



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 Judaism From Hillel to Helen Suzman, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Centre for Cultural Judaism.

Chava Rosenfarb (1923—2011)



the last days of the war.

The three survivors crossed over illegally into Belgium, where they lived in a Displaced Persons Camp. Rosenfarb taught in a Yiddish school and resumed writing poetry about her experiences. One poem was accepted by the American Yiddish literary journal *Tsukunft* (*The Future*). Her first collection of ghetto poems *Di balad fun nekhtikn vald* (*The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest*) appeared in 1947, while still in Belgium. Rosenfarb married Henry Morgentaler, her childhood sweetheart from Lodz, and conceived a child. The couple immigrated together

to Canada in 1950, settling in Montreal. In 1954 Rosenfarb graduated from the Jewish Teachers Seminary. Her husband became a medical doctor and beginning in the late 1960s, Canada's foremost advocate of abortion rights. The couple divorced in 1977. Their daughter, Goldie Morgentaler, became a professor of English literature and the chief translator of her mother's works.

Rosenfarb sacrificed her sleep to find time to write while raising two children, while also working and caring for an aging mother. Her poetry collections include *Dos lid fun yidish kelner Abram* (*The song of the Jewish waiter Abram*), about her father; *Geto an andere lider* (*Ghetto and other Poems*); and *Aroys fun gan-eyden* (*Out of Paradise*). She also wrote a play *Der foigl fun geto* (*The Bird of the Ghetto*) about the martyrdom of Isaac Wittenberg, a leader of the resistance in the Vilna Ghetto. Turning to historical fiction, she produced her masterpiece, *Der boym fun lebn* (*The Tree of Life*), published in 1972, a three-volume historical novel of the destruction of the Jewish community of Lodz, spanning the years 1939-1944.

This trilogy was acclaimed throughout the shrinking Yiddish world as a unique contribution to Holocaust literature, and won Rosenfarb many honours, including Israel's prestigious Manger Prize (named after Yiddish poet Itsik Manger), bestowed on her in 1979. *The Tree of Life* has been translated into Hebrew, condensed into a one-volume English version published in Australia, and reissued in a complete English translation as *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto* by the University of Wisconsin Press (2004-2006).

Rosenfarb is also known for a two-volume novel, *Bociany* (1982), a grim story loosely based on the lives of her parents in the years preceding the German invasion of Poland and considered to be a prequel to *The Tree of Life*. She translated it into

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Chava Rosenfarb survived the Holocaust to become the most outstanding Yiddish woman writer in Canada.

She was born in the industrial city of Lodz, Poland into a working-class family that belonged to the Jewish Labour Bund, an organization that advocated for socialism, the Yiddish language and culture, and equal rights for Polish Jews. She was educated at a Bundist elementary school and was active in a Bundist youth organization. Before she graduated from a Polish high school, World War Two broke out and the Nazis herded her family into the Lodz Ghetto. It was there that she managed to receive her diploma.

As a teenager in the Lodz Ghetto, Chava was moved to write poetry. She was discovered by a prominent Yiddish poet, Simcha-Bunim Shayevitch, who introduced her to a Jewish writers' group. In her poem, "Ballad of Yesterday's Forest," she compared Jews to sturdy stumps of trees consumed in a forest fire, whose ashes would nourish new growth. She dedicated the poem to Shayevitch, who perished in Auschwitz, and to another of her mentors, the Bundist leader Arthur Zygelboym, who committed suicide in London to arouse the conscience of the world to stop the Nazi genocide.

To avoid deportation, her family went into hiding, but they were soon discovered and sent to Auschwitz. Chava, her elder sister, and her mother were fortunate to be selected for slave labour rather than extermination. At the war's end they were in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Chava had contracted typhus and was near death when the British Army liberated the camp and saved her life. Upon recovering, she and her sister searched for their father, only to discover that that he had been killed by an American air attack on a train carrying concentration camp prisoners in

are the same under Likud and Labour—it may even be more under Labour. The point is that Zionist ideology justifies this kind of thing.

