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'Alexandria of the 1940s Looked Like Tel Aviv of the 1990s'

Four decades after its original, Hebrew publication, 'Alexandrian Summer' is out in English, and its look at that romantic city has captivated readers more open to the 'Mizrahi' experience. A conversation with author Yitzhak Gormezano Goren.

Neta Alexander Sep 17, 2015 3:01 PM



Gormezano Goren. 'There's a vast difference between deprivation and oppression.
Credit: 'Gil Eliahu

Yitzhak Gormezano Goren was born twice. He came into the world in 1941 in Alexandria, the youngest of the Gormezano family's four children. His parents, big fans of Hollywood star Robert Taylor, decided to name their son after him, though they usually called him by the nickname Robby. Ten years later, not long after the family arrived in Israel by ship and was sent to the ma'abara (transit

camp) in Shfaram, Robby Gormezano was reborn as Yitzhak Goren, and went on to find his place within the Israeli melting pot.

Thirty-seven years after his first novel, “Alexandrian Summer,” was published in Hebrew, the book has finally been translated into English, by Yardenne Greenspan, published by New Vessel Press. It has received flattering reviews in New York Magazine and The New Yorker (where it was called “fast, carefree, visceral, and incipiently lubricious”).

The 200-page volume depicting Gormezano Goren childhood in cosmopolitan Alexandria is also garnering renewed attention due to the growing interest among American Jewry to learn more about the culture of the Mizrahim (Jews with origins in North African or Middle Eastern countries). Moreover, in the wake of the book’s success abroad, Am Oved decided to publish a new Hebrew edition of it as well, as the original edition had long ago become a collector’s item.

Now American readers can also come to know the harsh criticism that Gormezano Goren expresses toward the Ashkenazi (Eastern European Jewish) hegemony. Starting in the 1970s – decades before the interest in Mizrahi culture became trendy in Israel and led to, among other things, the literary revolution provoked by *Ars Poetica*, a group of young Mizrahi poets whose works are aimed at reclaiming the Mizrahi voice and cultural heritage, while foregrounding the discrimination against minorities in Israel – Gormezano Goren was writing novels, radio sketches and plays that covered topics ranging from his cosmopolitan Egyptian childhood to his adolescence in an Israel rife with the sabra ethos.

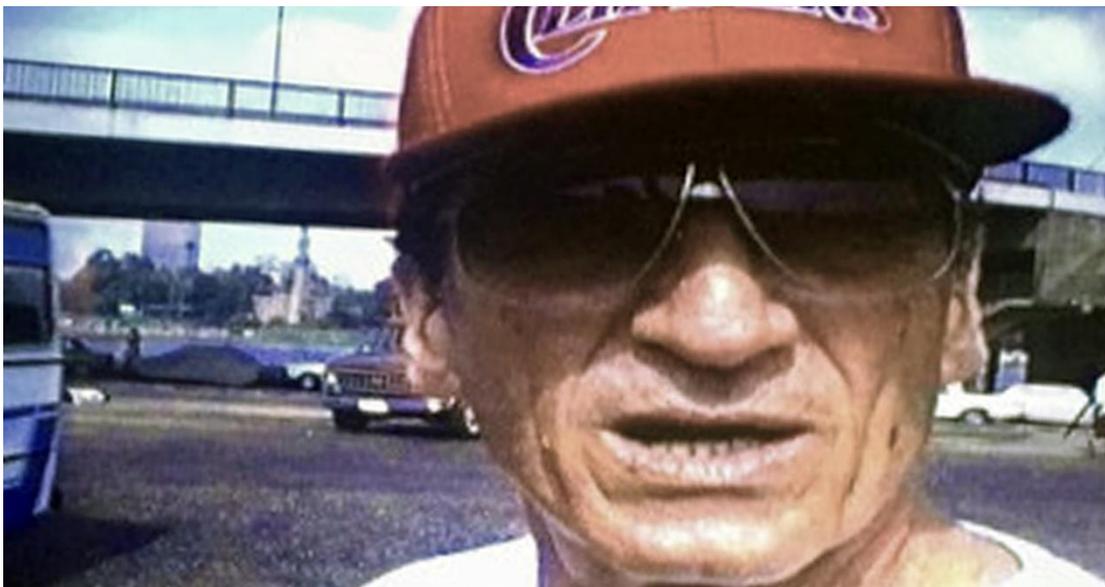
In addition, together with his wife, Shosha Goren, and playwright Rafael Aharon, Gormezano Goren founded the Bimat Kedem Theater (which he ran from its inception in 1982 until his retirement in 2011). He also founded the Bimat Kedem publishing house in 1988 and, in 2000, the literary and cultural journal *Hakivun Mizrah*.

