

More



Objective Than Tears

by Jeffrey Sharlet



For thirteen years Chava Rosenfarb wrote from dawn to dusk, setting down all she remembered of the Lodz Ghetto. Her masterpiece completed, one of the last great Yiddish writers still can't stop summoning up the past.

Left: Chava Rosenfarb, after the war.
Above: Chava in her writing room, 1997. Photo by Lionel Delevingne.

4 a.m. For years after the war and after the camps, Chava Rosenfarb woke up every morning at 4 a.m. to write. She'd open her eyes in the darkness and slip out of bed without waking her husband, make herself a cup of coffee and sit down in her study, still wearing her nightgown. Her study was even smaller than her kitchen—barely large enough for the table she had bought for ten dollars from a doctor's office. On it she kept a stack of notebooks. Sipping her coffee, she'd pick up the top one, and by the light of a table lamp, beneath a portrait of the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz, review yesterday's stories. Occasionally she'd make changes; most of her revisions would come later. Re-reading served mostly to draw her back a handful of years into the world she wanted, needed, to inhabit and depict. When she felt herself nearly there, she'd turn to where she'd left off, pick up a pencil and begin to write, slipping backwards as she turned the pages, from her apartment in Montreal to the Ghetto of Lodz, Poland, 1939-1944.

First to greet her there was her favorite character, Samuel Zuckerman. Born from Chava's memories of the rich men of Lodz she'd glimpsed as a child, Samuel was a "salon Zionist" and heir to a fortune. His passion, though, was writing—in his case, a history of the Jews of Lodz, a population of a quarter-million living in a city then known as the "Manchester of Poland" for its smokestacks and textiles. But before Samuel finished more than an outline of his history, the war came and the barbed wire of the Ghetto surrounded him. Samuel quickly sank into the depths of the *Judenrat*, the Nazi-controlled Jewish government of the Ghetto. He gave in to collaboration so easily that Chava—sitting in her study, talking aloud to Samuel as if he were a neighbor dropping by for a morning visit—feared he'd lost his soul. The novel she was writing, *Der boym fun lebn* (*The Tree of Life*), would chronicle the five-and-a-half years leading up to the Ghetto's final "liquidation" in 1944; other than that unavoidable end, Chava had no clear plans for what would happen to any of her characters—Samuel included. She knew she could not save them, from the Germans or themselves, even if she tried. One day, though, Samuel abandoned the *Judenrat* and its privileges, and joined his fellows' suffering. He rescued himself. For that Chava loved him.

After Samuel came Adam Rosenberg. A pig to Samuel's peacock, he was even richer than Samuel. He was also more

hollow, an obese man stuffed with nothing. "Puffing and panting," wrote Chava of Adam at a ball, "he pressed his immense belly to the frame of his skeletal wife, [as] her protruding shoulder blades moved in and out, up and down, like the parts of a machine." Adam loved machines more than people; he hated his fellow Jews nearly as much as he did the Nazis. But Chava spoke with him as she did with Samuel. She listened to him as attentively as she listened to Rachel, her most important character.

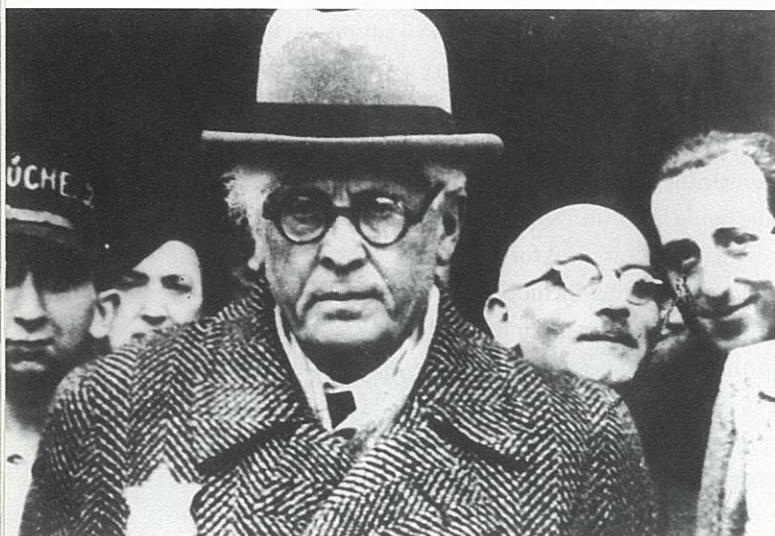
Chava wrote for eight, ten, sometimes fourteen hours a day, for thirteen years. Most of that time, she was alone in her study—except for Samuel, Adam, Rachel and all her other characters.

Rachel was one of the many heroines in Chava's story, a tall, handsome teen-age girl with wide, gray-green eyes—the same color as Chava's. Rachel was the character who allowed Chava to write about all the others. Like Chava, Rachel realized early on that she differed from those around her; while they suffered in the Ghetto, she watched, fascinated by their suffering, as well as her own. At first Rachel wrote poems about them; then, when the parameters of poetry no longer fit her goals, she wrote stories. After it was all over—the Ghetto, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen—in a tiny room of a small, warm apartment during the cold, dark mornings of Montreal, Rachel—Chava—wrote *The Tree of Life*.

WHEN THE SUN ROSE IT WOULD BE TIME FOR Chava to wake her children, a daughter named Goldie, born right after Chava had arrived in Montreal in 1950, and a younger son named Bamie. When Bamie was still too small for school, Chava would send Goldie off, then set Bamie on the floor of her study with a pile of toys and continue to write while he played. Bamie was a builder. As Chava worked, miniature towers and fortresses rose from the floor around her. In the midst of imaginary cities the two silently wrote and built through the morning. At noon Chava dressed and took Bamie to the park. Once Bamie was old enough to follow Goldie to the local Jewish day school, Chava could continue writing throughout the afternoon and into the night. She'd often finish after her family had gone to sleep. From the early 1950s to the early '60s, then through several years of revision before the novel's publication in 1972, her characters never left her. "I lived with them," she said. "When they died, I wept. I wept many times. When I wept, I did not write. I did not believe I should write in that mood. I was describing, reporting. My work demanded that I be more objective than tears."

By the early 1960s, Chava had already published several respected volumes of poetry and any number of essays in Yiddish papers and journals around the world. But she never spoke of her novel to anyone. She appeared to be a young mother, a wife and an active member of Montreal's Jewish refugee culture. She and her family had moved into a spacious new house in an affluent suburb. Her husband, Henry Morgentaler, a childhood sweetheart and fellow survivor of Lodz, was a successful doctor, on his way to prominence as Canada's foremost advocate of abortion rights. Chava's children were growing up in a modern, North American city. They thought of the Holocaust as depressing, boring and long ago.

