exile at last:
Selected Poems
Chava Rosenfarb

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Edited by Goldie Morgentaler

Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities.

GUERNICA
TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2013
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When Chava Rosenfarb arrived in Montreal in February 1950, she was already a published poet with one acclaimed volume, "Di balade fun nekhtikn vald (The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest)" to her credit. She was also a Holocaust survivor who, after being liberated from Bergen Belsen in 1945 had crossed the border illegally into Belgium, where she lived with her mother, sister and husband, all Holocaust survivors. In 1950 Rosenfarb's Montreal publisher, Harry Hershman, who had just published a Canadian edition of "Di balade fun nekhtikn vald" sponsored the entire group to come to Canada. Rosenfarb and her family settled in Montreal.

Almost all of the poems in this collection were originally published in Yiddish. Chava Rosenfarb herself translated most of them into English. The exceptions are: “I Would Go into a Prayer House”; “He Asked Me,” “Daughter,” and “Rachel and Leah,” which I translated. The poems “Peace,” “Bourne End” and “Exile at Last” were originally written in English and have never been published. Some of the other poems have been published in English in Rosenfarb’s own translation: “Praise” in *Prism International* and “Aquarium” in *Judaism*; “At the Window” in the Australian journal *Bridges*; “Bourne End” and “My Children” in the British journal *Jewish Quarterly*; “Rachel and Leah,” “The Three Little Goldfish” and “A Dress for my Child” in the American journal *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal*. A translation of “I Would Go into a Prayer House” by Abraham J. Karp was published in *Conservative Judaism* in Summer 1966 and reprinted in the journal *Jewish Roots* in December 1966. “Isaac’s Dream” and “I Would Go into a Prayer House” were published in the June 2010 issue of *Literature and Theology*.

Most of the poems presented here are from Rosenfarb’s last book of poetry, "Aroys fun gan-eydn (Out of Paradise, 1965). The ghetto poems are from the volume "Di balade fun nekhtikn vald (The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest). I have arranged the poems so that they follow roughly the chronology of Rosenfarb’s life, beginning with the poems she wrote in the Lodz ghetto as a young girl and moving to the more mature poems of her years in Canada. The selection reflects my own preferences. I also want to extend a heartfelt thanks to Rivka Augenfeld for alerting me to the poem “Landscape.”
Rosenfarb’s introduction was also originally written in English and was meant to accompany a translated collection of her own poetry that she compiled in 1971. For reasons unknown, this collection was never published. I am including the introduction here because I feel it is best to let the author speak in her own words. As will be seen, while the introduction focuses on Rosenfarb’s experiences during the Holocaust, only a few of the poems included in this volume date from that period of her life.

Chava Rosenfarb was my mother. She died on January 30, 2011. This volume is my tribute to her, born not only out of great love, but more truly out of great respect for a woman who considered herself first and foremost a writer, a writer who wrote in Yiddish out of fidelity to the lost language of the Jewish community of her youth, a community that was brutally destroyed.

—Goldie Morgentaler

Introduction

There are readers who do not like any introduction to a volume of poetry. They believe that a poem, or for that matter any product of artistic endeavor, should stand on its own and speak for itself. These readers should omit these few introductory pages of prose and go directly to my poems, where I wait to meet them, eager to address them through poetry alone. I respect all definitions of art, but I cherish most the definition which states that art is an expression of the desire to communicate on the most meaningful level.

But I do feel the need to write an introduction. I think that books lacking such an introduction are like houses that one enters directly from the street, still wearing one’s shoes and galoshes, still wrapped in the mood of outdoors. But an introduction to a volume of poetry functions like the anteroom to a house, a vestibule where one may shake off the burden of daily routine, where one may take off one’s coat and boots, catch one’s breath, pause for a minute to absorb the atmosphere of the dwelling one is about to enter.

And there are books, in particular collections of poetry, which are often not just houses, but rather like the Holy of Holies. A Holy of Holies can be a magnificently decorated, magical place; or it can be quite unassuming, simple and even poor. But it is always furnished by the poet’s most intimate thoughts. Here she shelters the most exclusive, the most precious secrets of her being — everything that she has managed to conceal from other peoples’ eyes and often also from her own. Here rest her relics. Here her soul walks barefoot, in rare moments dancing on carpets of Dionysian exhilaration, but more often rolling in pain on stony floors of despair.

Urged on by the desire to communicate, I have written this introduction, as well as this collection of poems. And I have translated them into English. It is an attempt to reach out, to remove the linguistic chains I was born in, chains that are uncomfortable to any writer; because, basically, language is an inadequate and limited instrument. No matter what language a writer speaks, she always hopes that it will be universal, that it will transcend the particular ethnic barriers that language creates.

For twenty-one years I have lived in Canada, the country of promise. There is a magnificent air of freedom about this country, a
freedom which the winds of all seasons, sweeping through the breadth of the continent seem to carry on their wings—an ideal place of escape for those who have been oppressed and enslaved elsewhere, for those who wish to turn over a new leaf, who hope for change, for betterment, who want to live their lives as they please.

