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THE POETRY OF CHAVA ROSENFARB: THE JOYFUL DRABNESS OF THE EVERYDAY

In her short story, “A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend,” Chava Rosenfarb describes a typical Friday in the life of an ordinary Canadian housewife.¹ Nothing much happens, although the events of the day are conveyed in minute detail. Sarah Zonabend seems to be suffering from the common mid-twentieth century malaise that was said to hit middle-aged women in the era before women’s liberation and may still hit them today. She has a husband who is indifferent to her, adolescent children too busy with their own lives to pay attention to hers, and days too full of nothing meaningful to do. The story ends with Sarah confiding to her diary, “Today is Friday and, thank heaven, nothing happened.”

It is this last line, with its tell-tale “thank heaven,” that suggests the drama underlying the lack of event in Sarah’s life, because she means this line literally and not, as one might suspect, ironically. Sarah Zonabend is a Holocaust survivor, and, as we learn during the course of the short narrative that describes her day, she remembers the most horrific events of her life in the concentration camps as all taking place on a Friday. Sarah’s uneventful present life in Canada is thus implicitly contrasted with her overly eventful life in Europe.

Sarah spends her time trying to fill lonely days with a variety of artistic pursuits. She also lets her imagination run wild, fabricating the worst kind of horrors out of the events of everyday life, such as a car running over the mailman who had

neglected to bring her letters that day. Having returned safely home from a trip to the grocery store, she can therefore indulge in the kind of relief associated with evading great calamities. But, of course, nothing has happened. This is good because in Sarah's early life too much had happened. But it is also bad, because it points to an empty life, a life devoid of events and hence of fulfillment.

This tension between relief at nothing happening and despair at the void that the lack of events creates also lies at the heart of some of Rosenfarb's best poetry with its insistent focus on the domestic and the everyday. This is the poetry that Rosenfarb wrote as a mature woman of thirty and forty living in Montreal with her husband and two children in the 1960s. The Holocaust is behind her, although she is still engaged in reliving it through the writing of *The Tree of Life*, a novel based on the four years that she spent incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto. At the same time, her marriage is falling apart, a tragedy of a different kind. In the midst of domestic turmoil in 1965, she publishes a collection of poems called *Aroys fun gan-eydn*, [Out of Paradise].² This will be her fourth and last book of poetry.

Chava Rosenfarb first made her name in the Yiddish literary world, not as a prose writer, but as a poet, publishing her first poem, "Di balade fun nekhtikn vald" on April 16, 1946, almost exactly a year after her liberation from Bergen Belsen on April 15, 1945. It was published in the Yiddish-American journal *Di tsukunft* [The Future], a journal with a significant title for someone who had just emerged from the hell of the concentration camps.³ Rosenfarb had begun writing poetry when she was a child and she continued to write as an adolescent, when she and her family were incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto. Here is her description of what it meant to write poetry in the Lodz ghetto:

In the ghetto, despite the hunger, the cold and the fear, I wrote poems more ardently than ever before—or since. I wrote a great many of them, filling the pages of bookkeeping registers—which were covered with calculations on one

side, but clean on the other—with hundreds of stanzas. I did not regard myself as a poet in those days. I had too exalted an opinion of the poetic vocation to see myself in the role of a poet. I was just a girl who wrote poems. There were many girls and boys in the ghetto who resorted to the pen in order to preserve the integrity of their spirit. Even children and old people were infected with the literary bug. In the ghetto, along with tuberculosis, typhus and dysentery there raged the epidemic of writing. The drive to write was as strong as the hunger for food. It subdued the hunger for food. Each writer nurtured the hope that his or her voice would be heard. It was a drive to raise oneself above fear through the magic power of the written word, and so demonstrate one's enduring capacity for love, for singing praise to life. Even in the concentration camps, even by the glare of the crematorium flames, there were those who wrote.⁴

In 1943, the girl who wrote poetry was invited to join the writers' group in the Lodz ghetto, which met at the home, first of the poet Miriam Ulinover and then that of the painter Israel Lejzerowicz, where she was honoured with the title of "*yunge dikhterin*," young poet.

