

Culture Report

Literature Film Dance Art Food



TEL AVIV once had a bustling literary café scene – poets and writers such as Shaul Tchernichovsky, Rachel (Bluwstein), Hayim Nahman Bialik and A.D. Gordon frequently drew crowds who came to listen to their dreams of a better world. These men and women of letters played an important role in creating the vision of the modern state of Israel, and it's not surprising that their names are honored with street names in every major Israeli city.

In our current TV and Internet age, however,

public literary events are few and far between and it's been a long time since a street was named after a poet. But on a Saturday night in late September at a book-lined café in south Tel Aviv, the clock seemed to have been turned back to an earlier era as a large crowd assembled at the Little Prince café to hear some dozen contemporary Israeli poets recite their works.

The occasion was "100,000 Poets for Change," a global event taking place that night in 500 locations around the world.

The name of the event hinted that the participants would address issues of the day, but poets being poets could hardly be expected to conform.

There were humorous poems, such as one about an Israeli enjoying her biggest dilemma in Amsterdam: choosing between ketchup or mayonnaise with her French fries. And there were political readings, including Joanna Chen's translation of an ode by Palestinian poet Nasser Rabah:

A Vietnamese poet in Tel Aviv

Sabine Huynh was born in Saigon, grew up in France and made Israel her home. Her Hebrew-titled French poetry is making waves
By Bernard Dichek

*When bullets speak
who needs an interpreter?*

One of the poets, however, seemed to draw her inspiration from a distinctly different time and place:

*It's hard not to think
of a place...*

*where a father with chapped lips planted
tulips around a dying cherry tree
where a mother's screams scared
dust and kids into dark corners*

*where children watched T.V.
in the garage...*

The reader was Sabine Huynh, 44, who was born in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) during the Vietnam War “when everything, not just cherry trees, seemed like it was dying.”

Huynh has lived in Israel for most of the past 15 years, writing poems, novels and short stories, and in recent years, her works have attracted increasing international attention. She was

In her work, Sabine Huynh draws on her personal history, from her childhood in war-torn Vietnam, to her life as a refugee in France

Literature

the winner of the prestigious 2015 European Calliope literary prize, and “Kvar Lo,” a book of her French poems (with a Hebrew title meaning “No More”) was recently named as one of the winners of France’s Prix CoPo competition. Consequently “Kvar Lo” can be expected to become part of the French literature curriculum in France and other countries.

In Tel Aviv, Huynh reads some of her English poems quietly, yet tries to make every word count. “For me, it’s almost a matter of life and death,” she tells *The Jerusalem Report* when asked why she reads with such intensity.

Huynh and her family left Vietnam for France when she was three and a half. The themes she tackles are often deeply personal and troubling, whether they are drawn from her wartime childhood and coming of age as a refugee in France,

*a flying ant above my head
a white falcon perched on my thumb
if I thought of it there
where it all happened
I’d turn into that
silent child again
and never come back*

or whether she is writing about present-day problems such as the break-up of a relationship:

*You always insisted that the bedroom be
as dark as a coffin*

But, within the tableau of a writer who sees herself as being in exile from both her country and language itself – though she is fluent in many – there are also lots of bright moments shaped by several key turning points, seemingly inconsequential chance events that inspired her writing career.

The first occurred when an uncle gave her a copy of the American Heritage English dictionary. She was six years old, living with her refugee family in Lyon.

“Until then, I spoke only French,” recalls Huynh, noting that the exposure to English she did have came from living in Vietnam with her grandmother who listened to the American army radio station all day.

“I heard many American songs. A lot of them were Elvis Presley songs, including ‘White Christmas,’ which I later found out was a signal to the American troops to leave the country.”

Three years after Huynh’s family settled in France, one of her mother’s sisters who was living in the United States with her American soldier husband came for a visit.

“My uncle gave me the [English] dictionary as a present and I somehow taught myself to read it and used it to teach English to my younger brothers. English, for me, was like being back home again in Vietnam with my

grandmother, who I missed dearly and never saw again.”

As Huynh grew up, she read English books whenever she could and started to write in English.

“English had become a ‘kind of a secret language for me,’” she recalls.

When Huynh was granted a scholarship to study at the University of Lyon, she chose to major in American and English Literature. That led to the next turning point – meeting Allen Ginsberg.

