

## GROSSMAN, YEHUDIT ANASTASIA (Ida) (Judith Maro) (1919 - 2011), Jewish patriot and author

**Name:** Yehudit Anastasia Grossman

**Date of birth:** 1919

**Date of death:** 2011

**Spouse:** Leonard Jonah Jones

**Child:** David Jones

**Child:** Peter Jones

**Child:** Naomi Jones

**Parent:** Jeremias Grossman

**Parent:** Roza Grossman

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** Jewish patriot and author

**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing

**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Yehudit Grossman (Judith Maro) was born in the city of Dnipro (Yekaterinoslav during the era of the Tsars or the Dnepropetrovsk of the Soviet era) in eastern Ukraine, on 24 November 1919, daughter to Jeremias Grossman (1884-1964) and his wife Roza (Rosa; 1890-1967). The family fled from the country the following spring, spending time in Lithuania and the United States of America before migrating to Palestine in 1924. In her memoir, *Atgofion Haganah*, published in 1972, Yehudit claimed that the location of her birth was a mystery, questioning whether she had been born on the ship which brought her parents and herself to the country of their forefathers or on the territory of Israel itself, before concluding that it was 'a trivial matter'. This ambivalence, however, was part of a conscious effort to own her Jewish forefathers' land as a Sabra (native) in an autobiographical volume which, at times, brings a strong measure of authorial creativity to its portrayal of her life story.

The family settled in the city of Haifa, on the slopes of Mount Carmel - Kerem-El, 'God's vineyard' - where Yehudit's father worked as Professor of Mathematics at the Technion Institute. In her memoirs, she described the experience of witnessing the murder of Jewish worshippers by Arabs near the Walls of the Old City in Jerusalem - an event which can be dated to 23 August 1929, when she was nine years old, and which she considered to have had a long-lasting effect upon her. Although Haifa was, in comparison, a 'paradise for children', Yehudit found herself in perilous situations within the tension-ridden climate of Palestine under the British Mandate. After her discovery of documents testifying to an intention by the Arabs of the territory to attack Jewish people with the aid of European Fascists and Nazis, she was recruited to the Haganah Zionist military association. When plots evolved into an insurrection (the Arab revolt of 1936-9), whilst she was a pupil at the Reali School in Haifa, she was prepared to serve as a member of the Haganah. She had been trained in the use of arms and Morse code but also, as she later noted, had learned that human life was sacred. She wrote of her sympathy towards the native Arabs of Palestine who, she felt, belonged to the same political tradition as the members of the Haganah, a tradition which respected democracy and did not covet 'national greatness'. In the wake of the militant leadership of the Arab Revolt, however, the Haganah turned to defending the Jewish way of life, keeping watch day and night against threats to the unique Jewish communal agricultural settlements of the Kibbutzim, and making regular repairs to their damaged crops.

Aged sixteen, Yehudit left the Reali, during a period which coincided with the administration of martial law in Palestine, under the leadership of the British government, a law which limited the Jewish right to settle in Palestine. She spent six months in the Upper Galilee area, working at the Kibbutz of Tel-On ('Hill of Strength'), where she learnt how to carry out the explosion of bridges and railway junctions. In May 1936, she began study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem School of Law and in April 1942 she became a member of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the female branch of the British armed forces, from which she was released in May 1946. Since February of the same year she had enrolled on a course in English Literature at Mount Carmel College, Haifa, an institution run by the Army Education Corps. Here she met Leonard (Jonah) Jones (1919-2004), a conscientious objector from Wardley, Tyne and Wear, who had worked with 224 Parachute Field Ambulance in Palestine following service in Europe during the war. As Yehudit and Jones's relationship flourished, animosity was developing between Britain and the Israelis. In *Atgofion Haganah*, Yehudit wrote of joining the Palmach, the commando wing of Haganah, at some point during this busy year and of her contribution to the effort to defeat the British Government Administration and the restrictions which it placed in the paths of Jewish migrants from Europe to Palestine.