Chava could have forgotten the war, as her husband urged her to do, as he claimed to have done himself. She could have settled into the roles of a "good mother" and "creative woman." She could have written about the vast Canadian landscape and its limitless possibilities. "It exerted a mesmerizing power over the Yiddish poetic imagination," she later told an interviewer for the *Montreal Gazette*. "Canadian lakes and rivers, mountains and prairies, represented such an elemental magnificence, such a glorious metaphor for freedom—to these escapees from the narrow Ghetto streets of Eastern Europe—that once they sensed Canada's power, they were forever captivated by its spell." For many in Auschwitz, the word "Canada" itself was a symbol for the limitless possi-



"Dictatorship is not an ugly word. With it, I earn the Germans' respect."—Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the Nazi appointed "Elders of the Jews of Litzmannstadt." From "Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege," courtesy of The Jewish Heritage Project.



"Take life in the ghetto, how ought one to write a novel about the ghetto? Perhaps in such a manner that the reader will throw it away half-read. Or perhaps in such a manner that the reader should not tire of reading it over and over again." From "Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege," courtesy of The Jewish Heritage Project.

bilities of past and future, stolen riches and "natural resources" hoarded in Nazi warehouses: gold, suitcases, clothing; teeth, hair, photographs.

But Chava remained loyal to the stories that had sustained her when nothing else but hunger and fever filled her mind; stories that she had committed to memory in the Ghetto and repeated to herself in the camps; that surrounded her when she slept, and that came back to her after the children had left for school and her husband for work; when, the new house empty, she could return to her notebooks.

Chava Rosenfarb is now seventy-four years old. She still lives in that spacious house in the suburbs; she still writes. She is no longer tall, no longer young. But she is wise, and it shows in her gray-green eyes, alert and wide. She keeps her hair red, wears pearls to greet visitors, and in the warm afternoon light of her living room, her high cheekbones and rosy skin lend her the appearance of youth. She likes to read in that light, plucking biography after biography from a stack of life stories—Gauguin, Paul Celan, Charlie Chaplin. When she lays down her book to talk, she speaks in a deep, slow, accented English, punctuated by a laugh that sometimes draws you in,

sometimes slams shut in your face like a gate. When that happens, her eyes twinkle and she leans back, holding her grin for too long.

Ivy covers her house now, and a giant pine stands guard against the sidewalk. Hers is the darkest home on a street of cheery, upper-middle-class homes: it is the kind of house neighborhood children might think was inhabited by a witch, the one I would have picked as hers if I hadn't known the address.

Her first husband, the doctor Henry Morgentaler, left in the early '70s; her second husband, Bono Weiner, a Bundist (Jewish Socialist) leader and another survivor of Lodz, died a year ago. Bamie, Chava's son, lives in Boston. Goldie Morgentaler, her daughter and translator, lives with her. Only Goldie keeps Chava company now; Samuel and Adam died years ago.

IN THE CITATION CHAVA RECEIVED FOR THE J. I. Segal Prize in 1972 for *The Tree of Life*, the judges wrote, "It is impossible to read your work in a calm state of mind, so we can imagine how difficult and traumatic it must have been for you to relive and recreate the essence of those gruesome days

and nights.” The judges who awarded her Israel’s Manger Prize in 1979 for her life’s work commented, “*The Tree of Life* paints a magnificent, broad picture of the quick-paced destruction of a large congregation of Jews whom the Nazis had condemned to death....She shows us the people who populated the Ghetto and shows us how each one of them reacted to the horror....*The Tree of Life* is a work which rises to the heights of the great creations in world literature and towers powerfully over the Jewish literature of the Holocaust.”

The judges also wrote of Chava as a savior: “During the years when the Jews of Eastern Europe rose from the ashes to a new life, the appearance of the young Chava Rosenfarb was...a miracle of continuity and creativity in the Yiddish language. It awoke in us the hope that she brought with her the promise that the storm-swept tree of Yiddish literature would flourish again.”

An unusual source of optimism: Chava’s completed work, three volumes in its Yiddish edition and one massive 1,075-page tome in English (shortened significantly in translation) stands as perhaps the most completely detailed depiction of life in the Nazi ghettos. It is, in the words of one critic, “unbearably sad.”

Her masterpiece follows the lives of ten main characters, including Samuel, Adam and Rachel, and at least a dozen minor ones through the year before the war, then into the

“When I wept, I did not write. I did not believe I should write in that mood. I was describing, reporting. My work demanded that I be more objective than tears.”

Ghetto until its liquidation in 1944. “*The Tree of Life* is absolutely faithful to history and to the facts,” Chava told me. “I wanted to put in all I know about life in the Lodz Ghetto.”

What Chava knows includes: how to make food out of kitchen scraps—babkas from coffee grounds, herring from potato-peels; what kinds of shoes people wore and how they procured them; the intricate workings of a black market economy; the spectrum of Jewish politics—Zionist, Bundist and Communist; how you look and feel when you’re starving to death. Chava also knows about collaborators. In *The Tree of Life*, Chava creates perhaps the most complete portrait ever written of Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, “Eldest of the Jews,” self-proclaimed King of the Ghetto.

The only non-fictional character in the book, Rumkowski headed the Judenrat established by the Nazis to keep order in the Lodz Ghetto and transform it into one of their most profitable slave labor factories. “A sentimental Polish patriot and a

Chava, Henry Morgentaler, and her sister Henia—Brussels, 1947.



man who loved children," Rumkowski seemed "taller than he really was. His face was splendidly expressive, strong and vivid in spite of its marks of old age." Chava introduces Rumkowski before the war, the director of an orphanage, in his own eyes a misunderstood leader, a brave soul with few weaknesses. Those failings include a sexual proclivity for his youthful charges, but Rumkowski the molester is also Rumkowski the prophet, the only character to foresee the full scope of Hitler's power and ambition. Like all the rest of the Ghetto inhabitants, Rumkowski does battle with his conscience. In Chava's hands, he is a man who both craves power and its luxuries, and sincerely believes that by offering up sacrifices to the Nazis—1,000 heads a day and more during the time of deportations—he will save a remnant. Near the end he ruminates on the hatred that future generations of Jews will heap upon his memory and accepts it as his due.

I asked Chava if she loved Rumkowski as she did Samuel and Adam. She sneered. "Of course not!" She paused and took a sip of coffee. "But I *know* him. This is the writer's privilege, to try to explain a Rumkowski."

As much as *The Tree of Life* plumbs the depths of collaboration, it explores the ethics of art in the presence of atrocity. In the novel, Rachel's acquaintances include a painter, a consumptive writer, a religious poet, and Simcha Bunim Berkovitch, who acts as Rachel's mentor. Even artists face charges of collaboration. One painter is disdained by his colleagues because he makes portraits for the Nazis; he responds that his work hardly differs from that of a doctor: "Let's not kid ourselves, by bringing a Jew back to health, you only fix a machine that works for the Germans." Another character named Esther, a teacher for the Communist Party, finds herself denounced by her students for participating in musical events sponsored by Rumkowski. "Culture in the Ghetto is a sin," they shout. Rachel, still in school, finds every literature class turned into an argument over literature's right to exist at all. The lesson of the Ghetto, insists one classmate, is that art is nothing more than a refuge for those who crave predictability, an alternative to real resistance. "Art is rebellion," Rachel counters, "a desire to correct life."

