



exile at last:
Selected Poems



Chava Rosenfarb



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Edited by Goldie Morgentaler



GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2013

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Guernica Editions Inc.

P.O. Box 117, Station P, Toronto (ON), Canada M5S 2S6

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2012951262

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Rosenfarb, Chava, 1923-2011

Exile at last : selected poems / Chava Rosenfarb ; Goldie Morgentaler, editor.

(Essential poets series ; 198)

Issued also in electronic format.

ISBN 978-1-55071-681-8

I. Morgentaler, Goldie, 1950- II. Title. III. Series: Essential poets series ; 198

For Ken Sherman, with gratitude and affection

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Preface

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 republished 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

PART I



*Echoes Of The Ghetto*¹

 *Freedom**

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

 *Ghetto Lullaby**

— 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 cud 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-loo,”
never 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.

 *He Asked Me*

He asked me:
How can you still smile?
I answered him:
The smile is the smile of another.

He asked me:
How can you still set the table?
I answered him:
The table is set by another.

He asked me:
How can you even pour the wine?
I answered him:
The joy is that of another.

I have made the bed
and snuggled up to my beloved;
while somewhere else, my other self, long gone,
caresses the ashen head of a man who is smoke.

Translated by G. Morgentaler

PART II



Questions of Faith

 *A Prayer*

Be with me, sweet hour of serenity,
that I may not hear the darkness shivering with fright.
Teach me the words of your soothing prayer;
destroy all the pains of my night.

Shield me within a citadel of silence,
let your every minute be a guardian at my side,
that I may not, even with the deepest hearing, hear
the trembling pulses of the night.

Descend into me as a miner
descends into the mine with his light,
and carry out of my exhausted soul-pit
the darkest coals of my fearful night.

 *Rachel and Leah*³

Rachel plays on the mandolin
And Leah plays on the flute.
Between them the Shekhina lays out the cards
And seeks an exact account.

Leah will have two eyes that are dim,
but a large and hungry heart.
Rachel will have luck in love
and braids that are darker than dark.

Leah will have passionate dreams,
and on her lips—a trembling song.
But Jacob, the man from distant lands,
will only see that her eyes are not strong.

Rachel will bewitch the foreigner Jacob;
her beauty will be pleasing to him.
So what if she does not have passionate dreams?
At least her eyes are not dim.

Leah will die after a long life,
but her heart's longing will never abate.
Rachel, sated with love, will die young,
with the black shining still in her plaits.

Rachel plays on the mandolin
and Leah plays on the flute.
Between the two women, the Shekhina is smiling.
She now knows how each life will conclude.

Translated by G. Morgentaler

 *Oriental Ballad*

The sun like a golden ball is swaying
inside the bell of the sky.
Upon ladders woven of sunbeam amber
climbs the luxuriant day.

A holy wanderer lies on the cobbles
of the street, in its burning dust.
A holy wanderer whispers his prayer,
half-conscious and pale from his fast.

When daylight is gone and black velvet curtains
extinguish the heavenly light;
when on carpets embroidered with starry rubies
appears the secretive night,

It still finds the holy wanderer kissing
the cobblestones covered with dust,
as he prays prostrate, calling his Maker,
ecstatic, exultant and lost.

Then out of the shadows, concealed by the darkness,
a thief sneaks home with his loot.
His foot becomes caught in the wanderer's mantle
and he gives him a kick with his boot:

“Hey fellow,” he whispers, “your job must have tired you,
if you lie here as dead as a hare.
The cops will soon be here, come quick, let's get going.
I will take you along to my lair.”

The holy wanderer lies on the cobbles,
detached from his body by pain,
not knowing if this is the threshold to wisdom,
or the world of the blind and insane.

Then, through dark gates and out of veiled corners,
a drunkard comes singing along.
As his foot catches in the wanderer's mantle,
he bursts into tears through his song:

“Poor guy, you must be quite soused, I reckon,
if you've slipped like a swine in this muck.
But though I've wet my throat with some liquor,
I can still take you straight to my shack.”

The holy wanderer lies on the cobbles,
released from his body by woe,
not knowing if he descends towards the dying,
or ascends to be born anew.

From the deep silent distance emerges another,
his bare feet limping, exhausted and slow.
He sees the holy man lost in his prayer
and bending, whispers, awestruck and low:

“Oh, brother, how sacred must be your oblivion,
if God seems so near to this place.”
And he lies down beside him upon the cobbles,
touching the dust with his face.

From between misty clouds the moon enters slowly
the streets of the empty town
and hears two wanderers call *De Profundis*
from the abyss of dirt and of stone.

 *Twilight at Dawn*

I woke and found my faith asleep,
I knew: all mirages will go.
I felt what one feels when seeing
a graveyard covered with snow.

I woke and found my faith asleep.
Do I miss it? I do not know.
All I know is that my heaven sleeps beside it
entombed under blankets of snow.

 *I Would Go into a Prayer House*

I would go into a prayer house
Somewhere in a corner of the city,
Or in the middle of a field
Or on a high mountain—
I would sit down on a small stool
And wait
For God.

And a community of the pious would be there with me,
Whispering, prayerful, radiant — and there
I would release the pool of half-shed tears
And open my heart to Him.
My love would soar up at His approach
Like a dove newly released from its cage.
I would ask nothing of Him.
All I would want would be a token of his kind regard;
Or, that a touch of His strong hand
Should stroke my head.
Because I no longer have a father or a mother,
And it is hard
To be orphaned also of God.
So I would go into a prayer house
To sit with a community of the pious
Who are bound to His strong belt.
And both in tragedy and in happiness
They praise Him, they praise Him.

