Confessions of a Yiddish Writer

I was never a Sunday scribbler. Writing was never a hobby for me, a pastime to while away the hours. On the contrary, it was as necessary to me as life itself; it was a refuge, a substitute for living, a confrontation with myself, a form of confession—but always it was a necessity that allowed me to feel that my life had an accompanying motif, an underlying melody. Writing often gave me moments of such ecstasy as can only be experienced by lovers; it gave me instances of such intense spiritual forgetfulness that I truly believed that I and the cosmos were one, so that through the simple act of breathing the air in my room I felt that I was inhaling the universe itself. Clasped within the bosom of this universe, my physical self simply ceased to be. Rare moments these, but blessed.

I have called this essay "Confessions of a Yiddish Writer," because, after all, what is writing if not a form of confession in disguise? No matter what the subject, all literary roads lead back to the self. The writer descends like a miner into the deepest shafts of her soul in order to unearth the blackest coals of her torment, or to retrieve the most glittering diamonds of her memories, and bring them back to the surface in the form of fictions that she wishes to share with the world.

I began writing when I was about eight years old. In Lodz, Poland, where I was born and raised, I was a student in the Yiddish secular school called the Medem School. One day our teacher, Mrs Kirshenbaum gave us a lesson on what it means to write a literary composition. On my way home from school, I bought a notebook and wrote down all my poems. I then took coloured pencils and decorated each page with drawings of birds and flowers. On the first page, I wrote the title, "My Literary Works," and the next day I carried this first poetry collection to my teacher and generously gifted her this "Work." In return I received a kiss on the forehead, my first honorarium.

When I was older our teacher was Mr. Resnik, who taught us Yiddish and history. Mr Resnik transformed each class into a grand voyage for the imagination. He had a habit of writing comments in the form of little letters in red ink under every written assignment that was submitted to him. To me, he wrote: "I have underlined a great deal in this paper. It is for the good of the work, and may it be for the good of the writer as well."

The language of my home was Yiddish. For most of my childhood it was the only language I knew, because my contact with the Poles was non-existent. Thus, from the beginning, I was deeply immersed in the Yiddish language, and for much of my life, Yiddish was for me the only means of literary expression.

I was a high school student when the war broke out. In February of 1940, I, my parents and my sister, along with the entire Jewish population of Lodz were herded into a ghetto established in the slums of Lodz, an area called Baluty. The ghetto was encircled by a barbed wire fence, so that not one Jew managed to escape during all the years of the ghetto's existence. There we subsisted on a starvation diet, laboring for the Germans, and in constant terror of deportation to the death camps of Chelmno and Auschwitz.

During those horrible months and years of incarceration in the ghetto, I never stopped writing. I produced hundreds upon hundreds of poems, filling with stanzas the pages of bookkeeping registers, which were covered with calculations on one side, but blank on the other. There, despite the hunger, the cold and the fear, I wrote poems more ardently than ever before—or since. I did not regard myself as a poet in those days. I had too exalted an opinion of the poetic vocation to see myself in the role of a poet. I was just a girl who wrote poems. There were many adolescent girls and boys in the ghetto who took to the pen in order to preserve the integrity of their spirit. Even children and old people were infected with the literary bug. In the ghetto, along with tuberculosis, typhus and dysentery, there raged the epidemic of writing. The drive to write was as strong as the hunger for food. It subdued the

hunger for food. Each writer nurtured the hope that his or her voice would be heard. It was a drive to raise oneself above fear through the magical power of the written word, and so demonstrate one's enduring capacity for love, for singing praise to life. Even in the concentration camps, even by the glare of the crematorium flames, there were those who wrote.

It was in the ghetto that the Jews—and not for the first time in their history—denied the validity of the Latin proverb, "Inter arma silent musae" (during war the muses are silent). Perhaps we found it so easy to sing, because our companions in the cage were justice and the rage for freedom. We were like those song birds which sing most beautifully when in captivity.