Rachel has her own doubts about literature: "Take the form of the novel," she says, "the fact that it must have a beginning, a middle and an end. Life is not like that. Beginning and end are birth and death. But in between, life flows sometimes in waves, sometimes in circles, sometimes it moves forward, sometimes it's still.... There's a lot of... non-narrative in life, while in the novel... the story must keep going. The new novel, of the new times, will have to free itself of that harness. Take life in the Ghetto, how ought one to write a novel about the Ghetto? Perhaps in such a manner that the reader



will throw it away half-read. Or perhaps so that the reader should not tire of reading it over and over again."

Ghettoniks often spoke of a "new world" that would follow the war; they couldn't imagine the old one would survive. Zionists planned for Palestine, Bundists for Socialist revolution, writers for a new literature. I asked Chava if *The Tree of Life* had fulfilled Rachel's hopes. "No," she said, "I was never able to achieve that."

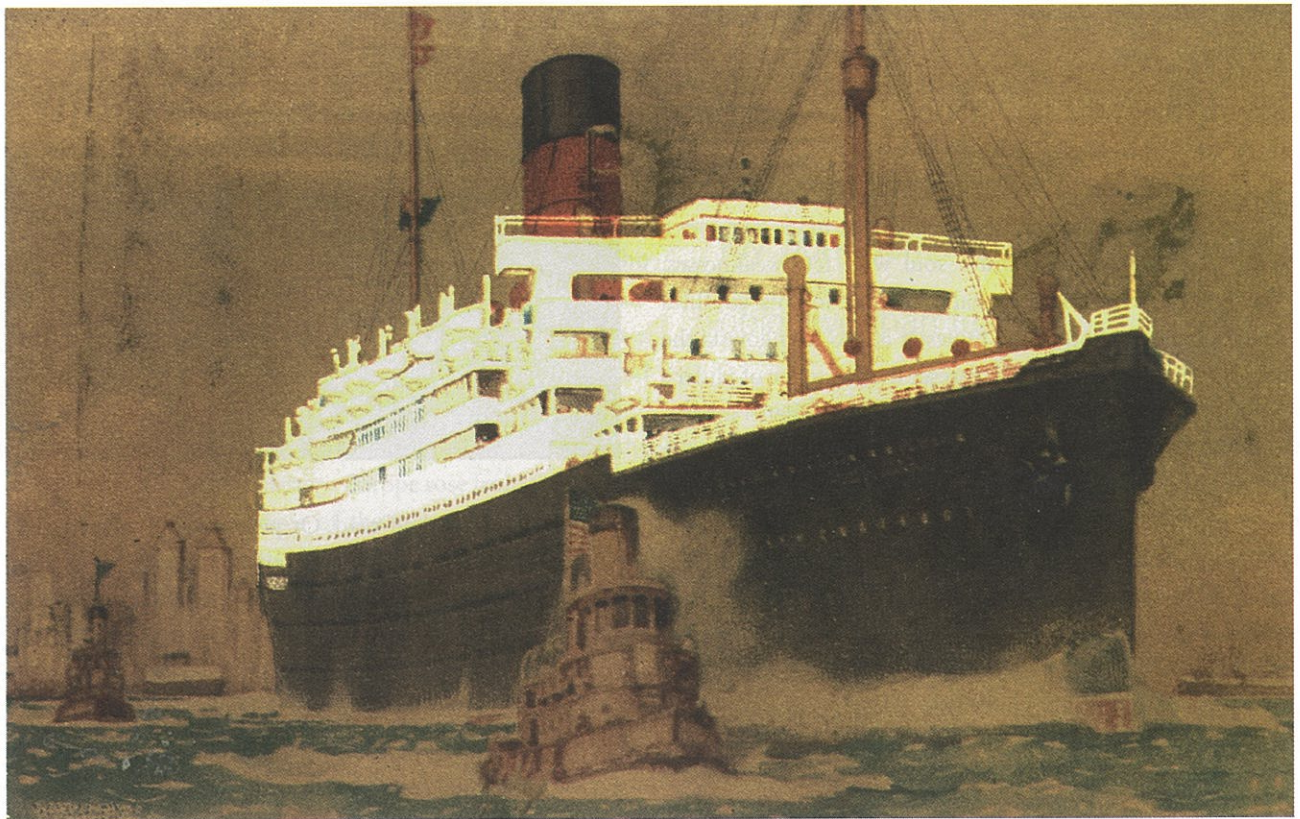
Psalms "The Holocaust did not make a writer out of me," says Chava. "It had nothing to do with me being a writer."

Chava's father had hoped that his first child would become a poet since the day she was born in 1923. "He was a dreamer, a romantic," she says, "a Bundist from the shtetl who came to Lodz. He discarded his religious attire and became a modern man. He started to read literature, and he wanted to write. But he thought he was too uneducated. He wanted me to fulfill his dreams."

Instead of dolls Chava's father gave her notebooks. When she was eight years old, he took one filled with her poems and asked a poet who frequented the cafe where he waited tables to read it. The poet told him that he couldn't say whether Chava would be a great writer because she was a child, and all children are poets. But yes, he said, there seemed to be promise.

At school Chava excelled, equaled only by the student who shared her bench, a precocious boy named Henryk, later Henry, Morgentaler. Henry envied Chava her ability to compose poems. Chava wished she could understand numbers as Henry did. Henry's father, a Bundist leader and city councilman, knew Chava's father; the parents approved of the children's rivalry and the friendship that accompanied it. When they finished their primary schooling in a dead heat, their teachers decided to give them both prizes. Awarding Chava hers, they accidentally called her Chava Morgentaler, a fitting mistake: by then the two were a couple.

Henry went off to an exclusive Polish *gymnasium* (high school), one of only three Jewish students permitted to



attend. Chava enrolled in a Jewish girls' *gymnasium*, where Polish was the language of instruction and Polish literature the only permitted source of inspiration. In *The Tree of Life*, Chava writes of a dispute between Rachel and her teacher over an essay Rachel had composed about her favorite writer, I.L. Peretz. "You say that he was the founder of modern Yiddish literature," her teacher reprimands her. "Very nice, but is it not an altogether questionable assumption that a jargon can have a literature, and that people living in a Ghetto can be modern, let alone capable of producing modern literature?"

The school forbade any political activity, but Chava defied the ban and organized socialist cells to spread the message of the Bund. "Peace and justice for all," she later described as her teen-age view of socialism; "the elimination of poverty and hunger; friendship between peoples, love of nature and all living things, love of the Yiddish language." Although hers was more youthful idealism than subversive ideology, the school feared Chava's Bundist propaganda. When a classmate informed on her, the directress threatened Chava with expulsion. Chava finished her gymnasium degree in 1939 only after promising to abandon political activity—a promise she could keep no more than she could stop writing poems and stories in Yiddish.