Nothing remains of the poems that Rosenfarb wrote in the ghetto. The knapsack that contained them was torn from her hands during the selection at Auschwitz and thrown on a pile of refuse. Having passed the selection, she was sent to a labour camp at Sasel near Hamburg, where she occupied the upper bunk of the barrack. A kindly German supervisor had given her a pencil stub and with this she recreated in miniscule letters on the ceiling above her bunk as many poems as she could remember. These she memorized and after the war, while living illegally in Belgium, she published these Holocaust poems along with "*Di balade fun nekhtikn vald*" [The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest] in her first book of poetry, named after the title poem, *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (London: Oved, 1947).

This was followed by *Dos lid fun dem yidishn kelner Abram* [The Song of the Jewish Waiter Abram] (London: Oved, 1948), a long narrative poem about her father who had been killed just before the liberation when the Americans bombed the train on which he and other Dachau inmates had been riding during the Nazi attempt to liquidate the concentration camp ahead of the Allied advance. By the time Rosenfarb's next book of poetry appeared she was settled in Montreal. *Geto un andere lider* [Ghetto and Other Poems] was published in 1950 by the Montreal publisher Harry Hershman.⁵

All of these early books of poetry dealt with Holocaust themes. But finding that poetry alone was not adequate to express everything she wanted to say about the Holocaust, Rosenfarb turned to prose fiction. She did not publish another book of poetry until 1965 and by then her subject matter had changed. Very few of the poems in *Aroys fun gan-eydn* deal with the Holocaust, at least not directly. If they do address the suffering engendered by that monumental catastrophe, it is in a round-about way that celebrates the wonder of survival through an insistence on the glory of the uneventful—for instance, in the poem “Praise,” the first of Rosenfarb's poems to be published in English. It appeared in Earl Birney's poetry journal *Prism International* in 1965 translated into English by Rosenfarb herself with the original Yiddish text printed on the facing page.⁶ Here are the first and penultimate stanzas:

Praise

Praise likewise the day
 standing still like a water—
 a mirror without a reflection.
 Though hours that glide
 Through its hazy-pale surface
 like breath-carried skaters
 are shunning the lighted eye of awareness,
 erasing their footprints
 before they are falling—
 Praise likewise that day
 you will never remember.

Praise likewise that day
when no letters are coming,
no tidings arriving,
not good ones, not bad ones—
when silent the bell at your door
and the telephone's mute
and the loudest of echoes
that reaches your being
is that of a kiss
that your baby gives you
with lips sweet as honey...

Like the story "Sarah Zonabend" this poem deals with a lack of events, but unlike the ironic ending of the short story, there is no double meaning here. The poem means what it says about praising the day when nothing happens, when no letters come, when the doorbell is silent, when the telephone is mute. A day in which nothing happens is, from the perspective of a Holocaust survivor, a day that is precious, because there is no anxiety about what may happen next. If it is a day without event, it is also a day without humiliation, hunger, brutality, deportation or death.

A similar rejoicing in the everyday can be found in "Breakfast," in which the speaker makes breakfast for her beloved out of the various aspects of a sunny morning.⁷ And yet, here there is a hint that everyday life contains both joy and its opposite. The very first verse speaks of a distance expressed in contraries: "It is as far from you to me/ As from a tear to a smile./ It is as near from me to you/ As from the night to the day," thus implying both estrangement and sorrow as well as intimacy and joy. Despite the loving tone of the rest of the poem, the opposites do not get resolved at the end, when the speaker says that she will sit down between the smile and the tear, the day and the night, directly opposite her lover. The image is as much one of confrontation as it is of sharing.

A similar back-and-forth dynamic can be found in Rosenfarb's poems to and about her children. In the short poem, "Child," the emotions associated with motherhood appear at first

glance to evoke nothing darker or more complicated than wonder and joy. But the middle verse hints at something less positive:

Once I would spin languid songs
with a lilt of barely heard chords.
Today my best poem's a child.
My silence sings brighter than words.

