Translation / Traduction

164
Goldie Morgentaler

Translator’s Introduction to “Binele Gives Birth”
“Binele Gives Birth” is an excerpt from *Letters to Abrasha*, Chava Rosenfarb’s last untranslated novel, which was published in Yiddish in 1992 as *Briv tsu Abrashn*. Like Rosenfarb’s other work, this novel deals with the Holocaust, but it goes further than either the earlier trilogy *Der boym fun lebn* (1972) (translated as *The Tree of Life*) or the two-volume *Boishani* (1983) (translated as *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*) in describing the death camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, and it does so in unflinching detail. *Letters to Abrasha* does not, however, start with the war; it begins in its immediate aftermath, in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons camp, where the book’s heroine, Miriam Polin, is recovering from the typhus she contracted in the camp.

Miriam learns that Abrasha, a man who had been a close family friend before the war, is alive and recuperating from a serious illness in a hospital in Bernau, Germany. She begins to write letters to him. The rest of the novel unfolds in flashbacks as Miriam recounts the story of her life in these letters to her friend, beginning with the courtship of her parents in Lodz in the period immediately after the First World War. One of the episodes that Miriam recounts is that of her elder sister’s birth. “Binele Gives Birth” is that account.

I chose this scene for inclusion in this special issue, not only because it is dramatic in itself and can stand on its own without requiring too much exposition for those who have not read the novel, but also because it fuses two of the main themes of the pre-war part of the narrative: the flourishing cultural and political life of Jewish Lodz between the two world wars, and the workaday existence of Jewish textile workers, who often laboured in factories owned by Jewish bosses. Binele, the woman who gives birth in this extract, is one of these textile workers, employed as a *shotopek*, a fixer of faults in fabric, at a factory with a Jewish owner. Both Binele and her husband Yacov are members of the Jewish Socialist Bund, a political party that played a large role in Jewish political, cultural, and social life in Poland in the inter-war period.

The first half of *Letters to Abrasha* deals with the everyday life of a young woman growing to maturity in Poland before the Second World War. In its focus on the fate of one family, the novel highlights the deep politicization of the Jewish community of Lodz, as well as the constant battle with Polish anti-Semitism.

I like the scene depicted in “Binele Gives Birth” because it ends on a hopeful note; everyone behaves well, and the ending seems to signal a kind of rapprochement between the workers and their bosses. That this harmony will soon dissipate turns this account of a birth into a glimmer of hope illuminating the dark background of Jewish life in Poland during the 1920s and 30s.

I have been working on the English translation of *Briv tsu Abrashn* for ten years now and hope to be done by the end of 2021. Before she died I promised my mother that I
would translate this novel and try to find a publisher for it. Many things have slowed
down my progress, but as I write this piece, I am closer to the end than the begin-
ning. It has been a labour of love, which I will be sorry to see end, because as I trans-
late I feel that my mother has come to life, even though she has been dead now for
ten years. I can hear her voice reading the Yiddish aloud as I sit by the computer and
tell her how I would translate what she has just read to me. This is how we used to
work when she was alive and I was translating her work into English. Unfortunately,
now I have no one to ask for clarification when I get stuck on a word or am unsure of
a meaning. I can no longer pester my mother about which part of her fiction is “real”
and which part is made up – questions that she was always reluctant to answer. But
as I work on her text, I can feel her talking to me. Of all the pleasures that one may
derive from translating, this is the one I least expected and the one I most treasure.

1 Norman Ravvin’s essay in this special
issue is focused on “In the Boxcar,”
another extract from Letters to
Abrasha and the only part of the novel
to date that has been published in
English. “In the Boxcar” first appeared
in the Malahat Review 188 (Autumn
2014): 37–68 and was republished
in Tablet Magazine on January 27,
sections/arts-letters/articles/in-the-
boxcar.

2 The two volumes of Botshani were
published in Rosenfarb’s own English
translation under separate titles
as Bociany and Of Lodz and Love
(Syracuse: Syracuse University Press,
2000).
"Binele Gives Birth"
Extract from *Letters to Abrasha* by Chava Rosenfarb

The winter of 1922–23 is brutally cold, with frequent blizzards followed by periods of bitter cold that hold the city in their grip for days on end. The streets are forever wrapped in white fogs of snow and gray gusts of smoke.

Binele goes to work as usual. At the factory, she lies to everybody about when she is due to deliver. But then comes a dreary day in February. She is doing her work by the dingy light of the electric bulbs, her mind dulled by the hiss of the transmission belts and the monotonous roar of the machines. Her thoughts wander in a no-man's land of undefined impressions as her hands mechanically fix the faulty runs in the weaving and straighten the bulges and knots in the fabric spread before her.