It was in the ghetto that I met the poet Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch who became my first real mentor. He taught me not only to take poetry seriously, but to take myself seriously as a poet, to dig to the bottom of what was most deeply hidden inside me in order to give my verses a more original, a more powerful dimension. I feel his spirit accompanying me even today, and it is because of him that I feel ashamed of my artistic inadequacies and dissatisfied with my limited abilities. It is to his influence, more than that of anyone else, that I owe the creation of *The Tree of Life,* my trilogy about the Lodz ghetto.

In 1943 Shayevitch introduced me to the group of writers among whom I would serve my apprenticeship. This group of starving, doomed writers was led, by the elderly Yiddish poet Miriam Ulinover.[1] The group welcomed me as their youngest member and bestowed upon me the title of *yunge dikhterin*, young poet. But I did not yet dare to call myself so. To this group, which met in the home of the painter Israel Leizerovitch,[2] I read my poems, which were then discussed and critiqued while we nibbled on pieces of what we called "babka," a concoction made of the potato peels that we all brought as food contributions to our meetings. These meetings with the writers' group were the closest I ever came to a class

in creative writing.

My apprenticeship as a writer was also helped by my association with the enigmatic Rabiner Hirshberg, a German Jew from Danzig, who had been deported to the Lodz ghetto. The Rabiner hired me to help him translate the psalms from Hebrew into Yiddish, my pay being a slice of bread and butter. The Rabiner Hirshberg was the director of the *Wissenschaftliche Apteilung*, (Scientific Division of the "Jewish Museum"),[3] an enterprise set up by the Nazis to study Jewish culture and folklore, a dubious project whose offices were located in the heart of the ghetto.

In the ghetto, we lived in constant terror that the Germans would deport us to the death camps, especially to Auschwitz, which was the closest camp to Lodz. These deportations occurred continually from the time the Lodz ghetto was first established in 1940 until its liquidation in 1944. The deportations decimated the ghetto population, until, of the 203,000 Jews who were originally forced to live behind the barbed wire fence, only 68,000 remained. At the end of the summer of 1944, the Lodz ghetto was liquidated. We—that is, my parents, my sister and I—tried to avoid being sent on the transports that were emptying the ghetto. So, along with a group of about ten of our nearest and dearest friends, we hid in the back room of our two-room Baluty apartment, disguising the existence of this room by placing a large wardrobe in front of the entrance. We managed to fool the Germans for only two days. On the 28th of August we were discovered and transported to Auschwitz.

On that dark day in August, a cattle-train unloaded me and my family, along with 3000 other Jews from the liquidated Lodz ghetto onto the ramp of the train station at Auschwitz. There I stood, knapsack on back, one arm embracing my father, who was ordered to join the column of men. I held the small bundle of my ghetto poems under the other arm. A kapo tore the bundle out from under my arm and threw it onto a heap of discarded prayer books, letters and photographs.[4] Then came the selection. My mother, my sister and I were sent off through

the gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*. Soon I stood naked, with my head shaved, but my life spared. It was then that the thought of one day writing a book about the Lodz ghetto—that is, if I survived—flickered for a split-second across my mind.

From Auschwitz we were transported to Sasel, a forced labour camp near Hamburg, where we built houses for the bombed-out Germans of that city. I occupied the upper bunk in my barrack. I had managed to beg a pencil stub from a friendly German overseer at work. In the evenings before falling asleep I inscribed in minute letters on the ceiling above my head some of my lost ghetto poems; those poems which I could remember. I memorized them and right after the war I published them in my first book of poems.

When the battlefront neared Hamburg, we were again packed onto cattle cars, and this time transported to the hell of Bergen-Belsen. There I fell ill with typhus. On the 15th of April 1945, the very date of our liberation, my mind was wandering through a no-man’s land where typhus reigned supreme. I was unaware of being evacuated, the day after the liberation, to a lazarette on the other side of the concentration camp's barbed-wire fence.

Miraculously, I succeeded in smuggling myself back across the border from death to life. And so I tumbled into the reality of the time after the liberation, a reality that had nothing of the real about it, but appeared rather like an extension of my own feverish hallucinations. It seemed to me that I and the other survivors had been transported into a new kind of concentration camp, where our daytime delusions and nighttime longings took over the functions of guards and kapos, torturing us with the echoes of screaming silences, with the revival of blinding images, and with the continual summoning of the specters of loved ones whom we had lost forever.

