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**“THIS WAS THE HUMAN COURSE”: GENDER,
HOLOCAUST SCHOLARSHIP AND THE LITERARY
WORK OF CHAVA ROSENFARB**

In the fraught and complex discipline of Holocaust Studies, new issues and perspectives are still presented and fiercely debated among scholars and writers. One of the more constantly evolving and also controversial of these is the question of gender and the Holocaust, usually more specifically women and the Holocaust. Although as a field it is still in the process of challenging and defining itself, there are several conclusions that are widely accepted in its mainstream. In this paper I will attempt to bring into interaction the primary conclusions of scholarship on women in the Holocaust and women’s Holocaust literature, and the literary output of Yiddish writer Chava Rosenfarb. Rosenfarb, as both a female survivor and a female writer of Holocaust fiction, represents on multiple fronts the very proposed object of such studies. While her Holocaust writing contains many of the events and responses that gender and Holocaust studies academics have concluded were characteristic of women’s experience, I will argue that Rosenfarb’s fiction ultimately challenges these conclusions and calls many of them into question.*

*While I recognize the validity of objections, raised by various scholars, to the term “Holocaust,” I use the term here because it is widely-known and understood, and because it was Rosenfarb’s own preferred term.

I will begin with a concise survey of the gendered approach to Holocaust studies, so as to clarify the scholarly output and conceptions that Rosenfarb's work complicates. Before progressing to a close reading of her literature itself, I will offer a careful exposition of the historical context of Rosenfarb's life and work, drawing some brief conclusions about the situation for women in the interwar and Holocaust-era Polish-Jewish community whose destruction she documents. I will then launch into the fiction with a thematic analysis of her massive trilogy of novels about life, death and survival in the Lodz Ghetto, *The Tree of Life* (Yid. *Der boym fun lebn*). I will progress through a transitional reading of some of her poetry, and conclude with a close examination of several short stories from her late collection *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*. In so doing, I will present the ways in which Rosenfarb challenges theories about the "strategies" of survival, coping, or recovery among women as identified by the traditional scholarship. This divergence is due in large part, I will argue, to three primary causes. First, there are issues in the scholarship itself, including some essentialization of the experiences of women in the Holocaust and excessively differentiating many of those experiences from those of men. Second, there is Rosenfarb's own understanding, as a person and as a writer, of what it was to live through the Holocaust and continue into post-war life. Third, it is important to account for the influence of being a Yiddish writer in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, remaining devoted to expressing herself in that language even in the wake of its cultural destruction and precipitous decline.

Gender and Holocaust Scholarship

Begun in the mid 1970s, Holocaust studies has continued to grow and evolve as a particularly fraught domain of research and investigation. Dominated by historians since its inception, the field has constantly grappled with the meaning and method of its practice. According to Baer and Goldberg, a particular

debate “surfaces at virtually every Holocaust conference”: the tension between historians who seek to uncover “what really happened,” and a variety of scholars of other orientations, both inside and outside the discipline of history, who attempt to craft and apply theoretical frameworks (with scholars of “representation” falling somewhere in between).¹ Intersecting disciplines, like literature, philosophy, religion, and sociology also have had a more difficult time gaining a foothold. In large part, this also limited the introduction of the postmodern, or “linguistic turn” in Holocaust studies, which encourages scholars to understand concepts like memory, language, and history as constructs and representations determined by social and historical context.²

Nevertheless, beginning in the early 1980s feminist academics, primarily interested in German history and culture, began to look into issues of the daily lives of women under the Nazis. By 1983, a two-day conference convened by Holocaust Studies and feminist scholars Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz inaugurated the transformation of what had been classed as simply a minor “intellectual inquiry” into an area of serious scholarly research.³ This early research focused on proving that what had been being studied as a “typical” Holocaust experience by the larger field, and indeed the vast majority of current knowledge about experiences of the Holocaust, were in fact entirely male-centred and showed no awareness of the voices or gender-specific experiences of women.⁴ It also marked the beginning of the persistent and complicated challenges that would mark the progress of this sub-field until the present day, most of which questioned the legitimacy of a gendered approach, or the quality of the conclusions common to that approach.⁵

As it evolved, the study of women and the Holocaust yielded four primary “structural sources of gender differences during the Holocaust,” as identified by Ofer and Weitzman:

- 1) the culturally defined gender roles of Jewish men and women before the war, which endowed the two sexes

with different skills, knowledge, and expertise; (2) the Jews' 'anticipatory reactions' to what they believed the Nazis were going to do to Jewish men (but not to women and children); (3) the differences in the nature and degree of harassment, work requirements, arrests, and regulations that the Nazis imposed on Jewish men and women—even though they were equally destined for death; and (4) the different reactions of Jewish men and women in their everyday lives in the ghettos, the forests, and the camps as they tried to cope with the destruction they were facing.⁶

There tends to be a great deal of consensus within the field as to what these reactions were, what these female-specific realities were, and how they were coped with. These mostly encompass, for the first two: the more advanced housekeeping and family management skills cultivated by the majority of pre-war Jewish women; and the mass exodus of men from German occupied territories, leaving behind a vulnerable female-heavy population that could not, or would not, escape due to the limitations or obligations of family life.⁷

For the latter two, while the general Nazi policy was to treat all Jews as targeted for death, some argued that the *practice* of that policy affected women differently because of their biological and socially-determined identities. Vulnerability to and disruption of phenomena like sexual assault, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, femininity and modesty, marriage, and family responsibility were either exclusively or distinctively experienced by women as a result of the Nazi genocidal activities.⁸ What is most important for the purposes of this study is the conclusions about coping that are commonly deduced from these differences. Given that women had all the above vulnerabilities and yet still constituted a pronounced numerical majority of the Jews in the ghettos and concentration camps, it is frequently concluded that they must have had lower mortality, and therefore have coped better than men in the universe of Nazi atrocity.⁹

One reason for this has been maintained above all the others: it is concluded that women had a tendency to form and maintain strong mutually assistive relationships with other women, whether family members or strangers, that gave life-saving emotional and practical support. Whether keeping families together in the ghettos, refusing to abandon each other in the camps, or creating families of *Lagerschwester*, “camp sisters,” who helped each other escape selections, recover from illness, or conceal pregnancy or childbirth, prominent scholars argue that women bonded together with other women to increase the likelihood of survival and the maintenance of mental stability.¹⁰ Related works of scholarship on women’s Holocaust and post-Holocaust writing generally confirm these same conclusions (while frequently privileging women’s testimonies, memoirs, and autobiographies above their fictional or poetic literary output). While more recent publications have begun to complicate these conclusions,¹¹ as I seek to do, there still remains a strong academic accord that reads women’s post-Holocaust literature as affirming the continuity of women’s wartime coping skills into improved coping in post-war life.¹² Rosenfarb’s work undermines this assertion in particular.

Before continuing to the historical context of Rosenfarb’s Jewish Poland, it is vital that I clarify here the intent of this paper. It is not to in any way “disprove” these conclusions, argue with their historical veracity, or dispute the legitimacy of a gendered approach to Holocaust studies. Rather, it is to offer up evidence that these conclusions may be too simplistic or widely applied, without enough regard for the larger, more complex context (especially the post-Holocaust reality). Rosenfarb’s literary work on the Holocaust, moving as it does from representations of pre-war life, through the ghetto years, and eventually into the lives of the survivors she creates in her short fiction, complicates these conclusions from the closest possible perspective. As a survivor, a writer, a woman, and an educated reader and observer, Rosenfarb is ideally placed to offer up a legitimate alternative to the simpler packaging of these studies.

