

# Confessions of a Yiddish Writer: Chava Rosenfarb

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/confessions-yiddish-writer-chava-rozenfarb>.

Chava Rosenfarb (1923-2011) was one of the most important Yiddish novelists of the post-War period. Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1923, she spent her high school years incarcerated with her family in the Lodz ghetto. It was here that she first became known as a writer. After the Lodz ghetto was liquidated, Rosenfarb survived both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She spent several years as a Displaced Person in Brussels, where she began writing *The Tree of Life*, now her best-known work. In 1949, she married Heniek Morgentaler and the two emigrated to Canada, landing in Montreal in February 1950. There she gave birth to her first child, her daughter Goldie Morgentaler, who would later become a literature professor and a translator and champion of her mother's work. Rosenfarb resumed her nascent literary career in Montreal, publishing volumes of poetry and a play, "The Bird of the Ghetto," before writing a series of short stories exploring the afterlife of Holocaust survivors. These stories were primarily published in the Israeli literary journal, *Di goldene keyt*, between 1974-1995. In 1972, Rosenfarb published her three-volume epic, "The Tree of Life" (*Der boym fun lebn*). Her turn to prose attracted attention and accolades worldwide. In 1979, Rosenfarb was unanimously awarded one of Israel's highest literary honors, the Manger Prize for 1979.

In 1982, she followed with a two-volume prequel to that epic, entitled *Bociany*, the name of a Polish village. Rosenfarb's work only began to be extensively translated and to receive critical attention in the year 2000, when Syracuse University Press, published *Bociany* as two separate novels *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*. Chava Rosenfarb died January 30, 2011. Her archive can be found at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto.

### Subjects

Chava Rosenfarb; Yiddish; women writers; Holocaust; Poland

### Biography

Chava Rosenfarb (1923-2011) was one of the most important Yiddish novelists of the post-War period. Born on Feb. 9, 1923 in Lodz, Poland, Rosenfarb was the elder of two daughters of Abraham Rosenfarb, a restaurant waiter, and his wife Simma. Her parents belonged to the Jewish Socialist Bund, a left-leaning political movement with an enormous following among working-class Jews in Poland. While Bundist ideology encouraged agitation for equal rights for Jews in Poland, but it also incorporated a strong cultural element that privileged Yiddish as the language of the Jewish masses.

Rosenfarb's parents sent her to the Bundist Medem School, where all instruction was in Yiddish. This grounding in Yiddish secular studies had an enormous influence on Rosenfarb's intellectual development, even though her secondary school education was in Polish. But her schooling was cut short by the war. By the time she was ready to graduate high school, Rosenfarb and her family had been incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto, and it was in the ghetto in 1941 that she received her high school diploma. This marked the end of her formal education, but it was she embarked upon her beginnings as a writer. Every day, she would wake up at dawn after sleeping on a bed of chairs to compose her poems in bookkeeping registers, before going to work at her various ghetto jobs. Her poetry attracted the attention of the Lodz ghetto writers' group, who invited her to join their ranks.

When the Lodz ghetto was liquidated, Rosenfarb was sent to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen. She was on the verge of dying from typhus when the British liberated the camp in 1945. She spent several years as a Displaced Person in Brussels, where she began writing *The Tree of Life*, now her best-known work. In 1949, she married Heniek Morgentaler and the two emigrated to Canada, landing in Montreal in February 1950. There she gave birth to her first child, her daughter Goldie Morgentaler, who would later become a literature professor and a translator and champion of her mother's work.

Rosenfarb resumed her nascent literary career in Montreal, publishing volumes of poetry and a play, "The Bird of the Ghetto," before writing a series of short stories exploring the afterlife of Holocaust survivors, which would become the basis for *In the Land of the Postscript*. These stories were primarily published in the Israeli literary journal, *Di goldene keyt*, between 1974-1995.

In 1972, Rosenfarb published her three-volume epic, "The Tree of Life" (*Der boym fun lebn*). Her turn to prose attracted attention and accolades worldwide. In 1979, Rosenfarb was unanimously awarded one of Israel's highest literary honors, the Manger Prize for 1979. The jury wrote: "[The Tree of Life] is a work that rises to the heights of the great creations in world literature and towers powerfully over the Jewish literature of the Holocaust, the literature which deals with the annihilation of European Jewry, in particular Polish Jewry." In 1982, she followed with a two-volume prequel to that epic, entitled *Bociany*, the name of a Polish village. Rosenfarb's work only began to be extensively translated and to receive critical attention in the year 2000, when Syracuse University Press, published *Bociany* as two separate novels *Bociany* and *Of Lodz and Love*.

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### Rosenfarb as a "Post-Holocaust" Writer

At a talk at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal in 2004, Rosenfarb reflected,

"I live there a peaceful, idyllic life—and a life full of contentment. When I consider where I live now, and where I have lived, I cannot believe that I am the same person, that I am the same Yiddish writer and Holocaust survivor who has been asked here to address you on the subject of her life and work. Because neither my life nor my work has been bucolic, idyllic, peaceful, or full of contentment."