“I come from a family of Spanish descent,” he tells me as we sit in the small living room of his home in Kfar Kish, a moshav in the Lower Galilee (he divides his time between here and an apartment in Tel Aviv); the walls are covered with pictures of his three children and 13 grandchildren.

“My parents were born in Turkey near the Greek border, and in the early 20th century, they immigrated to Alexandria, which was considered the city of boundless possibilities. If you were a foreigner – and not a native-born Arab – it was easy to do well. After she had already had three children, my mother had me when she was 33, which in those days was considered fairly old. I came to Israel with my family in 1951. My brothers and my sister have all passed away now. I’m the lone survivor of the nuclear family.”

In the opening scene of the documentary “66 Was a Good Year for Tourism,” your brother Haim-Victor (father of the film’s director, Amit Goren) visits Alexandria after 40 years of living in Israel and the United States, and introduces himself as an Egyptian. How do you define yourself: Egyptian? Israeli? Both?

“I dedicated the new translation of ‘Alexandrian Summer’ to my brother, who left Israel and lived most of his life in America and always liked to say that he was a ‘citizen of the world.’ But the 13-year gap between us made all the difference. I came to Israel at age 10, and so it was easy for me to integrate into the society. You have to understand that I came from a cosmopolitan city that was a European-American bubble.



Haim (Victor Gormezano) Goren on his trip to Alexandria. Credit: Amit Goren

“I came from the future, and so I was an alien: Alexandria of the ‘40s looked like Tel Aviv of the ‘90s. There was rampant and hedonistic capitalism there. In Egypt, most of the children went to the French or Scottish school, but when I was a kid, I insisted on going to the Jewish school, which was excellent but less snobby. I had four hours a week of Hebrew, but when I got to Israel, about all I knew was the children’s song “Tu, Tu, Tu Bishvat.””

Was immigration a traumatic experience for you?

“No, they put us in the Gilam ma’abara in Shfaram, which was mostly cabins. It was a strange situation: On the one hand, there was no electricity or running water. On the other hand, we managed to turn our hut into a nice place. My father and sister both found white-collar jobs – my father at Ford and my sister at Zim – and we lived on their two salaries. Really, financially speaking, we were much better off than a lot of the people who lived in the housing projects. We were in the ma’abara for four-and-a-half years, and at least twice a month I would go to Haifa to the Bat Galim swimming pool and afterward to a movie.

When we moved, later, into a housing project, our economic situation worsened because we started to pay bills and a mortgage.”

Although the word “ma’abara” has become associated in Israeli discourse with a stormy debate over ethnic discrimination and subjugation, and a disregard for the needs of the immigrants from the Arab countries, the short documentary “Prince of the Transit Camp,” directed by Gormezano Goren in 2002, paints a more complex picture: The film opens with a shot of the pastoral woods that have grown over the site where the Shfaram facility once stood, and it continues with a voice-over describing how the immigrants from Egypt managed to preserve their cultural habits, including ballroom dancing on Fridays and card games – even in the new Israeli environment and in the unbearable heat, without basic infrastructure or electricity.

Following the publication of the English translation of your book, you wrote an article in which you argued that Israeli literature has an obsession with the Holocaust, the Palestinians and the kibbutzim.” Why do you think other kinds of content were so sorely lacking?

“I feel that Israeli literature is very limited. It’s very self-aware and wordy. I can’t read the author [i.e., Amos Oz] who’s considered a perpetual Nobel Prize candidate; his novels are so wearying. When these writers – Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Yehoshua Kenaz, even David Grossman – speak, there’s always this feeling that they’re righteous prophets delivering an address to the world.”

So is “Alexandrian Summer” a reaction to Ashkenazi literature?

“I’d say it offers an alternative to the pompous style that was common in the 1970s. As a young man, I started writing in Hebrew and I wrote about Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. It never occurred to me that I could write about Alexandria. It was only after I went to America to study theater for a few years that I was able to get enough distance from the Israeli bubble and the ethos of the great melting pot and the trend toward dismissing the Diaspora: The Ashkenazim decided to disown their Diaspora, and they disowned mine as well in order to create a monolithic culture. It took me many years to realize there was a value to writing about my childhood in Egypt.”