Historical Background

In the period between the two world wars, the new nation-state of Poland (reconstructed from territory held since the eighteenth century by Germany, Russia, and Austro-Hungary) had the largest Jewish community in non-Communist Europe, both by raw numbers and by percentage of the population. Poland conducted two censuses in this period, in 1921 and 1931, which showed the Jewish population (determined by religion, not nationality or “race”) to be 2,855,318, or 10.5 percent of total Polish population in 1921, and 3,113,933, or 9.8 percent of the total, in 1931. In fact, British Mandate Palestine was the only territory with a larger proportion of Jews in relation to the overall population.¹³ The Polish Jewish community was predominantly urban (across the country, an average of 72.7 percent lived in cities), with the largest number engaged in corresponding professions, both professional and proletarian.¹⁴ Various work in commerce, insurance, industry, medicine, teaching, law, and journalism were the backbone of Jewish economic life, but out of those who worked in industry the vast majority owned or worked in the smallest establishments (445, 821 in 1931, as opposed to 60, 869 in large- and medium-sized establishments combined).¹⁵ This population also overwhelmingly spoke Yiddish as its mother tongue, with the census giving the figure at 79.9 percent. However, Mendelsohn cautions that a further 7.8 percent identified Hebrew as their mother tongue, which was most likely motivated more by Zionist political demands than actual household realities.¹⁶ Regardless, the numbers indicate a strong linguistic connection to Jewish identity.

In fact, connection to various facets of Jewish identity expressed itself in the powerful ferments of interwar Jewish-Polish life. This was marked, for the most part, by politics and debates between Orthodox traditionalists, Zionists, Communists, and Socialist Bundists, between the religious and the secular. There certainly were assimilated Jews, the significant 26.5 percent minority who identified themselves as nationally Polish, rather than Jewish. However, even the vast majority of

even non-religious Jews could be described by Mendelsohn as a “modern [man who]... did not go to synagogue, but he was proud of his Jewishness, spoke a Jewish language, and fought for the creation of a new, secular Jewish nation...”¹⁷ This is the Jewish community in which Rosenfarb, born in Lodz in 1923, was raised, and in whose life she participated actively as a Yiddish-speaking Jewish Bundist, educated both in a Yiddish proletarian school and a middle-class Polish *gymnasium*, populated exclusively by cultured Jewish girls.¹⁸

Lodz, Rosenfarb’s home city, had a particularly prominent Jewish presence. Among the cities, it had the second-largest Jewish population in Poland in 1931, only less than Warsaw (202, 497 versus 352, 659); it also had the second-largest Jewish population by percentage of total population, after Lublin (33.5 percent versus 34.7 percent).¹⁹ Importantly, that large population also was one of the most likely to identify itself as Jewish (as opposed to Polish) by nationality as well as religion: 82.3 percent of Lodz Jews did so, behind only Bialystok, Volynia and Polesie (these last two were in the Eastern borderlands as opposed to the Central region, imposing a heightened attention to nationality and a weaker attachment to Polish identity).²⁰ Working from the same 1931 census, Michal Unger gives the gender breakdown in Lodz as 47.7 percent men and 52.3 percent women. She estimates that between that time and the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939, the Jewish population grew to about 233, 000, with the gender ratio remaining essentially the same.²¹ Lodz, then, was a city with a very large, visible, Jewish population who remained for the most part attached to Jewish identity by means of markers of language, religion, and economy.

Unger goes on to give a detailed account, bolstered by quantitative evidence, of how the gender demographics played out over the course of the ghetto period. She begins by noting the initial “numerical advantage” held by women, which increased dramatically in the first months of the war. This was confirmed by a German census taken on June 16, 1940, a month

after the ghetto was sealed. This census found that, largely as a result of the mass exodus of men who either were drafted by the Polish army, fled to the East as the occupation of Lodz loomed, or escaped from humiliation and abduction for forced labour, the ghetto population was now 45.5 percent men and 54.4 percent women (71, 227 and 85, 175 out of a population of 156, 402 Jews, which already represented a roughly 33 percent population decline overall); that is, 119.4 women for every 100 men.²² For the Jewish population between the ages of twenty and forty-five (the most fertile and physically fit), the difference was even more dramatic: 57.7 percent of this group was women.²³ It is therefore clear that even from the earliest weeks, men and women's experience of the Holocaust in Lodz were diverging in some manner.

She goes on to point out the ways in which women seem to have shouldered the majority of the responsibility for sustaining any vestiges of normal family life, including transforming the ghetto's starvation rations into approximations of real food, modeling proper rationing, maintaining minimum cultural/religious observance, and cultivating family morale.²⁴ As well, Unger points out that the radical transformation in women's occupational profile as a result of the evolution of the ghetto into a forced labour camp after the 1942 mass deportation of young children and the elderly, known as the *Sperre*, meant that the previously predominantly unemployed female population of Lodz took on the same labour hardships as men, without any accompanying elevation in formal status.²⁵

As life in the ghetto went on, it became apparent even at the time that men and women were continuing to be effected differently: the Lodz ghetto *Chronicle* noted in 1941 that at times "the mortality rate of men is almost twice that of women."²⁶ Between 1940 and 1942, the mortality rate of women versus men climbed from near parity to a clear 20 percent disparity.²⁷ Women were particularly vulnerable to deportation from the ghetto (for extermination at Chelmno or Auschwitz), given that they were more likely to be unemployed, have a husband who

had been taken for labour, to be on welfare, or to be attached to young children, the ill, and old people (all which categories were deliberately targeted by the Nazis and *Judenrat*). Women composed at least 60 percent, and at times were even double or triple the number of men, of each of the major deportations.²⁸ After the large-scale arrival of Jews from Western Europe and neighbouring towns and villages, of which the majority were again women, women's numerical disparity in the ghetto population climbed relentlessly until the final liquidation of the ghetto in the summer of 1944.

By that time, there were 137 women to every 100 men, and among the twenty to thirty-four age group, one of the largest remaining in the ghetto, it was as high as 196 to every 100.²⁹ Unger argues that the only sound conclusion is that men's mortality rate must have been dramatically higher than women's throughout the life of the ghetto, in all its stages; therefore, she infers that "women were better able than men to tolerate the ghetto conditions."³⁰ However, a disturbing and challenging fact about the period between the end of the ghetto and the end of the war: despite these supposed coping skills, despite the presence of mutually supportive relationships, and despite their pronounced numerical superiority entering the concentration camp system, the camps were still a significantly deadlier place for women. Only about 40 percent of the survivors were women. Without question, fewer women than men survived the Holocaust.³¹

Based on this data, there certainly does seem to be grounds for an investigation of the Holocaust experiences of Lodz's Jewish women as divergent from that of its Jewish men. It is precisely evidence like this that led to the growing call for a gendered approach to Holocaust studies that would take women's distinct experiences and voices into account. What is more potentially problematic is the ways in which this gendered approach transformed the data into its defined conclusions about women and the Holocaust, as summarized above. It serves as an early indication that taken as a whole, the experience of coping with and surviving the Holocaust is much more complex than

many scholars like Ungar conclude. Post-Holocaust literature like Chava Rosenfarb's is ideally placed to reflect precisely those more complicated perspectives.

The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto

Rosenfarb's three-part novel *The Tree of Life* (*Der boym fun lebn*), although written in a post-Holocaust setting, takes place entirely within the confines of the Lodz described quantitatively above by Mendelsohn and Unger. *The Tree of Life* follows an interconnected group of characters from December 31, 1938 until the last of them is forced onto the train to Auschwitz in August 1944. Although incorporating many more, the novel centres around ten primary characters and their extended network of family, friends, and lovers. Alternating between narrative perspectives, and showcasing a mix of historical, composite, and entirely fictional characters, Rosenfarb pulls the reader equally into the head and behind the eyes of men and women of many ages and social positions. All of the characters, whether likeable or despicable, are invested with a full and complex psychology and set of experiences entirely their own (although frequently interlocking in time, space, or relationship with another character).