In her 2000 essay, "Land of the Postscript," literary scholar Goldie Morgentaler, Rosenfarb's daughter, remarked that "by definition, Yiddish literature is a literature of



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exile, since Yiddish itself is a language of the diaspora." For Rosenfarb, as a Canadian Yiddish writer, she was doubly exiled, as a Jew in the global diaspora, and as a Jew exiled from her now-destroyed homeland in eastern Europe. Montreal emerged as a somewhat unlikely literary locus for Yiddish writers in the postwar era, since it was not historically a Yiddish cultural center, but from 1900 to the outbreak of World War II, Jews made up Montreal's largest immigrant community and Yiddish was, after French and English, the city's most widely spoken language. Poets such as Rokhl Korn also arrived in the postwar era, creating a vibrant new literary community. Most of these writers focused their literary lenses on Europe, not their new community in Canada. However, in Rosenfarb's short fiction, as opposed to her other literary works, she chooses to focus on her new cultural context, and develops a specific literary perspective dealing with the time and place of postwar Montreal. As Morgentaler writes, "Canada becomes in these stories the land of the postscript, the country in which the survivors of the holocaust play out the tragedy's last act." "Her characters are neither ennobled by their suffering nor necessarily embittered by it, Morgentaler writes. "Instead they represent a gallery of all conceivable human types, and all conceivable human reactions to devastation."

What makes this form of post-Holocaust literature distinct is that the writer is a newcomer and an immigrant, which is an age-old trope, but her homeland has disappeared, and can never be revisited. It can only be recreated in literary form. "The stories therefore exist within a symbolic framework, which addresses the relationship between Europe and North America," Morgentaler writes: "Canada in these stories does not wipe out Europe—not even symbolically. It cannot nullify the European past. Canada here plays the role of the spam in the sandwich. It is bland neutral territory, which is nevertheless deadly, because its unflavored ahistorical terrain, like a *tabula rasa*, permits the intrusion of a corroding European reality."

Stories such as "Edgia's Revenge" deal with the psychological complexities inherent in coming to terms with the past, and with confronting the "unfinished business" of the recent European past. Even though the Canadian landscape plays a role – in the form of winter, architecture, and Catholic iconography – these elements cannot impact Rosenfarb's characters as much as the unceasing need for closure and resolution with their pre-war and wartime lives, which can never be reconciled.

### Multimedia Resources

Chava Rosenfarb

[https://soundcloud.com/yiddishbookcenteraudio/chava-rosenfarb-reflects-on-writing-the-tree-of-life?utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_campaign=wtshare&utm\\_medium=widget&utm\\_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fyiddishbookcenteraudio%252Fchava-rosenfarb-reflects-on-writing-the-tree-of-life](https://soundcloud.com/yiddishbookcenteraudio/chava-rosenfarb-reflects-on-writing-the-tree-of-life?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fyiddishbookcenteraudio%252Fchava-rosenfarb-reflects-on-writing-the-tree-of-life)

"On my voyage back into the Ghetto, I wanted to take with me all the questions that had tormented me after the liberation. Why had the world learned nothing from our suffering? Were the Nazis only the most extreme example of the urge to do evil, or was the drive to destroy inherent in human nature? The Nazis were, for me, the most obvious channel through which the poison of hatred could flow freely—but the poison itself, where did it come from? What was its source? In writing about the Ghetto, I wanted to find that source. I wanted to discover the essence of our humanity, to touch upon the source, upon the core of the human soul and see it reflected in the soul of the Ghetto Jew, who had stood stripped of every shred of artifice and pretense necessary to leading a normal life.

There, in the Ghetto, humans had faced humans without any embellishments or illusions. They had faced the brutality of their fellow human beings, as well as the knowledge of what that brutality meant to their own destinies. It was as if the dams of a river had opened within me, and I became pregnant with the idea for my book. And so it was, that by the time I arrived in Montreal, I was doubly pregnant: pregnant with my daughter, who was born in Canada, and pregnant with my novel, which was born here as well, but many years later, when my daughter was already grown and my son was an adolescent. I called this novel about the death of the Jewish community of Lodz *The Tree of Life*."

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rosenfarb-chava>

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/recorded-programs/ybcr-nybc-ybcr-1086/chava-rosenfarbs-montreal-goldie-morgentaler>

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/the-shmooze/222-confessions-yiddish-writer-and-other-essays>

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0004772/tree-life-chava-rosenfarb-synopsis>

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0004773/chava-rosenfarb-s-writing-style>

[https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/frances-brandt/fbr-1827\\_5822/my-life-yiddish-writer-chava-rosenfarb](https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/frances-brandt/fbr-1827_5822/my-life-yiddish-writer-chava-rosenfarb)

<https://ingeveb.org/blog/confessions-of-a-yiddish-writer-and-other-essays-an-interview-with-goldie-morgentaler>

### Discussion Questions

Goldie Morgentaler suggests that, for Rosenfarb, European Jewish history and the destruction of this society during the Holocaust is "unfinished business." What do you think this means, and how does it play out in Rosenfarb's stories?

Rosenfarb wrote these stories in Montreal in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. How do you see place and time mattering in these stories?

Rosenfarb was arguably doubly marginalized as a writer, as a woman and as a Yiddish writer. How do you think that impacted her creative process, and the reception of her work?

Rosenfarb began writing as a teenager, after being expelled from her home and while facing the daily struggles of deprivation and forced labor. What does it mean to become a writer in extreme circumstances? How do you think those experiences impacted Rosenfarb as an artist, and as a person?

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## **Resources**