Chava Rosenfarb’s Early Life Writing: “Bergen-Belsen Diary, 1945”

Ruth Panofsky, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

This essay analyses Chava Rosenfarb’s Bergen-Belsen diary as a work of life writing that pays meticulous attention to details of voice, craft, and narrative development. Suffering gave her a subject and Rosenfarb turned to the diary as a means of recording and coming to terms with a life irrevocably altered by tremendous loss. That artistry shaped a work produced in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust confirms that Rosenfarb was first and always a writer. Moreover, that her writerly persona—not her actual person—emerged intact and mature from the unmitigated trauma of the death camp is evidence that writing was a source of solace and hope that helped carry her through to survival.

Chava Rosenfarb’s diary of May 6 to September 1, 1945, written in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp immediately following liberation, first appeared in Yiddish in 1948 as Fragmentn fun a tog-bukh (Fragments of a Diary), an addendum to her collection of poems Di balade fun nekhtikn vald (The Ballad of Yesterday’s Forest), published by Harry Hershman in Montreal, where Rosenfarb emigrated in February 1950. The fragments were translated into English by Goldie Morgentaler, Rosenfarb’s daughter and literary executor, and published in Tablet Magazine on January 27, 2014 under the title “Bergen-Belsen Diary, 1945.”¹ Now, sixty-seven years after it appeared in Yiddish, this rare instance of a diary is widely accessible.

Rosenfarb’s diary documents a young woman’s return to selfhood through the act of writing and is profoundly significant for several reasons, both historical and literary. First, its anguished immediacy affords an unparalleled glimpse of the lived experience of survivors in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp in the wake of their liberation by the British Army on April 15, 1945. Second, it provides a window to the thoughts and feelings of Rosenfarb, newly liberated at the age of twenty-two. Rosenfarb would go on to become one of the most important Yiddish writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Best known for her magnum opus, Der boim fun lebn (The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto), first published in 1972, Rosenfarb’s oeuvre resurrects the lost world of Polish Jewry, in particular her own community of Lodz. Finally, and most pertinent to this essay, the diary stands as a masterful
work of life writing. Self-conscious and performative, it deploys highly lyrical language and literary tropes to render the experience of reentering life anew at the end of Hitler’s war against the Jews.

This essay analyses Rosenfarb’s diary as a work of life writing that pays meticulous attention to details of voice, craft, and narrative development. Suffering gave her a subject and like other victims—none more notable than Anne Frank who died at Bergen-Belsen in 1945, as well as Polish partisan Gusta Davidson Draenger who was executed in Kracow’s Montelupich Prison in 1943 and Dutch diarist Etty Hillesum who died in Auschwitz in 1943—Rosenfarb turned to the diary as a means of recording and coming to terms with a life irrevocably altered by tremendous loss. That artistry shaped a work produced in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust confirms that Rosenfarb was first and always a writer. Moreover, that her writerly persona—not her actual person—emerged intact and mature from the unmitigated trauma of the death camp is evidence that writing was a source of solace and hope that helped carry her through to survival.

As Sara R. Horowitz explains, diarists “offer a unique perspective on the events of the Holocaust… [They] convey the chaos and confusion of the time, the lack of reliable information and the hope—most frequently in vain—that the writer and her family would survive the war” (Horowitz, “Holocaust”). Moreover, diarists “often include material that might later be forgotten or discounted as irrelevant” (Horowitz, “Holocaust”).

Chava Rosenfarb (1923-2011), who wrote her Bergen-Belsen diary in the midst of extreme “chaos and confusion” (Horowitz, “Holocaust”), saw her record as the work of a writer and this is borne out by its publication history. When she prepared her diary for publication in 1948, Rosenfarb was deliberate in her selections. Rather than publish the diary whole, she chose “fragments” and omitted “material that she thought was too personal” (Morgentaler, Email), including all references to Douglas Jensen, a British soldier whom she befriended at Bergen-Belsen. She also made emendations. She does not name Henekh (later Dr. Henry) Morgentaler, whom she married in 1949. Instead, he is referenced as the survivor “friend who delivers the news about the death of her father and the poet Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch” (Morgentaler, Email), the author of “Lekh-lekho” who was Rosenfarb’s “mentor and friend” (Rosenfarb, “Last
Poet”) in the Lodz ghetto.\textsuperscript{4} Chosen for their melodic quality, the fragments cohere as a narrative that builds inexorably toward a powerful crescendo—further evidence of the diarist’s artistic impulse.

