

Who was Ludovic Bruckstein?

In his memoirs "All Rivers Run to the Sea", Elie Wiesel describes his returns to Sighet, the Transylvanian town of his childhood. He writes there:

Friends had given me the phone number of Leibi Bruckstein, a Communist Yiddish writer who lived on what used to be "my" street. I called him. He was afraid to see me alone. It was 1964, and the walls had ears. But we did manage to walk together for an hour or two. "I'm going to have to file a report," he warned me. I understood his concern. My visit threatened to cause him trouble with the Securitate. He would have to be careful.

We walked around. Here was the house where my friend Dovid'l had lived, and there was Itzu's, and further on Yiddele's, whose grandfather I remembered well. He had been the *dayan*, or rabbinical judge, always elegant and pleasant. Across the street was a former House of Study. "Can I go in?" I asked. My companion hesitated, then nodded: "Yes, but it will be in my report." I asked him, very softly, "How can you live like this?" He looked over his shoulder. No one was following us. "I would love to leave for Israel," he whispered, "but it's complicated. Asking for an exit visa makes you suspect. You instantly become isolated and targeted. And then, what would I do there? I'm too old to start from scratch." I shuddered. My father had spoken almost exactly those words. "Don't stay here," I begged this Jewish Communist writer who, though not religious, was more Jewish than Communist. "Don't let this regime crush you." I offered to help him get an exit visa. I would speak to Dr. Moshe Rosen, the chief rabbi of Romania, and to Israeli friends who dealt with questions concerning Eastern European Jewry.

Eighteen years later I found myself at the Wall in Jerusalem. And there was Leibi Bruckstein. What was the atheistic Communist doing in the midst of this praying throng, stuffing a piece of paper into the interstices of the Wall? What could he be requesting? Only later did I understand: Both he and his wife were gravely ill.

("All Rivers Run to the Sea", Memoirs by Elie Wiesel, Harper Collins)

Unfortunately, Elie Wiesel did not understand...

He visited Leibi Bruckstein twice in Sighet and Leibi indeed told him about his thought to move to Israel, but what he was concerned about was this: in Romania he already had a career of 20 years, he was established and well-known, his plays written in Romanian and Yiddish were staged and his books were printed and, most importantly, people were interested in them. What could he expect to happen in Israel?

Bruckstein did not need help in getting out of Romania, he needed help in getting into the literary circles of the Western World. And he knew that such help would not be forthcoming.

In 1969, mainly for the sake of his now teenage son, Bruckstein finally decided to leave for Israel. His brother in Israel and their good friend from Sighet, Atzy Mendelson, alias Amos Manor (who then headed Israel's counter-intelligence services and was instrumental in bringing Eichmann to trial), helped him get out of Romania.

As foreseen, the move was traumatic. It involved a very long period of visa refusal in Romania, losing his position and job, being suspected, isolated and targeted, a period of indescribable psychological suffering for the entire family which, before applying for a visa to Israel, enjoyed a good livelihood and a prominent position in the town. But more traumatic than all this was the quite predictable realization, once out of Romania, that in the Israel of the 70th an author who writes in Romanian and/or Yiddish will forever be doomed to be an outsider, his work considered neither Israeli nor foreign literature. Although Bruckstein rationally understood this in advance, he had in his heart some hopes of breaking through. He continued to write and publish his works in Romanian, Hungarian and Yiddish in the local (and at that time, horribly low standard) foreign language press that appeared in Israel, then published and, surprisingly, also sold a series of books in Romanian, at Panopticum Press in Tel Aviv.

Since his arrival in Israel, in 1972, Ludovic Bruckstein and Elie Wiesel corresponded and met from time to time, and sent each other books they published. The chance meeting at the Wall in Jerusalem should have certainly not surprised Elie at all. He knew all too well that Bruckstein came from a very prominent Hassidic family, that Leibi was never an "atheistic Communist", but rather a communist of a special kind, who did not see any conflict between Marxist ideals and Jewish traditions and beliefs, for which he had a deep love and of which he had a thorough knowledge. Leibi enjoyed visiting Jerusalem, and the visits to the ancient Temple Wall always moved him deeply... and, at the time of their meeting, Leibi was not ill at all.

Over the years, several of Bruckstein's books were translated and published in Hebrew too, by the prestigious Sifriat Poalim and Eked Publishing houses, and these books were as warmly received by the Israeli literary circles as the writings of a local, but foreign language writer could be. Recently, the noted Israeli writer Yotam Reuveni, undertook the job of translating all of Bruckstein's works into Hebrew, and publishing a series of four books collecting his writings at Nimrod Press, in Tel Aviv.

ELIE WIESEL

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TO THE SEA
Memoirs

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