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**CHAVA ROSENFARB: THE YIDDISH WOMAN WRITER
IN THE POST-HOLOCAUST WORLD**

Chava Rosenfarb is the last of the great Yiddish-language novelists. That statement is bald, but it is the truth, a truth that is closely bound up with the vagaries of Jewish history in the twentieth century, especially the tragic history of East European Jews. Now over 80 years old, Chava Rosenfarb has spent a lifetime writing in a language with an ever-diminishing readership. She is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, despite having lived in Canada for over 50 years, winning numerous prizes for her fiction, and producing an impressive body of work in all literary forms – poetry, drama, essays, stories, and novels. What follows, then, is an introduction to the writer and her work.

When she arrived in Canada at the age of 27, Chava Rosenfarb was already the author of an important collection of poetry and was being hailed as the leader of the next generation of Yiddish writers.¹ Newly married and pregnant (as she would say later, pregnant both physically and artistically), she was welcomed at the Montreal train station on a cold February afternoon in 1950 by one of the city's most prominent Yiddish writers, Melech Ravitch.

Montreal in the 1950s was a haven for Yiddish culture. Beginning in the early decades of the century, the city had been home to a vibrant community of Yiddish poets, novelists, scholars, and journalists, some of whom, like J. J. Segal, Melech Ravitch, and Rachel Korn, who arrived two years before Rosenfarb, enjoyed worldwide reputations. It was the ideal place for a young

Yiddish writer, newly arrived from Europe, to put down roots and flourish. In fact, a major reason for Rosenfarb's coming to Montreal had been the sponsorship of her Canadian publisher, Harry Hershman. And Chava Rosenfarb did flourish in Montreal, for as long as there were Yiddish readers in the world who could read her works, all of which – with the exception of that first collection of poetry – were written in Canada. Rosenfarb soon established herself as one of the major writers in the Yiddish language.

What made her unique among her generation of writers was not simply her literary talent, but her subject matter. She was a survivor of the Holocaust who had experienced first-hand the horrors of the Nazis' war against the Jews. For four years she had endured the starvation and brutality of incarceration in the Lodz ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated, she was deported to Auschwitz, then to Sasel, and finally to Bergen Belsen. Given her experiences, it is not surprising that Rosenfarb's prodigious output of poetry, novels, short stories, plays, and essays all deal with the Holocaust in one way or another. She began as a poet, publishing her first collection of poetry, *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (*The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest*) in London in 1947. This was followed by a book-length poem about her father, *Dos lid fun dem yidishn kelner Abram* (*The Song of the Jewish Waiter Abram*), and the poetry collections *Geto un andere lider* (*Ghetto and Other Poems*) and *Aroys fun gan-eydn* (*Out of Paradise*). Her play *Der foigl fun geto* (*The Bird of the Ghetto*), about the martyrdom of the Vilna partisan leader Isaac Wittenberg, was translated into Hebrew and performed by Habimah, Israel's National Theatre, in 1966.

Unlike most other writers on the Holocaust in Yiddish, Rosenfarb did not write memoirs or autobiography. Instead, she transmuted her experiences into fiction, producing three multi-volume novels, *The Tree of Life*, *Bociany*, and *Letters to Abrasha*, all of which deal with the Holocaust either directly or indirectly. She is, in fact, one of the few Yiddish fiction-writers on this topic who is herself a survivor of the camps. Unlike Sholem Asch, Rachel Korn, or I. B. Singer, all of whom wrote stories about the Holocaust without having any personal experi-

ence of the events they described, Rosenfarb had been at the centre of the maelstrom. It was a topic that she could not get out of her system.

Chava Rosenfarb was born on 9 February 1923 in Lodz, Poland, the elder of two daughters of Abraham Rosenfarb, a restaurant waiter, and his wife Sima.² Her parents belonged to the Jewish Socialist Bund and sent her to a Yiddish secular school for her primary schooling. Both the left-leaning inclinations of her parents and her grounding in Yiddish secular studies had an enormous influence on Rosenfarb's intellectual development. But her schooling was cut short by the war. By the time she was ready to graduate high school, Rosenfarb and her family had been incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto, and it was in the ghetto in 1941 that she received her high school diploma. That marked the end of her formal education.

In the ghetto she began to write poetry, waking up at dawn from her bed of chairs to compose her poems in book-keeping registers in the hours before going to work at her various ghetto jobs. Despite her modest appraisal of herself as "just a girl who wrote poems,"³ Rosenfarb's talent brought her to the attention of Simcha-Bunim Shayevitch, the great ghetto poet and author of the epic poem "Lekh Lekho." She became Shayevitch's protégée and it was he who introduced her to the writers group of the Lodz ghetto, who quickly recognized her talent and accepted her, at age 17, as their youngest member.