With the exception of “one descriptive paragraph” in the first entry that did not “read properly in English” (Morgentaler, Email), Goldie Morgentaler faithfully translated Fragmentn fun a tog-bukh for publication in Tablet Magazine. She has yet to uncover the original diary, which “may have been lost when my parents came to Canada, or my mother may have thrown it out. She was in the habit of throwing out her diaries” (Morgentaler, Email), but Morgentaler still hopes to find it in Rosenfarb’s remaining papers.\textsuperscript{5}

Writing was the gift of Rosenfarb’s father Avrom, a restaurant waiter, member of the Jewish Socialist Bund, but “a poet at heart” (Waletzky) and an avid reader who somehow managed to maintain “a clandestine Yiddish library” (Horowitz, Introduction vi) in the Lodz ghetto. He nurtured his daughter’s writerly impulse and the two shared a special bond of love and respect for literary expression. Rosenfarb recalls her father’s “warm, sure hand…open[ing] the sacred doors of our Yiddish aleph-bet…you guided my hand over the neat white lines. We wrote the word ‘Tateh’ [‘Father’] and there arose such a light from those five small letters that the word itself acquired a soul, and I saw that soul reflected in your loving smile” (May 6).\textsuperscript{6}

Through the joint act of writing, father and daughter were united, body and soul.

Implicitly, Rosenfarb dedicates her diary to a father who symbolically “guides” the development of twenty-two diary entries toward a final swelling of hope. The opening question, “Father, where are you?” (May 6), summons the parent and signals his importance as actual figure and literary muse. Through repetition, the question becomes a poignant chorus invoking the paternal spirit that imbues Rosenfarb’s diary and finally leads her to the writing life.

The diary serves as an elegy for a beloved father, a memorial to Rosenfarb’s cherished friend Shayevitch, and stands as a moving example of the power of literary expression to posit renewal—but never redemption—after the darkest hour. It also gives voice to the writer emergent who once clung to verse for life: “My unfinished ghetto poem…used to accompany me in the camp. With its words on my lips I used to drag myself through the snows in the early winter mornings to work. I penciled the verses on the ceiling above my bunk. Each day a few
more lines. In my mind, I hear them constantly” (May 8). Just twenty days after liberation, when she feels called to commemorate the dead and honor the living by taking “a pencil in…hand,” her “fingers” trembling “over the white sheet of paper” (May 6), Rosenfarb’s literary inclination is revived.

The first diary entry sets the tone and narrative form for the entries that follow. To mirror her irreconcilable feelings of grief and renewal, anxiety and expectation, despair and wonder, Rosenfarb adopts a melancholy tone and offers an emotional, rather than a cerebral, response to the tortuous past of enslavement and the historic moment of liberation. Stylistically, by switching back and forth between her inner world and the reality she is experiencing, she recreates a sense of the present as a heightened interlude—seemingly suspended in time—that defies comprehension. Language is used to differentiate experience. Her musings and dreams, for example, deploy elevated language and literary tropes to suggest “that bubble of being” (Waletzky)—Rosenfarb’s own phrase—while lived experience is conveyed through descriptive passages. The diary of her “double life” (June18) is driven by these dual modalities.

Her father’s “luminous eyes” (May 6) oversee the wider narrative of the first entry. Not yet able to participate in the life she perceives from a seat “near the window,” Rosenfarb reports on the scene below: “Leaning against the stone wall,” a man “gulps down…soup as fast as he can. God, how hungry he is! For years he has been hungry and for years he has been frightened” (May 6). By the close of the entry, the man arouses the memory of her father and Rosenfarb ponders: “Perhaps you too are standing somewhere at this very moment with your bowl of soup, leaning against another wall” (ibid.).

The next day’s entry is a brief, direct address to the father. In poetic refrain, the narrator asks, “Where are you, Tateh?...Where are you now, Tateh? I want to tell you everything!” (May 7), variations on the question that opens the diary. Father is muse, but also a human being who may have heard “the firing of the guns...meant to tell the world that peace has come, that the hour of freedom has arrived” (ibid.). By May 8, when she personifies “[p]oor, sad Freedom” as a female wearing “a prosaic face” and resembling “a beggar,” it is clear that the creative impulse has fully taken hold. Freedom “beckons,” but the writer continues to suffer under “dark shadowy
wings” and once again invokes her beneficent muse: “Where are you, Tateh? I want to hug you” (May 8).

The muse recedes, however, when Rosenfarb becomes ill with typhus. The onset of collapse is noted ominously—“can we protect ourselves from death? No, we are still very helpless” (May 10)—as a novelist might turn a plot toward danger. What follows is a suspenseful four-week gap in the narrative while “the fever boiled...scorched my eyes and dulled my brain” (June 13). Rosenfarb reveals that she spent nearly six weeks in hospital, often delirious and dreaming of her father and lost friends. When she finally rallies, she is “returned to life” (June 18) to rejoin her mother Simma and younger sister Henia, fellow survivors who have not left her bedside. Typhus is thus presented as Rosenfarb’s private inferno—“I felt my own burning breath scalding my face” (ibid.)—that she must endure if she is to reengage with the living. It is both a turning point in life—recovery from typhus brings the realization that Rosenfarb’s soul, as much as her body, is in need of healing—and a critical pause in the diary, as the narrative lens refocuses outward.

