

Speaking Volumes: Family histories

Sunday, November 25, 2007

At the beginning of Israeli writer Michal Govrin's new novel "Snapshots" (Riverhead, \$26), the acclaimed architect Ilana Tsuriel is killed in a car accident in Germany in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. Her diary and personal papers reveal that she was carrying on a tormented love affair with Sayyid, a prominent Palestinian theater director, as they collaborated on a peace monument in Israel.

Govrin uses Ilana and Sayyid's romance to explore the tragic history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the elusive quest for peace. Throughout the book, Ilana has an ongoing conversation with her dead father, a Zionist pioneer. Ilana's mother survived the Holocaust, as did Ilana's husband, Alain, a prominent scholar obsessed with tracking down Nazis. The memory of the murder of the European Jews, the survival of Israel and the Palestinian search for identity and statehood permeate the novel. Ilana and Sayyid pull back the layers of history, with atrocities on both sides. As the U.S. military builds up its troops in Saudi Arabia to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, the adulterous affair unravels. Ilana and her children then survive the horror of Iraqi Scud missiles raining down on Israel.

Govrin, 56, is a theater director, poet and novelist. She was born in Israel and educated at Tel Aviv University and the University of Paris. Her novels include "The Name" and "Hold On to the Sun." Govrin, her husband and two daughters split their time between East Brunswick and Jerusalem. Govrin spoke with freelance writer Dylan Foley by telephone from her home in New Jersey.

You spread some of your autobiography and your parents' story among the characters. Why? Part of my assumption with this part of the world (Israel) is we live a private story and a connected story at the same time. Everyone's biography is part of the connected story. There is no way to negate that. By throwing in some of my autobiographical notes, I somehow wanted to create a dangerous zone, where no distance was possible. Once you tell the story of the collective identity, you are implied in that, you are part of it. The father in the novel is not my father, but any Jewish pioneer who would have passed through those events. Sayyid is a theater director, and I took that from my knowledge of being a director and from being the teacher of a whole generation of Palestinian directors. It was the best way for me to explain the Palestinian narrative. Using my own biography was a way to draw the reader in, saying yes, it could have been my biography. In a way, we all have similar or parallel biographies. Through the parents in the novel, you write about the melding of two groups -- the Zionist pioneers and

the Holocaust survivors who formed Israel. Is this part of your family history? That's the story of my parents. Only later did I find out that I had inherited two important chapters of Israeli history. I was the only child of two people who had other families. My father had been divorced and my mother's first husband and child had been killed in the Holocaust. As a child, I didn't know their history. I just felt the tension at home. I ran away through reading. I tried to isolate myself from others. I wanted to be a writer, but I thought, "What could I write about in this boring childhood?" I ran away to Paris and tried to become part of the European culture, but I discovered more of the richness of my parents' life, my father's story, Zionism from the Ukraine, and my mother's story, where she denied her identity as a victim. She chose life after Auschwitz. Through her love of theater, art and literature, she had a tremendous belief in Israel. Why did you choose to frame the long, tragic history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a love affair? Jerusalem is one of the most erotic cities in the world. It has aroused desire since the Hebrew Bible. The relationship between the basic desire of the place to the place is key to the conflict. It has been crucial since the beginning. That is why the relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians has the dimension of an impossible couple. The history of Israel overshadows much of your novel. How do you address this? History is another character in the book, maybe even the plotter in both senses of the word. It's a trap. People can feel that they can break free of it, but they cannot. History forms the boundaries of the story. Part of Sayyid and Ilana's passion comes from the fact that they are trapped by history, and are trying to cross these boundaries to reach each other. They are both aware of the tragic belief that you can step out of history. Or you can believe in love. All of these options are there, but they are like fragile dreams. This is the price for the passionate life.

The Jewish story is a legacy. It's an identity that you inherit, that is imposed on you when you are born. I believe you are born into a story that is written in advance.

You write about Ilana living through the terror of the Scud attacks on Israel with her young children in 1991. Were you there yourself? I lived through it myself. I was in Jerusalem. When one didn't know where the target was going to be, the whole place was a target. As a mother, I decided that I should write a book about mothers in war. This is a new form of war, far from the battlefield, against civilian populations. I was trying to portray sheer fear. It was difficult to write. To feel that your child is in danger is almost unbearable. I should testify to the effect of war on a woman with small children. I do believe that if the presidents of the world were women who were breast-feeding children, body to body with an infant, we would not go to war. How did you wind up in New Jersey? I married a well-known mathematician, Haim Brezis, and he is a

distinguished professor in the math department at Rutgers. In order to be together, we have a home in East Brunswick. My girls and I come to visit him. I love the idea that both Israel and America have such strong histories of im migration.