When it became clear that the Lodz ghetto was to be liquidated in August of 1944, Rosenfarb and her family, as well as Shayevitch and the family of Henech Morgentaler, the man who would become her husband, all hid in an alcove behind a false door in the Rosenfarbs' apartment.⁴ They were discovered by the Nazis a few days later, on 23 August, and deported to Auschwitz. At Auschwitz the knapsack containing Rosenfarb's poems was taken away. Rosenfarb, her mother, and sister survived the selection and were sent from Auschwitz to a labour camp at Sasel, where they were put to work building houses for the bombed out Germans of Hamburg. There she begged one of her German overseers for some implement to write with. He

gave her a pencil stub and with this she recorded on the ceiling above the uppermost bunk on which she slept the texts of those poems that had been taken away from her. She then memorized the poems and later included them in *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald*, the first volume of poetry that she published.

From Sasel, Rosenfarb, her mother, and sister were sent to Bergen Belsen. There Rosenfarb contracted typhus and on the very day when the British army liberated the camp in 1945, she was lying near death. The British transported her to a makeshift hospital outside the camp, where she slowly recovered. Once she regained her strength, Rosenfarb and her sister traveled the German countryside seeking news of their father, whom they had last seen at the train station in Auschwitz. After weeks of fruitless searching, Rosenfarb learned that her father had died in the last transport out of Dachau, when the train on which he and other inmates had been riding was bombed by the Americans. In 1945, Rosenfarb, her mother, and sister crossed the border illegally into Belgium, where she lived as a Displaced Person until her marriage and immigration to Canada in 1950.

Finding that neither poetry nor drama could begin to express the depths of her feelings about the Holocaust, Rosenfarb turned to fiction. In 1972, she published in Yiddish *Der boim fun lebn* (*The Tree of Life*). This monumental three-volume epic chronicles the destruction of the Jewish community of Lodz during the Second World War.

The Tree of Life follows the fates of ten Jewish inhabitants of Lodz who live through the terrible events of the years 1939-44, that is, from before the beginning of the war, when life was still “normal,” until the liquidation of the ghetto in August and September 1944. The 10 characters include Samuel Zuckerman, a factory owner before the war, and Itche Mayer, a carpenter with four sons, each of whom belongs to a different political party. There is also the doctor, Michael Levine, who corresponds compulsively with a woman he loved in Paris before the war, but never sends the letters; Rachel Eibushitz, a politically committed high school student and her boyfriend David, a diarist; Adam Rosenberg, a pre-war industrialist and

Kripo (German criminal police) spy; Miss Diamond, a high school teacher and Polish patriot; and Esther, a great beauty and ardent communist, who is active in the ghetto underground and whose wish to have a baby in the ghetto seals her fate.

Because these ten characters come from all walks of life, the novel recreates, in all its complexity and particularity, an entire Jewish ghetto community – and then unflinchingly chronicles that community's destruction. The novel describes in detail everyday life in the ghetto workshops and food distribution centres. It describes the gatherings of the ghetto intelligentsia and of the various political parties – the Zionists, Communists, and Bundists. And it does not shy away from describing the activities of the ghetto spies and informers.

While most of Rosenfarb's characters are fictitious, some are based on actual people, like the poet Shayevitch, who appears here under the name of Berkovitch. Rachel Eibushitz is clearly a portrait of the author as a young woman, while Rachel's boyfriend David is modeled on Henech Morgentaler. The most important historical portrait is that of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the "eldest" of the Jews in the Lodz ghetto. Rosenfarb describes the ironic road that Rumkowski traveled from being the founder and director of an orphanage before the war, to being the puppet leader of the ghetto, put in place by the Nazis, who – in one of the novel's most chilling accounts of a historical event – demands that the mothers of the ghetto willingly give up their children to the Nazis for the good of the collective.

The Yiddish press immediately hailed the publication of *The Tree of Life*, repeatedly emphasizing its unique place in the literature of the Holocaust. In unanimously awarding Rosenfarb Israel's highest honour for Yiddish Literature, the Manger Prize, for 1979, the jury concurred: "[*The Tree of Life*] is a work that rises to the heights of the great creations in world literature and towers powerfully over the Jewish literature of the Holocaust, the literature which deals with the annihilation of European Jewry, in particular Polish Jewry."

Rosenfarb followed *The Tree of Life* with the novel *Bociany* in 1982, named after an imaginary Polish village.