However 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 both a writer and a Jew of the Diaspora, the eternally restless, eternally wandering Jew. This share of my alienation I accept and recognize as part and parcel of my identity. This part of my alienation is stimulating. It is at the very core of my creativity. Whereas the other part that I feel weighing upon me so heavily is stifling, paralyzing, tampering down all the most vital sources of energy within me both as a human being and as a writer.

I have no idea whether translating my work is a cure for this malaise. It is certainly a gesture towards a cure. 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.

I was born in Lodz, Poland’s industrial city, often referred to as the Polish Manchester. Both my parents came from a tiny shtetl called Konskie and were brought up in the strict Orthodox tradition. My father was a direct descendant of the famous spiritual leader of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz. However, both my parents were touched by the winds of religious and social enlightenment and broke with tradition. In their youths, they fled separately to Lodz where my father worked as a restaurant waiter and my mother as a factory hand.

When the Second World War broke out I was a schoolgirl. After the Germans occupied Lodz, they herded all the Jews into the city slums, which became the Jewish ghetto. There, surrounded by fences of barbed wire, I lived with my parents and my sister, always near starvation and under the constant threat of being caught and deported to a concentration camp for annihilation, since the Germans systematically decimated the ghetto population, leaving only those who, before being destroyed, were still strong enough to work.

I started to write poems to amuse myself almost as soon as I learned to read and write. But only in the ghetto did I begin to take my writing seriously, and to my surprise, I was in turn taken seriously by the group of writers living in the ghetto. They invited me to join their clandestine circle of writers and artists, at whose meetings new works were read and discussed, since there could be no talk of publishing them. Thus I feverishly practiced two arts at the same time, the art of writing and the art of evading deportation.

There were many adolescent girls and boys in the ghetto who, like me, resorted to the pen in order to preserve the integrity of their spirit. 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 magical power of the written word and so demonstrate one’s enduring capacity for love, for overcoming death by singing praise to life. Even in the concentration camps, even by the glare of the crematorium flames, there were those who wrote. We were like those humming birds who sing most beautifully when in captivity.

After four years, the Germans decided to liquidate the Lodz ghetto and we were sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. When we were forced onto the transport, I had a wad of paper with all my poems hidden in my knapsack. In Auschwitz I was separated from my father, whom I never saw again. (Later I discovered that he had been killed by one of the last bombs that the Americans dropped on the day of liberation.) There I was also forced to part with my poems, which were taken from me along with the rest of my belongings. I passed the selection and my life was spared, as were the lives of my mother and sister. I considered myself fortunate, when, with head shaved, clad in concentration camp stripes, I spent the first night in the camp outdoors, sitting on the parched earth and looking up at the smoking chimney hovering above our heads. There was no thought more remote from my mind at that moment than the thought of my perished poems.

I was fortunate. I was not tattooed with the Auschwitz number on my arm, but after a few days was sent off, along with my mother
and sister, to the concentration camp at Sasel, near Hamburg. There, day after day, from dawn to dusk, throughout the entire winter of 1944-45, we — a few hundred Jewish women from Lodz — built houses for the bombed-out citizens of Hamburg. In spite of the fact that every morning and every evening on the way to and from work, we scavenged the German garbage bins we passed like hordes of mice in search of food and endured the SS women's whips for our efforts; in spite of the fact that we were not allowed to wear even a cement bag under our striped dresses and neither work nor vigorous marching could protect our skeletal bodies from the biting cold — despite these facts, Sasel was paradise. It was a camp without a crematorium. Fear of death was as distant as the nearest concentration camp that was better equipped than Sasel.

In Sasel I found a pencil. My bunk was just beneath the ceiling. As I lay there before sleep at night or after waking during the day, I tried to recall some of my poems. I jotted them down in tiny letters in a corner of the ceiling, so that they could not be seen from below. I then learned those poems by heart.

When the end of the war drew near, we were again herded into a transport and transferred to the concentration camp at Bergen Belsen. There the ovens no longer worked. There was no need for them. The camp was designated "zum krapieren." Its population was dying of typhoid fever.

The spring landscape of my new surroundings resembled a desert. Sand. Dust. Mountains of corpses, some burning, some rotting. Stench in the air. Near and far the endless sight of long caravans of dying people dragging the dead by their legs, piling them one on top of the other to create pyramid upon pyramid of bodies. Silence beyond words, pierced now and then by the scream of an enraged torturer. Or of his victim.

Poetry seemed strangely appropriate here — to be recited instead of jokes. But this occurs to me only now. At that time I would not have thought of reciting anything. I would not have thought at all. The brain, in order not to be an unnecessary encumbrance, shut itself off altogether. Of course it registered the sight of male prisoners cutting off pieces of flesh from the corpses piled into pyramids and cooking them in a black can. It registered the sight of my girlfriend being shot and killed as she rushed to retrieve a fallen potato from behind the kitchen barracks. It registered the sight of my mother's and my sister's faces as they lay close to me on the floor of the barracks, where, along with a few hundred other women we were devoured by fever, pleading for water where there was none. All these sights my mind registered without comment. Memory collected them like mechanical gadgets, along with all the other sights and sounds and smells of the concentration camp universe.

