



## CHAVA ROSENFARB

b. 1923



The work of twentieth-century Yiddish novelist Chava Rosenfarb has received great acclaim in the Yiddish literary world but, reflecting the

*by Goldie Morgentaler*

Chava Rosenfarb, a major Yiddish novelist of the second half of the twentieth century, is one of the few Holocaust survivors who transmuted their experiences into fiction rather than memoirs or reminiscences. Chava Rosenfarb was born on February 9, 1923 and her sister Henia (Rosenfarb) Reinhartz was born in 1927 in Lodz, Poland. Her father, Abraham Rosenfarb (1897–1945), was a restaurant waiter, and her mother Sima (née Pinczewska, ?1899–1959), worked in a textile factory.

Rosenfarb's parents were Bundists and she attended a secular Yiddish elementary school and a private Jewish high school, where the language of instruction was Polish. By the time she graduated in 1941, Rosenfarb, her family and the rest of the city's

### TIME PERIOD

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### COUNTRY

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fate of much recent Yiddish writing, has gone virtually unnoticed by the rest of the reading public.

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her to the writers' group of the ghetto, who quickly recognized her talent and accepted her, at age seventeen, as their youngest member.

When the ghetto was liquidated in August 1944, Rosenfarb and her family were transported to Auschwitz where, like her mother and sister, she survived the selection. They were sent to a labor camp at Sasel, near Hamburg, where they rebuilt houses for the bombed-out Germans of Hamburg. Rosenfarb continued to write poetry, which she memorized and later included in *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (The ballad of yesterday's forest), her first published collection of poems, which appeared in London in 1947.

From Sasel, Rosenfarb, her mother and sister were sent to Bergen Belsen, where she was liberated by the British army in 1945. Soon after, she learned that her father had died in the last transport out of Dachau. In 1945, Rosenfarb, together with her mother and sister, crossed the border illegally into Belgium, where she lived as a Displaced Person until her marriage in 1949 to Henry Morgentaler (b. 1923), another Holocaust survivor. The couple immigrated to Montreal, Canada in 1950, and it was there that Rosenfarb did most of her writing. She had two children, Goldie and Abraham (b. 1956) with Henry Morgentaler, who earned his medical degree in 1956 and was subsequently instrumental in changing the Canadian abortion laws. The couple divorced in 1977. In 1998, Rosenfarb moved to Toronto, and in 2003 to Lethbridge, Alberta where she now resides.

Rosenfarb was profoundly affected by her experiences during the Holocaust, and her prodigious output of poetry, novels, short stories, plays and essays all deal with this topic in one way or another. She began as a poet, following the publication of *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* with a book-length poem about her father, *Dos lid fun yidishn kelner Abram* (The song of the Jewish waiter Abram). She then published two more poetry collections, *Geto un andere lieder* (Ghetto and other poems), and *Aroys fun gan-eydn* (Out of Paradise). Rosenfarb's play *Der foigl fun geto* (The bird of the ghetto), about the martyrdom of the Vilna partisan leader Yitzhak Wittenberg (1907–1943), was translated into Hebrew and performed by Israel's Habimah Theater in 1966.

Finding that neither poetry nor drama could adequately express her feelings about the Holocaust, Rosenfarb turned to fiction. In

1972, she published *Der boim fun lebn* (The tree of life). This monumental three-volume epic, which has been translated into Hebrew and English, chronicles the destruction of the Jewish community of Lodz during World War II. The book, which was from the first hailed as a masterpiece won its author the Manger Prize for Yiddish literature in 1979.

*The Tree of Life* follows the fates of ten Jewish inhabitants of Lodz from before the outbreak of the war in 1939 until the ghetto's liquidation in late summer 1944. Because these ten characters come from all walks of life, the novel recreates an entire Jewish ghetto community—and then unflinchingly chronicles its destruction. While most of Rosenfarb's characters are fictitious, some are based on actual people. The most important of these is Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877–1944), the chairman of the Judenrat (Jewish Council) in the Lodz ghetto. Rosenfarb describes the ironic road that Rumkowski traveled from being the founder and director of an orphanage before the war, to being the Nazi-appointed puppet leader of the ghetto.

Rosenfarb followed *The Tree of Life* with *Bociany*, published in Yiddish in 1982. Translated into English by the author, it was published in two volumes by Syracuse University Press. The translation won Rosenfarb the John Glassco Prize for Literary Translation in September 2000. *Bociany* is a prequel to *The Tree of Life*, giving the early history of some of the characters who appear in that novel.

Rosenfarb had always been reluctant to write about the horrors of the concentration camp in her fiction. It was not until 1992 that she finally felt capable of attempting such a description in her novel *Briv tsu Abrashen* (Letters to Abrasha), which contains searing descriptions of the death camps and their horrors.

Rosenfarb was a frequent contributor of essays to the Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain), where in the early 1980s she also began to publish a series of short stories about the lives of Holocaust survivors in Canada. The best known of these stories, "Edgia's Revenge," (published in English in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, 1994) describes the unhealthy symbiotic relationship of two women survivors who meet again in Montreal after the war.

Rosenfarb's important essay on the problems of being a Yiddish woman writer appeared in English in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (1993). She has contributed essays and reviews to the *Montreal Gazette*, as well as to numerous Yiddish-language publications. She is the winner of numerous international literary awards, including Israel's prestigious Manger Prize for Yiddish Literature. In 2001, she was the subject of a two-part documentary on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio program "Ideas."

Despite the great acclaim that her writing has received in the Yiddish-speaking world, Rosenfarb's work is little known by the non-Yiddish reading public. Her fate as a writer thus reflects the general isolation of Yiddish literature from the mainstream of world literature, an isolation that has unfortunately grown more profound with time.

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