Henry Morgentaler completed his studies the same year as Chava. He was at the top of his class, but the Polish school granted first prize to a flaxen-haired Pole. Henry saw his surroundings as anti-Semitic, and considered his Bundist comrades naive. Even his mother, he would later tell a biographer,

didn't love him. But Chava did. She rarely mentions her first husband now, but in *The Tree of Life* she describes at length a romance between Rachel and a fictionalized boyfriend named David. The reader first meets David "standing with his arms outstretched to [Rachel] under the awning which protected 'their' imported-food store. She took [a] jump, [a] step and found herself in his arms. 'Hold me tight!' she exclaimed, warmth spreading all over her. Smothered by his embrace, she panted, 'Not so tight! I can't breathe!'"

By 1940, the Germans had squeezed the city's quarter-million Jews into a small slum, the new Ghetto of Lodz. Henry's father had been among the first taken by the Nazis; Henry's sister escaped to Warsaw. His family decimated, he spent most of his time with the Rosenfarbs. But even as the Ghetto pressed Chava and Henry together, it pushed them apart. Henry despaired often, and withdrew into himself. Chava, meanwhile, flourished even as her once full body grew bony and spare.

"Usually when you're hungry you don't talk about art," she remembered, echoing a line from her book, "*Inter arma silent musae*," as they say, 'In war the muses are silent.' And it's true. But not for the Jews. The Jews could discuss poetry and art on an empty stomach."

As Henry grew less active in the Bund, Chava embraced it. She compiled a secret library for her comrades, going from door to door asking for books she would then loan out from her parents' apartment. She collected more than 300 volumes of literature and history, while Bono Weiner, the

man who would become her second husband decades after the war, assembled a companion collection of political and economic books.

She continued to write poems, until “one day I suddenly felt cramped. I had to break out of the confines of the poetic form. The main thing I wanted was an image, and this I couldn’t create with poetry. Spontaneously, absolutely spontaneously, I began to write stories.” At first Chava wrote scenes of Ghetto life: more like fragments than stories, moments of pain observed. Then she began to explore the psychology of those around her, wondering why one thrived as another wasted away; what it felt like to steal food from a friend, or to take extra rations from a parent you knew couldn’t afford the loss. She began to think about the man who had caused all this suffering, and she started to plan a novel about Hitler, told from his point of view.

At the same time, Chava discovered a spiritual life. The Germans had given a Czech rabbi the job of creating a museum of Jewish life before the war. They gave him the art and books they’d looted and a building to put everything in. Then they left him alone. The rabbi decided to bring the Torah into the Ghetto. Before the war, the Torah was a book for educated men who knew Hebrew. Now, the rabbi thought, everyone needed it. He began translating the Book of Psalms into Yiddish, out of love for the Ghettoniks and love for the Psalms. But although the rabbi was an educated, worldly man, his knowledge of *mameloshn* was rooted in German. He asked around for a Yiddish writer who could help him. Someone sent him Chava. In exchange for her help, the rabbi told her, he would give her a few hours a week in his warm office and all the coffee she could drink. He would also teach her the Torah. Soon Chava was going to the rabbi’s office several times a week—not for the coffee, or the warmth, but for the Psalms. First she fell in love with the language, the rhythm of the words as they flowed in a halting trickle from the rabbi’s tongue, then faster, through her pen and onto the page. The structure of the Psalms entranced her; finally, she saw them as a vessel; one that contained not God, but an ideal form she called beauty. Beauty, not God, sustained her, fed her love of language. Taking those words, then her own, and shaping them into poems and stories blinded her to her own despair even as it gave her the eyes and the heart to understand it in others. Words saved her life.

At the rabbi’s museum Chava met writers and artists who gathered to make dioramas of pre-war Jewish life and sip the rabbi’s coffee. Among them was Sheyavitch, author of an epic poem of the Ghetto. The rabbi introduced Chava to Sheyavitch and insisted she read him some of her work. The poet introduced Chava to the secret circles of artists who met in

the home of a serene woman who wrote loving verses about the Sabbaths of her childhood. After the Germans deported this woman, the group met in the hut of a painter. When he was taken away, Chava and Sheyavitch continued their discussions on their own, at first walking through the Ghetto streets, then, after Sheyavitch’s wife and daughter were deported, by the stove in his barren home. Finally, they talked about whatever art they still believed in as they hid in a tiny room of the Rosenfarbs’ apartment, where they and Chava’s family, the remaining Morgentalers and a few others hoped to wait out the liquidation of the Ghetto. They lasted ten days; then the Germans discovered them.

Chava took her poems and stories with her to the camps. As soon as she arrived, a Jewish kapo seized them and threw them into the mud. Sheyavitch, whom Chava had urged to bury his epic poem as others had buried documents and treasures, clutched his work to him. Aside from two shorter poems he’d given to Ghetto officers of the Judenrat, his work died with him in Dachau.

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The Pencil “Lorry Number Five,” the overseer whispered in Chava’s ear, and walked away quickly. When the guards left to inspect other building sites, she hurried over to the truck and fell to her bony knees. Beneath the engine lay a cotton slip, white as a dove. Her hand—bone and skin, some veins, nothing more—darted out and snatched it. She crushed it between her fingers, making it as small as possible. Then, as she straightened up, she stuffed the slip beneath her foot, into her wooden clog, and marched back to the worksite. Later, in the barracks, she raised the slip above her head and let the cool snowfall of cotton cascade over her shoulders, her breasts, her stomach, her hips.

The cotton was warm, too, protection against the bitter winter winds of Hamburg. She’d been sent there to help build

new houses for Germans. Her guards allowed her nothing more than the striped dress all the prisoners wore. Sometimes women would make vests and undercoats out of canvas cement bags. The rough material scratched and shredded their skin, but it kept them warm. When the guards patted the women down, though, they'd discover the bulky undergarments; then they would beat them. The beatings could kill a woman quicker than the cold. The war couldn't last forever, the women told themselves; winter would come to an end.

The guards never felt the cotton slippers Chava wore. She owed her life to those slippers. She owed her life to the German overseer who'd whispered "Lorry Number Five."

His name was Hermann. He never told her his last name, afraid of what could happen if the guards learned of the gifts he smuggled to the Jewesses. Every day he carried with him a suitcase which he'd packed full of his most prized possessions.

She owed her life to those slippers. She
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He kept it with him always, afraid of the next bombing, of looting. She never saw what he considered his treasures, but she knew that among them were his gifts: the cotton slippers and panties. And newspapers. Like the slippers, he'd drop the newspapers under a truck and whisper their location. She'd stuff them into her wooden shoe and take them back to the barracks, where she and the other prisoners would read between the lines. A newspaper could get them killed, so after they read it they'd use matches stolen from the kitchen to burn the paper, huddling over its warmth.