While convalescing, I allowed the past to live on within me. One moment I relished the joy of rebirth. Every blade of grass, every tree and shrub seemed to me to be retelling the story of Genesis. I was drunk with the happiness of being, of breathing, of sensing, of seeing

how the flesh began to cover my skeletal body. The next moment I hugged my sorrows so that they poisoned the previous moments of joyful oblivion.

From time to time the thought of writing a book again entered my mind. The need to write and make order in the chaos raging within me was great. Yet the fear of writing, of again plunging into the abyss of terror was greater still. More than once, I was ready to take pencil in hand, and more than once I decided never to touch upon the subject of the ghetto and the camps. I doubted whether it was at all possible to impose a form, a discipline on the painful phantasmagoria whirling inside me. The more strongly I felt the urge to write, the weaker I felt in face of the enormity of the subject. I feared it, and this fear hovers over me to this day, whenever I try to write on the subject of the Holocaust.

The German soil was still warm with the blood on which it had gorged *zum krepieren*. Ravaged and eviscerated, its carcass lay stretched out over the heart of Europe, the fields ploughed through by tanks, the forests razed by bombs. Split in two, the bridges, bent like broken knees, dangled in the rivers. The ruined towns with their mountainous swells of rubble stood like tombstones on the graves of Germany's vanquished conceit. The tips of former factory walls protruded like broken teeth, while winds rattled through houses that resembled broken lanterns, lacking doors or windows. The pitted and broken asphalt of what had once been streets led out onto what had once been boulevards and highways.

Upon these former boulevards and highways, through the devastated towns and raw fields and forests, we, the survivors of the concentration camps, we, the "victors," wandered about like ghosts. We were like corpses disgorged from the bursting mouths of mass graves—as if this German soil, surfeited with death, had been incapable of swallowing us, and so had left us free to wallow in its heaps of refuse.

It was April. Nature followed its course and gradually began to cover the ugliness, the

remnants of violence, with a veil of green and flower. The sun warmed delightfully. Our dry bodies and frozen hearts began to thaw with the sprouting of that unbelievable macabre spring, while the wound of bereavement still burned in our throats.

May and June followed. We were still alone. In the past, when we had been trapped in the ghettos and concentration camps, we had tried to convince ourselves that the world had not come to save us because it was impossible to do so; but as soon as the storm was passed — so we told ourselves — the world would rush to us with open arms to console and help us. The world would carry us in triumph on its arms.

Now the storm was over and the world was in no hurry to come and put its arms around us. It did not rush to soothe our wounds with balms of brotherhood. Nations did not open their hearts, countries did not open their borders to let us in. Even the gates of those countries which had just freed themselves from the Nazi yoke and which should have understood us best in our homelessness and desolation were closed to us. No one wanted us. Perhaps the sight of us would have prevented them from forgetting the nightmare that had just passed. The world wanted to forget.

What were we to do with ourselves? What was there to do with our rescued lives? I had used to write poems in the ghetto. It was easy to write in the ghetto. We had had clean hands and clean consciences. The faces of good and of evil were clearly etched. We had no trouble distinguishing between the two. It was a time when black was black and white was white. We were white. We were innocent.

That was how we had felt in captivity. But now, when we could finally savour that freedom for which we had so stubbornly longed, of which we had so incessantly dreamed, things were far from being as simple as they had been in the past. The face of the post-war world, of which we had dreamed in the shadow of death, for which we had longed with a longing that helped us face the most vicious cruelties, was unrecognizable: a strange cold

face. And so disillusionment crept into our hearts belatedly, like a bitter aftertaste. To our grief and sense of loss was added the sorrow that it had all been in vain. The stifled scream of our lost world, the pain of our orphanhood, combined with the awareness of the living world's silent indifference towards us were devastating. This was not a propitious time for writing poems.