Bociany, based loosely on the lives of Rosenfarb's parents, follows the intertwined fates of a young boy and girl from the shtetl of Bociany who meet again as young adults in the city of Lodz, where they marry. *Bociany* was translated into English by the author herself and published in two volumes as *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*. The translations won for Rosenfarb the John Glassco Prize of the Literary Translation Association of Canada in September 2000. While these novels do not deal directly with the Holocaust, they actually constitute a prequel to *The Tree of Life*, giving the early history of some of the characters who appear in that novel. The Holocaust hangs like an unspoken presence over the lives of the Jews described in *Bociany*.

Rosenfarb always had been reluctant to write about the horrors of the concentration camp in her fiction. She purposely ended *The Tree of Life* at the point where her characters were deported from the ghetto. This was her way of saying that she could describe their fates no further. The last few pages of *The Tree of Life* are thus purposely left blank, to imply that the horror was too great to be put into words. It was not until 1992 that Rosenfarb finally felt herself capable of attempting a description of the camps in her as-yet untranslated novel *Briv tsu Abrashen (Letters to Abrasha)*. The story is told through a series of letters penned after the war by Miriam, a Holocaust survivor, to a man recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium in Germany, who Miriam mistakenly believes to be her former teacher and friend Abrasha. Miriam recounts the events of her incarceration in Auschwitz, Sasel, and Bergen Belsen where she was liberated. Some of these descriptions make for harrowing reading, especially the scene in which Miriam loses her mother during the selection at Auschwitz. *Briv tsu Abrashen* is in many ways Rosenfarb's most powerful novel, although its unflinching descriptions of the death camps and their horrors make it an emotionally wrenching book to read.

All of Rosenfarb's novels are conceived on a grand scale and fall within the tradition of European realism. She is a writer who likes to take her time setting the scene and she is particularly interested in the way in which the psychological makeup

of her characters changes over time. Her interest in the incremental effects of time on personality may account for the fact that her novels tend to be long. The narrative voice in Rosenfarb's fiction tends to be third person omniscient. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule, for instance, in *Letter to Abrasha*, where much of the narration takes place through letters. One of Rosenfarb's most powerful short stories, "Edgia's Revenge," is also written from the first person perspective of an ex-kapo.

Rosenfarb also tends to stay away from surrealistic effects and all forms of magic realism. However, her origins as a poet can be seen in her use of symbolism. So while her literary style is strongly realistic, she does occasionally include characters in her fiction whose function in the narrative is primarily symbolic. One such is the Toffee Vendor in *The Tree of Life*. This character sells candy that he makes himself from the ghetto rations of sugar honey, but what he really is selling is hope. The Toffee Vendor is the only character in *The Tree of Life* whose function is clearly symbolic and who is given no psychological dimension. However, he is not a major character and his occasional appearances seem intended both to lighten and underline the grim reality of the rest of the novel.

In all her novels, Rosenfarb remains true to the tradition of Yiddish writers in Canada in harking back to her European roots. Her novels are thus European works by an essentially European writer, who just happens to be living in North America. But in her short stories, published primarily in the 1980s in the Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), Rosenfarb began to explore the effect of their migration to Canada on the lives of Holocaust survivors. In these stories, she attempts a synthesis between her primary theme of the Holocaust and the Canadian milieu in which she finds herself, so that Canada becomes, as I have argued elsewhere, the land of the postscript, the country in which the survivors of the Holocaust play out the tragedy's last act.⁵

One of these stories, "The Greenhorn," about a newly arrived Holocaust survivor working his first day at a Montreal

sweatshop was translated by Miriam Waddington for her 1990 anthology *Canadian Jewish Short Stories* and has since been republished in *Not Quite Mainstream*, edited by Norman Ravvin.⁶ Another story, “Edgia’s Revenge,” appeared in English in *Found Treasures*, an anthology of stories by Yiddish women writers.⁷ In “Edgia’s Revenge,” a tangled love-hate relationship between two women Holocaust survivors, which began when one woman saved the life of the other during a selection in the camps, plays itself out against the backdrop of contemporary Montreal. All of these stories appear in a single volume entitled *Survivors: Seven Short Stories* published by Cormorant Books of Toronto.⁸

Rosenfarb’s stories exist within a symbolic framework that addresses the relationship between Europe and North America. But the stories suggest that a synthesis of the Old World with the New is impossible, because the Old World incorporates the stain of the Holocaust, which the New World is incapable of washing away. For instance, in the story “Last Love,” an elderly Jewish woman’s dying wish is to make love to a handsome young Frenchman. All the characters in this story are European. Amalia, the heroine, is the representative of all those survivors who found refuge in Canada after the ravages of the war. She has settled in Montreal with her sculptor husband, and both husband and wife grow old on Canadian soil. But when Amalia learns that she has only a short time left to live, she begs her husband to take her back to Paris, the city where the couple had first met after the war. Once there, she announces that her dying wish is to make love to a young man. It is as if she hopes to incorporate within herself a more innocent Europe, cleansed of atrocities and pain. Amalia herself represents the dying order of an Old World corrupted as much by the presence of its victims as by that of its aggressors. After much hesitation, her husband dutifully finds an idealistic young Frenchman who overcomes his initial reluctance and grants Amalia her last wish for a last love.