S. Lillian Kremer argues distinguishes women's Holocaust literature, which is the "foregrounding of women's suffering and response in gendered ways that accord with findings by feminist historians and social sciences... the critical differences between the fiction of male and female writers are centred in the presentation of gendered ghetto and concentration camp experience and coping mechanisms..."³² One way Rosenfarb defies this categorization is through her approaches to female and male characters. For example, one central female character, Rachel Eibushitz, is largely based on Rosenfarb herself; however it is not Rachel who is given the novel's few first-person narrations. Rosenfarb reserves this to tell the stories of two of her primary male characters, Michal Levine and Rachel's boyfriend David. In their sections of the novel, both these men actively write, and we read their first-

person writing: Michal writes letters to his sweetheart, Mira, whom he left in Paris before the war (letters which go first unread, then unsent, and finally are only written in Michal's head), while David writes vividly in a notebook about his emotions and experiences. Although the three primary female characters are developed with care and intricacy equal to that of the seven primary male characters, and there are at least a dozen more vibrantly realized female characters, Rosenfarb has already challenged academic expectations by not exclusively placing women's voices and concerns at the centre of her novel.

One of Kremer's auxiliary characteristics for women's Holocaust literature is that, unlike men's literature, it shows the experiences of both men and women. This Rosenfarb does without a doubt, and with exceptional skill, but her intent is not to "foreground" a gendered understanding of suffering. Rather, she seeks to depict kinds of pain that men and women experience differently, but not necessarily exclusively, and an explicitly gendered approach is not central to her thinking. Certainly, Rosenfarb's writing has many similarities to other female writers, and depicts many forms of suffering that are biologically specific to men and women (as uncovered by historical investigations by scholars of gendered Holocaust Studies), but her stated emphasis is on *people*, not on men and women.³³

She says as much herself in her essay "Feminism and Yiddish Literature: A Personal Approach." In a careful exposition of her craft and life as a writer, Rosenfarb insists:

... the intellectual luggage which I carry on my literary road is nonetheless colored by my awareness of being a woman... yet, feminist thinking has not managed to penetrate to the core of my basic literary interests... Although my being a woman, no doubt, shines through in my work, I am not consciously aware of being one when I write; rather, I am conscious of being some kind of extrasexual, or bisexual creature. What mystifies me in nature is precisely that which defies gender, heredity, or upbringing. But if my hero is male, I

must try to immerse myself in his masculinity, in order to inhabit his soul.... in a successful work the writer transcends the confines of his or her own gender... In such a work, the author—man or woman—is a feminist.³⁴

This craft is very much in evidence in *The Tree of Life*, and produces one of its most successful literary effects: placing the reader within the fully developed mind of a multitude of characters from an immense social and emotional spectrum. In this way, the novel emphasizes the common humanity of all the Jews caught in the Nazi universe. In doing so, Rosenfarb indirectly issues a challenge to the dominant conclusions of scholarly study in the area, and begins to problematize their theories while engaging with the same historical reality.

In the first volume of the novel, *Book One: On the Brink of the Precipice*, 1939, this subversion of the mainstream scholarship occurs primarily in Rosenfarb's treatment of its key conclusion: the profound impact of interpersonal relationships between women. At first, she seems to be in agreement with them, for in a manner that starkly reverses traditional understandings of romantic love and friendship between men and women, Rosenfarb insists in this novel that true complimentary relationships, and real mutual understanding occur only in same-sex friendship rather than within the dynamic of romantic love and marriage. However, true to her craft, she allows for this to be the case for men and women equally. Totally without exception, the men and women of *On the Brink of the Precipice* experience in romantic relationships a lack of genuine emotional and intellectual mutual understanding. On the other hand, Rosenfarb paints an unexpectedly contrasting and intimate portrait of friendships between men and between women that do demonstrate the continuity and mutual understanding that is so painfully absent from the lovers and spouses she depicts around them. Writing about his marriage from the point of view of a primary male character, Simcha Bunim Berkovitch, Rosenfarb has him think:

They were like two close parallel paths, heading in the same direction, yet leading toward different regions... Each of them was desperately calling: I am alone. But they had already learned from their life together that this was the human course, that no matter how strong a love, no matter how powerful a friendship, two people could not be forged into one...³⁵

This chapter on Simcha Bunim contains an interesting perspective on more than just marriage and romantic love. It also contains accounts of two very intense friendships he has with other men. Rosenfarb portrays these friendships, as opposed to the romantic ties, as deeply compassionate and profoundly connected. She also depicts another such friendship between two women, the characters of Miss Diamond (primary) and Wanda. In all these cases, the characters involved experience more stable and continuous relationships with each other than with any romantic partner. They put forward a combination of natural sympathy and huge effort in order to generate a functional, mutually assistive, and understanding connection. As Bunim again, sitting by the side of his dying friend and composing a poetic ode to friendship, Rosenfarb writes:

The [poem] he was writing now was dark, heavy, and wrought in grief. The first poem had the wind at its core, this one had fire; a fire produced by the rubbing of hard rough rocks of loneliness against each other, a fire emerging from the clash of black clouds of despair. Yet it possessed the power to smoke out all anguish and fear from the mind and to forge solitude into pride, making the heart so defiant and unbendable that neither time, nor life or death had any power over it. (1: 151)

Likewise, Miss Diamond insists:

Did friendship take into account such external matters [as the Nazi oppressions], in particular a friendship like hers and Wanda's, the friendship of a lifetime? There were ties in the bond

between the two of them that nothing could destroy... there was a profound understanding between them. They knew each other as well as one human being could know another...(1: 204-5)

Ultimately, however, Rosenfarb's message here is not so unambiguous as it first appears. The first clue can be seen at the end of Bunim's lament on marriage: "no matter how strong a love, no matter how powerful a *friendship*, two people could not be forged into one" (1: 144; emphasis mine). As the books progress, it turns out that external circumstances can and do come irrevocably between the Jewish Miss Diamond and the Polish Wanda (2: 142 and 3:95, 97). Likewise, the chaos of the ghetto causes Bunim to forget about Friede almost entirely, to the point where he finds out about the other man's death from the same illness as above only by accident, and experiences an immense and alienating grief:

But around the corpse candles flickered, embracing the prostrate body with a circle of light, a circle which divided and separated forever. Bunim tried to penetrate this circle of light, to join his soul with the soul of him who had been a man, a friend. But the circle rejected him. He belonged to another world—to the world of those who still suffer. (2: 67)

These friendships, then, as profound and briefly helpful or meaningful as they are, cannot withstand the horror of the Holocaust. Two further incidents, from the first and last book, solidify this reading. On New Year's Eve, 1939, Rachel Eibushitz, Rosenfarb's closest alter ego, sinks into allegorical nightmares. Pursued by an immense black shark with a human voice, all her world and family are stripped away and devoured, and she herself is swallowed. Significantly, the sound that finally gives her strength to walk through the darkness and emerge from the beast's jaws is not the united strength of two hearts beating together, but "the [one] little clock" within her own chest, which "starts to grow into a drum that thunders in

front of her, leading her onward” (1: 307). Similarly, at the story’s tragic and horrifying close, the makeshift “family” (as David terms it) that the last surviving characters forge while in hiding, filled though it is with intense intimacy and practical, emotional, and intellectual mutual assistance (3:351), can only prolong their lives a little bit, and ultimately, it makes no difference to their survival. All are put on a train to Auschwitz, in the same carriage as the least connected, most repulsive man in the ghetto: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. (3: 360-1)

The other thread that Rosenfarb takes up and complicates in the novel is that of parenthood and children. Scholars like Kremer argue that depictions of pregnancy and motherhood are “virtually absent from male Holocaust writing.”³⁶ Rosenfarb does indeed show powerful depictions of pregnancy, motherhood, and childrearing, but characteristically for her, does so through an equally tragic male and female lens. In *The Tree of Life*, men and women love, cherish, and lose children equally; the destruction of children is a catastrophe for *parents*, not just mothers. So while direct experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding is biologically exclusively female, many of Rosenfarb’s fathers, like Simcha Bunim, Moshe Eibushitz, Ichte Mayer, and even Michal Levine, who is not yet a father in reality, centre themselves on their children (of all ages, even unborn), and are destroyed either in attempting to protect their children and families, or by the failure to do so.

