

Jewish Humanists Honoured

By Bennett Muraskin

In this series we are featuring profiles of leading secular and humanistic Jews from various countries and eras. These profiles are written by Bennett Muraskin, a regular contributor to Outlook, Humanistic Judaism and Jewish Currents. Many of these profiles appear in Bennett's book *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Humanistic Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman*, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Center for Cultural Judaism. (For ordering information contact CSJO at csjo@csjo.org.)



Adrienne Rich (1929—)



Wreck won a National Book Award for Poetry in 1974. This honour established her reputation as a leading American poet. In 1976, she published a major work of non-fiction, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Her poetry collection *Dreams of a Common Language* (1978) was one of the first to deal explicitly with lesbian sexuality. One of her more influential essays, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," was published in her collection *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, which appeared in 1979. Many other books of poetry and essays followed which played a major role in redefining the role of women. *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1994) also included meditations on Jewish-

Now a well-respected poet and essayist, Adrienne Rich's journey as a Jew and a woman has been anything but smooth. She was born to an assimilated Jewish father and an Episcopalian mother, both with Southern roots. Raised in Baltimore as a Christian in a wealthy WASP environment, she felt conflicted about her heritage. Perhaps due to the presence in her life of her paternal grandparents, immigrants from Austria and Hungary, she privately considered herself more Jewish than Christian. Or maybe it was the fact that her father's advancement as professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins was delayed due to anti-Semitism.

Rich attended Radcliffe College in Cambridge Massachusetts. In 1951, during her senior year, she wrote her first book of poetry, *A Change of World*, which was selected by poet W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Award. The next year she received a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled to Europe. In 1953 she married Alfred Conrad, who came from an observant Jewish New York City family. While he taught economics, first in Harvard and then in City College of New York (CCNY), Rich continued to write poetry and raised three sons. Her third volume of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), reflected her growing maturity as a poet and her deepening commitment to challenge the subordinate status of women.

At the same time, Rich became involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam-war movements. She also taught writing as a part-time professor at CCNY, Swarthmore College outside Philadelphia, and Columbia University. Her early poetry was influenced by T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, but as she became more political in the 1960s, she drew inspiration from the pioneering Jewish feminist poet Muriel Rukeyser. Her books of poems from this period, *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969) and *Will To Change* (1971) reflect a growing sense of social activism. Her marriage faltered and her husband died prematurely in 1970.

By the early 70s, Rich became a feminist, and in 1976 she came out as a lesbian. Her *Diving Into the*

ness and whiteness.

In 1997 Rich turned down a National Medal of Arts award in protest against President Clinton's welfare reform legislation, which, she believed, punished poor women and their children. In her letter of refusal she wrote, "There is no simple formula for the relationship of art to justice. But I do know that art... means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power that holds it hostage. The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate. A president cannot meaningfully honor certain artists while the people at large are so dishonored."

Rich's emergence as a self-described Jewish radical took place in the 1980s, with her autobiographical "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity." She was an early supporter of New Jewish Agenda and a founding editor of the Jewish feminist journal *Bridges*. Jewish themes became an important theme in her poetry, and in 2003 she received a literary award from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Asked in a 1999 interview about her Jewish identity, Rich responded, "Being Jewish has meant a question, not only as in 'the Jewish Question,' but as a woman, a lesbian, a patrilineal Jew, a non-Zionist, within the whole argument and contestation about 'being Jewish.'" These questions have led her to some refreshing insights. She "wonders if there has been anything more impoverishing to Jewish ethical and intellectual culture...than the idea of Jewish sameness, Jewish unanimity, marching under one tribal banner. Dissidence and argument...have been acutely characteristic of Jewish life, political or religious, Socialist or Talmudic: the question that begets another question."

Rich's heroes, then, are "secular heretics and radicals who have repeatedly emerged at the crossroads of culture and thought." She perceives a grave threat to this tradition in the Jewish establishment which appropriates the Holocaust as uniquely Jewish, stifles

continued on following page

criticism of Israel and makes unholy alliances with the Christian Right.

