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City, Writer, Conference: A Chava Rosenfarb Conference in Łódź, Poland, October 2023

If you have not been to Łódź you cannot imagine its texture, the strange uniqueness of its streetscape. Walking, one has the sense of a written-over past, or pasts, with rough edges sticking through from departed versions of the city, in a way that is unlike North American, European, even other Polish cities. What is the character of this unfinishedness, this sense of different cities being in view all at once? Something of the late nineteenth, early twentieth-century streetscape remains: one can sense its integrity, and how the boomtown developed a look, a tenement style, a street grid, all in a rush in the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. You find this city in the facades of buildings on major streets—take a walk along Jaracza then onto Wschodnia up to Północna, and certainly along Piotrkowska, the long through-street that ends at the octagonal, now fully under reconstruction "Freedom" square. Set into this city are postwar Soviet-style structures, which appear in the extant pre-World War Two cityscape. These communist-era styles are varied. There are early Stalinist structures, big blocks with some decorative flourishes, sometimes with an adapted version of the traditional carriageway leading to an interior courtyard. But then there are the routinized, sometimes colourfully painted, rectangular buildings found in all Polish cities, without any decorative markings at all, their facades as flat and utilitarian as a Soviet-era packing box.

A prewar sukkah in Łódź.
All photos by Norman Ravvin

The walker catches glimpses of past lives and city infrastructure by entering back courtyards, which are hidden by the facades that buildings show to the street. Tenement courtyards reveal a pre-World War Two Polish footprint, where one sees both gentrification and ruin, detritus, graffitied walls and a potpourri of every possibility of brick and fresco and storage shed, which have met with the ups and downs of postwar years. Sometimes, hidden in these places, are tell-tale artifacts of Jewish economic and social life, timber caravansaries and double-height sukkah structures left behind by their owners when they were forced from their homes by the Germans.

In different states of completion, all over the city, there is renewal. This often comes with a sign acknowledging European Union funding. The focus is on the streets themselves, on new tramway lines, set into intricate granite and stone beds, with attention to wide slate and cobblestone sidewalks and curbing, iron grates around trees, buried spotlights, and beds of neatly planted wild roses that divide the roadway from pedestrians and cyclists. It may be the EU bucks that make the difference, but Łódź's redesign strategies please the eye and the foot.

Alongside the array of improvements, you see the utter failure of businesses (one wonders about the lives of people who owned these) that did not survive the drawn-out process of street repair and the epidemic years. On block after block of aged buildings, some with repainted fronts, others with the tell-tale deterioration of decades on their stucco surfaces, one finds the new stuff under foot, and boarded, graffiti-marked and derelict storefronts alongside.

Workers' tenements on Ogrodowa.

There is something unsettling about this in-the-midstness, while other aspects of city life—viable businesses, the dwellings on upper floors, go dark. I wonder as I walk: where did the proprietor of this florist, that pharmacy, this *fryzjer* go when their efforts flopped in view of endless infrastructure repair? And then there are pieces of the streetscape that are entirely opened up, where old buildings have been removed and construction crews are in the process of clearing the site, leaving sections of Łódź littered with mounds of red brick and other remnants of pulled down buildings. (Here I cannot convey the variety of new developments that are a part of the city's characteristic streetscape, some of them remarkable examples of reuse of the city's manufacturing infrastructure).

One way to experience all this without a visit is to watch the Polish film *Ida*, which won the Best Foreign Film Oscar in 2015. The film's main character leaves a convent in the countryside to visit a relative in what the film presents as early sixties Łódź. Ida rides a tram and watches the streets pass, some reflected and doubled in the glass of the tram window. When the director, Pawel Pawlikowski, sent his location scouts out to plan these scenes there were plenty of locations where communist Łódź, still marked by prewar Łódź, were on display in ways that would require little set dressing. Maybe a wary Pole can spot continuity errors in Pawlikowski's work, but for the rest of us it's a time capsule; the city in 2012 or 2013 is easily transported via silvery, pewter, and black and white footage into the past.

Walking in the city, what did I pass on Ulica Dowborczyków as I made my way to the conference devoted to the Yiddish writer Chava Rosenfarb but the apartment building where one of *Ida*'s characters "lives." Wanda Grus is ground down by her work in corrupt courtrooms, and she shares a grisly wartime Jewish past with her niece Ida. I discovered that the building provided the film set for Grus's house from a plaque attached to its front fence. If you look at stills and clips from *Ida* it is easy to find scenes where the main characters enter the throughway that leads upstairs and into the building's rear courtyard. I wondered about the building's age. It didn't look prewar, nor was it built in a suitably utilitarian, communist style. It had an indiscriminate character, which I consider to be inhabited by the afterlife of the movie. It evoked not the historical contexts I describe above—not the early twentieth-century boomtown, not the postwar communist experiment in failed social change, not even post-Wall Poland. No. It was the cinematic would-be imagined Łódź of the early sixties that came at me, ghostly, on Ulica Dowborczyków. So it was with Chava Rosenfarb, who worked on her major novel of the city, *Der boim fun lebn* (The Tree of Life), in faraway Montreal, imagining the Łódź of her youth, its cloth barons, its Jewish slums, the work floors of cotton manufacture that predated her experience in Montreal sweatshops.