My sister and I wandered through all the zones of occupied Germany. There was as yet no organized transportation system for civilians, so we hitched rides on top of lorries loaded with coal, or on military freight trucks; but mostly we wandered on foot, along with bands of other survivors. We made our way from the wreckage of one German town to the next; we hurried from one UNRRA office to the next,[5] reading lists of survivors, searching for the name of our father and our other dear ones. We had left our mother, whom we had miraculously managed to save, in the camp at Bergen–Belsen, where, after liberation, we had taken up residence in the barracks of our former SS guards. There she was to wait for us, and if Father should come to Bergen–Belsen looking for us, there he would find her.

Father did not come looking for us. My sister and I did not find him. On our return to Bergen-Belsen we were greeted by a friend who had survived.[6] He had been with our father in Kaufering, Camp 4. He told us that our father had perished two days before the liberation. He had been on the last transport out of Dachau. The Americans had bombed the train and my father had been among the dead. It was for me one of the final ironies: that my father had managed to survive all the horrors that the Nazis had inflicted on the Jews, only to be killed by an American bomb.

The same young man told us that the poet, Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch would write poems in Camp 4 in Kaufering and read them to his comrades in the barracks. During the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto Shayevitch had hidden with us in the tiny back room of our flat and together with us had been transported to Auschwitz. He was sent to the ovens during

the very last selection before the liberation. Shayevitch was one of those mad scribblers who had written poems even in the concentration camp, even in the face of the crematorium fires.

The period immediately following the liberation was not a propitious time for writing poetry. What were we to do with our lives? What was there to hold on to? How could we continue our existence without a spark of optimism, without a fragment of faith that the world might still change for the better? True, the world had abandoned us, but we must not abandon it. The sacrifice of millions must not be in vain. We must not be passive onlookers.

In our desperation, we held fast to our former ideological beliefs. Political engagement became the order of the day. We renewed the dreams that we had nursed in the ghettos or in the camps, dreams which had once illuminated our darkest days. We breathed new life into the old political parties we had once belonged to. We—my mother, my sister and I—seized on our former belief in socialism, and along with other survivors we created a Bundist group in Bergen-Belsen.[7] We took comfort in our fraternity. It substituted for the families we had lost. The members of our group were bound to each other and to our old ideal. We no longer lived in a vacuum. We knew what we wanted. Other survivors, who before the war had had political affiliations of their own did the same. They too renewed the dreams that they had nursed in the ghettos or in the camps, dreams that had once illuminated their darkest days. We breathed new life into the old-time phraseology.

The air of liberated Bergen-Belsen began to resound with the familiar songs we had once sung. Near the barracks where our meetings took place, Jewish actors, who were themselves Holocaust survivors, took to the stage in a tent theatre. The golden peacock, symbol of Yiddish poetry and song began to spread its broken tail. “Yidn shmidn zingen. . .” [Jews, smiths, sing!] The words echoed triumphantly through the silent corridors of our former death camp, which was located a mere walk away from our place of entertainment.

The young Zionists did more than just sing; they were preparing for a clandestine sea voyage to Palestine.[8] But it was enough just to look at those singers to see the unarticulated pain burning in their eyes, just as it did in ours. Even the hope for a Jewish homeland could not sweeten the poison of disillusionment, could not alleviate the despair at so much spilled blood.

The German soil began to burn beneath our feet. We wanted to escape it as soon as we could, and remove it forever from the map of our future lives. With my mother and sister, I left the Bergen-Belsen DP camp for the camp at Feldafing where a Bundist committee was organizing groups to be smuggled illegally across the border into Belgium. We joined one such group of ten people. On a cold October night in the year 1945, led by two German smugglers, we and another group of ten left for the Belgium border.

When we reached the border, we set out on a strenuous all-night walk. The smugglers told us that we had crossed safely into Belgium. They lied. They had abandoned us within sight of the Belgian border police. Fortunately, my group of ten realized the danger in time and managed to slip across the border on our own, undetected. We came to a small town, where a kindly Belgian family allowed us to spend the night and at the crack of the following dawn, transported us to Brussels in a workman's bus. The group that tried to cross after us was not so lucky. Those ten concentration camp survivors who had been so anxious to escape their German nightmare were caught by the border police and spent the next twelve months in a Belgium prison.