There are a total of four children born to the main characters in the course of the novel: Esther, a deeply passionate, troubled young communist woman, has two pregnancies; and Simcha Bunim and his wife Miriam have the two others. In the ghettos and the concentration camps, children were marked for death, without exception. In the ghettos, the Nazis instituted a policy of compulsory abortion, and children were explicitly targeted for deportation and murder.³⁷ In Lodz, out of a total ghetto population of approximately 150, 000 only 2,306 children were born in the four years of incarceration.³⁸ Lodz was also the site of a particularly notorious *Aktion* that took place

from September 5 to September 12, 1942 (called the *Sperre* by the inhabitants), in which Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski decided to meet the German quota of 15,000 deportees by asking the population to surrender all children under 10, all old people over 65, and the ill, whom the Jewish Police and the Germans ultimately sought out and abducted with horrifying brutality.³⁹ In the concentration camps, children and infants, pregnant women, as well as anyone (but particularly women) holding or sheltering a child or infant, were immediately selected for the gas chambers. Babies born or discovered hiding in the camps would be gassed, starved, exposed, experimented on, burned alive by fire or lime, or killed at birth by camp doctors or in secret by Jewish midwives (attempting to sacrifice the infant for the mother; camp policy was to kill both mother and child without exception).⁴⁰

While the issues of pregnancy and childbirth were more likely to condemn women to death, or to be faced by women in isolation from the child's father (given the unbalanced ratio of fertile-aged women to men in the ghetto and the sex-segregated nature of the majority of camps), Rosenfarb demonstrates first that her male characters experience the trauma and grief of childrearing and murder in the ghetto right alongside the female characters. Second, her characters' fate points out that although women's Holocaust scholarship frequently figures the promise of children during the Holocaust as indicative of *both* new life and a "violent assault" on Jewish motherhood, the hopeful dimension is utterly doomed, and no companionship or love can change that fact. As the trucks full of babies encountered by Junia Zuckerman and Michal Levine during the *Sperre* attest, "she had seen the victorious mothers who would not let their babies be torn out of their arms, but climbed in the trucks with them. Not all mothers had done so. And that meant that 'Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh' was a lie. How then could one find strength for the forthcoming experience?" (3: 144)

For example, Esther's first pregnancy occurs during her dysfunctional romance with a fellow communist named

Hersh. In a simultaneous attempt to get distance from Esther and save the health of the unborn child, Hersh sends her away to a Party retreat in the country (this is before the creation of the ghetto). Significantly, it is only in the mutually assistive, fraternal atmosphere of the retreat that she rediscovers real and natural intimacy with her new friends, her own body, and the child within it. However, this has no long-term impact, for on her forced return to the city and at the outbreak of war, Esther falls while seeing Hersh into hiding, and the baby, Emmanuel, is born and dies without her ever seeing his face (1: 170-6). Absolutely bereft, Esther loses all will to live and succumbs to a deep depression that lasts into the second volume of the novel.

Her second pregnancy results in a live infant named Shalom, who goes into hiding with Esther, Israel Mayer (the baby's father), and the other principal characters at the close of the novel. Although he is the focus of the ardent hope and care of all, Shalom is ultimately deported with them to Auschwitz, clutched in Esther's arms (3: 340-60). From the historical record, and the fact that Rachel and David name their son born after the war 'Shalom' as well (which they would not have done, according to Jewish tradition, had the little boy been alive) (3: 370-1), make the reader certain of the baby's murder, and almost certainly Esther's as well.

Similarly, Simcha Bunim is a frantically devoted father to his young daughter Blimele, whom he tries desperately to save during the *Sperre*. Her birth just before the war is one of the most revelatory moments in his life, described by Rosenfarb with tender beauty: "The world receded into the background. The tiny creature in Miriam's arms, tied by her little mouth to the nipple of her mother's breast... just awakened to life... yet so reminiscent of... death, this helpless little daughter of his—was everything" (1: 141). When his son is born, the night before the first day of the *Sperre*, Bunim sees in the little boy's lips the only hint of "soothing freshness" left in "the relationship between agony and birth" (3: 128). However, within a matter of hours, his entirely family has been destroyed, snatched from

the house and deported to their deaths. By chance, Bunim is not with them, and his failure to save his family is a devastation from which he will never recover, even driving him to a foiled suicide attempt and haunting his mind until the end (3: 131-2, 184, 292-5, 355). Rosenfarb could have chosen to narrate these events from a woman and mother's perspective, from Miriam's—her narration steps into other secondary characters' perspectives frequently enough—but she has made the choice to tell about this tragedy from a father's point of view, out of a man's mind. What matters here is not Bunim's gender, but his soul, his terrified, tender, and profound poet's voice and mind. Regardless of sex or family or friendship, Bunim is left alone, just as vulnerable to destruction as everyone else.

The Tree of Life complicates academic assertions that women's traumas of violated parenthood were particular to gender,⁴¹ and that same-sex interpersonal relationships were a) gender exclusive, b) assistive to motherhood, or c) significant in terms of chances of survival, but it essentially does not touch on the post-war or concentration camp experience. However, a scene from the Yiddish original of the novel signals there is no happy ending after survival. In it, the ghost of Simcha Bunim Berkovitch appears to Rachel and insists that the only way that she can carry on is to maintain connection with the dead, to remain with them and tell their stories. This is not intended as a liberating or healing experience, but a literal necessity and a heavy ethical responsibility. It will not usher Rachel forward into a new life, but will rather bring her into communion with her dead loved ones and ruined world. In the middle of the day, in another country and years away from the ghetto, Rachel hears the ghost say: “How can you look at the sun? How can you feel the spring?... How can you breathe—without me... without us?... You will feel again your father's hand on your head... You encounter again your dearest ones and take unto your life their devotion...”⁴²

An Empty “Postscript”: The Post-Holocaust Fiction

Although technically post-Holocaust fiction, in that it was written after the Holocaust, *The Tree of Life* makes no attempt to grapple with the context of its composition, but remains very much a European Holocaust novel dealing with European characters in that time and location of the Lodz ghetto.⁴³ It is Rosenfarb’s true *post*-Holocaust writing—the short fiction—that issues the most direct challenge to the scholarly idea, introduced earlier, that women’s specific “coping strategies” in the face of their specific experiences improved their situation or adjustment in post-war life. 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. Rosenfarb’s survivors are too complex to be labeled as the walking wounded, yet they are people who can never again live happily ever after.⁴⁴

In this short fiction, Rosenfarb effects “a synthesis between her primary theme of the holocaust and the Canadian milieu in which she finds herself, so that Canada becomes in these stories the land of the postscript, the country in which the survivors of the holocaust play out the tragedy’s last act...” and creates “immigrant literature with a difference. The Old World in this case incorporates the stain of the holocaust, which the New World is incapable of washing away.”⁴⁵ Her short fiction was not compiled and translated into English in any significant number until the publication of the collection *Survivors: Seven Short Stories* in 2004. However, this devastated note in Rosenfarb’s thinking can be observed as early as the immediate post-war period and into the 1960s in her poetry. This is the same period as the composition of *The Tree of Life*, but with no obligation to faithfully recreate the mindset of characters in a specific time and place.