But his experience with Amalia destroys the young man. He becomes restless, infected by a malaise he cannot

understand. In possessing Amalia, the young Frenchman has become possessed by her. Although he had been about to get married, he leaves his fiancée in France, and goes adventuring in Canada, driving across the country to the Canadian Rockies. There he plunges his car off a cliff, seeing in the towering mountains the beckoning form of the old lady to whom he had once made love. The story's conclusion suggests the impossibility of Amalia's longed-for purification. The young European can find in the pristine Canadian landscape only seductive reflections of the dying face of the old Jewish woman for whom he was – and who was for him – a last love. The future has become a sacrifice to the past.

Canada in these stories does not wipe out Europe – not even symbolically. It cannot nullify the European past. Instead, Canada plays the role of the spam in the sandwich. It is bland neutral territory, which is nevertheless deadly, because its unflavoured ahistorical terrain, like a *tabula rasa*, permits the intrusion of a corroding European reality. Rosenfarb's depiction of Canada in these stories thus calls into question any easy dichotomies that defined the innocence and naivete of America in opposition to the world-weariness and corruption of Europe. Here Canada is the neutral land of refuge, which, like blank paper patiently permits the survivors to impose their past on its present.

Rosenfarb's survivors are those for whom the present, not the past, is a foreign country. They are haunted by their Holocaust experiences, but haunted in all the diverse and individual ways that make one human being different from another. Her survivors are too complex to be labeled as the walking wounded, yet they are people who can never again live happily ever after – not in North America, not in Europe.

As long as the number of Yiddish readers worldwide remained relatively strong, the reception for Rosenfarb's work was extremely favourable. In particular *The Tree of Life* was hailed everywhere as a masterpiece, and earned Rosenfarb prizes and kudos in lands as diverse as Argentina, Mexico, and Australia, to say nothing of the United States, Canada, and Israel.⁹ But with the slow demise of a Yiddish readership, the

imperative to publish in translation grew stronger. And this proved much more difficult. Respected and lauded as she was among the international community of Yiddish readers and writers, in Canada, Rosenfarb's work hardly was known. Furthermore, Canadian publishers were reluctant to take a chance on a writer who was virtually unknown to English-language readers and whose novels were all conceived as two- and three-volume epics. For instance, despite glowing readers' reports and his own fervent admiration, Jack McClelland of McClelland and Stewart decided against publishing the English translation of *The Tree of Life* for financial reasons.

The result was that with the exception of the occasional poem or story published in translation in a literary journal, Rosenfarb's work was not available in English until 2000.¹⁰ In that year, Syracuse University Press, under the directorship of Robert Mandel undertook to publish *Bociany* as two separate novels – *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*. Interest in Rosenfarb's work got another boost thanks to a two-part documentary hosted by the journalist Elaine Kalman Naves for the CBC radio program *Ideas*. The program, which first aired in November 2000, has since been rebroadcast twice.¹¹

Last year, 2004, saw the reissue in three separate volumes of the English-language edition of *The Tree of Life* by University of Wisconsin Press. Of all Rosenfarb's novels *The Tree of Life* has gone through the most changes in making its way from Yiddish into English. Originally published in three separate volumes in Yiddish, it was then translated into Hebrew and published under the title *Ets Hakhayim* in 1978.¹² The Hebrew version kept Rosenfarb's original division into three volumes. But the English-language edition of the novel, published in Australia in 1985, combined all three volumes into one. It also eliminated the lengthy and highly lyrical introductory chapter with which the Yiddish version began.¹³ The decision to publish in one volume was clearly a financial one made by the Australian publisher. Rosenfarb had not conceived of the novel as one volume and the resultant problems associated with the large size of the English edition displeased her.

The book was hard to hold in the hand, the print was small and too dense on the page. Her preference always has been for the three volumes to be published separately and this is the case with the new edition issued by University of Wisconsin Press.