I would want to know, just as they do,
That He is here, that He exists,
That everything is fine with the world,
And with me.
And that through all the walls, no matter how strongly enclosed,
And through the darkness of the blackest obscurity
There opens a door to Him;
That He is behind it,

That He waits
And stretches out His hand
To raise me from the abyss.
I would want to believe, to believe, to believe,
So I would enter a prayer house
And wait for God.

But I cannot go there,
Even though I would give my life
To be with the pious.
Because I have broken every bone in my body
By falling from burning walls.
So I have no feet,
So I have no hands,
So He must carry me Himself to His prayer house
And He must lead me on his godlike legs
And mark out for me the path
From the place where He Himself was locked away behind iron
doors.
From where in the darkest days,
He hung from scaffolds of heavenly heights
From the chimneys of Auschwitz.
From where in the piercing nights, He
Expired in the sparks and fumes.
From where his soul exhaled its breath
With the last tremor of a community of the pious.
From where white lime was poured on His body
And clods of earth were piled upon it.
From where he was extinguished in the eye of a suckling infant,
Still clinging to its dead mother's nipple.
From where there were extinguished all His godly decrees,
From where He Himself, like a starving dog,
Beside Himself with joy at the sight of a frozen potato ...
Felt the boot of a soldier stamped on his face with one single stomp.

So He must come now and prove to me
That one can burn and be burned
And still remain God.

So I wait for Him
Like someone blind and lame,
Like someone mute and deaf,
In my windy, pain-soaked tent,
That He should lead me to a prayer house
Somewhere in a corner of a city,
Or in the middle of a field,
Or on a high mountain

And, in the meantime, I tremble in the cold.

Translated by G. Morgentaler

Notes

¹ALL THE POEMS in this section are from Rosenfarb's first collection of poems *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* (*The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest*), first published in England in 1947. They are the work of a very young poet writing under extremely difficult circumstances. Rosenfarb had just turned seventeen when she was imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto. She was twenty-four when her first book of poetry was published. The poems in this section were originally composed in the Lodz ghetto and then lost when Rosenfarb's knapsack containing her poems was torn from her hands on the railway platform at Auschwitz. She then recreated the poems from memory on the ceiling over her bunk at the Sasel labour camp and memorized them. Annotations following the poems in this section accompanied the published Yiddish originals.

²This poem about Rosenfarb's father was written after the war when she learned that her father had died when the Americans bombed the train on which he and other concentration camp inmates had been riding during the forced evacuation from Dachau. This occurred just 24 hours before the Day of Liberation.

³In the Hebrew Bible. Rachel and Leah are the two wives of Jacob. Jacob desires Rachel and labours seven years for her father Laban in order to win her, but is tricked into marrying the elder sister Leah instead. He must then labour another seven years for Rachel. In Jewish mystical tradition, the Shekhina refers to the feminine attributes of God.

⁴In 1959, Rosenfarb's mother died. Sima Rosenfarb had survived the war with her two daughters, but had succumbed to cancer nine years after arriving in Montreal. By 1965, the year of the publication of most of the poems in this section, Rosenfarb's marriage to Henry Morgentaler had started to fall apart. That year also saw the publication of her last book of poetry in Yiddish, *Aroys fun gan-eydn* (*Out of Paradise*). Most of the poems in this section are taken from *Aroys fun gan-eydn*. Some, such as "Peace," "Bourne End" and "Exile at Last" were written later and exist only in English. The arrangement of the poems is mine and does not necessarily correspond to their order in *Aroys fun gan-eydn*.

About The Author

CHAVA ROSENFARB (1923-2011) was one of the most important Yiddish writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1923, she received most of her schooling in Yiddish. During the Second World War she was incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated in 1944, she was deported to Auschwitz and then to Bergen Belsen, where she was liberated by the British army in 1945. After the war, she lived as a displaced person in Belgium before settling in Montreal in 1950, where she commenced her prolific six-decades-long literary career. Beginning with the 1947 publication of *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* [The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest], she authored three books of poetry in Yiddish. Her novels include *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto* (published in Yiddish in 1972 and in English in 2004-6), *Bociany, Of Lodz and Love* (published in 2000 in English) and *Letters to Abrasha* (not yet available in English.) She is also the author of a play, *The Bird of the Ghetto*, as well as of numerous essays and short stories, most of them published in the Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt*. A collection of her short stories was published in English in 2004 under the title *Survivors: Seven Short Stories* and several of her stories have been anthologized, most recently in *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*. One of the few female novelists writing in Yiddish, Rosenfarb received a number of international awards for her work, including Israel's prestigious *Manger Prize* (the highest award for Yiddish literature), the *Niger Prize* from Argentina, the *Award of the American Professors of Yiddish*, the *John Glassco Prize for Literary Translation*, and the *Helen and Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award*. In 2006, she received an honorary degree from the University of Lethbridge. Her landmark Holocaust trilogy, *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto*, remains one of the seminal works of fiction about the Holocaust in any language.

About The Editor

GOLDIE MORGENTALER is Professor of English at the University of Lethbridge, where she teaches nineteenth-century British and American literature, as well as Jewish literature. She is the author of a book on Dickens and of numerous articles on Dickens and Victorian Literature. Her translation from French to Yiddish of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs* was performed by the Yiddish Theatre of Montreal in 1992. Her translations from Yiddish to English include several short stories by I.L. Peretz, which appeared in the *I.L. Peretz Reader*. She is the translator of much of Chava Rosenfarb's work, including the play *The Bird of the Ghetto*, which was staged by the Threshold Theatre of Toronto in fall 2012. She was the translator, in collaboration with the author, of the three volumes of Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto*. Her translation of Rosenfarb's book of short stories, *Survivors: Seven Short Stories*, won the Helen and Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award in 2005 and the Modern Language Association's Fenia and Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies in 2006. She was for many years a language columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*.