publication coinciding with the handing over of the ghetto of Kovno to the SS.<sup>19</sup>

עת פי יכבה היום על גדות נהר ממרה,  
עירי, עירי, פניך עתיקים.  
בגזר השקיעה אשוב אראך  
דמותך הנכזבה ממרחקים.

בין אבניך ריח תחלף,  
מצלב הכניסה תקרא צפור  
הסמטאות גולשות-רצות לחוף,  
כנערות קטנות רדופות מגור.

לפתע מן הגשר האפל  
יבקיע-על בכי עירי.  
הרחק מאד, מאחורי הליל  
קולך אשר נדם, עירי, עירי.

(When the day will end on the banks of the rebellious river, /my town, my town, your face is ancient. /In the crown of sunset I will return and see/your dashed image from the distance. /Amongst your stones the wind will pass/from the cross of the church the bird will call out/The lanes are gliding-running to the shore, /like little girls haunted by fear./ Suddenly from the shadowy bridge/a solitary cry will rise/very far away, behind the night/your voice that was silenced, my town, my town.)

"How, then does one mourn effectively when there is no way back and the ruins will never be rebuilt?" asks Roskies in his study of Jewish texts (Roskies 1984, 8). In contrast to her earlier nostalgic poems, this poem represents the process of losing the space of the home, and the lyric speaker seeks to contend with this unbearable knowledge. But the space represented in the poem does not seek to evoke only Jewish literary tradition, for it is actually the cross on the church that symbolizes the destruction of Jewish life. Nor does it seem that Goldberg believes in the possibility of effective mourning.

From across the distance of time and space, the lyric speaker addresses the home town she has lost forever. It is this unbridgeable distance, it seems, that makes the face of the town look ancient. The poem is a loving look backward, reminiscent of Lot's wife's gesture, another form of nostalgic memory. The town that she looks back at is entirely devoid of human beings; it is almost a ghost town, where the little girls are only present in their absence. The empty streets echo the call of the solitary bird and the former

inhabitants' fear. However, even in the process of mourning, Goldberg's lyric subject reflects the illusionary or deceptive dimension of nostalgia and its very limited access to the past. The crucial difference between this poem and the previous ones manifests itself through the distortion of acoustic nostalgia in the last strophe. The closing lines of the poem describe two simultaneous processes: the breaking through of the solitary cry on the shadowy bridge and the silencing of the voice of the town – "very far away, behind the night/your voice, that was silenced, my town, my town" (238). A nostalgic discourse is no longer capable of evoking the "vocal" fragments of the town. The disruption of the connection between nostalgia and melody leads to the silencing of the town's voice and to the impossibility of "hearing" the past. Paraphrasing Fritzsche, one could argue that the representation of nostalgic discourse as a mode of listening is totally replaced by nostalgia as a mode of seeing without hearing. Perhaps, it is the recognition of this irrevocable loss that provokes Goldberg to address Kovno as "her town" for the first time. The repetition of the apostrophe stresses not the presence of the town but the elegiac urge to evoke it through nostalgic memory.

Goldberg will revive the voice of her destroyed home town for the last time in a poem written at the end of the war, but this time in a form that explicitly evokes the liturgical pole of Jewish textual tradition. Written in April 1945, *Baleilot* (At night) is her only wartime poem that directly addresses the loss of her loved ones who perished in the Holocaust – her father, relatives and friends.<sup>20</sup>

בְּלֵילוֹת  
 כָּל אוֹתָם הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁבִּסְתֵּר שִׁתְּקַמִּי אֶת שְׁמֵם-  
 בְּלֵילוֹת עֲמוּקִים פְּגִשְׁתִּים.  
 מִבְּטֵי אֶל הַחֹשֶׁךְ. קְשׁוּבָה וְזוֹכְרָת. דּוּמָם.  
 שׁוּב אֶקְבִּיל אֶת פְּנֵיכֶם, יְדִידִי, אֶהוּבֵי הַמֵּתִים.  
 וְכוֹלְכֶם עוֹד כְּאֵז – עֲטוּרֵי הַשְּׁלֵוָה הַקְּטָנָה  
 שֶׁל פְּרִיחַת הַגַּנִּים, וְדִשְׁאִים בְּצִדוֹ שֶׁל הַרְחוּב.  
 בְּקִמְטֵי בְּגָדֵיכֶם דְּאֵגוֹת-כָּל-יְמוֹת הַשָּׁנָה  
 וְהַתְּיָמוֹת פְּשֻׁטְנִית שֶׁל מְכָאוּב.  
 תְּמִימוּתְכֶם בַּת זְנוּעוֹת! מִי נִחַשׁ, מִי יָדַע קְדוּשָׁתָה?  
 קוֹל אָבִי מְסַפֵּר הַלְצָה. צְחֹק רְעִים-  
 מְלִילֵי הָעֲמוּק צוֹחֶקֶת עִירֵי הַמֵּתָה  
 בְּנִגּוֹן שֶׁל יָמִים נוֹרְאִים.