Brussels days. Brussels winter. Rain. Fog. Winds that creep into your bones. We wear clothes that we have made for ourselves out of UNRRA blankets. We walk around like drunkards. Belgium after the war displays an amazing profusion of goods for sale in its shop windows. The stores are full of all varieties of food, of rare fruits and sweets. The sight

intoxicates us.

Belgian comrades receive us with extraordinary kindness. They seat us at tables laden with meat, fish, bread, butter, all manner of cheeses and homemade cakes. They place platefuls of delicacies in front of us, entire tureens brimful of soup. They cannot do enough for us. They constantly ask us if there is anything else we need or want. They themselves have barely escaped with their own lives; most of them have lost relatives. Yet they insist that we have every right to demand to be attended to. We allow them to serve us. We look at them with envy. We cannot forgive them their "rich" apartments, their ordered lives, the fact that they have homes. We are friendly with them but not intimate. What do they know? They were not there.

We are restless. We are confused. We are wild and merry. We are noisy and forever singing. We never stop singing in the loudest voices. We form an organization, just like before the war. Blue blouses, red neckerchiefs. We march through the streets of Brussels along with our liberated comrades. We fill the emptiness into which we have fallen with the noise of boisterous hurrahs in order not to hear the voice of loneliness that howls in our hearts. Our loneliness grows and expands, along with the panorama of annihilation that increases in range and scope as we become aware of the chilling statistics, of which we ourselves are but a minute fraction.

Just like an object located in space, an event in time is subject to the laws of perspective; the object diminishes and fades the further one moves away from it. But with our tragedy the opposite happens. The greater the lapse of time that separates us from our past, the clearer and larger our tragedy grows. Our reason cannot digest the ciphers of destruction; they become an abstraction called six million.

We are young. Most of us are in our twenties. Our individual horror stories gathered together would outlast even the longest life. We crave the opportunity to tell at least some of

these stories. But no one is willing to listen. So we tell them to each other. We remember. We reminisce. We forget ourselves in remembering. Steeped in our misery, we long for happiness. We live in two realities, the one that is past seeming more real, more palpable, than the actual one.

My mother is one of the few older women who have survived the camps. Our comrades call her "Mameshie," and vie for her affection. There are difficulties in finding a place to live. We finally get a room on the *Rue d'une personne*, a street so narrow that only one person can pass at a time. There is a brothel on the first landing. We spend strange nights, ravaged by nightmares, which tear us from sleep, screaming. Disturbing days. We have no right to work in this country. "*Doit émigrer*" is stamped on our identity cards. A joke. Where should we emigrate to? No country wants to admit us. And we are tired of the burden that we carry. We long for respite—for peace, repose. We want to enjoy what is left of our youth.

I have had a slight fever ever since I recovered from the typhus that nearly killed me in Germany. I feel simultaneously cold and hot. I am restless, anxious, talkative. Along with our particular group of survivors my sister and I drag ourselves through the streets of Brussels. We are still dressed in the suits and coats made from the blue UNRRA blankets. On my feet I wear a pair of threadbare shoes. A quaint worn travel bag completes my toilette—the last word in feminine elegance.

We feign good cheer. Carefree and playful, we ride up and down the electric stairs at the Bon Marché, Brussels' sumptuous department store, unable to tear ourselves away. Never in our lives have we seen anything like it. Electric stairs! Such a wonder, such a marvel of human inventiveness! We work ourselves into a state of exaltation. Man and his well-being *are* important! Perhaps, after all, the world has learned something from the catastrophe? The voice of Edith Piaf rings out from a loud speaker. She sings "La vie en rose." A fire engine passes in the street outside. Its bells ring alarmingly. They ring out the rhythms of my own

vie en rose.

Yesterday there was a fire in the forest.
Today there is a field after the storm.
Where yesterday trees had lived
Today only graves remain.