She had another source of news as well, a kindly communist overseer the prisoners called the Churchmouse, because he was so poor. He could not afford to bring newspapers. Instead he whispered all the information he knew, the headlines he'd read and the party rumors he'd heard. But he never loved the prisoners the way Hermann did. And Hermann never loved Chava as much as he did her mother. Hermann told them so little of himself that they never understood his kindness, although Chava suspected Jewish ancestry. He revealed nothing. He wanted only to listen, and he loved hearing her simple mother most of all; he called her the *Meisterin*.

Chava's mother was named Sima, and she was one of the few mothers in the camps. Those who had survived the Ghetto

and all the deportations of the old, the sick, the unlucky—shot in the woods of Chelmno and shoveled into mass graves—had been weeded out at Auschwitz. Sima had arrived there with her two daughters. Leaning on their arms she had slowly moved forward in the line that forked like a snake's tongue, left to work, right to ashes. In between life and death stood Mengele. Sima and her daughters came before him.

Mengele pointed at Sima: the crematoria.

"No," said one daughter, "she is my sister."

"Our older sister," said the other daughter.

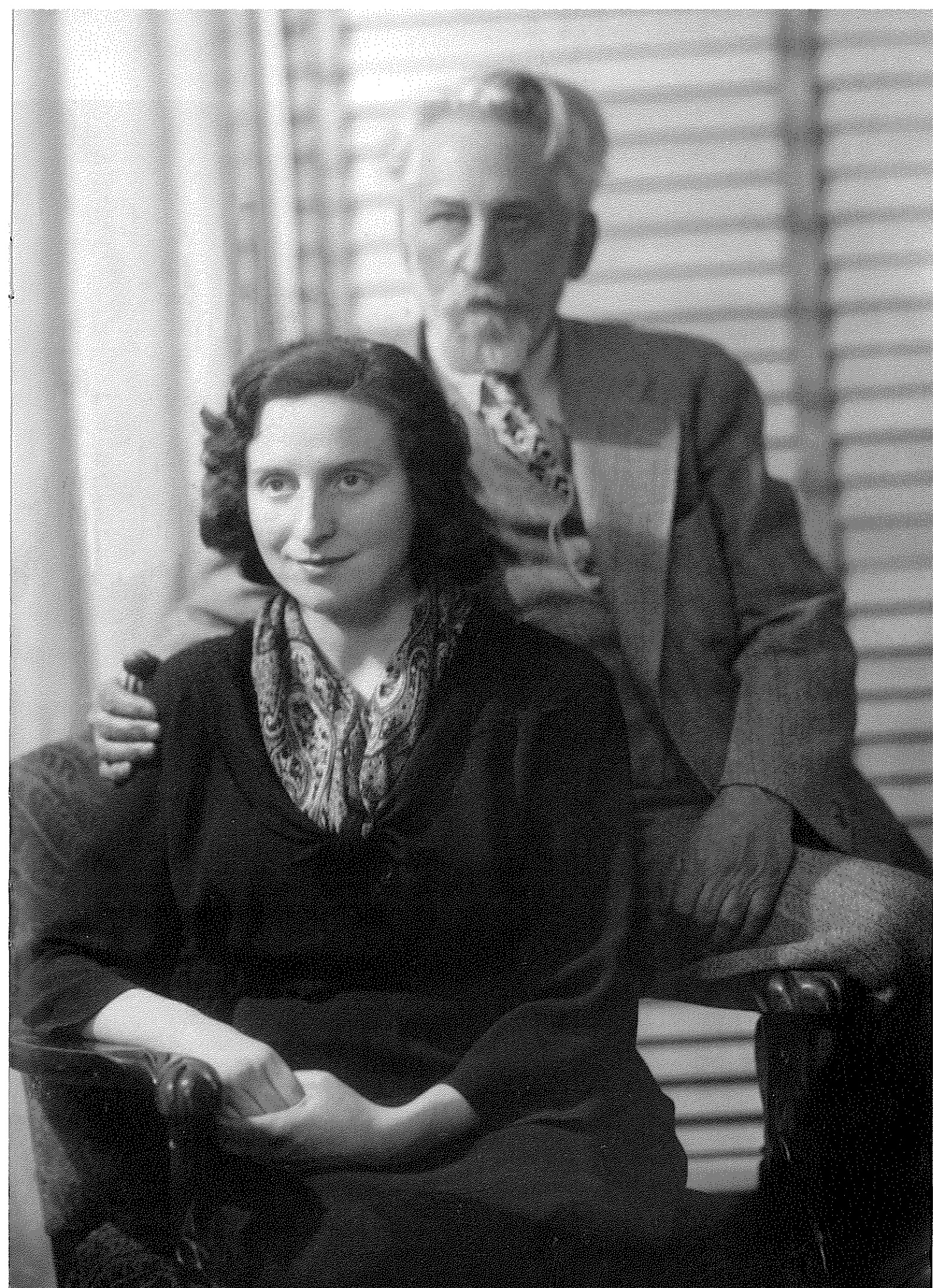
Mengele stared at the three women. "How old is she?" he said.

"She's thirty-nine," Chava said, and for that moment she believed it, the most important fiction she'd ever invent.

"He looked at her and let her go," Chava remembered fifty-three years later. "And that's how we saved our mother."

As to how Hermann saved Chava: he gave her a pencil. The cotton protected her body, but the pencil saved her soul. That pencil was the most precious gift she ever received, a dangerous thing to have and a dangerous thing to give. She'd asked him for it, and he had given it to her. No paper to write on, just the pencil. Like the slippers, like the newspapers she had to burn every day, she hid the pencil in her shoe, its wooden shaft as hard and bony as her foot. When she returned to the barracks she kept it in her shoe, each step reminding her of her treasure until nightfall. Then she slipped the pencil out and took it to bed with her. She had an upper bunk, close to the ceiling. While the other prisoners froze, starved, and dreamed nightmares no worse than their days, Chava scribbled across the planks of the ceiling. When there was no more pencil left, she read the poems she'd written. She read them every night before she slept. Slowly they crept into her mind. Each word became a part of her, until she no longer had to think to remember them. She hid them deep inside herself, and when the Germans sent her to Bergen-Belsen, there to starve among corpses because the crematoria no longer worked, the poems recited themselves within her.

AFTERWARDS, LIVING IN A TINY APARTMENT IN Brussels with her mother, her sister and Henry—who had survived Dachau—Chava began writing again. She sent her poems with a letter to an American Yiddish literary journal, *Tsukunft*. They wrote back asking if they could publish her letter along with the poems. A wealthy British Jew—a jeweler to the royal family—read them and in 1946, a year after the war, published them as a book, *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald*, *The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest*. They were the poems Chava had first written on the ceiling of the barracks of the concentration camp with her forbidden pencil.



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Canada "Life is so strange in our times and so complex that you now no longer have to seek a fictitious form for your stories," said Chava.

"It's hardly stranger or more complex than during the Holocaust," I answered.

"Exactly," Chava said. Her "now," I realized, included the half-century since the Holocaust had passed. "The whole Second World War," she added, raising a hand above her head and slicing it back down into her lap. "The shock of all the things which happened, the Holocaust and the atom bomb. All this made us face our reality."