There is an acknowledgement in the subtext of this poem of all that a mother must give up in order to care for a child, especially a mother who is also a poet and who must fall into silence, albeit a silence that “sings brighter than words.” Nevertheless, the poem celebrates an otherwise uncomplicated joy in motherhood, a joy that shades into anxiety about the child's welfare in other poems, such as “A Dress for my Child,” in which the speaker worries that no matter how well she sews her daughter's dress it will never be enough to shield the little girl from dangers posed by the outside world. But then we get the odd reversal that ends the poem, “My Children.” This poem begins conventionally enough with an apostrophe to the poet's children, which compares them to candelabras (menoras in the Yiddish original) that light the way to the future, connecting the poet to succeeding generations:

Children, glorious candelabras
which I carry to tomorrow and tomorrow.
Lead me, lead me, I shall follow,
like an ever-present shadow,
'til my hands shall through your
fingers touch the secrets
of the furthest endless futures;
'til through you my steps will join
in the round of the horizon—
to fulfill the perfect orbit
of our destiny accomplished.

The second verse revisits the trope of children as living poems, which we saw in the poem “Child.” In fact, it expands on this theme, connecting the children not only to poetry but also to mystical notions of purity and transcendence. The poet

implies that her children are more perfect than any poetry could be; they are the word of “sheer perfection.”

Children, you're my poems,
molded to the shape of bodies,
hummed into the lines of lips and
sung into the forms of earlobes.
Lead me, lead me from my stammer,
which is weaker than a murmur,
to the source of vibrant music
hovering in its completeness
somewhere in a lofty temple,
cleansed and pure in all its beauty,
and so simple in its clearness—
as the word of sheer perfection.

The exalted tone of such verses make it clear that the poem is intended as an expression of a mother's love transmuted into a form of religious devotion, so it is startling that the last verse should read like this:

Sweet, consuming, hungry godheads,
I'm the bite of bread you swallow.
I'm the milk and I'm the fruitskin
bursting open on your palate.
Take me, drink me and devour me
so that I may go on drumming
on your hearts with every heart beat,
with the rhythm of all your pulses—
So that you may keep protected
that mysterious spark within you,
that unknown seed of being
Life entrusted us to carry—
So that I may smile one morning
once again at you, my children,
from my crib where you will rock me.

Not only do the children here become devouring little gods who live off the flesh of their mother, but the mother herself becomes the child—more than a child, she becomes a baby in the crib. The older generation nurses the younger to adulthood and in the process becomes so totally dependent on

providing for and nourishing the young that the parent becomes the child; dependence reverses the roles of the generations. The poem, of course, also looks ahead to the end of life, when adult children become the parents of their parents. It is an acknowledgement of the interdependence of the generations and of how time itself alters their relationship to one another.

And yet the suggestion of cannibalism at the end of a poem intended to express love for children hints as well at something darker, at the inevitable destructiveness of time, at the inherent cruelty of one generation displacing the earlier generation that nurtured it to maturity. These kinds of depredations are rooted in the everyday; they are tied to the forces of biology and chronology. Unlike war, they are not man-made. And so the loving tone in the poem "My Children" can co-exist with an acknowledgement of the price that parents pay when they rear children.

A similar theme animates the poem "Little Lives," which describes a married couple as if they were children playing at house.

Little Lives

The little wife Felicia is delicious,
 Although she is slightly capricious.
 But so is dear Felix, her hubby,
 who is virile, clean-shaven and chubby.

They play at marriage with gadgets and baubles
 and vary their boredom with squabbles.
 Some sports and also some weeping
 they practice in bed, when not sleeping.

They have a neat cozy housie,
 where Felicia plays mummy and spousie,
 taking care of her carriage and dollies,
 making pies and sweet jam roly-polies.

As for Felix, her clean-shaven hubby,
 he runs between work and his hobby.
 When it is not some skirt that he chases,
 he joins the boys at the races.

Now bitter, now witty, he rattles
his sword in everyday battles,
for success which is equal to zero,
but which makes him feel like a hero.

But sometimes amidst fun, amidst quarrel,
Felicia's tummy gets round as a barrel.
And Felix, while chasing ideals,
is called to a war that is real.

And in labour Felicia screams—aye!
On the battlefield Felix moans—och!
Faced with birth or with death, only then,
Does Felicia become woman and Felix a man.

The husband and wife of the poem, whose echoing names in the English version derive from the Latin word for happiness, can afford to play at house and indulge in petty squabbles because nothing serious happens to them. Until it does. And then the insignificant events of everyday life lose their childish quality and force the couple to grow up. Again the unspoken contrast is the war. Although the poem was written during the period of the Vietnam war, it is really the Second World War that haunts the poem, a war that forced Rosenfarb and others of her generation to grow up too quickly, and deprived them of the possibility of taking everyday life for granted.