The poem “Isaac’s Dream” was composed during the *Sperre* in 1942, memorized and re-written in the Sasel labour

camp after its original was destroyed at Auschwitz, and finally published in London in 1947 as part of Rosenfarb's collection *Di Balade fun nekhtikn vald* [The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest]. In it, Rosenfarb describes a fantastical encounter between the Biblical figure of Isaac and a young woman caught in the Holocaust. Isaac promises to take her away, into the Bible, to be his bride and to be miraculously saved by God as Isaac was. The girl turns her back on Isaac though, saying:

I head for those places you have never dreamed of
Where altars do smoulder with their unwilling prey.
As I spoke a gale swept toward my threshold...
Hissing with rage: 'Juden rous! Juden rous!'...
'Make haster return to the Book which shall save thee.
Hide yourself in the Bible's fairytale land.
For your God Himself walks with me and my father,
Right now to the altar; with us—to His end.'⁴⁶

Rosenfarb dramatizes here a profound and complicated loss of faith in God, Jewish tradition, and even literature itself.⁴⁷ This Isaac is beautiful and seductive, and we are attracted to him, but this attraction is dangerous because of its clear falsity. If God is walking to his death with the girl and her own father Abraham, then he can not appear to save her from Isaac's "glittering knife"; there will be no miracle, and for Rosenfarb, there can be no such hope in the face of the reality of the Holocaust.⁴⁸

The only other of her poems to be translated into English is "I Would Go Into A Prayer House," from her 1965 poetry collection *Aroys fun gan-eydn*. Here, Rosenfarb expresses again a painful longing for rescue, healing, or redemption, but remains starkly convinced of its impossibility.⁴⁹ This is again framed in the context of faith, and the balance between longing for connection and consolation within the community of the faithful, and fierce despair and anger at God for his utter abandonment and death in the ash-filled skies and freezing mud of Auschwitz.

A life-long atheist, Rosenfarb nonetheless observes the peace that some seem to be able to glean from their faith:

My love would soar up at His approach...
All I would want would be...
a touch of his strong hand...
Because I no longer have a father or a mother,
And it is hard
To be also orphaned of God.⁵⁰

At the same time though, she demands that God “prove to me / That one can burn and be burned / And still remain God,” that He come and pick her up and carry her out of the place where they both were destroyed, where they both in some sense died. In devastating detail she imagines God dying with and inside the murdered Jews,

expired in the sparks and fumes.
... where white lime was poured on His body.
... extinguished in the eye of a suckling infant,
Still clinging to its dead mother’s nipple.
... like a starving dog...
Felt the boot of a soldier stamped on his face
with a single stomp.

These are not the words of someone surrounded by camp sisters, by family or community, but of someone doubly and triply exiled and orphaned, from home, from family, from peace, and from the community of the faithful whose seeking she can only wonder at from afar.⁵¹ Rosenfarb here sits shiva alone, waiting,

Like someone blind and lame,
Like someone mute and deaf,
In my windy, pain-soaked tent
That He should lead me to a prayer house...
And, in the meantime, I tremble in the cold.

The short fiction, compiled and translated much later, picks up these themes of desolation and a life that is irrevocably tied to death. In the story “A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend,” about a mundane and blankly horrible day in the life of a Holocaust survivor who is married with children and living in Montreal, Rosenfarb asks her central question: “What is wrong with this woman survivor? Why can’t she enjoy the life

Fate has bestowed on her?"⁵² The answer seems to be that her experiences in the Holocaust have destroyed Sarah in large- and small-scale ways. She feels disconnected from the life around her, and especially from her husband, feeling that her real self was left behind for the Nazis. Her days are an endless cycle of faint hope for connection, tied to small pleasurable experiences she has managed to find (like receiving mail or sewing rags), and the eventually dissolution of those hopes by the time lunch is over. More than anything, she longs "for a message of love or praise, something to... make her feel like somebody special, like a person to whom people wrote letters and with whom they needed to communicate; perhaps it would make her feel like a person who was fully alive, and whose days did not fall into black holes of nothingness." (68)

Sarah has lost her faith in love, in literature, in art, in connection, and in writing. She feels a compulsive drive to write down something, anything, "that by making notes she would feel more alive; she would supply herself with tangible proof that something... had actually happened to her" (64). However the writing is ultimately meaningless, since she regularly destroys it all, only to start over again in the exact same way with "a renewed hope" that is hopeless (65). Her identity is lost, submerged beneath the weight of her survival, beneath the onslaught of her concentration camp memories, which

stood out in her mind like an island of sharp, blistering clarity amid a sea of forgetfulness. But as far as the rest of her life was concerned, the past had turned into a terrifying blank which slipped through her fingers, as if all the living she had ever done had occurred in her childhood and youth, and in the surrogate "life" she had endured in the concentration camp... Blotted from her memory, the [recent] past had turned into what she called 'a black hole.' (64-5)

What is more, Sarah has lost faith in herself as a woman. Attempts at performing femininity, like trying on her own fur coat, repulse and frighten her (73-4). She is isolated from her

husband, Moniek, who is a fellow survivor and her childhood sweetheart. His failure to connect with her and his apparently better coping disillusion her greatly:

Sarah had always clung to the unrealistic belief that two people who loved each other before the war and had found each other after the war were touched by divine grace... such a man and woman were different from other couples by virtue of their love's miraculous salvation... Such a woman and such a man had been appointed by Fate to alleviate and comfort each other's pain and distress. As a matter of fact, Sarah had once worked up the courage to raise this topic with Moniek... who burst out laughing... Such a fool she had made of herself. (67)

Finally, and critically for this study, Sarah is brutally lonely. Despite all her connections in the past—a boyfriend, the ability to write, and *Lagerschwestern* (camp sisters)—Sarah has been left drowning, barely keeping her head above water. At the very end of the story, noticing that the phone has not rung all day, Sarah checks if it is even working, and as she notes with desolate self-mockery:

The telephone was functioning all right. There was something else that did not function... But whom should she call? Perhaps one of her former camp sisters who after the liberation had turned into ersatz friends, full of meaningless chatter and phoniness... how sincere could she be on this Friday afternoon, when the person on the other end of the line was just as confused as she was, and just as preoccupied with her own loneliness and her own dinner preparations? (78-9)

So it is only to her diary, empty paper doomed to the incinerator, that she writes, “Dear diary... You are... the only phone call that I am capable of making, the only letter I am both writing and receiving...” (79)

Subsequent stories in the collection only reinforce this picture of individuals struggling and failing to in any way “cope” with what has happened to them. They are alive, and living. They marry, and at least attempt to start families in their new surroundings. Casting around for companionship, they frequently spend time with others and try to travel, to learn and grow. Ultimately though, Rosenfarb shows us that living has nothing to do with healing or redeeming. In a world without faith in anything, without true connection, where simply too much has been lost and destroyed that not even the whiteness of the Canadian winter can cover it over, there can be no such thing. They inhabit the world of what scholar Lawrence L. Langer calls “tainted memory... ‘living without being alive,’” where the normal business of living, loving, working, thinking, and especially bearing and raising children is perverted in some sense by the memories of atrocity and the sheer fact of surviving when so many others did not.⁵³