Liberation was announced through loudspeakers. They spoke of freedom. No one believed, or disbelieved. No one danced for joy. Even a smile seemed more like the grimace of thirsty lips.

On the 8th of May 1945, the day the War was officially over, I was taken to the hospital, located in what had once been the dwellings of the SS guards. There I fought with the fever for my life, and won. However, the person who won that fight, the person who survived the camps was someone else. I had died in the concentration camp.

This new person began recalling the past as it was once chronicled in my poems, but I had no time to write them down. First I set out with my sister to wander the length and breadth of Germany to find our father, my boyfriend, our close friends. The search took us close to a month, after which I did indeed find out all I could about my tremendous losses and the few precious dear ones who had survived. Nothing else remained for us to do on this German soil drenched in the blood of those closest to us. I could not stay there one second longer than necessary; and so, I, my mother, sister and a group of friends, smuggled ourselves into Belgium, crossing the border illegally by night. Those who waited for a legal way to get out of Germany were marooned there for months and sometimes years.

As a Displaced Person I was not allowed to settle in Belgium and my identity card was stamped “doit émigrer.” Nevertheless, I stayed on in Belgium for five years. There I wrote “The Ballad of Yesterday’s Forest,” a long poem. It was the first of my works to appear in print. It was published in the Yiddish literary magazine Di Tsukunft (The Future) in New York. Then I sat down to write my Ghetto Poems. I also wrote a new book-length poem about my perished father called The Song of Abram the Waiter. The collected Ghetto Poems and The Song of Abram the Waiter were published in London, England in 1946 and 1947 by Moishe Oved.

The second edition of my poems, as well as the diary which I began right after the liberation, were published in Yiddish in Canada by Harry Hershman under the title, The Ballad of Yesterday’s Forest:
Ghetto Poems and Fragments of a Diary. In fact it was Harry Hershman who introduced me to Canada and placed it on the map of my life. It was he who sponsored my immigration to this country.

And so I came to Canada. Here I made my home. Here my two children were born. Here I wrote for almost fifteen years my trilogy about life in the ghetto of Lodz, The Tree of Life. Here I wrote and published the play The Bird of the Ghetto, which was performed by the Israeli National Theatre, the Habima, in Tel Aviv in 1968. Here I have written and published poems and essays, all in my mother tongue, Yiddish. Here my mother died and is buried. Here I have now, with such linguistic talents as I possess, translated my poems into English in the hope that my experience as an individual and as a citizen should make up at least a small fraction of the experience of Canada and of the wider world beyond it.

Chava Rosenfarb
1971
PART I

*Echoes Of The Ghetto*
Far, on the other side,
there is your freedom,
crossed out a million times
by barbed wire.
There, on the other side,
Time untamed pulsates
in lively rhythms.
People live there.

Brother, take my hand.
Stop complaining.
Brother, squelch the scream
of vain desire.
You've got your crust of bread?
Then chew it
and do not look across to
where green-lipped farmland
kisses the rising sun on the horizon.

For here on our side —
here, in the ghetto,
time and space exist
only in chatter.
Here all that counts
against oblivion is pain.
So if you've got a pillow,
bury your head in it at nightfall.
Here luck means that a dream
becomes a shortcut
to your freedom.

*First poem written in the ghetto, winter 1940
— Where are you, where are you, my sweet little son?
— In the mirrors of seas, dear mother, what fun
for the snow white clouds to bathe in the deep,
and be rocked by the arms of soft breezes to sleep.

— But you? Where are you, my sweet little son?
— In whispering forests, dear mother, where
the little birds sit on the twigs in their nests,
while boughs play like harps and rock them to rest.

And on the pastures, mother, my dear,
calves suckle on udders, while the cows lick their tears.
Then they chew on their cuds like little calves should
while the cowherds accompany them on their flutes.

— But you? Where are you, my sweet little son?
— The sheaves, dear mother, are never alone.
The field holds them tight by their fingery roots
and protects them from nightmares that lurk in the woods.

Then, one day, when the sheaves are a luminous gold,
Peace will arrive and its banner unfold.
Soldiers will march towards home to their hearths
and children’s laughter will ring through the earth.

— But you? Where are you, my sweet little son?
— On their fathers’ knees boys will be sitting enthroned,
forgetting all tears that they ever have shed,
and will bite into chunks of freshly baked bread.

— But you? Where are you, my sweet little son?
— A Jewish mother will sit somewhere alone,
rocking an empty cradle, she’ll weep;
a toy trumpet, mute, will lie at her feet.

Never again will she hum, “ay-lee-oo,”
ever say, “grown too small my little boy’s shoes.”
In vain will she seek her forever-lost joy,
calling “where are you, where are you, my dear little boy?”

— Where are you, where are you, my sweet little son?
— I’m gone, dear mother, forever I’m gone.
Ask the wind that howled on that very same night
when a German child’s father murdered your child.

Written after the Sperre in the Lodz ghetto, September 1942, when the children of the ghetto were forcibly taken from their mothers. Some 15,000 children were rounded up during one week and deported to the death camp at Chelmno.