We sat in Chava's living room, sipping tea and eating cookies she'd laid out for my visit. Sunk into the corner cushions of a long, radiantly green sofa, Chava looked very small. A painting of a man standing in back of a woman hung behind her, framing her face; she'd painted it herself, as she had most of the pictures which surrounded it, respites from writing. The two exceptions were a painting by her daughter Goldie, and high up on the wall and in the center, a portrait of Goldie painted by a British soldier who'd been one of the liberators of Bergen-Belsen, and had remained a family friend ever since. The room also contained sculptures Chava had carved over the years, and masks and statues from Africa and Australia. A chandelier of three spiraling strings of beads cast a cool light over it all, but the setting sun gave the room, and Chava's face, a warm hue.

"I find contemporary novels very weak," she said. She leaned forward and took a book off the coffee table, a paperback of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. "I was so eager to read this. I knew it was praised to the skies." Chava raised the book above her head as if it were the Ten Commandments, then, with a backwards flick of her wrist, made as if to toss the novel behind her. "But it's so light! It is beautifully written, but it is not very deep, I think. Where are the characters? You need full-blooded people, no?"

Chava sometimes wishes she could pluck just one character's story out of *The Tree of Life*: cheap to produce for a publisher, short and direct for the contemporary reader. She thinks Esther, the Communist, would be her best bet for commercial success, because Esther has brilliant red hair, green eyes, a curvy figure, and would make a great film heroine.

Chava's most widely read story, however, is a translated excerpt about Bergen-Belsen from her most recent novel, *Letters to Abrasha*, which appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* a few years ago. *The Tree of Life* stops in 1944; of the camps the novel contains only a few lines: "WORDS STOP. UNDRESSED,

NAKED, THEIR MEANING, THEIR SENSE SHAVEN OFF. LETTERS EXPIRE IN THE SMOKE OF THE CREMATORIUM'S CHIMNEY...." Then follow ten blank pages before a brief epilogue. *Letters to Abrasha* could be described as what took place in those ten pages.

"It's strange," Chava said, "I never thought I would write about it. I thought I *could* not. And then I did. But I did not live through my characters as I did in *Tree of Life*. Of course, I do not know if I could have lived through *Letters to Abrasha* like that. I had to keep it a little away from me."

Miriam, the heroine of *Letters to Abrasha*, is a dancer, not a poet. The horror Miriam describes is kept at a distance by the form of her story-telling, letters to a former teacher named Abrasha who, like Miriam, languishes in a displaced persons camp. Miriam, the reader knows from the beginning, has at least survived.

Writing *Letters to Abrasha* sustained Chava, but she didn't find the peculiar joy in it that she had in *The Tree of Life*. But she had no choice other than to write it. "A moment comes. Fifty years after liberation, I suddenly felt I must return."

Chava has gone back to the physical setting of her youth only once. The Bund reorganized in Poland after the war hoping that socialism in Eastern Europe could be salvaged. Bono Weiner, Chava's childhood friend, was among those who stayed. But many Poles secretly continued the anti-Semitic killing the Germans had begun, and the Communist government cracked down on Socialists. By 1947, most Bundists wanted to get out.

Western party members arranged for false documents to await their comrades in Paris. The leadership selected Chava to memorize the names of 200 people for whom papers had been prepared and to relay them to Weiner, in Lodz. Chava undertook the trip both as her duty and as an opportunity to explore the transformed landscape of her youth. In Lodz, she had Weiner take snapshots of her standing in front of the rubble that had been her friend the poet Sheyavitch's home. She looked up from the street at the apartment where her family had once lived, now occupied by Poles who she feared might kill her if they thought she had returned to reclaim her property. One day she traveled to Warsaw with Weiner, and there the two posed together for a picture in front of the monument to the Ghetto.

Chava in her writing room, beneath a portrait of Peretz. Photo by Lionel Delevingne.



Back in Brussels, Chava taught in a Jewish day school while Henry studied medicine. But both had decided they had no future in Europe. Henry had relatives in Argentina and Canada; the Montreal representative of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, H. Hershman, had published Chava's poems, so she and Henry decided to emigrate to North America, to Montreal. They moved first into Hershman's home, then into a one room flat beneath the apartment of another Yiddish poet, Rukhl Korn. The poet Ida Maize, connected to the city's med-

political and legal battles, left for good. Before he went, he helped fund the publication of *The Tree of Life*. It was his last gift to his childhood sweetheart. As far as Chava knows, he never read the book.

Edgia's Revenge "For every life saved another must be sacrificed," says Rella, narrator of a novella by Chava called "Edgia's Revenge." "In order for a sum to tally there can only be one correct answer; no ifs or maybes." The lives Rella refers to are those of the title character, Edgia, and her own; they are survivors of the same concentration camp, and both now live in Montreal, separated only by what each did, and did not do, to survive.

"Edgia's Revenge" is a short masterpiece of survivor psychology, and perhaps the most complex story Chava has written, an exploration of guilt, penance, redemption—and the absence of salvation after the Holocaust. It begins in contemporary Montreal as Rella prepares to commit suicide, a death she has planned ever since liberation. A tall, good-looking woman, in the camps Rella's height had often caught the attention of her guards, who picked her out for beatings—until the day she smiled at a German kapo and made herself his whore. He elevated her to his side, and made her a Jewish kapo over a woman's barracks, a position she relished not only for its safety, but for the chances it gave her to transform her suffering into punishment.

One day, Rella finds Edgia hiding in a latrine, terrified that in her weakened state she will surely be selected for "scrap"—extermination. Although Rella doesn't know Edgia and owes her nothing, she saves her from the daily selection. "There were no conundrums in the camps," says Rella, but this single act of kindness will plague her for the rest of her life. As the war's end approaches, Rella makes Edgia swear never to say a word of Rella's deeds in the camps. "And must I also not reveal that you saved my life?" asks Edgia.

Throughout the "Edgia's Revenge," Edgia and Rella shift back and forth between each other a balance of strength and weakness, guilt and blame. Each is reborn as the other, as first one then the other holds the power over both of their lives.

The two meet years after the war in Montreal. Rella has reinvented herself as a fashionable clothing designer, her tattooed number surgically removed and her accent refined through speech lessons. Edgia, though, remains a "muselman," one of those who lost their will to live in the camps. Rella no longer fears her at all; the "beneficiary of [Rella's] one and only heroic act" has kept her silence. All Edgia seems to want is to live in the shadow of her husband, Lolek, and his circle of survivor bon vivants, dedicated to seizing life and shaking every last good thing out of it. While the rest of the

Chava looked up from the street at the apartment where her family had once lived, now occupied by Poles who she feared might kill her if they thought she had returned to reclaim her property.

ical establishment, helped Henry find a place in the medical program of the University of Montreal. She also held a salon for the city's Yiddish writers, historians and journalists. "We would get drunk on homemade cherry wine and on literary discussion," Chava remembered. "Or we would go up to the top of Mount Royal, there to sit like gods of Parnassus, discussing the works of our absent colleagues and taking delight in literary gossip."