As her strength returns, Rosenfarb begins to notice the beauty of the natural world, which, in the absence of her father, becomes a substitute muse. Invoking the Romantic tradition of poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, she turns to nature as a rich source of metaphor. She is a trodden “blade of grass” that “has a hard job righting itself again and must wait until the sap in its veins starts to pulse with new life” (June 26). She marvels at the sky “decorated with a sparkling sun” (June 20), while “[b]lossoms fall from the trees, gathering into white carpets” (June 26). Finally, amid the textures and smells of the forest, where the ill are brought “to recuperate,” she is re-embodied: “I turned with my face to the earth and buried my head deep in the grass. The sweet smell of earth permeated my body and intoxicated my limbs” (June 27). At the same time, she recollects her father’s caress and “warm” sentient hand: “Tateh . . . Where are you?” (June 26).

Rosenfarb glories in what she calls “my first summer” (June 30) and the “joy of awakening” (June 26) to life. Like fellow writer/survivor Primo Levi, however, she is “drenched in memory” (Levi 21) that will not fade. As she admitted, even one “year later...the memory of the ghetto and the concentration camp horrors were still so fresh and immediate that it could
hardly be called memory” (Rosenfarb, “Last Poet”). Nonetheless, her diary deploys memory as a literary trope for trauma and rehabilitation. Her nighttime dreams, for example, remain an unfettered source of terror while she pursues the truth about her father and Shayevitch. In contrast, her daytime memories soften as her sense of self reemerges. By the close of the diary, when the search for her father and friend has finally ended, memory—in the form of dread—is contained, while memory—in the form of remembrance—brings comfort.

By the end of June, Rosenfarb has convalesced and reasserted her will to live. She has begun to accept that many of her friends are dead and, though she “long[s] for the familiar streets” of Lodz, she knows it is no longer her “hometown” (ibid.). She is “on the road to life” (June 23) and thus turns her attention to what she observes in the camp. Those details, which she feels compelled to “record and register” (June 30), dominate her diary from June 28 onward.

She describes, for instance, the newly awakened sexuality of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old girls who once thought their bodies permanently destroyed by their recent nightmarish experience. Their fears quieted, they indulge in exquisite pleasures: laughter and song, cigarettes and chocolates, flirtatious kisses and sexual encounters with British soldiers who “admire their fresh, newly budding femininity” (June 28). But the past is always present in the young women’s dreams “of their parents’ faces…the smiles of their sisters and brothers…[and] the horrors they have so recently survived”—and for other women, too, who “sell themselves to the soldiers simply and knowingly, just for a taste of a slice of white bread” (ibid.). Even as the diary shifts focus to the renewal of life unfolding before her, Rosenfarb unveils the haunting taint of the past on women like herself who still feel desperate, but now seek intimacy and human touch.

The men also yearn for love. In July, male survivors “flood into the camp” (July 5), driven to find family members. They “tremble with anticipation” as they ask about mothers, wives, and daughters, sisters and aunts, but feel “forlorn” (ibid.) among strangers when their search proves futile. Rosenfarb self-consciously brings dialogue into the entry of July 5—the only time she does so in the diary—not to render conversation, but to suggest thwarted connection among survivors:

—Where do you come from?
—Perhaps you know…?
—And you, young lady, perhaps you remember my little daughter? (ibid.)

The austere economy of unanswered questions intensifies the depiction of great “commotion… as the men move from barrack to barrack…call[ing] out long lists of women’s names” (ibid.). The use of such dialogue to evoke the survivors’ wretched despair is further evidence of the artistic turn that shapes Rosenfarb’s diary.

She and her sister join the search for surviving relatives, stopping “every man we meet. It would be so beautiful if one of these men turned out to be our father” (ibid.). They “scan the lists of names of survivors of the camps” (July 10), but do not find their father listed among the living. When the desire for news threatens to overwhelm Rosenfarb, she inserts a final address to the father: “Tateh, this very moment I am calling you with all the power of my being…We are calling you, Tateh!” (July 8). Invocation and lament, however, do little to assuage her unbearable pain.

On July 19, Rosenfarb learns that a man in the camp was with her father “until two days before the liberation” (July 19). Spurred by intolerable “uncertainty” (July 16) she finally announces, “Henia and I are going to look for Father. We left the camp this morning” (July 20). To mirror her sense of crisis, the three diary entries that precede her decision to leave Bergen-Belsen in search of her father are deliberately terse—their concision meant to signal resolve and the boldness of venturing into the unknown in search of answers.