The electric stairs transform themselves into lines and stanzas. They carry me away from my friends. They lead me into myself. I am alone. I walk energetically through the *Rue Neuve*, stop at a tobacco kiosk and buy myself a pack of strong bitter Belgian cigarettes. I sit at the window of my brothel house which looks down on the *Rue d'une personne*. Cigarette smoke. A pencil. A brown sheet of cheap writing paper. I feel good. I ache. I long, and calm my longing. I am grateful to destiny for granting me the ability to unburden myself with song.

I have no idea that at the same time in the United States of America, Theodore Adorno has come out with the sweeping declaration that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. A meaningful, powerful declaration, but it has nothing to do with me. The rhythms surging inside me deny his statement. I think of my father, who prodded me to write even in the ghetto. I think of the poet Shayevitch who wrote poems even in the camp, just days before he was sent to the gas chamber. They too deny Adorno's statement. As long as there is life, the human heart will never cease singing of its joys and sorrows. Up to the brink of the grave, man clings to his song, just as he clings to life. Moreover, those who feel the urge to sing, even when their throats emit only a whimper, or a screech, do not ask whether or not they ought to sing.

Soon the philosophers will come, Sartre and Camus. Camus will say that life is absurd,

nothing but the efforts of a Sisyphus. But the fact that he considers it important to write down his view of life proves just the opposite. Life without song, without spiritual expression is absurd. Song gives meaning to the travails of Sisyphus. I don't yet know about Sartre or Camus. It will take another three years before I read *Les Mandarins* by Simone de Beauvoir.

I sit at the window of our tiny room. Stanzas spill over the brown sheet of paper in front of me. I don’t analyze or rationalize about art, about form and style. Everything is clear as day and comes to me as easily as if I were a medium and some other voice were dictating the lines. Within me there is both calm and agitation. I don't want to only memorialize. I want to salvage my inner melody, so as to be able to continue with my life. I am the lone birch tree left on the border of the burnt-out forest. So I am the forest now. The stanzas pour out of me. I am reluctant to stop. But the ghost of my father, or perhaps of Shayevitch takes hold of my hand. "Enough," they say. "You will never express it all. Be content that you have said this much."

My poem is finished. With the arrogance of youth, with the chutzpah of a survivor saved by a miracle, I affix a name to my poem and call it “The Ballad of Yesterday's Forest.”

What am I to do with it? I recall that before the war my father would unfold a Yiddish literary magazine from New York called *Di tsukunft*, which means “the future,” and place it before me, saying, "Here, read this." A brand new issue of *Di tsukunft* arrives at the library of the Brussels Bundist club on *Boulevard de la Revision*. I copy the address of the editorial office. With the arrogance of youth, with the chutzpah of a survivor, I write a letter to the editors in New York and attach it to my poem. It is the first time since the liberation that I have put a letter into a mailbox. For the first time I have someone to whom to write. I am composed. I know what I will do with myself. On the 16th of April, 1946, a year after my liberation, I debuted in *Di tsukunft,* and so found my *tsukunft,* my future.

But it was not such an easy future. This poem was only the first outburst of the passion

that I had newly conceived for writing. That passion cried out within me for expansion. I wrote two more books of poems, but still something was missing. I had not yet unburdened myself of the story I had to tell, firstly of my hometown, Lodz, and then of its ghetto. That story was alive within me; it plagued and haunted me like a dybbuk. A subjective tale, a personal landscape—the ghetto as I saw it.

The last two years in the Lodz ghetto my friend and mentor, the poet Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch had laboured over a long epic poem about the ghetto, which, had it survived, would doubtless have been acclaimed as a work of high artistic achievement. I used to criticize him, saying that in order to write such an epic, it was necessary to have perspective, the distance of time, whereas he did not even know whether he would have the good fortune to finish his work. But he would respond: "We have no choice. Since we are not given the luxury of time or perspective, we must take the moments as they come, and let them drip onto the page with the ink of our pen."

He was right. After the liberation, we were finally given the luxury of time and perspective. But could we remember precisely the atmosphere of those days in the ghettos and camps? Hadn't we changed merely by virtue of our survival? How many times did we ask ourselves: Did it all really happen—to us? I was convinced that the nightmarish past could never be captured in words.