Her own critique of Israel and Zionism appears in an essay "Jewish Days and Nights," included in *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2003) edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon. There she argues that "As long as a solution...is sought in nationalistic terms, both Arab and Jew are condemned to a vicious circle of hatred and revenge...In the long run a way out may be found beyond the nation state, perhaps within the framework of a Middle East federation." Meanwhile, she works with organizations such as Brit Tzedek v'Shalom (Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace) and supports the work of Israeli organizations such as Gush Shalom, Women in Black and Rabbis for Human Rights.

Rich is not a Zionist, but a Diasporist in the tradition of Isaac Deutscher, whose Jewishness was based first and foremost on internationalism and solidarity with the oppressed and persecuted, Jewish and gentile. These ideals are poignantly expressed in her poem "Eastern War Time," which is characteristically full of Jewish references:

Memory says: Want to do right? Don't count on me.
I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
I'm a field with corners left for the landless
I'm accused of child-death of drinking blood
I'm a man-child praising God he's a man
I'm a woman bargaining for a chicken
I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
I am a family dispersed between night and fog
I'm an immigrant tailor who says *A coat is not a piece of cloth only*
I sway in the learnings of the master mystics
I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
I have dreamed that my children could live at last like others
I have walked the children of others through ranks of hatred
I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
A river in Mississippi
I'm a woman standing with other women dressed in black
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
There is spit on my sleeve there are phone calls in the night
I am a woman standing in line for gasmasks
I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening
I am standing here in your poem unsatisfied
lifting my smoky mirror

—from *Atlas of a Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*

GORSHMAN...

Continued from page 18

folk wisdom of women is unabashedly elevated to an almost mythic quality. In her obituary, the *Forverts* noted: "The central hero in her work is the woman as a folk-figure in this uneasy historical epoch. This particular figure, through whom the writer embodied the important problems of reality, always appears in a time when the foundations of old forms of social organization are broken, and new relationships and alliances in social life and in the life of a new kind of family are being constructed."

Other critics note that Gorshman's most important thematic is

"*beyn odem lekhaveyre*"—the responsibility of each person for every other. Perhaps in keeping with this thematic, Gorshman's work is stylistically more Russian than Yiddish, particularly in its detailed realist portrayals of people and relationships. Yet her stories are very Jewish, not only because most of her characters are Jewish, but because they are consumed by issues of belonging and identity, of creating community and discovering the meaning of our lives.

We do ourselves a disservice by ignoring the Yiddish writers of the former Soviet Union. In its problematic official relationship to Yiddish culture, the Soviet Union served as a huge refugee camp for Yiddish, keeping it alive while con-

tained; Yiddish in the Soviet Union lacked freedom, at times it was demonized, but it retained its inherent humanity. And now there is less excuse for our ignorance, as the National Yiddish Book Center has managed to put 10,000 complete readable and printable Yiddish books online at the Internet Archive. Two of Gorshman's nine books are among them.

For those who don't read Yiddish, there are only two stories currently available, one each in the anthologies *Found Treasures* and *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars*. My translation of "*Tsvishn Berg*" will appear in *Bridges: a Jewish Feminist Journal* this fall. There is a book-length translation available in Hebrew as well.

There are many lacunae also in what is known of Gorshman herself. Her maiden name, for example; what became of her first marriage; what work she did in Moscow. Her stories of the Caucasus hint at a personal journey, yet whether she herself was evacuated there is unclear. But ultimately, it is her stories themselves that are important, vibrant and throbbing with surprises that expand our understanding of what Jewish life was, and is, in all its troubling complexity. ♦

ERRATA

In our January/February issue, the cutline beneath the group photo of Yiddish writers on p. 25 gave the writers' names in reverse order. It should have read as follows: (l.-r.): **A. Reisen, I.L. Peretz, Sholem Ash, Chaim Zhitlovsky, and H.D. Nomberg.**

In Ismail Zayid's letter in the same issue, there was a passage which should have read as follows: "Ben Gurion, when announcing the creation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, refused to define its borders, declaring, 'We are creating a state in the western part of our country.' He later stated in his diaries, after the conquest of 78% of historic Palestine: 'To maintain the status quo will not do. We have set up a dynamic state bent upon expansion' (Ben Gurion diaries, edited by Michael Bar-Zohar, and published in 1954). Israel is thus the only state in the world that has no defined borders."