I had my eyes opened to this at a nonviolence training in Jerusalem in '91 or '92. We did a role-play and the scenario was that right-wing settlers were occupying someone's front yard in a Palestinian village and left-wingers were going to come and oppose them. We had one participant who was a Palestinian Israeli—he was with the left-wing group and I was with the right-wing group. Two things happened that really opened my eyes: one, he noticed how long it took the left-wingers to get their act together and figure out what their strategy would be—even in this role-play they had to say, "Give us more time to get ready." He found this very depressing because it reflected what he had seen in real life.

Second, was that, in the settler group, to pass the

time while we were waiting for the left-wingers to get their act together, we started singing, as settlers often do. Gila Svirsky, who is active in Bat Shalom and the Coalition of Women for Peace, started singing "*Techezakna*" ["May their hand be strengthened..."], and I joined her. I had learned it in a left Labor Zionist youth organization in San Francisco. Gila was brought up religious and had belonged to B'nei Akiva, and their group was taught that song by some kids from Beitar, the youth group of Herut, which merged into Likud.

I listened to the words—"Strengthen the hands of our brothers who are preparing the land by their very being there"—and I thought, "Oh my God, we share this basic mindset—whether Likud or Labour!" No wonder it's so hard for the lefties—unless they are totally anti-Zionist—to actually see clearly. This has been inculcated in them from when they were little kids! ♦

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English herself, and it was published by Syracuse University Press in two volumes as *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love* in 2000. The only novel in which Rosenfarb directly depicted the Jewish suffering and terror in the concentration camp was her last: *Briv tsu Abrashn (Letters to Abrasha)* which appeared in Yiddish in 1992. Her daughter Goldie Morgentaler is currently working on its translation, but an excerpt translated by Workmen's Circle veteran Barnett Zumoff has already appeared in the recently published *Yiddish Literature in America—1870-2000* (2009).

Rosenfarb wrote essays and stories in Yiddish that appeared in *Di goldene keyt (The Golden Chain)*, the Yiddish literary journal published in Israel by the great poet and partisan fighter Avrom Sutzkever who died at age 96, just a year before Rosenfarb. Her stories also appeared in anthologies including *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (1994) and *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by*

Yiddish Women Writers (2007).

In 2004, a collection of her short stories about the lives of Holocaust survivors in Canada appeared in English, translated by her daughter as *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*. It won the Canadian Book Award in 2005 and a Modern Language Library Book Award in 2006.

Rosenfarb was the subject of a documentary aired on CBC radio in 2000. She spoke all over the world on Yiddish literature, including an appearance at the Jewish Book Fair in Vancouver in 2002 in association with the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. In May 2006, the University of Lethbridge, where Goldie Morgentaler teaches, awarded Rosenfarb an honorary degree. In her convocation address to the graduating class, published in the July/August 2006 issue of *Outlook*, she said:

"I never sat in a brightly lit classroom...My university was the Second World War. My classroom was the Lodz Ghetto, my teachers were my fellow inmates there and especially the poets, painters and intellectuals of the doomed writers' commu-

nity, incarcerated between the barbed wire walls of the ghetto, who accepted me at a very early age as a member. So I am a graduate of the Holocaust, of the death camps of Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen. I have matriculated in one of the greatest tragedies known to man....

"I write in Yiddish because it was the language of my home in Poland; it was the language of my childhood and my community; it was the language I knew like the map of my own heart. So I wrote my novels in Yiddish out of a sense of loyalty to the vanished world of my youth, out of a sense of obligation to a world that no longer existed.

"And so here I am—a Yiddish writer on the prairies. A Yiddish writer who must depend on translation in order to be read. A Yiddish writer who has longed all her life for a formal education and an opportunity to belong to an academic community. And here in Lethbridge, so far away from where my life's journey began, as if by magic, that wish has been granted to me... "

Koved ir likhtikn ondenk (We honour her bright memory).♦