(All the things that I was secretly quiet about their names /I have met in deep nights./My sight toward darkness, I am attentive and remembering. Silently./Again I welcome you, my dead beloved.//And all of you are still adorned by little serenity/ of blooming gardens, and grass on the side of the street./ In the wrinkles of your clothes are the daily worries/ and the simplistic innocence of grief.// Your innocence, the daughter of horror, who guessed, who knew it's sacredness?/My father's voice is telling a joke. The laughter of friends – /from my deep night my dead town laughs/in the melody of High Holidays.)

In no other wartime poem does Goldberg reflect so directly on her inability to address her unfathomable loss. The loss that the lyric speaker cannot name at the beginning of the poem is named at the end of the first strophe. At the beginning of the poem the process of

naming is not the result of the lyric speaker's nightmarish condition but of a recollection she had during her sleepless nights. It is within the space of nostalgic memory that she can evoke and preserve the faces of her loved ones. They appear to her just as she left them: with the "daily worries on the wrinkles of their clothes," with the "simplistic innocence of pain." However, in the last strophe the space of nostalgic memory collapses into the time-space of death. The synecdochic representation of the voices opens the void of the home town that became a ghost town. An acoustic memory of Goldberg's father surrounded by laughing friends only stresses their irrevocable and final absence. David Roskies argues that within the literary tradition of the "Jewish dialectical response" to catastrophe, "the greater the immediate destruction, the more it was made to recall the ancient archetype" (1984, 17). Goldberg follows this "liturgical impulse" (80) only partially. She evokes the liturgical tradition in order to preserve her loved ones in a modernist, nostalgic form of memory.<sup>21</sup> The laughter of the town is being transformed within the poetic space into a liturgical melody of the High Holidays, but it lacks any metaphysical presence. The poem does not strive to become a lament. Instead of doing that, Goldberg's nostalgic discourse stops at the threshold of the liturgical, searching for a voice in this mute zone of loss and longing. At this very point, Goldberg offers a poetic solution for the problem of expressing longing for her home that was destroyed in the Holocaust. She reaches this solution by combining the Jewish literary tradition with modernist reflective nostalgia.

### **"I imagined that the time had stood still"**

Over many years Lea Goldberg refrained from mentioning the representation of nostalgia for her lost home town and its inhabitants in her poems. One could think that she had resolved not to return to this painful subject in a public or literary medium. However, in 1957, over a decade after the war, Goldberg revisited her old home in another lyrical cycle for the last time. During the war she rarely kept a diary and therefore reflections on her nostalgic poems written during this period do not exist. However, by the time she composed the cycle "The ending" she was again keeping a diary.

Apart from information regarding the autobiographical circumstances under which the cycle was written, the diary contains an early version of the poems, which Goldberg revised two years later, in 1959, when she was preparing them for publication in a collection of her early and current poetry, *Mukdam ume'uhar*. In the new volume the title of the cycle, *Siyum* ("Ending"), had a double meaning. Apart from literally being the final chapter of *Mibeiti hayashan*, it also marked the closure of her lyrical autobiographical journey to her old home. However, the original title given to the cycle in 1957 was strikingly more elaborate *Shiva el beiti hayashan* ("Return to the old home"), which referred explicitly to both an autobiographical and poetic return to Kovno.

We learn from Goldberg's diary that in September 1957 she planned a short vacation to Jerusalem, where she hoped to find peace and quiet. At the beginning of her stay at the King David Hotel, Goldberg left a note in her diary: "an attempt to escape 'towards myself'" (2005b, 387). Her diary entries testify that the vacation ("I am truly enjoying the life here" Goldberg 2005b, 380) assisted her in finding what she was looking for. It is under these favourable circumstances that she allowed herself time for introspection. The opening strophe of the poem succinctly summarizes Goldberg's relation to her Eastern

European home town and even more importantly to the logic of her own nostalgic discourse.