And so I continued writing poetry, while the ghetto world lived on within me, incessantly demanding that I give it life. I could only free myself of that demand by recreating the world that I had known as it filtered through the prism of my awareness. I wanted to write about day-to-day life in the Lodz ghetto, about trivial matters, and about interpersonal relationships. I wanted to write about holidays in the ghetto, about love and spring. And so the work started to germinate within me. But I did not dare to begin.

I feared to approach the world that I had lost. I was terrified of plunging once again into

the abyss of suffering, of re-living the reality that had nearly destroyed me. I wanted to enjoy my life, to relish every moment. I had learned its value at great cost. I wanted to forget the nightmare. I deplored the fact that my memory was so vivid and would not allow me to forget. And I felt too weak, too incompetent in the face of the enormity of what I had to describe. How could I encompass and give life to all those who populated my memory? Was not the novel too elegant and too polished a literary form for such a story, was it not too detached from any lived reality, too much a game of cleverly concocted plots? In writing a novel about the Holocaust would I not end by sinning against a reality that was impossible to encompass? Was I capable of recreating the specific atmosphere of those nightmarish days, assuming that it was possible to recreate it in the first place? As time went on, it became increasingly clear to me that no one, not even the most gifted writer, would be able to capture the true atmosphere of the ghetto. Even if the writer succeeded in writing a masterpiece, it would not, it could not be the real thing. At the same time it never occurred to me to consider any form but the novel as a vehicle for what I wanted to say. Only the novel seemed to have the necessary scope.

One day, while I was still living in Brussels, I received a small booklet from Poland. In it were published two poems by my friend, the poet Shayevitch. The two poems had been found on a pile of garbage in the ruins of the Lodz ghetto. I knew those poems. I knew the circumstances under which they had been written; I knew the long threatening shadow of deportation to the death camps that had hovered over their creation. And suddenly I stopped asking myself any questions. I felt that only by going back into the ghetto with my mind, could I arm myself against despair by grasping at the slim ray of hope that lay at the bottom of the deepest wretchedness of ghetto 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 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 pretence 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 fellows, as well as the knowledge of what that brutality meant to their own destinies. It was as if the dams of a river had broken within me and I was flooded with ideas for my book.

I conceived of my novel as centering around ten characters and encompassing all five years of the ghetto's existence. The first volume has thirteen chapters, twelve following the months of the year 1939. The thirteenth chapter is a retrospect of what has gone before. In this first volume I show my characters as they were before the war, before the Holocaust had a chance to change them. The subsequent two volumes follow the fates of the same ten characters, but this time the books are divided into twenty-four chapters, so that each volume covers two years. In this way I hoped to encompass all the five years of the ghetto's existence. The ten characters come from different walks of life and different political orientations. They are young and old, working class and capitalist. They include an industrialist, a factory owner, a doctor, a poet, a high school student, a teacher, a carpenter. But regardless of their station in life, regardless of their ages or political affiliations, all are incarcerated in the ghetto and all face the same fate. Most of these characters are fictional, but they are based on people I knew. One character, however, is historical. His name is Mordechai Chaim Rumkovsky, whom the Nazis called the "eldest of the Jews," when they set him up as the puppet dictator of the ghetto. All the events described in my trilogy actually

occurred. I invented none of them. I couldn't.

As I immersed myself in my writing I was never confronted by the problems I had anticipated before I began. The subject itself imposed its form on me. No longer did I worry whether what I was writing was art or mere testimony. The question of whether one can create a true work of art on the subject of the Holocaust stopped tormenting me.

This is how I began to write prose. It was not that I agreed with Adorno that there is no place for poetry after the Holocaust. Poems were created in the ghettos and even at the threshold of the crematoria. As long as there is life, the human heart will never cease singing of its joys and sorrows. But in telling my tale, I began to feel confined and restricted by the poetic form. What I wanted to say was impossible to sing. The brutal reality of the ghetto demanded the dry precision of unadorned words. Not that I wanted to ban the poet within me; on the contrary, I wanted her to stand by me, but I wanted her to creep with me through the maze of ghetto streets, through the muck of human baseness, as low to the ground as possible.