For example, in “François,” Rosenfarb tells the story of another married couple, Leah and Leon, both survivors, whose union “should have been a harmonious one based on their shared experiences of pain and loss. [However] both have, in fact, responded to the emotional emptiness inside them with a similar obsessive restlessness, an incessant searching for something that they cannot find.”⁵⁴ Their marriage finally disintegrates for good when Leah takes a imaginary French-French Canadian lover named François. Fascinatingly, she eventually kills him in a renewed attempt at really living—a living which can only come at the expense of the death of her marriage and of the “impossible, dazzling” dream of her cleansing connection with François.⁵⁵ Like Sarah, Leah has no female friends that remain, no one to protect her against her gnawing loneliness. Her fellow “post-war immigrant” friendships are ultimately shallow, and their conversations “deepened her sense of alienation not only from society but from her own self.” (197)

Likewise in “Edgia’s Revenge,” in which a former camp *kapo*⁵⁶ named Rella forms a dark, twisted, co-dependent

relationship with a fellow survivor named Edgia, whose life she saved, “the beneficiary of [Rella’s] one and only heroic act in the camps.”⁵⁷ They meet by accident again in Montreal, where they are both living, and Rella attaches herself forcefully to Edgia, despite the other woman’s terror of her. Almost immediately Rella insinuates herself into Edgia’s life and marriage, forming with Edgia’s husband Lolek a group of like-minded survivor friends.

Together these survivors become “culture vultures,” chasing down every new modern cultural fad, changing themselves to suit every “New World” modernity as it comes. They make a frantic attempt to shed the past, grasping at foreign, modern culture as a substitute for their own vanished Jewish religion, tradition, and language (the group deliberately speak only English or Polish among themselves, never Yiddish) (174).⁵⁸ Desperately they seek to move ever forward together, refusing to “cry over the past,” but this is impossible (105). Like the empty cross on Mount Royal that Rella can see from every one of her apartments, rich or poor, and like her “European” accident that she cannot shed, Rella and Edgia become locked in a brutal dance where they bind the other to the past without acknowledging that they are doing so.⁵⁹ A very far cry from the vision of mutually supportive camp sisters, they scrabble against each other to stay afloat as if still in the camp, competing for companionship, sex, dominance, and mental stability. The toxic combat can only be resolved when Edgia, after the near death of her second husband (also a member of the group) gains the strength to sever the friendship forever, and Rella decides to take her own life. (161-4)

Finally, in the story “Little Red Bird,” Rosenfarb recounts the sudden descent into delusion of a female survivor, Manya, whose little daughter and young husband were murdered and burned by the Nazis at Auschwitz. All through the story, Rosenfarb provides examples of the way that symbols that should stand for the peace and safety of home and family—the hearth fire, warm baths, children’s fairytales, toys and clothes—

are corrupted in Manya's mind by their relentless connection to her murdered child.⁶⁰ Her sexual connection to Feivel, her second husband, is disrupted as well, for when they are in bed, she compulsively imagines the ghosts of her first husband and their families standing by the bed, "shadowing every step she takes and sitting in judgment." (172)

The most terrible disruption of all is to Manya's attempt to heal by resuming motherhood, which failure eventually drives to her psychosis. She has been left barren from her experiences in the camps, and her psychiatrists insist she is too unstable to adopt the child she wildly craves. Standing at the window one Saturday, looking out into the snow and watching a little girl playing, Manya plunges into a hallucination of illicit motherhood so violent and absorbing that she stands idly by as her husband succumbs to a heart attack in the chair behind her, dying as the fireplace crackles greedily. (187-88) Essentially, the only form of motherhood left to her is a completely delusional, immoral fantasy of "the hideous crime of breaking a young mother's heart" by taking her child away. (182)

As Langer, a dissenting voice from the mainstream of Holocaust scholarship, points out, this perversion of tainted memory:

recurs often enough in our encounter with the voices and faces of other women survivors to force us to admit it into our colloquy about the Holocaust... I would have to conclude that numerous other women who outlived the atrocity also inhabit two worlds, the world of then and the world of now... There may be a valid text about small communities of women who survived through mutual support or some strength of gender, but it exists within a darker subtext... Even when we hear stories about mutual support among women in the camps, the full context of these narratives shows us how seldom such alliances made any difference in the long-range effects of the ordeal for those who outlived it.⁶¹

As in “Little Red Bird,” the tainting of motherhood is one the most common aftershocks of Holocaust survival, especially for women. Langer quotes Charlotte Delbo, who interviewed fellow survivors after the war for her trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, and who found that many of these women “cannot embrace [their] roles as wife and mother.” Visiting another survivor immediately after the birth of her child, Delbo records that the other woman “complained that her newborn infant brought her no joy; all she could think about was the children in Auschwitz being sent to their death in the gas chamber... frustrat[ing] her bid to reclaim her role as mother.”⁶²

Memories of children who were murdered do not necessarily prevent these women from having other children after the war, but they do often cast a horrific shadow over those new families. Langer quotes another survivor as saying, about her post-war life, and after the murder of her newborn son in the camp by a Jewish midwife, “I find my husband... And I was so afraid to have a child; he wants family. And I said: ‘For what? Again gonna happen, again gonna kill our children?’” She does get pregnant again, and wracked by fear and anger, aborts the foetus. Although she does go on eventually to have children, and love them with pleasure, she still tells the interviewer: “I’m like a stone... sometimes I feel I’m stone—inside, you know.”⁶³

In Lea Ausch Alteras’ collection she presents the oral histories of female Holocaust survivors (as well as their daughters and granddaughters). These women describe how “Happy occasions, such as getting married or having children... took second place to the horrors experienced in the concentration camps,”⁶⁴ even saying “I have a pain in my chest that will not go away... It’s like a virus that slowly eats at you.”⁶⁵ Their daughters describe mothers whose lives revolved around home and family, who were wildly overprotective and intimately connected to the minutiae of their children’s’ lives—and yet who had difficulty showing love and affection. Daughters dealt with it by rationalizing (“My mother lost everything. She just cannot be that vulnerable again in her life. She could not show

love. This was the way she defended herself...”),⁶⁶ and by seeking that demonstrative love in turn from their own children (““This closeness I never experienced before... Finally I am getting the love that I was starving for—in my relationships with my three daughters”).⁶⁷

In Brana Gurewitsch’s book, which contains similar accounts from female survivors, she shares the testimony of a woman named Brandla Small, who shares her difficulty carrying on to post-war life after the loss of her baby daughter. Brandla protected her daughter through the Lodz *Sperre*, without any assistance from anyone female or otherwise, but the little girl is snatched from her arms immediately upon arrival at Auschwitz, and never seen again. “I don’t know if I was lucky to survive,” she says, “because it’s no life afterwards... sometimes I suffer so much so it’s not worth living...” Describing her numbness and hopelessness after liberation, which has never left her despite the birth of two “wonderful” kids, Brandla says: “How can we recover after that tragedy? We’re never going to recover, honey. It doesn’t matter how we look and how we try to push ourselves and work and laugh. Fun, laughs... It’s not natural. How can we feel good... Happy? Not happy. Honey, we’re never going to be happy.”⁶⁸

Advocating an approach between the extremes of belief in more “successful” gendered coping and ignoring biologically- and socially-conditioned women’s experiences, Sara R. Horowitz provides evidence that the same kinds of feelings appear in Holocaust literature, where the effects of the Nazi atrocities resonate into post-war life, particularly motherhood. She points out how frequently in this literature to speak of birth is also to speak of death and destruction, and pregnancy and motherhood become deeply lonely and ambivalent undertakings both in the concentration camps and after.⁶⁹ These feelings extend to more than just motherhood, as well. Many of the survivor women also express their isolation and disillusionment with the relationships that were supposed to help them cope. One woman, Ilona, states: ““All those people whom I helped in the concentration

camp, they promised to help me if we survive... Not even one has come forward to ask me if I needed something after my husband died, or when I arrived to this country... so I learned never to expect anything from them.”⁷⁰