It is likely that Yehudit sat her final Law examinations sometime during 1946. On 5 September that year, she married Jones in a secret ceremony, without the official authorization of the army. The couple left for a honeymoon on Cyprus in November. The health of Jones's mother was a cause of concern and, in December, he was called back to Britain on account of her condition. When he returned to the Middle East in early March 1947, he found that the Palestine Mandate Authority (in an effort to control an increasingly complex political situation) had forced the departure of non-essential British citizens from the country. As his wife, Yehudit had been moved to Cairo and, furthermore, included on the army's list of persons to be transferred to Britain within a week's time. The pair avoided this involuntary migration by hiding from the authorities and spending a second honeymoon visiting some of the sights of Cairo, together with Ismailia on the western bank of the Suez Canal and Great Bitter Lake. After a period apart, during which Yehudit was put up in a large tent at El Ballah on the Egyptian coast alongside married families, Jones was decommissioned and they travelled to Britain aboard *SS. Dunnottar Castle*, landing at Liverpool on 7 June 1947. Representing this period in *Atgofion Haganah*, Yehudit offered an alternative narrative which saw her taking part in the Arab-Israeli Civil War (1947-8).

Through his connection with the wood-engraver **John Petts**, founder of the Caseg Press before the war, and his belief (erroneous, in fact) that he had Welsh roots, living in north Wales had been a dream for Jonah Jones. It was to his family home at Wardley, Tyne and Wear, that he and Yehudit turned on landing in Britain, but they spent a month at the cottage of Petts and his second wife, Kusha, in Cwm Pennant, shortly after their return to Britain. Yehudit referred in several articles to the memorable journey to Wales; her impressions clearly demonstrate how she had been mesmerized by the land, 'a completely new and exciting country' which left her 'as if revived through sorcery'. There was some delay before they were able to move to their own home, Bron-y-Foel, a ruin of a house on the slopes of Moel-y-Gest. Jones toiled to renovate it as

best he could, simultaneously working for John Petts at Caseg Press in nearby Llanystumdwy. Yehudit meanwhile remained at his parents' home in Wardley, where their first son, David, was born in December 1947, before joining Jones at Bron-y-Foel in February 1948. In November 1949, she returned to Israel, taking David with her and spending six months there tutoring immigrants in the Hebrew language. Back in Wales, she lived mostly alone with her young son until December 1950. Her husband was absent, undertaking training in engraving and letter cutting at the former workshop of Eric Gill in Speen, Berkshire, and beginning his career in this field before he was struck down by a serious case of tuberculosis. At that time, Yehudit was able with the assistance of the local member of parliament, **Goronwy Roberts**, to find a more suitable home in a council house at Pentrefelin, between Cricieth and Porthmadog (she named it 'Carmel'); Jones joined her in March 1952, recovered from his illness and ready to resume his career as a sculptor. The family remained there until the summer of 1955, when they moved to Plas Afon, a substantial house in the middle of Pentrefelin, which they were able to buy through a generous loan from Sir Bertram Clough Williams-Ellis (1883-1978), who took repayments in the form of art works by Jones for the Italianate village of Portmeirion. During 1965-6, Jones and his workers built a home for the family on the site of the old cottage of Tyddyn Heulyn on the banks of the river Dwyrdd at Minffordd.

Yehudit was attracted by the correspondence between place names in Wales and names familiar to her as a native of Palestine - 'Nasareth, Nebo, Cesarea, Soar, Hebron, Rehoboth, Salem', she listed in an article in *Planet* magazine in 1974. When this article was republished in the collection *Hen Wlad Newydd* later that year, the analogy was to be seen in the striking cover image, based on work by Jonah Jones, where maps of Wales and Israel are placed side by side, with the Hebrew names visible in both locations. If borrowed names were an obvious point of contact between the two countries, the native names and the language which sustained them could have been a cause for alienation, but this did not happen. Although Yehudit expressed regret that she had not managed to master the Welsh language, her support for it was steadfast. She insisted that her children, of whom there were three by the Pentrefelin period (the second Peter (Pedr), was born in 1952, and a daughter, Naomi, in 1955), learnt Welsh like native speakers - they could play, argue, and curse in the language, she boasted - and she offered leadership to the local village community in extending their use of Welsh to new domains. This perseverance was deeply rooted. It was she who, as a young girl, insisted on speaking Hebrew, the native language of the Jewish people of Palestine, with her mother, she claimed, enforcing upon her a change of language from Russian. 'It was an instinctive act', she said, but it could be compared with the deliberate effort of a hero of hers, the lexicographer Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), to establish Hebrew as the language of his people: he decided one day 'never to utter a single word that was not Hebrew'. Ben-Yehuda earnestly believed in the power of Hebrew to ensure the renewal of the Jewish race, a people who had lost their language upon being scattered to the four corners of the earth.

