

Beata Duncan
by Stephen Duncan

born 3 August 1921 died 23 April 2015

My mother Beata Susanna Duncan, née Rehfisch, (writes her son, the sculptor and poet Stephen Duncan) who has recently died from a stroke at the age of 93, was a much loved poet and performer of her poetry.

Beata was born in Berlin to a distinguished and creative family: her father Hans Rehfisch, described as 'the most successful playwright of the Weimar period'; her mother Lilli Dora Rehfisch, an early Adlerian psychoanalyst; her uncle the air-ace Paul Stadthagen; her grandfather the pioneer urologist Eugen Rehfisch; her great-uncle the noted Social Democrat MP Arthur Stadthagen. Beata remembers as a girl lively family dinner parties with Bertold Brecht and Erwin Piscator.

In 1934 Beata and her older brother Tom emigrated as refugees to England, at first to the famous Bunce Court School and then to settle in Belsize Park in north London. Her mother Lilli, uncle Paul, aunt Toni and cousin Eva-Marie remained in Germany, eventually to be murdered by the Nazi regime, a loss that was to deeply affect both Beata and Tom.

Beata, while studying and working in London throughout the War, witnessed and survived the Blitz. She gained a History degree from Birkbeck, University of London, and it was at Birkbeck that she first met my father Adrian, who was to become a psychology lecturer after the war, only to die, in my early years, at the age of 37. With little support Beata raised me as a 'single parent' family on a succession of part-time occupations, including school and college librarian, researcher for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, tutor and editor.

But it was her love and enthusiasm for literature and poetry that was her main focus, studying English Literature at University College London, attending poetry events (including one of the last London readings by Dylan Thomas) and pursuing her own literary research into the lives of Virginia Woolf and D H Lawrence. Beata also contributed to many local journals and campaigned assiduously for the preservation of libraries, joining committees for her local library as well as the N W London Osteoporosis Society, while pursuing her research interest in alternative and self-help health remedies.

Writing poetry became the core of her creative life: publications through the decades were by John Rettie's Hearing Eye Press, several of the Arts Council New Poetry Anthologies, many national journals and newspapers, and broadcasts on BBC Radio 4's 'Poetry Please'. Her poems were competition winners (including the National Poetry Competition), featured on poetry.pf and set to music by the composer Richard Arnell. Beata had spotted early on the lack of critical response for poets (before the flowering of university creative writing courses) and pioneered a succession of poetry workshops in London, the last finding a home at the Mary Ward Centre whose members have included several of the most successful poets working today.

Beata developed a distinctive style of public reading at libraries, pubs, bookshops and theatres, the South Bank and Poetry Society, and numerous events at the Torriano Centre. Sharing platforms with Hugo Williams, Alan Brownjohn and Margaret Drabble, she became a popular performer in north London. Her poetry of life in NW3, her growing family and memories of her childhood in Berlin were balanced with a shy but witty delivery. Her spoken English sharpened still with a hint of German every poem had a subtle depth and humour, despite the modesty of her presentation. In the last years of her long life one saw an elderly lady, supported by a walking stick, delivering lines with an unexpected edge and surprising subject matter! The poet Hugo Williams described her poetry as having 'a razor-sharp irony and a taste for the surreal counterbalanced by a tender moral sense....from the best and worst of life's experiences.'

Beata is survived by her son Stephen and her adored grandchildren, Robert, Ifor and Gabriella.