Langer and Horowitz both present a final complication, shared by Rosenfarb’s literature: limiting these traumas exclusively to women and women’s experiences is too simple and is deeply problematic.⁷¹ Simply ignoring the ways men (especially husbands and fathers) were affected by these incidents and losses renders any approach incomplete, and even inappropriate. Langer suggests that “if we substitute for these gendered terms the more generic ones of parent and child, we move... into a human orbit that unites them through a kind of regret that cannot be sorted by sex... we may glimpse the danger of overstating the importance of biologically unique experience.”⁷² Quoting the devastated testimony of a man who lost his little son in the Holocaust, who remembers holding him in his arms for the last time and knowing it to be the last, Langer demands: “could we reasonably argue that there is a gendered difference between the two expressions of anguish?”⁷³ The answer, as Rosenfarb presents it, is clear: acknowledge with anguish what it meant to be a woman, before, during and after, good, bad and ordinary, but never forget that the victims of the Holocaust, men and women, were above all human people; and they were Jews.

Conclusion

The last remaining question is: why? Why does Rosenfarb’s fiction complicate mainstream conclusions in this way? Why does her ultimate message participate in the dissenting stream of thought that insists on complicating these issues of connection, coping, and gender? Based on her own words, I offer some possible answers. The overriding one is experience: by her own admission, much of Rosenfarb’s work is grounded in autobiography.⁷⁴ An immensely talented fiction writer, her position as both survivor and author of fiction allows us, as

Norman Ravvin puts it, “an unparalleled view of the processes by which history is transformed into art.”⁷⁵ Saying of her Holocaust experiences: “It was more real to me than the real world that surrounded me,”⁷⁶ Rosenfarb describes with great poignancy the way that her own post-war motherhood was disrupted by her writing, by the dictum of Bunim’s ghost in the Yiddish of *The Tree of Life*:

... on my arrival in Montreal I found myself in my new abode, pregnant, both physically and mentally, sitting at a table with pen in hand and a blank sheet of paper in front of me. I put the pen down thirteen years and almost two thousand pages later... My characters more than once interfered with my actions and behaviour in real life... their fates intermingled with mine. At the same time, my day-to-day life was always threatening... my narrative... I paid for my absentmindedness with burned pots and overcooked meals, and paid a much dearer price with attacks of tremendous guilt-feelings for neglecting my dear ones... I felt guilty for neglecting my own life. I often asked myself whether the end product would be worth the sacrifice.⁷⁷

Through her writing, Rosenfarb undertook the immense project of transforming her individual eyewitness experience into a masterful symphony of testimonies, a plurality of voices that feel and hurt and cope everywhere along the spectrum. This already made her less inclined to fit easily within one theoretical box or another, to allow herself and her characters to be limited (or even valorized) as women or men, or the creation of a woman’s pen. As well, underneath the symphony can be detected the driving force of Rosenfarb’s own experience, as a woman who survived, who became a wife and a mother, and yet who lived the remainder of her life driven to write the stories of dead and devastated people.

However, there is one primary, critically important element to the cynicism of Rosenfarb’s authorial voice, and

that is language. For Rosenfarb, her approach to her work is “rooted in the specificity of [her] being a *Yiddish* woman writer” (emphasis mine).⁷⁸ “Yiddish,” writes Rosenfarb, “is still the language of my daily life... through which I try to harness my life’s experiences and recreate them into literature. Yiddish is not only the language of my yesterdays, it is the language of my here and now. It is the language of both my nightmares and my daydreams. It is my most intimate means of expression.”⁷⁹ “Torn out of the Yiddish-speaking world,” Rosenfarb is doomed to a triple exile as a Holocaust survivor, an immigrant, and an author who writes solely in Yiddish, whose “heart and mind are still rooted in it.”⁸⁰

Rosenfarb was brought to Montreal in 1950 from a displaced and liminal existence in Belgium by the concerted activity of prominent members of that city’s then-vibrant Yiddish cultural community. It was that cultural life, where Yiddish was the “third language” of a city dubbed “the Jerusalem of North America,” that gave Rosenfarb her first artistic home and first community after the Holocaust.⁸¹ At mid-century, institutions of Yiddish culture were flourishing, from the Jewish Public Library on Mount Royal, to the strong Yiddish school system, to the tens of thousands of speakers, to the only Jewish daily newspaper in Canada, to the literary oasis that attracted the brightest stars of North American Yiddish (and remaining European and emigrée) writing.⁸² Yiddish literary luminaries like J.I. Segal, Melekh Ravitch, and Rokhl Korn made Montreal one of Yiddish’s greatest literary centres. Rosenfarb herself was one of the most lauded Yiddish writers of the last half of the twentieth century, winner of some of the most important prizes given to Jewish works or writers.⁸³

However, writing in Yiddish was a deeply painful experience for Rosenfarb and other post-Holocaust writers. Once the dominant language of European Jewish culture, Yiddish was decimated by the Holocaust. Its remaining speakers are dying out, and its literary community has dwindled to almost nothing. Despite Yiddish Montreal’s vision of Canada as “the

land that gave them the opportunity to cry out their despair after the Holocaust... [where] they shyly planted the hope for a new, better life... a corner of the world where they could renew their communal life,” that community has disappeared. Now, in Rosenfarb’s own words, “the sky has darkened... a desert has replaced the forest... how dim the lights have grown in the garden of Yiddish literary creativity. We have lost almost all the dreamers and poets who sat with us by the waters of the St. Laurence River...”⁸⁴ On a personal level, the heavy weight of Yiddish writing (especially autobiographical writing) after the Holocaust took a heavy toll on authors: it submerged the writer’s own self, their own personal journey, beneath the obligation of commemoration and the “certainty that the literature to which they had devoted their lives was approaching its end...”⁸⁵

Within this context, the most important thing to a Yiddish writer like Rosenfarb were not concerns of gender or theory, but to render faithfully and artistically the meaning and life of a decimated universe and a bewildered, exiled, remnant. This can and did include attention to the unique circumstances of women, to presenting their experiences with fullness and complexity, but it meant that the same must be done for the men. Beside the enormity of Jewish suffering, and the crisis of the Yiddish language, such concerns of gender, for Rosenfarb, must retreat into the background.⁸⁶ Although she remained convinced that Yiddish will never disappear completely while its literature still survives, in the language she loved like “the skin on [her] body,” the experience of being a Holocaust survivor and literary fiction author who wrote in Yiddish was the absolute and tragic driving force of her creative life.⁸⁷ Far from the comforts of friendship and connection, unchangeable by any coping, is the life of a surviving Yiddish writer:

What affects me the 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 on which I don’t belong. If writing is a lonely profession, the Yiddish writer’s loneliness

has an additional dimension. Her readership has perished. Her language has gone up with the smoke of the crematoria. She creates in a vacuum, out of fidelity to a vanished language—as if to prove that Nazism did not succeed in extinguishing that language’s last breath. If creativity is a life-affirming activity, the lack of response to creativity and being condemned to write for the desk-drawer are stifling, destructive experiences. Sandwiched between these two states of mind, struggles the spirit of the contemporary Yiddish writer, male or female.⁸⁸

Endnotes

¹ Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldberg, introduction to *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), xiv-xv.

² Ibid.

³ Baer and Goldberg, xvii.

⁴ Baer and Goldberg, xvii.