A gap in the diary from July 20 to August 28 indicates a period of travel. When she returns, after weeks of hitchhiking “from one [German] city to another” (Reinhartz 48), Rosenfarb is abject. “[I am] back in the camp,” she declares, but self-reflexively wonders, “Why am I telling all this anyway?” (August 28). The entry of August 28, which recounts in plain language her attempt to locate her father, is one of heartache. Her arduous journey did not reveal the fate of her father. Upon her return, however, she learns from a “friend” that her father “perished a day before the liberation, killed when an American bomb landed” on a train transporting “Dachau prisoners deeper into Germany” (ibid.). At the same time, she is told “Shayevitch was taken on the very last transport to the gas chambers” (ibid.).
Initially, these stark revelations deaden Rosenfarb’s spirit. She “does not read the names on the lists any more. I do not go anywhere. I know that I shall never see my father again… Even Nature has lost its charm for me. I am empty of all desires” (September 1). Rosenfarb is consumed with thoughts of her father’s “lonely suffering” (ibid.), but finally release comes in the form of a powerful dream. In the diary’s closing dream, her father appears “with a burning staff in his hand” (ibid.), determined to fight the SS to stay the execution of his two daughters. His “staff emitted such fierce flames” that “all of Germany” was soon engulfed in fire and all the Jewish fighters “glowed victorious” (ibid.). Although her father does not survive the attack, the dream ends with a cellar door opening to “a grey shaft of light” (ibid.). “It was the beginning of a new day,” tinged with “great sorrow” (ibid.).

Two key words, “beginning” and “new,” signify hope arising out of the conflagration of lives lost in the Holocaust. They also allude to Rosenfarb’s turn to writing—the legacy of her father’s encouragement and Shayevitch’s mentorship. Her father’s guiding hand, Shayevitch’s ghetto poems and his belief that “[o]ur lives have to be recorded…the story of our daily lives drip off the tip of my pen. We do not need anything else” (June 30), beckon her to take up her pencil. And though she seeks to honour both men, she is reticent. “How,” she asks, “can one construct an artistic history of the ghetto?” (ibid.).

Rosenfarb’s Bergen-Belsen “fragments” are evidence that she was already engaged in such a project. As a diary, the fragments formed the first writerly act in a life subsequently devoted to memorializing the ghetto through poetry, drama, fiction, and personal essays. On June 30, 1945, having just recovered from typhus, Rosenfarb wrote that a novel of the Lodz ghetto “would be an insult to my dear ones and also to myself” (ibid.). Her view changed, however, when she, like Shayevitch before her, felt called to chronicle the “story of our daily lives” (ibid.) in her award-winning epic The Tree of Life.⁸

As Goldie Morgentaler explains, Rosenfarb “was a writer of the past, of her own past and that of the Jews of Poland. For her, the past meant Poland, specifically Jewish, Yiddish-speaking Poland, the Poland that she saw disappear before her eyes during the five long years that she spent in the Lodz ghetto and the final year in the concentration camps. This was the subject that her imagination responded to” (Morgentaler, “I am still there’’). The Bergen-Belsen diary of
Chava Rosenfarb

1945 was the first literary work of Rosenfarb’s potent imagination. In the wake of liberation, it gave rise to hope and a life of writing that commemorated the tragic loss of Polish Jewry.

Works Cited:
Morgentaler, Goldie. Email to author. 18 June 2014.
---. “‘I am still there’: The Recreation of Jewish Poland in the Canadian Novels of Chava Rosenfarb.” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 35.2 (Fall 2016); forthcoming.


**Endnotes:**

1 Rosenfarb’s diary has also been translated into Dutch by Rien Verhoef; see “Bergen-Belsen Dagboek, 1945,” *Vrij Nederland* 25 April 2015: 76-85.
3 For the sake of clarity, I use “Rosenfarb” to refer to the first-person narrator of the “Bergen-Belsen Diary, 1945,” but I recognize her as a construct of the writer/survivor Chava Rosenfarb.
5 I am grateful to Goldie Morgentaler for information on the provenance of her mother’s diary.
6 Rosenfarb’s sister Henia Reinhartz describes her father’s “beautiful, long, white hands” (Reinhartz 4) in her 2007 memoir *Bits and Pieces*, a title that invokes Rosenfarb’s *Fragments of a Diary*.
7 In her memoir, written and published decades after liberation, Reinhartz claims that she and her sister learned of their father’s death from fellow Bundists in the Feldafing displaced persons camp. This essay, however, accepts Rosenfarb’s rendering of the painful discovery, written in Bergen-Belsen following liberation.
8 *The Tree of Life* won Argentina’s Samuel Niger Prize, Canada’s J. I. Segal Award, Israel’s Itzik Manger Prize, and the United States’ Atran Prize.