Instead of joining her, Henry greedily gathered up English words and sought out Canadian friends; Chava's literary and Bundist circles no longer impressed him. "They had a kind of Messianic, overexaggerated fervor that Jewish and Yiddish literature was the tip of everything," Henry later told his biographer. "I didn't buy it."

At night, Henry dreamed of German soldiers. By day, Chava's characters haunted him. He'd turned his own attention to the question of abortion in Canada—to his mind, an appropriate channel for one's energies, a contemporary issue. He became an outspoken advocate for abortion, then began to perform the procedure himself, taking grim delight in the wicked-sounding title of "abortionist." As Henry's reputation and notoriety grew, so did his estrangement from his wife. By the late 1960s, Henry and Chava barely spoke to one another. Close to the time *The Tree of Life* was published in 1972, Henry, by then a national figure embroiled in numerous

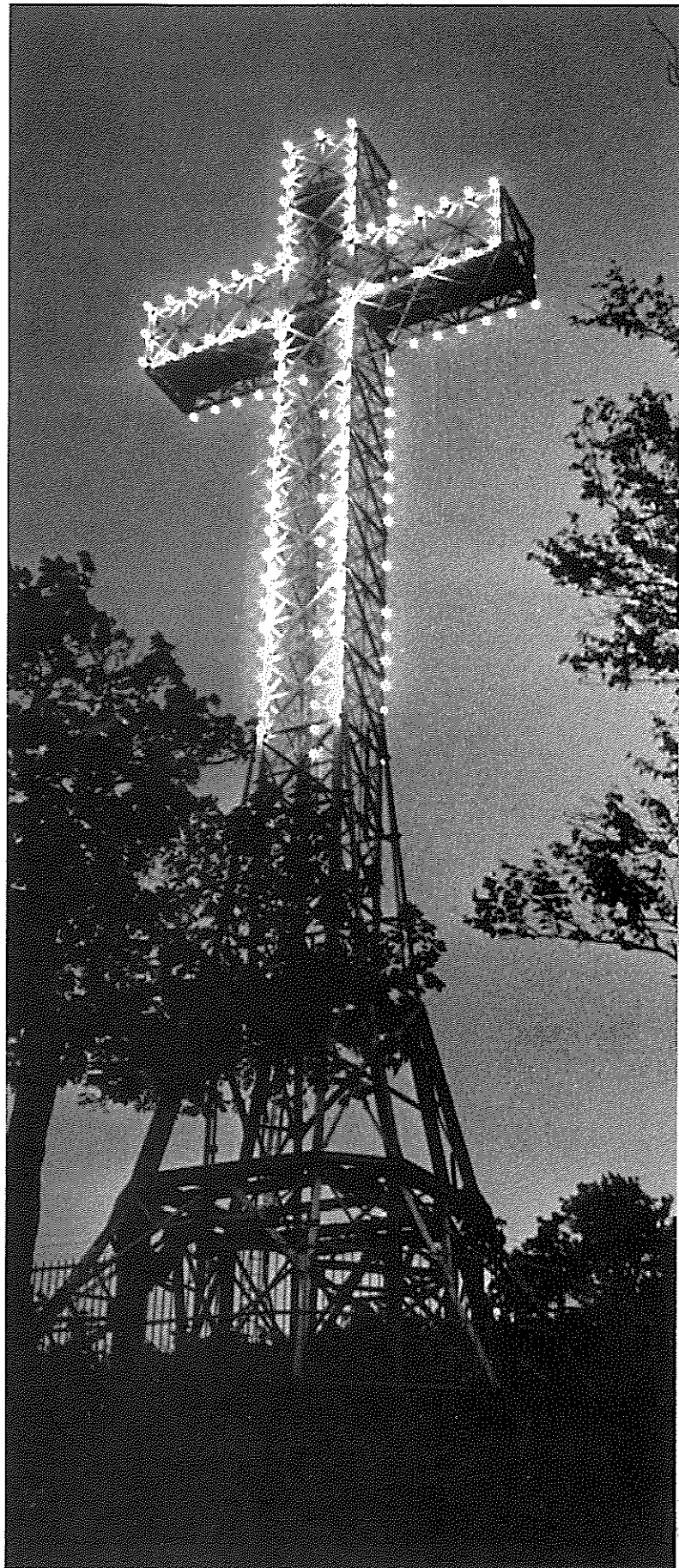
group discuss the latest fads, Edgia serves meals and cleans dishes. When Rella begins a loveless affair with Lolek, Edgia scrubs the lipstick stains out of her husband's shirts. Edgia's continued silence confirms for Rella that Edgia no longer holds anything over her, that Rella's noble act must have balanced out her collaboration, leaving Edgia with no reason to reveal Rella's past.

Or so Rella thinks. But Edgia does not live in a Christian universe, where repentance, and the simple math of a good deed for the bad, can wash away sins. Haunted by the giant cross which stands atop Mount Royal in the center of Montreal, she longs for the day when "all the Jesuses will come down from their crosses, become astronauts, and move to another planet." The Christ Edgia most wishes would leave this world is her husband, Lolek; even as he believes that Edgia is his cross to bear. One day, Lolek cracks his skull and dies tumbling down the steps of a brothel.

Freed of Lolek, Edgia drifts away from the group of survivors. Rella both hopes and fears she will never see her again—until she encounters her at the theater. Edgia has transformed herself into a mirror image of Rella. She has filled out her figure and grown rosy, clothed herself in a style Rella herself might have chosen. She has even dyed her hair black, like Rella's. But as Rella stares at her reflection in the figure of Edgia, she grows aware that she too has transformed herself; that on the border of Edgia's circle of admirers, she has nothing to say. She feels out of place, humble, and drawn again to Edgia, but this time Edgia is the kapo and Rella the weakling. The two become fast friends. Then Edgia re-marries and crushes her husband as Lolek once crushed her, until he collapses under the strain of a breaking heart.

Her husband's near-fatal heart attack is a rebirth for Edgia. Thank you for saving my life, she says to Rella, and goodbye; their friendship has been poison for them both. Edgia has broken her vow of silence, but she has also let go of the tie that bound her and Rella to each other and to their mutual denial of the past. Edgia dispels Rella's last illusion: that a single act of goodness can redeem an empty soul. There is no redemption, neither in the act itself nor in Edgia's forgiveness, which only returns Rella, in her suicide, to the camps she thought she'd left years ago.