“When I was 15 my mother got divorced and all hell let loose. She literally threw me out on the street. So I was struggling all the time throughout high school and university.

Being a poet is basically being clairvoyant, seeing beyond what everybody else sees and not being afraid of what’s beyond

“Then, one day when a friend and I ran into a bookstore in order to get out of the rain, we saw people waiting in line for Allen Ginsberg to autograph his books. But I had no money. My friend suddenly took a copy of Ginsberg’s *Empty Mirror* from a bookshelf, gave it to me – without paying for it – and pushed me into the line.”

“I am French-Vietnamese,” I said.

He looked at me, and answered, “I am a poet, I am Jewish, I am American, I am gay, I am also Russian, from my mother.”

“I write poetry too,” I said boldly. “Any advice you can give me?”

His eyes narrowed and he told me, “One has to be aware that there is reality and emptiness. There is reality, rich with dreams. You have to be precise, do you hear me?”

In addition to a poem, about 20 years later, Huynh would write an entire book describing Ginsberg’s impact on her life.

“Avec vous ce jour-là – Lettre au poète Allen Ginsberg” (“With You That Day – A Letter to Poet Allen Ginsberg” 2014) was well received by critics who described it as “a pilgrimage of the heart” and “a fine example of what the act of reading [and writ-

ing] can bring to a troubled life.”

By the time Ginsberg met Huynh in 1993, he had become one of the most celebrated poets of his day. But he achieved that standing only after many years of struggling with the American literary and political establishment. His book “Howl” was the subject of a highly publicized obscenity trial and banned during part of the 1950s.

“Kaddish,” a raw, honest contemplation of Ginsberg’s distressed mother, was one poem that resonated strongly with Huynh, whose own mother had attempted suicide in her presence.

Mother-daughter relationships figure prominently in many of her poems and novels. One of her novels, “La Mer et l’enfant” (“The Sea and The Child” 2013), is based on a letter that a mother writes to her daughter 30 years after abandoning her.

“When I gave my first public reading of that book, I didn’t recognize it. It sounded so crazy and violent. I was scared by my own book,” says Huynh, noting that the child in the book was left alone on the beach.

But, when the 21-year-old Huynh met Ginsberg, she had not yet imagined how writing would help her grapple with her own turbulent life.

“GINSBERG WAS a very important figure in my life,” says Huynh, explaining that his poetry gave her the confidence she needed to express herself freely. “He let many poets feel that they had the right to break community taboos and say ‘I am as good as anyone else, even better than what the community wants me to believe. I have the right to be happy, to be sad, to be anything.’”

“Being a poet is many things,” continues Huynh, discussing how Ginsberg’s influence ricocheted onto other writers she read. “The French poet Arthur Rimbaud, whom Ginsberg loved talking about, said that being a poet is basically being clairvoyant, seeing beyond what everybody else sees and not being afraid of what’s beyond, even if it means seeing death, maybe even foreseeing your own death.”

The urge to write is so strong, she says, that she continued to do so even when a medical condition caused her to temporarily lose her eyesight. It was an experience that reminded her of what happened to the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. “When Borges became blind at the end of his life, he expressed a feeling of elation. Finally, he said, ‘I have got rid of everything that prevented me from really seeing and I can devote myself to the

essential, to writing and dreaming.”

Huynh is a prolific writer but has not always been able to devote herself to “writing and dreaming.” In addition to translating many English writings into French, she also translates Hebrew poems and novels, including those of Leah Goldberg, Nathan Alterman and Uri Orlev.

When she translated Orlev’s “Poems from Bergen-Belsen” (1944), a collection he wrote at age 13 during his ordeal in the concentration camp, she started out working with the Hebrew version. “But, in order to get the precise meaning, I felt a need to go back to the original Polish manuscript,” she says, explaining that, to do so, meant gaining a working knowledge of Polish, the eighth language that she has written in or translated.

Several of her own poems are about Orlev:

*when the leaves burn
sacred smoke cleanses the air
clouds travel to the children’s bedrooms
bringing them back*

Huynh also translated Orlev’s children’s classic “Granny Knits” (Hebrew version, “Savta Soreget” 2005) into Vietnamese. The book, which describes a grandmother’s fight to gain recognition for her nonconformist children, was the first modern Hebrew book to be translated into Vietnamese and became a bestseller, with all 5,000 copies of the first run quickly sold.