While preparing the poems for publication, Goldberg decided to add another poem to the original three poems of the cycle, a poem that was written almost a decade earlier. It seems that through this addition she created a theological frame for the whole cycle in order to undermine it at the same time. In this essay I refer to the original version of the cycle, the version without the first poem.

Remarkably, the poems underwent only minor changes during the two years before their publication in *Mukdam ume'uhar*; therefore Goldberg's decision to replace a certain word with another is telling. In the later version of the opening strophe Goldberg changed only one word. In the fourth line she replaced the word "איך" (how) with the word "שוב" (again) – " (again) – "לא אהבתי שוב נהיה עברי האהוב עברי אשר" ("The past I never loved became again my beloved past", 48) This seemingly slight change is, in fact, significant because it suggests a shift in Goldberg's view of the role of lyrical nostalgia. Whereas the original line can be read as an implicit question about the phenomenon of nostalgia – namely, how can she long for a past that she did not love, a question she already dealt with during the war – the final version provides a literary autobiographical explanation, which simultaneously serves as a metapoetic one. The use of the word "שוב" stresses the temporal frame of this change in relation to the past through the designation of the repetitive character of the emotion.<sup>22</sup> In other words, according to the poem, this is not the first time that the lyric speaker has felt nostalgic towards the past; it has happened to her before. Indeed, keeping in mind the fact that this cycle was written 13 years after the first publication of the volume *Mibeiti hayashan*, this is truly the case. But Goldberg does not only provide the reader with a biographical explanation, the replacement of "how" with "again" signifies, in the crystallized form of her reflective nostalgia, that the unloved past can become loved only within the poetic space, and this is done without eliminating the ambiguity of the poet's attitude to it. Goldberg represents her disillusioned recollections of her youth in her "grey homeland" much more directly here than she does in her early poem, *Zikhron ir* (Memory of a town, 1940) which represented the loneliness, melancholy and fear she experienced as a girl in her home town. Despite almost two decades that separate the two poems, the logic and the function of nostalgic memory remain the same. One of Goldberg's own definitions of nostalgia as a "forgiving and illuminated memory," a definition previously discussed in this essay, reappears in this poem in the opening lines of the second strophe as tears of memory that cast a different light on the past – "בדמעות-זכרונות זורחת/ המולדת האפורה" (245) (the grey homeland/glows in memories' tears, 48). Even though both poems operate with the same understanding of nostalgia, their epistemic and historical frames are radically different. Whereas the first poem was published at the beginning of the war, the latter one is clearly a post-Holocaust poem that stresses the tragic irreparability of the past and the epistemic rupture.<sup>23</sup> The closing lines of the poem reveal the lyric speaker's feeling of guilt for the strong desire she felt to leave her home town in her youth in light of her current knowledge of the final loss, the "loss that has no remedy".

Like the first, the second poem in the original cycle can also be viewed as a personal summary of Goldberg's reflective nostalgia. The second poem can thus be read in a twofold way, on the one hand, as the poet's return to nostalgia for nostalgia and, on the other hand, as her metapoetic reflection on the nostalgic discourse of her previous

poems. One can see that these two levels of interpretation are interwoven right from the opening line – “I imagined that time had stood still” (49). This can be read as an imaginary act that the lyric speaker is carrying out in the present and past tense of the lyrical utterance and as a metapoetic elucidation of the wartime nostalgic poems. Already in the first line Goldberg reflects on one of the basic aspects of nostalgic memory: its ability to detain time. As a result of an imaginary act that freezes time, the lyric speaker can see within the poetic space the blossoming apple trees in the autumn gardens of her home town untouched by the destruction of war, “as though our world has not been shattered.” This aspect of nostalgic memory is also underlined in Sara Horowitz’s argument that nostalgia is often invoked with reference to the Holocaust, as an “invocation of a world as yet untouched by Nazi genocide”(2010, 45).

The second aspect of the nostalgic discourse, its mediation between personal and collective memory, becomes evident precisely through the movement from “I” to “we” at the beginning of the second strophe. The nostalgic voice here is the voice of the entire Jewish community whose life, world and homes in Eastern Europe were destroyed. At the end of the poem, nostalgic memory is defined as “forgotten memories that cannot be forgotten,” and at this point Goldberg closes another circle by coming back to her early poetic thoughts on forgetting as the basis for nostalgic memory. Precisely because the past is in danger of being forgotten, the fragments of memory that can still be, at least partially, recollected should be saved.