For Chava, after the war it was her ability to exist in two worlds that for decades allowed her to live at all. By the 1980s, she was one of the last great Yiddish writers still alive, and her only topic was destruction; even as she represented the last



"Haunted by the giant cross which stands atop Mount Royal in the center of Montreal, Edgia longs for the day when 'all the Jesuses will come down from their crosses, become astronauts, and move to another planet.'" Photo by Allan Leishman/*The Montreal Gazette*.

breaths of a literary culture, she delivered its eulogy. The great despair of "Edgia's Revenge" is that doubling and re-invention don't necessarily offer salvation. Rella splits her life in two: before the war and after the war; then Edgia doubles Rella again by mirroring her and forcing her to mirror what Edgia once was. But the fault lines remain. "This world is not this world," a Holocaust survivor once told the psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, and in the end the same holds true for Rella. The second world she had built, in which a life in Montreal supplants the nightmare of Auschwitz, crumbles before her guilt, a guilt which comes on the crest of desire for a return to the first world of horrific youth and what she did there. "Every criminal craves the moment of judgment, no matter how afraid of it he might be," she says. "I return to the camp, to the scene of my crime" — and the only love she has in her heart, the love she kept for those who died before her world split in two.

Chava receiving the Manger Prize, Yiddish literature's highest award, in Israel, 1979.



When Chava wrote "Edgia's Revenge," she sent it first to the Yiddish *Forverts*, a long-time publisher of her work. The editor, another survivor, sent it back with apologies. His readers, many of them survivors as well, would never forgive him, he said, if he published such a story: a first-person account of a kapo. Chava then sent it to *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), the premier Yiddish literary journal at the time. Not long after the story appeared there, Chava received a letter that seemed more like an indictment than criticism: How dare you? the letter-writer demanded. To Chava, the answer was simple: Where else had she left to go other than the mind of a collaborator?

A READING GROUP IN TORONTO DEDICATED to Yiddish women writers read "Edgia's Revenge" in *Di goldene keyt*, and, in 1994, published it in a translation by Chava's daughter Goldie in an anthology called *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*. Yet even though Chava may be the greatest female Yiddish prose writer, even though her novels offer nuanced portraits of Jewish women's lives rare in the work of male writers, Chava does not think of herself as a "woman writer." The renewed interest of readers looking for a feminist perspective flatters and intrigues her, but she insists that she belongs to a far more endangered group, that of Yiddish writers. For fifty years, she says, she wrote only for herself, delighting in the accolades she received from the Yiddish community but sustained by the necessity of her art. Now, in her old age, she wonders what will become of her work—whether it will find a new audience or, like Rella, return to the camps. She disdains the only English translation of *The Tree of Life* as clumsy and inaccurate, even after Goldie—now a literary scholar—did what she could to fix the original translator's errors. Fifteen hundred copies of *The Tree of Life* sit in a publisher's warehouse in Australia. Chava sometimes likes to imagine the book in a reader's hands, a new discovery of her work. Most of her Yiddish readers are dead, her writer friends and Bundist comrades among them. Once a celebrity in a small but international Yiddish community, says Chava, "I am now an unknown, even among Jews."

"That's the tragedy of Yiddish literature," Goldie says. "Here's a writer with encyclopedic knowledge and amazing style, but you know, so what? Who's going to read it?"

Chava wonders the same thing. "For whom should I write?" she asked one Shabbes evening while we sat at her kitchen table eating take-out chicken. The truth is that she cannot stop. She has recently completed a volume of stories entitled *Survivors*—of which "Edgia's Revenge" is one—that she hopes to publish in English translation. And she has embarked on more. "I won't go back," she said. "I finally know

that I won't go back to the camps in my writing. But now I must write of the survivors, stories in which the Holocaust is not a theme, but a thread."

"But in 'Edgia's Revenge,' it was far more than a thread," I replied.

"Yes," she said, and left it at that.

I asked her if she had known a Rella.

"No," she answered, "not exactly. I started with Edgia, then I realized that to understand her I had to create Rella."

"You knew an Edgia, then?" I asked.

"We were, we are, all Edgias," she answered. And in a way, Rellas too, I thought.

IN 1965, CHAVA TRAVELED TO AUSTRALIA ON a lecture tour sponsored by Melbourne Jewish groups. Chava knew her old friend Bono Weiner had moved there and that he'd done well for himself, but the man she found startled her: a survivor living in only one world, successful in a present continuous with the past. Bono still believed in the Bund, but he was also active in contemporary Australian politics. Like every other survivor, he carried with him the baggage of his experience—in his case literally, in the form of two boxes of documents and notes he'd kept in the Ghetto. He'd buried them near the end, then returned afterward to dig them out of the streets of post-war Lodz. But rather than hide his past, Bono seemed to use it as a source of strength. Since the camps, he'd established a career as a travel agent, eventually building one of the largest agencies in Australia. Everywhere he went he carried his Ghetto archive with him, determined that it should not be lost, intent upon one day forcing himself to publish its contents.

Not much of a letter writer, Bono sent Chava postcards from every continent. He had good friends all over the world; Chava was one of them. The two stayed in close contact until the early 1970s, when, as Chava and Henry's marriage reached its tortuous end, she and Bono found themselves in New York at the same time. They fell in love, or admitted their love, or maybe just took up living together as if nothing could be more natural. They lived in Chava's house in Montreal and Bono's home in Australia, dividing the year between north and south, with numerous excursions to distant points in between. Their relationship was smooth and happy, and Chava never felt compelled to transform it into fiction. Then, in the spring of 1995, a strange anxiety overtook Chava. Bono could not live forever, and after he was gone, what would the world, what would she, have left of him? She insisted he write his memoirs.

Bono had never written his book about the Ghetto, and he was not prepared to write his own story. Instead, he told

Chava all that he remembered. She began to write not a novel but a biography. That summer, Chava completed a draft of her first chapter, the story of his childhood. Satisfied with her work, she put it away and decided to read it to him the next day. The following morning, Bono had a stroke. A few days later he died.

Not long afterward, *Di goldene keyt*, the journal that had always published Chava's work, ceased publication. Following Bono's death, this second blow nearly killed her. But she survived. In recent months she has dedicated herself to two projects: a history of *Di goldene keyt*; and a sort of personal *Yizkor* book, a memorial volume of essays by Bundists, Australian politicians and historians who had known Bono. To this

"For every life saved another must be sacrificed," says Rella, narrator of a novella by Chava called "Edgia's Revenge." "In order for a sum to tally there can only be one correct answer; no ifs or maybes."

tribute she has contributed a revised version of her chapter about Bono's youth. In thinking about her late husband's life, she realized that the man who had always seemed whole and complete, living in the present but aware of the past, had in fact also doubled himself. The archive he forever carried with him (Chava has since donated most of the documents to libraries) and put off writing about were "part of himself, of his sense of identity; they were his alter ego." No matter how long he lived, he would never have written his book; to do so would have been too close to the life he still lived.

Chava ends her chapter about Bono with a story about a trip they once took to Tahiti. They stayed in a hotel set upon a cliff overlooking the sea. During their first night a hurricane hit the island. The electricity went out. Chava watched through darkness as uprooted trees and twisted pieces of roofing flew past their balcony. Bono, meanwhile, prepared for bed. "How can you sleep at a moment like this?" she yelled. "Can't you see what's going on outside?"

"Why exactly should I start worrying now?" Bono answered. Then he turned to the wall and slept. Chava, shivering, stayed by the window and kept watch through the night. ⑩