A word about translation and its constraints: The Yiddish original of this poem conveys its childish flavour through the insistent use of diminutives until the very last line. This is very difficult to do in English, which lacks a similar range of rhyming diminutives. But I think that Rosenfarb's translation here is good enough to give a sense of how the verses are intended to mimic the world of children who play at being adult. Another difference has to do with proper names. In the Yiddish original the female character is named Gloria or Soreh and the male character is Johnny or Chayim, i.e. each has a Jewish name and a non-Jewish name. There are two ways to look at this: on the one hand, the dual names may suggest that life deals the same hand to Jews and to non-Jews. But it may also be an allusion to

the assimilationist tendencies of Jews who forsake their own culture, represented by the Yiddish names, for that of the land in which they live. In this case, since the non-Jewish names are common Anglo-Saxon appellations that country would be Canada. But this cultural ambiguity is lost in the English translation which confers on the male and female characters echoing Latinate names. The English version thus subtly changes the implicit meaning of the poem by suggesting, not assimilation or universality, but the similarity between the fates of men and women.

But if the events of daily existence lived out in peaceful times cannot compare in intensity and consequence with wartime, they do nevertheless contain their own small depredations and these can be as devastating in their own way as the more horrific events of the Holocaust. The poem “The Three Little Goldfish” is a good example of this. In this poem, the housewife forgets to feed her goldfish for several days, thereby causing their deaths. The reason for her neglect is that her husband has forgotten to kiss her and she fears that he has “left his heart/ on the other side of the door.” The neglect of the wife by her husband is therefore made equal to the neglect of the fish by the wife. The fish die as a consequence and the reader is left to wonder if the lack of love will similarly affect the wife. Yet the equation seems somehow disproportionate. How does one compare loss of life to the misery of a missed kiss? The fate of the goldfish is after all so much more serious than the fate of the wife. This message is brought home by the poem’s last verse which focuses on the couple’s baby, who is happily oblivious to the guilty tears of its mother.

The baby in its crib,
 sleep washed from its eyes,
 smiles, its eyelashes dipped in the sky.
 And the woman?
 She counts her tears,
 like lost sheep
 as they drip

from her blouse's lace
into the water—
And she sees the golden end
in the face
of the mirror-like bottom.

This poem uses the mundane event of dead fish in a fishbowl to speak about unhappiness in a marriage. The unhappiness itself is rather mundane, based around a forgotten kiss that causes the housewife to forget to feed the fish who rely on her for sustenance. The alienation of a spouse's affection in marriage is not, after all, an earth-shaking, out-of-the-ordinary occurrence. Yet, in this case, it causes a death. Three deaths in fact. Just as the woman relies on the love of her husband for emotional nourishment, so do the goldfish rely on her care for life. The two events are related, and yet, the consequences of neglect are not the same.

I would like to end by looking at a poem that was originally written in English and was not published with Rosenfarb's other poems in *Aroys fun gan-eydn*. This poem is called "Exile at Last."

Exile at Last

So she had gone,
forgetting to cry,
without saying goodbye
even to the dog.
Without letting her eyes embrace
the walls between which she had paced,
without touching the things she was leaving
behind,
things cherished for years.
Without kissing him whom she had loved
even in her mind.
She locked the door to her past,
An exile at last.
So many roads leading from this street—
to which should she turn her feet?
Never mind. They are all the same:
highways of longing, expressways of pain,

boulevards of estrangement, alleys of fear,
no matter where she would turn to go from
here.

Mountains of snow have covered
sweet, forgotten memories with blankets of
sorrow,
an icy topping upon freshly dug graves.
The taxi speeding between yesterday and
tomorrow.

“Please, driver, turn back. I have
forgotten to take along...I must...”

“Like what, my dear?”

“Like home...like the past...”

“Forget it, lady,
you’re an exile at last.”