Capitalistic bubble

As many English-language readers have discovered in recent months, “Alexandrian Summer” is a captivating, rich read that manages to recreate the Alexandria of the 1940s – a combination of sun-drenched Levantine city and hyper-capitalistic bubble, while telling the story of a family of Jewish jockeys from Cairo that spends its summer vacation in Alexandria with the family of the narrator – a 10-year-old boy named Robby. Robby hangs on the stories of the

adults around him, especially Joseph Hamdi-Ali and his son David, well-known horse racers. During the summer, he also begins to discover his own sexuality.

When asked if the novel is autobiographical, Gormezano Goren says, "It's a novel that draws inspiration from my life, but it also uses literary imagination. The character of Joseph, a Muslim who converted [to Judaism], but secretly maintained his Muslim identity for decades, is based on a Turkish patriarch who barely exchanged five words with me."

Although the original Hebrew version of "Alexandrian Summer" earned positive reviews and won Gormezano Goren the 1979 Ramat Gan Prize, he says it's no coincidence the book was almost completely forgotten: "Even though the publisher wrote 'an innovative achievement in the new literature' on the jacket, I felt they were treating it as a novelty book. Almost everyone who wrote a review talked about the exoticism and foreignness of it: Here's something you've never read before. Not because it was another 'Brothers Karamazov,' but because it's a novel that tells a story about barbarians from an Arab country who are essentially almost like us. The first one to discuss the novel's literary value, rather than to analyze it in a folkloristic way, was the poet and translator Amiel Alkalai, who published an essay about it."

But nowadays there's a tremendous awakening regarding Mizrahi culture – from poet Erez Biton being awarded the Israel Prize to the activity of Ars Poetica. Do you feel that your efforts and your decision to found a theater focused on Mizrahi artists and a journal devoted to Mizrahi culture contributed to this?

"I see Ars Poetica as part of a broader movement of the Mizrahi awakening. I remember a highly charged encounter in the '80s in which [social activist] Vicki Shiran, [actor] Yosef Shiloach and I tried to cope with complaints that were hurled at us when we started to talk about the gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim.

"We were called Israel-haters and people said that bringing up the subject of ethnic discrimination created needless divisiveness. Artists and writers like me, or like Sami Michael, born in countries like Egypt or Iraq, were considered to be the 'generation of the wilderness,' and so it was hard for us to integrate in Israeli society. The argument was that when we die, the whole Mizrahi thing would die with us. Ars Poetica is the ultimate proof that our detractors were wrong.

"It's a generational thing too: Between me and Ars Poetica is a 'lost generation' of Mizrahi artists. I'm considered one of the youngest of the generation born in Arab countries, but our children did not continue the rebellion we started. The middle generation basically disappeared, and it's the third generation that's returning to the sources and asking the tough questions. They are insistent that the Mizrahi experience is an Israeli experience. This is an important cultural

current, although the country continues to be caught up in the holy trinity of Holocaust-kibbutzim-Arabs.”

Are you certain that these are still the most prominent themes? Since the '70s, the kibbutzim have gone bankrupt, and the Holocaust is not as big a presence in contemporary literature.

“Still, what interests the average Israeli? The Ashkenazi experience – whether it’s the Holocaust or the kibbutz or Tel Aviv life. After they finished lauding the kibbutz ethic – they eulogize it now, but it’s still the same obsession. It’s true there’s been a real change in the attitude toward Mizrahim, but the average Israeli’s eyes only light up when you’re talking about his personal and collective experience. This isn’t an accusation: It’s a simple fact of life.”

Although Gormezano Goren tends to speak in a thoughtful, deliberate tone – as if dictating and carefully choosing his words – when asked if Israeli society is racist, his body language noticeably changes. “A lot of people say to me, ‘What racism are you talking about? My daughter is married to a Moroccan,’” he raises his voice and fidgets in his chair.

“But we’re not talking about mixed marriages, but about two overlapping and critical problems,” he says. “The first problem is that there is an undeniable correlation between being Mizrahi and living in development towns and in the periphery. There are more impoverished Mizrahim, and more Mizrahim than Ashkenazim in prison. How is it possible that a fourth generation of Mizrahim is in a worse educational situation than the generation of Jews who actually came from the Arab countries? The ‘enlightened’ Land of Israel should have given them the tools for modernity.

