



Barbara Baer

INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA BAER

Writer and Small Press Publisher

Barbara Baer attended Stanford University, graduating with a BA and MA. She has taught in India, USSR, and Denison University in Ohio. She considers herself a journalist, essayist, fiction writer, and small press publisher. She has lived in Sonoma County for the past thirty years, and has a new novella, "Grisha" soon to be released from Ghost Road Press. Her most recent Floreant Press book is *Pomegranate Roads: A Soviet Botanist's Exile from Eden* (Floreantpress.com).

In August of 2006, Barbara Baer, the owner/editor of Floreant Press, came to Cal Poly for the annual Festival of Fruit armed with her newly published book, *Pomegranate Roads: A Soviet Botanist's Exile From Eden* by Dr. Gregory Levin. Barbara wrote in the editor's notes: "Some scholars now believe that Eve pulled down a forbidden pomegranate, not an apple, in the Garden of Eden. (This radical assertion will be repeated in *Pomegranate Roads*; Levin will also assure us that botanically speaking, Paris would have had to award Aphrodite a pomegranate for her beauty because pomegranates but not apples were grown around the Mediterranean)." ¹ Having read the book, I would say that Barbara has channeled not only Levin's concerns and knowledge as a botanist specializing in pomegranates, but contributed to a story of a man who was sadly exiled from his home of forty years, his own "Eden" along the Sumbar River in Turkmenistan, a Central Asian republic formerly part of the U.S.S.R. There, at the Garrigala Turkmen Experimental Agricultural Station, in a strangely verdant and subtropical valley between the desert of Turkmenistan and the mountains of Iran, Levin collected, analyzed, propagated, and created new varieties of pomegranates—over 1,000 varieties of *Punica granatum*. In *Pomegranate Roads*, Levin discusses everything about the pomegranate, from its botany, its mythical/historical elements, and the medicinal properties that today have contributed to its popularity. Levin also records the tumultuous times in the former Soviet Union and recounts his amazing adventures.

Moebius: Because the text you had to compile was supplied by Margaret Hopstein, who translated Dr. Levin's Russian into English, was it hard for you to fully understand the botanist's terminology?

BB: It was almost impenetrable for me, and yet because the botanical language infused the text and was what Levin wanted his readers to understand, I had to deal with it. I relied on some good friends who are botanists themselves to help me interpret the terminology so that I could then transmit theories and practices in English without losing the scientific meaning. Of course, I still wanted to keep the tone and voice of Dr. Levin intact as I wrote. I needed to convey the rhythm of Levin's words, his tone, his voice, his love for this fruit—the pomegranate—through some rather gnarly language.

Moebius: When did your passion for the pomegranate as "both the temptation and a form of commitment and fidelity" happen for you, or did it? Was there a point in the editing of the book that you became conscious of a new connection to the fruit?

BB: Oh yes. I'd loved pomegranates as a child, loved the Greek myth of the six seeds

that Persephone ate as she was being freed from the underworld by her mother Demeter—those six seeds that destined her to return to Hades every fall and bring our winter. My mother, who as an earth mother, let me make a great mess eating the fruit. Many decades later, in 2001, when I heard Gregory Levin speaking on *The World*, the BBC/PRI radio show—when I heard him talking about the pomegranates and how the Garrigala Station was being lost because they hadn't received funding after the breakup of the Soviet Union, my heart simply went out to him and to pomegranates. All told, it took years to locate Dr. Levin, travel to Turkmenistan, fail to meet him there, make contact and finally suggest that he write his pomegranate memoirs. Of course I had to learn about the fruit, which I did over many trips to UC Davis and much reading. In the process, I've almost become an amateur authority. I have over a dozen pomegranate varieties in my orchard that originated in Central Asia, sent by Gregory Levin to Davis. Although I have twice missed meeting Gregory Levin, first in Turkmenistan and then in Turkey at a conference, it's been a great experience, and I feel close to Gregory and his wife, Emma. As the pomegranate flowers come out in spring and the fruits ripen to cracking in the fall, and I sit down with the deep red fruit waiting to be opened, I feel it's the most beautiful thing that has happened to me.