⁵ Baer and Goldberg, xviii.

⁶ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, introduction entitled “The Role of Gender in the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998), 1.

⁷ Ofer and Weitzman, 3-9.

⁸ Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (Portland, OR : Vallentine Mitchell, 1998), 9-17, 20-27.

⁹ Michal Unger, “The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998), 140-142.

¹⁰ Kremer, “Introduction,” 14-22.

¹¹ Sara R. Horowitz, “Holocaust Literature,” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, last modified 1 March 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/holocaust-literature>.

¹² Kremer, “Introduction,” 22-23.

¹³ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1983), 23.

¹⁴ Mendelsohn, 24.

¹⁵ Mendelsohn, 26-27.

¹⁶ Mendelsohn, 30.

¹⁷ Mendelsohn, 44.

¹⁸ Elaine Kalman Naves, "Keeping the Flame Alight," in *Putting Down Roots: Montreal's Immigrant Writers* (Montreal : Véhicule Press, 1998), 62.

¹⁹ Mendelsohn, 23.

²⁰ Mendelsohn, 30.

²¹ Unger, 123.

²² Unger, 123.

²³ Unger, 124.

²⁴ Unger, 133-139.

²⁵ Unger, 127-133, 139.

²⁶ Lodz ghetto *Chronicle*, Vol.1 [July 22, 1941] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1987), 194; quoted in Unger, 125.

²⁷ Unger, 125.

²⁸ Unger, 126.

²⁹ Unger, 125.

³⁰ Unger, 127.

³¹ Baumel, 31; Although much of this can be accounted for by many of women's biologically-determined dangers in the camps, including the automatic selection for murder of pregnant women and the mothers of young children, the data still presents a challenge for mainstream conclusions about women's coping.

³² S. Lillian Kremer, "Women in the Holocaust: Representation of Gendered Suffering and Coping Strategies in American Fiction," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldberg (Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 2003), 260.

³³ Although it could be argued that Rosenfarb is only "able" to comfortably do because of the advances of feminism and feminist scholarship in this area, the fact that *The Tree of Life* was composed between 1950 and 1972 (and the field was not established until 1983) means that this influence must be moderate and derived from broader trends, at the most.

³⁴ Chava Rosenfarb, "Feminism and Yiddish Literature: A Personal Approach," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi B. Solokoff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich, The Jewish

Theological Seminary of America (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1992), 217, 225-226.

³⁵ Chava Rosenfarb, *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto*, 3 vols. Trans. Chava Rosenfarb, collab. Goldie Morgentaler (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), vol. 1: 143-144. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

³⁶ Kremer, "Introduction," 11.

³⁷ Kremer, "Introduction," 11.

³⁸ Unger, 138; by means of comparison, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, in 1940 there were approximately 2, 077 children born per 100, 000 women in the United States; in Lodz, there were 383 (original calculations based on data found at www.dhhs.gov).

³⁹ Unger, 126.

⁴⁰ Unger, 7; Kremer, "Introduction," 11.

⁴¹ Although as stated before, they could be sex-specific, in terms of the biological elements and dangers of motherhood.

⁴² Chava Rosenfarb, *The Tree of Life*, 13-16, quoted in Norman Ravvin, "Ghost Writing: Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life*," in *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity, and Memory* (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 96; translated by Norman Ravvin.

⁴³ Goldie Morgentaler, "Land of the Postscript: Canada and the Post-Holocaust Fiction of Chava Rosenfarb," *Judaism* 49, no. 2 (spring 2000): 168-169.

⁴⁴ Morgentaler, "Postscript," 180.

⁴⁵ Morgentaler, "Postscript," 169, 171.

⁴⁶ Chava Rosenfarb, "Isaac's Dream," from *The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest* [*Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (London: Moishe Oved, 1947)], unpublished translation by Chava Rosenfarb, manuscript dated November 2009, courtesy of Goldie Morgentaler.

⁴⁷ Morgentaler, "Dream."

⁴⁸ Morgentaler, "Dream."

⁴⁹ Morgentaler, "Dream."

⁵⁰ Chava Rosenfarb, "I Would Go Into A Prayer House," from *Out of Paradise* [*Aroys fun gan-eydn* (Tel-Aviv: Peretz Farlag, 1965)], unpublished translation by Goldie Morgentaler, manuscript dated November 2009, courtesy of the translator.

⁵¹ Morgentaler, "Prayerhouse."

⁵² Chava Rosenfarb, "A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend," in *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, trans. Goldie Morgentaler (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2004), 75. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

⁵³ Lawrence L. Langer, "Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998), 352-355.

⁵⁴ Morgentaler, "Postscript," 175.

⁵⁵ Chava Rosenfarb, "François," in *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, trans. Goldie Morgentaler (Toronto : Cormorant Books, 2004), 241. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

⁵⁶ "Kapos were Jewish concentration camp guards whom the Nazis had put in charge of their fellow inmates. Rella, who had become a kapo through bestowing sexual favors on a guard, lorded it over the other women in her barracks, beating them, and indulging in the petty cruelties which her position permitted." Morgentaler, "Postscript," 173.

⁵⁷ Chava Rosenfarb, "Edgia's Revenge," in *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, trans. Goldie Morgentaler. (Toronto : Cormorant Books, 2004), 96. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

⁵⁸ Morgentaler, "Prayerhouse," and "Postscript," 174.

⁵⁹ Morgentaler, "Postscript," 173-174.

⁶⁰ Rosenfarb, "Little Red Bird," in *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, trans. Goldie Morgentaler. (Toronto : Cormorant Books, 2004), 165-174. Further citations to this work are given in the text.

⁶¹ Langer, 351-355.

⁶² Langer, 353.

⁶³ Langer, 357-358.

⁶⁴ Lea Ausch Alteras, *Three Generations of Jewish Women: Holocaust Survivors, The Daughters, and Granddaughters* (Lanham, MD : University Press of America, Inc, 2002), 44.

⁶⁵ Alteras, 57.

⁶⁶ Alteras, 132.

⁶⁷ Alteras, 147.

⁶⁸ Brana Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, Judaic Studies Series, gen. ed. Leon J. Weinberger (Tuscaloosa, AL : The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 88-92.

⁶⁹ Sara R. Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998), 364-378.

⁷⁰ Alteras, 54.

⁷¹ Horowitz, "Women in Holocaust Literature," 375-376.

⁷² Langer, 361.

⁷³ Langer, 361-362.

⁷⁴ Naves, 59-63.

⁷⁵ Ravvin, 86.

⁷⁶ Naves, 64.

⁷⁷ Rosenfarb, "Feminism and Yiddish Literature," 224-225.

⁷⁸ Rosenfarb, "Feminism and Yiddish Literature," 217.

⁷⁹ Chava Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," in *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal*, ed. Pierre Anctil, Norman Ravvin, and Sherry Simon (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), 11.

⁸⁰ Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," 11; Morgentaler, "Prayerhouse."

⁸¹ Morgentaler, "Prayerhouse."

⁸² Naves, 50-53; Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," 11.

⁸³ Goldie Morgentaler, "Chava Rosenfarb," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, last modified 1 March 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rosenfarb-chava>.

⁸⁴ Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," 17-18.

⁸⁵ Irving Howe, quoted in Jan Schwarz, "Part III: After the Holocaust: Ofa World That Is No More," in *Imagining Lives: Autobiographical Fiction of Yiddish Writers* (Madison, WI : University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 133.

⁸⁶ Rosenfarb, "Feminism and Yiddish Literature," 217-218.

⁸⁷ Rosenfarb, "Canadian Yiddish Writers," 17; Naves, 52.

⁸⁸ Rosenfarb, "Feminism and Yiddish Literature," 226.