In the final part of Goldberg’s last nostalgic cycle, she points once again to the core of her lyrical reflective nostalgia: the rupture within the nostalgic discourse that is manifested through the disappearance of the voices of the city and its inhabitants. Paradoxically, in this poem, which is reinforced with a Chagall-like image of a crying angel, the fading of sounds is represented through the acoustic metaphor of the “voice of the lost worlds” (49) that bursts into the silence of the present from which the lyric “I” is speaking. In the poem itself however, the voices are not heard. On the contrary, they appear in their negativity, as unheard: “No shofar calling out to the silence” (50). When the town is orphaned of its Jewish melodies, the sound of the crying angel is the only sound the lyric speaker hears.

To conclude, this late poem shares its poetic structure with a few poems Goldberg wrote years earlier, during the last two years of the war when the death of her loved ones became the explicit subject of her lyric utterance “my dead never rose.” Also in this poem, written in the 1950s, the nostalgic discourse moves towards the Jewish liturgical pole. Once again reaching the border between the liturgical and the modernist, Goldberg looks back for the last time to the past she “never loved.” She also looks back to it in order to summarize her nostalgic wartime poetics. Goldberg’s lyrical form of longing for the “loss that has no remedy,” which moulded modernist reflective nostalgia with Jewish literary tradition, enabled her to develop her own mode of seeing and thus to remember fragments of her Eastern European past destroyed by the war and the Holocaust.

## Notes

1. On the reasons for her self-censorship of the early poems which were heavily underrepresented in this collection, see Miron (2004, 334–354).

2. For a well-informed summary of the different perspectives on nostalgia, see Arnold-de Simine (2013, 54–61).
3. On the development of the nostalgic discourse in her novel *Vehu ha'or*, see Gordinsky (2012, 455–464).
4. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are mine, and they should be viewed merely as “working translations.”
5. It seems that at the same time Goldberg is also evoking the tradition of Yizkor literature written in the 1920s in Eastern Europe under the impact of the pogroms, on the subject, see (Mintz 1984, 109–154).
6. By choosing a poetic form that echoes in a certain way the generic conventions of romantic verse tales as well as *Kunstvolkslied*, that of Pushkin on the one hand and of Bialik on the other, Goldberg also evokes on a poetic level the vanishing of a whole literary world.
7. See, for example, the first letter in Goldberg’s epistolary novel *Mikhtavim minesi’ah meduma* (1937) (*Letters from an Imaginary Journey*) written by the extra-diagetic narrator L. which declares that her main protagonist, Ruth, is not a sentimental young woman, whereas, Ruth inserts in her letters sentimental passages. On Goldberg’s usage of sentimental discourse in her literary and public writings, see Gordinsky, Ben Zmanim (forthcoming).
8. On the influence of this traumatic experience on Goldberg’s literary world and her cultural standpoint, see Hirschfeld (2000).
9. See Weiss (2007).
10. Quoted in Starobinski and Kemp (1966, 94).
11. Quoted from the translation of Rabi David Mevorach Seidenberg <https://Neow.Hasid.org/>
12. In the seminal study of responses to catastrophe in Hebrew Literature, Alan Mintz devotes a whole chapter to the rhetoric of *Lamentations*, see Mintz (1984, 17–48).
13. On the history of the identification of nostalgia with amnesia, see Dames (2001, 3–20).
14. On Goldberg’s dialogue with Avraham Ben-Yitzhak in this cycle, see Gordinsky (2013, 81–88).
15. On the symbolist elements in “Al hapriha” and Goldberg’s dialogue with Dante, see Bar-Yosef (2000, 98–116).
16. On the lyrical rapture in Goldberg’s poetry, see Gordinsky (2016).
17. The other poem that was written even later, in 1944, and was included in the same cycle depicts the suffering of the Jewish girls in the ghetto. See VL. II, p.236.
18. The Jews of Kaunas were enclosed in a ghetto in August 1941. Already in the first month of its existence, about 3500 Jews were killed. For further information, see Arad (2009, 141–143).
19. Compare to Arad (2009, 319).
20. Weiss (2009, 359) was the first scholar to address Goldberg’s loss of her father during the Holocaust in her research on the poet.
21. On the difference between liturgical and historical times, see Spiegel (2002, 149–162).
22. Weisman (2014, 239) interprets these lines in the frame of Goldberg’s “dialectic non-decisiveness”: “Was the past loved or wasn’t it? It was and it wasn’t, and also: it was neither one nor the other.”
23. On the epistemic rapture caused by the Holocaust, see Diner (2006, 33–48).

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