On the surface the poem tells of a woman leaving behind her home and presumably her marriage. But it moves from the domestic realm of the dog left behind, the house forsaken, the husband unkissed to a description of a variety of symbolic roadways, all of them made up of negatives: longing, pain, estrangement, fear. And the poem ends by appropriating the biblical concept of *galut*, exile, to the situation of a woman leaving her home and her marriage. In the Bible when God wants to punish the people of Israel He sends them into exile. The notion of exile is thus a concept deeply embedded in Jewish religion and culture. The speaker here is exiled from her past. But which past is it? Is it the past of her marriage or the past of the Jewish people, forever doomed to wander? The poem’s use of the term “exile” merges the personal with the historical and the biblical.

And this in turn alludes to Rosenfarb’s own history. For her, Canada itself was the land of exile — and it was an exile that, unlike that depicted in the poem, was not voluntary. First she was forced by war out of Poland, the country of her birth. She then lived as a Displaced Person in Germany before crossing the border illegally into Belgium. After five years in Belgium she was forced by law to emigrate and eventually found safe haven in Canada. But, as she writes in the 1971

introduction to the English translations of her poems, she never felt entirely at home in Canada:

I do not feel at home in this country. Here, in Montreal, in the Province of Quebec, I have lived for two decades between the two solitudes—in my own solitude. My alienation is due to natural causes, if I may call them that, and is incurable. It is due to my being a writer, a woman and a Jew of the Diaspora, the eternally restless, eternally wandering Jew. But this share of my alienation I accept and recognize as part and parcel of my identity. . .

For many years, Canada, and through it, the wide world has spoken to me in many voices; it has enriched me, it has quite often enraged and frustrated me; it has coloured the taste of my daily life. And so I think that it is now my turn to speak in the hopes of finding some receptive ears. I write not only from the experience of being Jewish, but also from the experience of being a woman in this turbulent century.

The poems of domestic bliss and sorrow that Rosenfarb wrote in Canada are indeed the poems of a woman and a Jew. The unspoken contrast here is always to the Holocaust. Domestic unhappiness is still unhappiness, and that is the experience of the woman. But how can one compare the pain caused by a failed marriage to the misery caused by hunger, disease, brutality and murder? And that is the experience of the Jew. That is why Rosenfarb's poems of everyday life have a double edge. They praise the uneventfulness of the everyday, and yet despair at its emptiness, an emptiness punctuated by small tragedies. And while the tragedies of the everyday are serious, at least they are part of life. And life, with all its pains, should be celebrated.

Endnotes

¹ “A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend,” in *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*. Trans. Goldie Morgentaler (Toronto: Cormorant, 2004), 63-81.

² *Aroys fun gan-eydn* [Out of Paradise] (Tel Aviv: Peretz farlag, 1965).

³ For an autobiographical account of how Rosenfarb came to publish her first poem, see “My Debut,” *Midstream* 35, no. 3 (April 1989): 26-9.

⁴ This quotation is excerpted from an unpublished English-language lecture called “Confessions of a Yiddish Writer.” This lecture is a reworked and translated version of a Yiddish article by Rosenfarb that was originally published as “*A vide fun a mekhaber*” [A Writer’s Confession], *Di goldene keyt* 81 (1973): 127-141.

⁵ For a discussion of two of Rosenfarb’s Holocaust poems, please see my essay, “The Prayer House of Chava Rosenfarb: Poetry, Religion and the Shadow of the Holocaust,” in *Literature and Theology* 24, no. 2 (June 2010), 161-174.

⁶ “Praise.” In English. Trans. the author. *Prism International* 5 n. 2 (Autumn, 1965): 30-33.

⁷ This poem and all the others, with the exception of “Exile at Last,” were published in Yiddish in *Aroys fun gan-eydn*.

Endnotes

¹ See Brad Sabin Hill, "Early Hebrew Printing in Canada," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 38/39 (2002), 306-347.

² Rebecca Margolis, "Jewish Print Culture" in Patricia Fleming, et al, eds. *History of the Book in Canada* vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007): 305-307.

³ Hill notes the apostate Bishop of Huron, Isaac Hellmuth, wrote typographically complex works such as his unfinished *Biblical Thesaurus* (1884), which were printed in England, and even simpler texts such as liturgies were often printed in Philadelphia.

⁴ Zalman Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater*, Vol. 1 (New York: Elisheva Press, 1931): 736.