“In addition to the socioeconomic gap, throughout the years Mizrahim have also suffered cultural discrimination. Little by little, as they started to write more about their experience – whether it was Biton or Sami Michael or Shimon Balas – the change began to happen. When I started writing ‘Alexandrian Summer,’ I wasn’t aware of the existence of other Mizrahi writers in Hebrew.”



Gormezano Goren's parents at their wedding in 1932. Credit: Courtesy

Genes vs. consciousness

In 1996, you were part of the group that founded the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition.

“Yes, we learned that words have value, and there’s a vast difference between ‘deprivation’ and ‘oppression’: We’re fighting against oppression, we’re not victims of deprivation. The gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim are not a matter of genes, they’re a matter of consciousness. We set out to say that the whole idea of ‘edot hamizrah’ [the Mizrahi ethnic group] is baseless. There’s no connection between Maghreb Jewry and Balkan Jewry. But if you, the Ashkenazim, created the connection, then we’ll adopt it and use it as a weapon. Basically, the Ashkenazim created the Mizrahim, just like Israel created Hamas.”

At the time of our meeting, last month, Gormezano Goren was preparing for a U.S. publicity tour for “Alexandrian Summer,” the central event of which is to take place this Sunday (September 20) at the American Jewish Historical Society in Manhattan. In addition to a talk by the author, the event will include the world premiere of a new documentary on Alexandria directed by Gormezano’s nephew Amit Goren, and a panel discussion featuring Hebrew literature professor Hannan Hever (Yale University) and English professor Joyce Zonana (Borough of Manhattan Community College).

Shirly Bahar, artistic director of the American Jewish Historical Society, says she was inspired to organize the book launch in part because of the growing awareness of Mizrahi culture among American Jews.

Bahar, who two years ago launched a series of screenings of films made by Mizrahi directors, sees the interest in America coming in response to the increased awareness of Mizrahi culture in Israel. Slightly belatedly, there has been an awakening among Jewish social organizations and a desire to remedy the injustice of many years standing of Ashkenazi hegemony in the American Jewish community – a hegemony manifested in the way that the word ‘Jew’ here is really taken to mean an Ashkenazi, and in how Mizrahim here have felt excluded and out of place in the Jewish community”.

One of the reviews of “Alexandrian Summer” called the novel “nostalgic.” Is there a danger that your nostalgic attitude toward your childhood will distort the reality or idealize a complex situation?

Gormezano Goren: “Did anybody go up to James Joyce after ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’ and accuse him of nostalgia? I write with nostalgia about Alexandria because it was an amazing place. A bubble, but an amazing bubble. We were living in a Hollywood movie. Beyond the nostalgia, there is plenty of criticism of Egyptian society and its rampant capitalism. But it all comes from love. This novel is a reaction to how in the Israeli reality two brothers could kill each other because one supported Ein Harod Ihud and the other supported Ein Harod Meuhad [after the kibbutz split in two because of political reasons.]

“As a Sephardi I don’t have this destructive dichotomy that was imported from Europe – ‘Are you with us, or against us?’ I come from a place where you’re both honest and a thief, righteous and evil – it all depends upon the circumstances. That’s why I could say that I’m not writing in a dichotomous manner”.

Still, you chose to remain in Israel and to raise your children and grandchildren here.

“I feel very good in Israel and I wouldn’t trade it for anywhere else in the world. I lived in New York for six years and could have gone on living there if I’d wanted to. I admit I’m very upset about the current right-wing government, but I can differentiate between the ‘Israeli government’ and ‘Israel.’ I don’t feel bound to the ‘stones’ of Israel, but to the Israeliness that was created here, that also includes the Mizrahi-ness that I’ve fought for all these years. Here, these struggles have meaning. And this is an argument that I have with some of my friends, who because of the injustices perpetrated by Zionism, have chosen to continue the struggle from the Diaspora.

“Yes, Zionism has committed injustices against the Palestinians and the Mizrahim, but at the same time, it caused the miracle that we have a country to live in without having to rely upon the kindness of other nations, and with our own troubles rather than ‘hitching a ride’ on – and sometimes being the victims

of – other people’s troubles, as happens in the Diaspora. So I call myself a patriot, but don’t understand the tendency to label patriotism as ‘Zionism’”.

Neta Alexander

Haaretz Contributor

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