Vietnamese, surprisingly, is a language that did not come easily to Huynh.

“I didn’t remember anything from my childhood and even when I took lessons later on, it always eluded me. Finally, while working on my PhD in linguistics at the Hebrew University, I managed to do it,” says Huynh, who notes that it was more than just language that became repressed from her early childhood.

“When I was living in Jerusalem during the second intifada, every time helicopters flew by, I started sobbing,” recalls Huynh.

*But words have turned into stones in your
dry mouth
Their cruel incoherence suffocates you*

In addition to translating and writing book reviews, Huynh has frequently supported herself through teaching. When she was 19, she left France for the first time to teach French for a year in a girls’ high school located in a rough London neighborhood.

“I was very shy, and because it was a girls’ school I wasn’t ready for the shock I got when I faced the class I was given. Many of

the girls were quite big, some were older than me, some pregnant, others glue sniffers...”

Several years later, at the age of 23, she returned to England to teach, this time as a lector at the University of Leicester. The position was prestigious but not well-paying, so she found herself an inexpensive place to live.

*I taught French in a small fishing place
where they frowned on romantic affairs,
where under-eye bags were as dark as
tattoos,
and cigarette breath warned me ‘the kid
better do well’.
In class John always read the clouds
instead of his book.*

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HUYNH HAS written several nonfiction books about living in Israel. In “En taxi dans Jérusalem” (“In a Taxi in Jerusalem”), Huynh paints a picture of the three-year period (2002-2005) when terrorist bombings were commonplace in the capital.

“It was a horrible time when I was teaching at the Hebrew University and there were days when no students would show up because a bus blew up,” recalls Huynh, who found herself riding to work in taxis. “The taxi drivers liked speaking to me and I found it very easy to connect with them.”

The book is accompanied by photos by French photographer Anne Collongues. Some of the stories originally appeared in the French edition of *The Jerusalem Post*.

Huynh wrote another book “La sirène à la poubelle” (“The Siren in the Trash” 2015) during the 2014 Gaza war, when the frequent rocket attacks forced her, along with her infant daughter, to seek refuge in bomb shelters. The book is based on an online journal she compiled that was later published as an ebook.

“I was appalled by the disinformation that was being put out in the French media,” she says, noting that the French media tended to be very vociferous in its criticism of Israel.

“It took a bit of courage for me to write that book, but I felt a need to show the other side,”

adds Huynh, whose livelihood is largely dependent on contracts with French publishers and journals.

Two of Huynh’s books that have not yet been translated into English are a recently published novel and a major anthology of women’s poetry. She is particularly proud of the latter since it represents a personal initiative aimed at filling a gap in the literary world.

“No one had ever before collected the works of living women poets from around the world writing in French,” she muses, noting that she included selections from six Francophone Israeli poets.

Huynh returned to Vietnam for the first time since leaving about 12 years ago, while doing linguistics research.

“I had an image of the country in my mind as idealized as a postage-stamp illustration. But when I got there, I was horrified to see how my relatives had been treated by the communist regime,” she recalls. Because her aunt and uncle were considered to be pro-American, she discovered that they were sent to “reeducation camps” and not allowed to work in their professions.

Vietnam, however, is not the only place where Huynh has not felt at home. She also has lived in Boston and Ottawa, yet it is in Israel, where she came to live during 2000 to be with her Israeli partner, that she feels most at ease. “Friendships are deeper here,” she says, though she notes that the subject of exile continues to permeate her writings.

As for her poetry and fiction writing, French critics have compared Huynh to Marguerite Duras, the French novelist and screenwriter of the film “Hiroshima Mon Amour” known for her psychological probing, minimalistic style and questioning of what is truth. Duras was also born in Saigon.

Unfortunately, few of Huynh’s poems and books have been translated into English or Hebrew. In the case of her nonfiction books about Israel, this is a pity because her works provide a compelling picture of what life is really like in Israel.

“Her war diary poetry-in-action is the ultimate weapon in fighting the war of disinformation,” observed one reviewer.

It’s time Anglophones and Hebrew speakers also had a chance to share in her contemplations.

*when you really live somewhere
you do not write about it.
So this is for real,
this everlasting arrival.* ■