Given the problems she has had with publication in English, it is no surprise that Rosenfarb sees her marginalization as being due more to the fact that she writes in Yiddish than to the fact that she is a woman. Although she always has been sympathetic to women's causes, Rosenfarb has considered that the secondary status of women in Yiddish writing was nothing compared to the secondary status of Yiddish in world literature. Nevertheless, she did publish an essay in English on the problems of being a Yiddish woman writer in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*.¹⁴ But it is the fate of the Yiddish writer, female or male, in a world that no longer knows the Yiddish language that affects her most profoundly. She has poignantly expressed the pain of being both a Yiddish writer and a survivor in her lecture "Confessions of a Yiddish Writer":

What affects me most is the continual sense of isolation that I feel as a survivor, an isolation enhanced by my being a Yiddish writer. I feel myself to be an anachronism wandering across a page of history where I don't really belong. If writing is a lonely profession, then the Yiddish writer's loneliness has an additional dimension. Her readership has perished. Her language has gone up in the smoke of the crematoria. She creates in a vacuum, almost without a readership, out of fidelity to a vanished language, as if to prove that Nazism did not succeed in extinguishing that language's last breath, that it still lives. Creativity is a life-affirming activity. Lack of response to creativity and being condemned to write for the desk-drawer is a stifling, destructive experience. Sandwiched between these two states of mind, struggles the spirit of the contemporary Yiddish writer, male or female.¹⁵

Chava Rosenfarb left Montreal for Toronto in 1998. She now lives with her daughter in Lethbridge, Alberta.

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Notes

¹The book was *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (*The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest*), published in 1947 in London by Moishe Oved. It was republished a year later as *Di balade fun nekhtiken vald un andere lider* (*The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest and Other Poems*), in conjunction with *Fragmentn fun a tog-bukh* (*Fragments of a Diary*) (Montreal: H. Hershman, 1948).

²Portions of the following have appeared in somewhat altered form in my entry on Chava Rosenfarb in S. Lillian Kremer, ed., *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2003) 286-89.

³The self-assessment is taken from Rosenfarb's "Confessions of a Yiddish Writer," an unpublished ms.

⁴Henech Morgentaler anglicized his name to Henry when he arrived in Canada and, in later life, led the fight to decriminalize abortion.

⁵See my "Land of the Postscript: Canada and the Post-Holocaust Fiction of Chava Rosenfarb," *Judaism* 49.2 (Spring 2000): 168-83.

⁶"The Greenhorn," trans. Miriam Waddington in Waddington, ed., *Canadian Jewish Short Stories* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990) 111-22. "The Greenhorn," trans. Goldie Morgentaler in Norman Ravvin, ed., *Not Quite Mainstream: Canadian Jewish Short Stories* (Calgary: Red Deer P, 2001) 75-87.

⁷"Edgia's Revenge," trans. Goldie Morgentaler in Frieda Forman, et al., eds., *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story P, 1994) 243-311.

⁸*Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, trans. Goldie Morgentaler (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2004). This collection includes the story "A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend," trans. Goldie Morgentaler, which also appears in Michael Greenstein, ed., *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada: An Anthology* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004) 47-57.

⁹In addition to the Manger Prize and the John Glassco Award for Literary Translation already mentioned in this essay, Rosenfarb's numerous literary awards include the Canadian Y. Y. Segal Prize, which she won twice, as well as the Award of the American Association of Professors of Yiddish in 1998. She also has twice won the New York Prize of the Congress for Jewish Culture, Israel's Sholem Aleichem Prize, and the Argentinean Niger Prize in 1972.

¹⁰One of Rosenfarb's first poems to be published in English was her own translation of "Praise," published by Earle Birney in *Prism International* 5.2 (Autumn 1965): 30-33.

¹¹The CBC program referred to the Australian translation of *The Tree of Life*, which was published in English in Melbourne in 1985. This book had no distribution in North America. It is this text that the University of Wisconsin Press reprinted, with the difference that while the Australian edition compressed all three volumes into one, the new American edition was issued as three separate volumes, which was also the way the Yiddish and Hebrew editions of the novel were published.

¹²*Ets Hakhayim* [*The Tree of Life*], trans. Shloyme Shenhod, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: Syfriot Poalim, 1978). Hebrew translation.

¹³For more on the differences between the English and the Yiddish versions of the novel, see the chapter on Rosenfarb in Norman Ravvin, *A House of Words* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997) 85-101.

¹⁴"Feminism and Yiddish Literature: A Personal Approach," Naomi B. Sokolof, et al., eds., *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992).

¹⁵From "Confessions of a Yiddish Writer," unpublished ms.