

“I WAS STRUCK BY THE WHOLE  
ATMOSPHERE OF MONTREUX”

Yuri Leving’s Interview with Nurit Beretzky

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**Y**uri Leving: What did you do in Zurich, in January 1970?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Actually, I was getting married later in England. The marriage happened in England, but I was with my to-be husband here. He fled from the Czech Republic in 1968 and came with a group of students to Israel. His parents let him know that I was in Switzerland at that time, so we reunited there before the marriage in England. I was doing some work for my newspaper in Switzerland. Then my husband had finished his studies there, and we went back to Israel together.

**Yuri Leving:** And you worked for the Israel newspaper *Ma’ariv* at that time already?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Yes, it was *Ma’ariv*.

**Yuri Leving:** Where did this idea of interviewing Nabokov come from?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Well, I knew that Nabokov was living in Switzerland at the time. He was a great writer, so I didn’t have much hesitation.

**Yuri Leving:** Was it an assignment from your editor or your own initiative?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I offered to interview him myself. I think that I wrote to his publisher, I don't remember exactly – it was years ago – but somehow I got his contact information.

And so I went to Montreux and visited him.

**Yuri Leving:** Fascinating. And what of Nabokov did you read by that time?

**Nurit Beretzky:** By that time certainly *Lolita*, but before I read, of course, *Pnin* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. There were already a few books of his translated into Hebrew by the 1970s, but it's hard to remember now exactly.

**Yuri Leving:** Of course, four decades passed since then. So you read it in the original English and in the Hebrew translations?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Yes, in both versions.

**Yuri Leving:** What was the Israeli readers' attitude to Vladimir Nabokov at that time?

**Nurit Beretzky:** *Lolita* became a bestseller in Israel, so even those haven't read his prose, knew who Nabokov was. He was very famous and very much admired.

**Yuri Leving:** Why, in particular, in Israel? After all he was a Russian émigré, living in the United States and Switzerland.

**Nurit Beretzky:** I don't think it was something specific to Israel, but at that time everybody in Israel was reading. Reading was a popular pastime, it was a way of life and people were reading. You'd come to someone's home and you'd see books – people were not just reading, they were discussing new books. You saw people reading in the bars, in the parks, and so on.

**Yuri Leving:** Indeed, it seems as there was a genuine interest in literature and a fertile soil for readership of your conversation with the writer. Did the actual meeting with Nabokov take place as you requested or were the answers delivered in writing?

**Nurit Beretzky:** What happened was that Nabokov told me he wanted the

questions to be sent to him and then for me to come and take these answers as well as to ask more questions if I wished. So this is exactly what happened. I sent him my questions, but he didn't send me back the answers – making an appointment instead. I came to Montreux and the Nabokovs invited me for coffee. We were sitting together – about two hours or something like that. And each answer was discussed at some length. It was the first time in my life that someone like Nabokov asked me to join the conversation: I was still young and didn't know how to take it, you know!

**Yuri Leving:** Why was it so hard to compose questions for Nabokov, as you mention in your preface?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I wrote my questions like a good pupil. And Nabokov was very, very impressive person. And his wife, Véra, was really... I can't tell you: I don't think I've ever seen an elderly lady so beautiful and full of grace.

**Yuri Leving:** In what sense?

**Nurit Beretzky:** She was really something.

**Yuri Leving:** Were you surprised that she was even present during your meeting with the author?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Véra would remark something from time to time, but she didn't say a lot, no.

**Yuri Leving:** What was the way Nabokov behaved – did he laugh, did he tell you stories – memorable moments like these?

**Nurit Beretzky:** It's so far back now and so many things happened since then. But I was struck by the whole atmosphere of Montreux: an old-fashioned, very stylish hotel; elegant people strolling around the town – everything produced a strong impression on me.

**Yuri Leving:** Who translated Nabokov's answers into Hebrew?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I did, of course.

**Yuri Leving:** Were any photos attached to this publication in print?

**Nurit Beretzky:** No. I think that Nabokov's publisher provided us with something.

**Yuri Leving:** What, by the way, was your area of expertise at that time as the young *Ma'ariv* journalist?

**Nurit Beretzky:** Arts and culture; no politics. I was especially interested in literature and life style. The latter was very different then in Israel than nowadays.

**Yuri Leving:** Judging by some of your questions, you seemed to be interested in the feminist issues. Nabokov was probably less keen. Why do you think?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I was young and, I guess, this is what interested me at that time. But I don't want to invent the answers, sorry to disappoint you...

**Yuri Leving:** Have you talked about Israel?

**Nurit Beretzky:** No, but he did answer about the situation in the Middle East in his written responses.

**Yuri Leving:** Is Nabokov still popular in Israel today? Could you describe the level of interest in his writings in this region of the world?

**Nurit Beretzky:** A few years ago they have re-translated *Pnin* [into Hebrew] and there was a huge interest in the novel. Then we had a new translation of *The Luzhin Defense* published recently as well. I am looking at my bookshelf right now: I like his book on *Nikolai Gogol* and his *Strong Opinions*.

**Yuri Leving:** Have you read his last, just recently published novel in fragments, *The Original of Laura*? What is your opinion?

**Nurit Beretzky:** No. Is it worth reading?

**Yuri Leving:** There are pros and cons. Some were disappointed, while others

believe that anything that has been written by a great author is worth being published. Nabokov's son Dmitri made his decision.

**Nurit Beretzky:** Yes, I followed the dilemma and the discussions about the fate of the novel, but I was afraid to read it.

**Yuri Leving:** Do you think that was a right decision to make?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I don't know. [Pause] I don't know.

**Yuri Leving:** If you were to meet with VN (again), what would you ask him today?

**Nurit Beretzky:** I would ask him if he would write the same *Lolita* today. Personally, I don't believe so.

**Yuri Leving:** For sure, our perception of ethics has changed since the 1950s.

**Nurit Beretzky:** Today one sees girls at the age of twelve modeling in provocative dresses. Who needs *Lolita* around anymore!

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