She feels a sudden ache deep in her abdomen, followed by a searing pain. For a moment she cannot breath. Soon the ache is gone, but with teeth dug into her lower lip, she awaits its return. When it does return, she feels herself caught in an agony of pain which she can only ease with a muffled moan. The pain returns even more insistently the third time. She can no longer stifle her scream. The contractions arrive with increasing frequency and strength. A commotion as the other women rush to help her. She wants to stand up but cannot, although many hands are supporting her, so heavy has she become with her stone-hard belly. Going home is out of the question. All she wants to do is sink to the floor, and find relief from the spasms that are torturing her body.

She feels herself being lifted. Two foremen and three other men from the neighboring hall are carrying her down the stairs. The factory roars with the echoes of the upheaval in her body; her head roars like a factory.

“Yacov! Send for Yacov!” she implores the electric bulbs peering down at her from the ceiling. She aches to be held by Yacov, to have him cool her perspiring forehead, to have him comfort her with those soft-sounding words of love that hold such power over her. No, that’s not what she needs him for. She needs him to vent the rage of her suffering on him, to yell at him for having inflicted this misery on her. He is not even here; he is letting her die alone, she, who is still at the beginning of things, still so young and greedy for life. Oh, women have small brains for sure, their memories are short-lived like those of cats; they forget the horrors of childbirth so quickly, experiencing them again and again, never warning other ignorant and uninitiated young women of what is in store for them. But not she, not Binele! If she survives this experience, she will remember it. And never, never in her life will she go through this again – never!
She lies prostrate on a leather sofa on a mattress of newly woven cloth. Mr. Moscovitch, the factory owner himself, is holding her hand and stroking her head. She is too deeply absorbed in her torment to be awed by his presence. He tells her, “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything.” His face shines above hers like a glowing lamp. “I’ve sent for the midwife. She’ll be here any minute.” He says something else, but she no longer hears him, her ears deafened by the heavy cramps constricting her belly. Every time a pain grips her belly, she loses her breath and clutches Mr. Moscovitch’s hand like a vice.

“Save me! Send for Yacov! Save me!” she screams between one contraction and the next.

Mr. Moscovitch has disappeared. Two women are now holding her hands. There are other women milling about the room. As they flutter around her, their white head scarves make them look like a flock of storks from her native Bociany. Oh, what comforting stories she had been told as a little girl about storks bringing babies from the heavens.

The women rush back and forth, carrying kettles and basins of steaming water. Steam rises into the air, licking the frost on the window pane. Binele sees it all from very far away and yet as sharply and clearly as if a needle were engraving it on her memory forever. Then she is gripped by a spasm that refuses to let go.

“Yacov! Help me!”

“Inhale and push! Inhale and push!” a female voice commands, while two heavy hands tell her the same by pressing against her belly, letting her know that there is no possibility of retreat; that the only solution is to force out that precious bundle of pain, to displace the intruder from the core of her being. She must inhale and push it out!

“Come out, you devil. Come out, my angel! Faster! Faster!” she pleads through clenched teeth, her cheeks crimson, puffed with the strain of pushing. With her last ounce of strength she implores the little being who has slid down towards the bottom of her abdomen to hurry up and arrive.

“It’s coming! It’s coming!” a squeaky female voice sings out.

“It’s co–ming! It’s co–ming!” Binele gasps, pushing with all the power of her will – until the final explosion.

Her daughter arrives on a red carpet of blood, born on a heap of material woven at
Mr. Moscovitch's textile factory. A truly proletarian daughter. She takes possession of the world with a powerful howl, as befits a daughter of revolutionaries.

The baby is lying on Binele's belly. By her side stands Yacov. Near the door, at the far end of the room stands another man, Binele's boss, Mr. Moscovitch, her class enemy and her protector, the man who held her hand during those terrible moments. Tears mixed with perspiration sting her eyes as she sees Yacov approach Mr. Moscovitch and gratefully shake his hand. Mr. Moscovitch, who is still quite a young man, is deeply moved by what has just happened inside his sumptuously furnished business office, and by the role he has just played in the drama of birth. He wipes his face with a white, pressed handkerchief, breathing heavily as if as he were the one who had just brought a child into the world. Binele, still in a daze, beams a smile at him. “I will always remember you for the best, Mr. Moscovitch,” she declares.

Translation by Goldie Morgentaler