Now known under the name Judith Maro, Yehudit contributed extensively to the debate about the future of the Welsh language and of the Welsh nation, through essays published in various journals (including *Llais Llyfrau*, *Planet*, *Tafod y Ddraig*, *Taliesin*, and *Barn*), and as a broadcaster (for example to the BBC Home Service). She used the experience of being raised in Palestine and of her youth there to stimulate change in Wales. At times, the nationalist establishment, led by Plaid Cymru and its president, **Gwynfor Evans**, was uncomfortable with this association, especially in the wake of Israel's oppressive policy towards the Palestinian territories following the war of 5-10 June 1967. When Maro was challenged on the question of the correspondence which she asserted existed between Wales and Israel in an interview with Ned Thomas for *Planet* in 1976, she defended Israel's actions in the 'tragedy' then evolving in the Middle East. At the same time, she again presented the concept of interesting parallels between territorial and linguistic renewal in both Wales and Israel. Through this lens, there is no doubt that Maro made a pioneering contribution to the debate on Welsh nationalism. She challenged the belief common among Welsh parents that Welsh would 'hold a child back', noting that she never heard such a notion expressed in the context of the Hebrew language; she complained about the lack of proper opportunities to promote language learning among non-Welsh speakers in Wales; she spoke in favour of prioritizing the language within a Welsh 'ghetto'; she noted the real threat to rural Wales from the sale of property as holiday homes; and she mentioned her distress that the 'same sense of urgency' towards saving the language among the Welsh did not mirror that among her own compatriots and the protection of Hebrew. To underline her commitment to the language, she insisted that her essays and novels be translated into Welsh prior to publication, and it was only later that English versions of many of them were published. *Y Porth nid â'n Anghof* (1974), a novel based on the years leading to Israeli independence, appeared the following year under the title *The Remembered Gate*; and her last novel, *Y Carlwm* (1986), a detective story, as *The Stoat* in 2009. As a supporter of Plaid Cymru (although she never became a member), she contributed political and cultural essays to the party's English-language paper, *The Welsh Nationalist/Welsh Nation*.

Maro's movements during the next years were led by her husband's activities. Between October 1974 and December 1978, Jones worked as director of the Dublin National College of Art and Design. Maro joined him there in the spring of 1975, enjoying alongside him the experiences of the cultural and social life of the city, although she also spent extended periods back at the family home in Wales, Tyddyn Heulyn, throughout this period. The pair returned to Wales at the end of 1978; spent a year at Newcastle (where Jones had been appointed resident artist at the University) in 1980-1; and a further year at Gregynog in 1981-2 (after his appointment as Gregynog Fellow). It was Jones's health, together with rough weather and its effect on Tyddyn Heulyn, which led them to leave north Wales at the end of February 1991, making their home in Llandaf, Cardiff. After the death of Jonah Jones on 29 November 2004, Maro moved closer to her daughter, Naomi, in Swansea, and her elder son, David, at Langland near Mumbles. She died at Brynfield Manor care home, Langland, on 16 November 2011. She had followed her husband into the Catholic faith, and her funeral service was held at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church, Mumbles, on 1 December.

## Author

**Ffion Mair Jones**

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## Further reading

Jasmine Donahaye, 'Jewish writing in Wales' (unpublished Swansea University PhD thesis, 2004)

Tourist Israel: **What is a Kibbutz?**

Wikipedia Article: **Hebrew Reali School**

Wikipedia Article: **Jonah Jones (sculptor)**

Wikipedia Article: **Judith Maro**

## Images

Geoff Charles, *Judith Maro after publishing her memoirs "Atgofion Hagana"*

## Works

Judith Maro, Mair Closs Roberts (ed.), *Y porth nid Ȃt'n angof: Nofel* (Lerpwl 1975)

Judith Maro, *The Remembered Gate* (Swansea 1975)

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