Travel, writing, cinematic viewing and reading, these are the alchemical methods by which one steps back into any version of Łódź you might choose to inhabit.

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The last thing I saw of our conference, "Chava Rosenfarb and Jewish Female Writers of the Twentieth Century," was on the Internet, in online news in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. There I found a report that an "arcade" in central Łódź had been renamed "Pasaż Chavy Rosenfarb." This was the last interaction between the conference-goers and the city itself, including descendants of Rosenfarb and their families. In the posted press photos the family and a few other intrepid conference goers pose with locals to acknowledge the blue and red street sign bearing the new name. The photos are cropped so one can't tell exactly where the new "passage" is, just off Piotrokowska, near to one of the renovated manufacturing complexes where Łódź's redbrick nineteenth-century infrastructure is repurposed for twenty-first century business, socializing, and cultural facilities. The Rosenfarb "passage" is located at the heart of the new Łódź, where young people and those with means go to enjoy the city. This is a juxtaposition with some irony. Chava Rosenfarb was born in Łódź and spent her youth and adolescence in the city as part of a working-class family a generation removed from its village antecedents. Buildings associated with her youth still stand but they are in faraway, less touristic neighbourhoods than that of Piotrkowska. She attended a Bundist Yiddish day school where her idealistic teachers made an impact on her imaginative life, and then a Polish-language high school, with its more

The Rosenfarb family tenement, where Chava lived in her youth.

A repurposed factory not far from the Rosenfarb family tenement.

cosmopolitan approach to language and culture. All this was disrupted by the German occupation of the city on September 8, 1939, and Rosenfarb's literary output, best exemplified by her novel *Der boim fun lebn,* depicts her prewar life and the Holocaust calamity that interrupted it, first in the Łódź Ghetto and then at Auschwitz and other German camps that transformed the nature of central Poland.

The international conference devoted to Rosenfarb took place in October 2023, suitably close to Bałuty, the neighbourhood where the Germans corralled some 164,000 Łódź Jews, and not far from the large Jewish cemetery that remains largely intact, a mate to the similarly overwhelming and beautiful Okopowa cemetery not far from the centre of Warsaw.

Conference-goers represented a variety of Rosenfarbists, some who have been dedicated to her for years and others, younger, who have come to her work as part of recent interest in Yiddish culture and literature. There were Poles among the people who gave papers, as well as Montrealers, young scholars and writers from Sweden, London, New York, California, Toronto, and elsewhere. Some focus their energies on translating Rosenfarb, helping to move her writing into a variety of European languages, while furthering, too, the substantial amount of her work that has ap-

peared over the years in English. Translation is remaking Chava Rosenfarb in our time. Especially in Poland, and particularly in Łódź, Rosenfarb has reappeared, like a returning traveler, as a writer of the Polish city where she grew up, a woman whose work is being newly woven into the fabric of the city's culture, its view of itself, its ongoing efforts to address the city's important Jewish past that is largely unseen in daily life. The resurgence of Rosenfarb presents an interesting possibility of Jewishness reasserting itself in new ways.

A divide was apparent among the conference-goers with regard to these kinds of projects, signaling disagreement about their motivation and potential for success. I tend to view such things with open eyes, with a visitor's willingness to take things as they come, unwarily. But there is good reason at times to use a colder eye to look on things like the much loved bronze street-side statues of the Jewish poet Julian Tuwim and the Jewish pianist Arthur Rubinstein, to recognize that they represent a certain kind of Jewish Pole or Polish Jew, an artistic figure so fully accepted by the global cultural canon that placing them on the main drag may not be the act of reconciliation that the open-eyed among us receive it as. Of course, a good guide will lead you to the grave of Tuwim's mother in the Jewish cemetery and tell you of her terrible murder by Germans in Otwock and of the son's efforts to have her buried properly in Łódź after the war. But this brings the awfulness of German Nazis in wartime into the picture, and they are fortunately no longer walking the byways of Piotrkowska in the city they renamed Litzmannstadt.

The Julian Tuwim Monument amidst a media scrum.