Moebius: Dr. Levin uses history linking Asia, Europe, and Africa together through cultural traditions surrounding the pomegranate. When Dr. Levin weaves the idea of the pomegranate having become a “symbolic archetype” into the text, did you research to affirm Dr. Levin’s theory about the pomegranate and its symbolism to cultures and history? Dr. Levin asserts that “the apple of discord that Paris gave to beautiful Aphrodite on the Islands of the Blest had to have been a pomegranate”²² because there were no apple trees yet in the Middle East. Was that one of the assertions you came to believe, or did you need reaffirmation of other sources to agree with Dr. Levin before keeping these ideas in the text?

BB: I must confess, I did little historical or botanical research. The book was Levin's, and I trusted his knowledge though I know many Soviet scientists were limited in the information they could get and the contacts they could make. Current research might find some glitches, but essentially it's a true story both botanically and personally.

Moebius: I especially enjoyed the chapter “Long Routes,” where Dr. Levin describes his work looking for old pomegranate gardens by traveling on foot, mule, jeep, or bus sometimes on mountains with abandoned roads and boulders strewn across his path. The way his voice is humanly filled with passion and yet so scientific, as a botanist would be, has made the story more compelling to read. For example, when he writes about the wild pomegranates of the Tupolang River Gorge as “populations and not the abandoned, cultivated plants that had reverted to the wild, as some researchers had formerly stated.

Sometimes you arrive at conclusions in science by going a long and hard way to make them.”³ I can feel his exhilaration at the discovery of truly wild pomegranates found in nature, and yet see the formal and disciplined hand of science, too. Did you have any trouble when piecing his writing together in balancing the scientific applications with the human passion of discovery?

BB: Yes. I did quite a lot of editing. Levin wanted to name every Russian scientist who had anything to do with the research he had conducted, but the names and the ideas were too specific, too limited to Russian botany, for me to use them all. Many times he missed a dramatic opportunity that I was dying to bring to a conclusion, but I resisted altering his meaning. Levin has never said to me that he minded my cuts, nor my moving material around.

Moebius: It struck me that some of what Levin writes can be applied to human nature and botany of any kind, maybe even the preservation of plants in general: “If one has to worship anything, life alone deserves being worshipped at every level, especially now, when so many plants and animals are endangered. Every life form has the right to live, but many species are facing extinction. The pomegranate is one of these endangered species,” and his acceptance that “our direct influence has led to the loss of pomegranate plants, while indirect influence has altered the environment that supports the pomegranate,”⁴ in the second to last chapter, must have been a hard chapter for you to edit. Was there anything you would have added to his words, or did you leave the text the way it came to you? Did you try to read the Russian text as well-because I know you can read and speak Russian?

BB: My Russian has pretty much fallen by the wayside, so I relied on the translator who often spoke by phone with Levin, who lives in a suburb of Tel Aviv, Israel, whenever we didn't feel we were certain about meaning. Editing wasn't easy. But, all along I felt that after going deeply inside a section or chapter that I would come up with the right words. I did sometimes feel I was channeling and worked many hours without feeling tired. Levin always said he wasn't a writer, that his own story didn't interest him the way the outside world fascinated him, but I knew that he wanted to express his philosophy of life, exiled from his Eden, torn from all he'd known, including the language he spoke. I know that I could have smoothed the text down. But in the end, I didn't want to lose whatever sound and feel of his voice I was able to find. Often I chose to leave awkwardness-sentences that sounded like translations-rather than substitute more modern English. I hoped the reader would understand.

Notes

1 Levin, Dr. Gregory M. Pomegranate Roads: A Soviet Botanist's Exhile from Eden. Forestville: Floreant Press, 2006.

1. 2 Ibid., 88.
2. 3 Ibid., 118.
3. 4 Ibid., 179.v

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Anne Regan, Winter 2009