Placing the Rosenfarb "passage" near the repurposed section off Piotrkowska called the "Off Center," a set of refurbished buildings, has its own charge and challenge; what one thinks of such things depends upon whether one is a Canadian novelist, an American academic, a Polish translator of Jewish women writers, or simply a tourist without memory concerns, who is in search of a good Polish lager. In the photographs taken at the unveiling of the Rosenfarb "passage" we see Rosenfarb's daughter Goldie Morgentaler, who has been an active translator and supporter of her mother's work all her adult life. An academic herself, Morgentaler has maintained two parallel streams of activity in her professional life. At the University of Lethbridge in southern Alberta she taught Dickens alongside American authors until her recent retirement. While her mother was alive and after she maintained a steady stream of translating projects, creating networks of reception in Canada and abroad that continue to bear fruit today. The latest of these is the Łódź conference itself, mounted by the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center, an impressive outfit in a modernist building with its own landscape of commemorative objects on suburban grounds, as well as by the University of Łódź. The opening of the conference included statements of welcome from local politicians, and this had a certain sweetness to it—at least for the open-eyed among us—because it was only a few days prior to the conference's opening that the awful Law and Justice party, whose nationalist activities raised one cynical and destructive policy after the next with regard to national memory, was tossed out in an election that many Poles viewed as the most important one since the end of the communist era.

The Rosenfarbists then, along with their colleagues who gave papers on related authors and movements—from Cynthia Ozick to Adele Wiseman, to Esther Kreitman and Rokhl Korn— came to do their work in close proximity to great and important change in Poland.

One of the issues that conference attendees may have taken home with them is the question: What will become of Rosenfarb and her work in Poland in the future? Reading her in Polish is something I cannot experience—I know her *Tree of Life* in Morgentaler's English translation and have grappled, too, with it and other work, including Rosenfarb's short stories, poems, and essays, in the original Yiddish. As her works become a part of the reception of her birthplace, in Polish readers' hands they become something new.

The Izrael Poznański Palace reflected in street art.

It has been the Edelman Center's ongoing project to bring Rosenfarb out in Polish translation. The conference included something related to this—a musical setting of some of Rosenfarb's earliest poems, written in Yiddish in the ghetto, taken from her on the ramp at Auschwitz, and reconstituted by memory after the war. The fragments of poetry the vocalist sang over a pulsing, at times strident, at times meditative musical setting, divided the room. Here the open- and cold-eyed listeners chose their own view of new forms of reception of Rosenfarb. Led by the music's composer, with an electric guitar hung over his shoulder at the level where one might swing a scythe, the female vocalist, a clarinetist, keyboardist, and accordionist produced a kind of art theatre, a soundtrack for a sad and beautiful eastern European world out of often repeated words, among them *wolność*, the Polish translation of the Yiddish *freiheit* (freedom), that is the central motif in the early poem "Dort oif yener zeit." This is a ghetto poem whose English translation is titled "Freedom." Like the Rosenfarb passage off Piotrkowska, and a variety of provocative murals that have been placed around the city to commemorate Rosenfarb and her work (one is called "Tree of Life" after the novel), the music created its own painful atmosphere reminiscent of such Polish figures as Tadeusz Konwicki and Bruno Schulz. It was itself evocative of

the Polish moment, of efforts at reconciliation, of return to the past, to its vanished Jewish literary life and personalities.

For the cold-eyed in the conference audience there was something disconnected and alien in the performance, in its response to Rosenfarb's ghetto poetry. I didn't feel this way, but I understood this way of responding after talking to people who did.

If one were to make a documentary film that would capture the outcomes of "Chava Rosenfarb and Jewish Female Writers of the Twentieth Century," the greatest and most pressing challenge would be to convey this range of emotions, responses, and judgements regarding the outcome of a revival of interest in Rosenfarb in Poland, and especially in Łódź. These issues may not reverberate strongly in Montreal, New York, or Stockholm, but those of us who attended the conference bring these issues home. They lurk in the photographs we took, in things we'll tell friends and family, and, one would hope, in what we write or make in response to what we saw and heard.

Plac Wolności under repair at the top of Ulica Piotrkowska.

Łódź is a sad and beautiful place. This is my view and would not be shared by everyone I spent time with in the city. It's a true palimpsest, a thing written over by calamitous history and also one created originally by a particularly Polish kind of multiculturalism, once fed by its Polish, Jewish, German, and Russian influences. To the visitor it is a puzzle to be pieced together. Increasingly, Chava Rosenfarb is a part of that puzzle. It will take some time to recognize what shape her part in the puzzle will take on Piotrkowska, with the Edelman activists, and in the minds of translators, visitors and readers.