So I wrote about day-to-day life in the ghetto, about all the various concoctions made from turnips and potato peels that we consumed in order to still the craving for food. I wrote about all the ways of tricking fate in order to survive for another hour, another day. I wrote about interpersonal relationships, between husbands and wives, parents and children, lovers and friends. I wrote about holidays in the ghetto, about spring and song and flights of the spirit. And I wrote about the ugliness of daily life, its wretchedness and its constant terror. What I always kept in mind was that in the ghetto, despite hunger, disease and the threat of death, I had spent the richest and most inspiring years of my life. Mine is a brutal nightmarish story, but also one of extraordinary endurance and nobility of heart, a story of moral strength and defiance. It is the story of the last six years in the life of a once flourishing Jewish community. I called this novel about the death of the Jewish community of Lodz, *The*

Tree of Life.

When I began my novel, I was about to become a mother and to immigrate to Canada. A new chapter in my life was about to begin. And so it happened, that on my arrival in Montreal I found myself doubly pregnant, both physically and mentally, sitting at a table with pen in hand and a blank sheet of paper in front of me. I put the pen down twenty years and almost two thousand pages later. By that time my daughter was already grown and my son was an adolescent.

For those twenty years I led a divided existence. I lived with my family in the Canadian immigrant reality. I was a greenhorn, the mother of two, the daughter of a sick mother. I worked in factories, and did all kinds of odd jobs in order to help my husband finish his studies—and I lived in the Lodz ghetto. My characters more than once interfered with my actions and behaviour in real life, and even when I was not holding the pen in my hand, in my mind, their fates intermingled with mine. At the same time, my day-to-day life was always threatening, if not actually to cut the thread of my narrative, then at least to postpone its ending. I had to get up at four in the morning to do my writing. Those dawn hours were the only ones that belonged solely to me.

In the meantime I paid for my absent-mindedness with burned pots and overcooked meals, and paid a much dearer price with attacks of guilt for neglecting my dear ones and my friends. I felt guilty for neglecting my own life. I often asked myself whether the end product would be worth the sacrifice.

The years passed. The more entangled I became in the story I was telling, the less and less satisfied I was with it, and the more worries it caused me. A question began to nag at me: whether what I had already written should remain as I originally wrote it? Because through the long span of time that my work required, my own life had not stood still. I grew older. Shattering events occurred in my life and in the world at large. My outlook on life underwent

various transformations; even my writing style underwent changes. Whenever I reread the pages that I had written as a younger woman, I grew bitter and angry at myself, and had to correct and set things straight. No part of my work was ever in a finished state; it was always in the process of becoming.

And so it went for those twenty odd years until the manuscript of *The Tree of Life* was out of my hands. After *The Tree of Life* I wrote two other novels connected to the Holocaust. One, the novel *Bociany*, deals with Jewish life prior to the Holocaust in a shtetl similar to the one in which my parents were born. As for the other novel, *Letters to Abrasha*, it recounts a childhood spent in the city of Lodz. This novel marks the first time that I was able to tackle the topic that I had always considered taboo—my experiences in the concentration camps.

I wrote *The Tree of Life* in the hope that I might bring the next generations a little closer to the awareness of what it means to have survived the Holocaust. I bore witness in the belief that there is no future for mankind if it refuses to face itself in the mirror of the Holocaust, disturbing and horrifying though that mirror might be. It is a mirror that tells us that man is not the most beautiful and noble of God's creatures, but the most tragic. It tells us that man's potential for aggression and evil, for hating others and for self-hatred, for committing suicide through acts of homicide and genocide may lead to his own eradication from the face of the earth. Moreover, if we forget the Holocaust, we deprive ourselves of the knowledge of the human soul, with its hidden recesses of love and care, of dignity and courage, for those were in fact the qualities which the humiliated, spat upon, doomed Jews displayed every day of the tortured lives they led between the barbed wire fences of the ghetto.

When we were in the ghettos and concentration camps, it seemed to us that we were the collective Isaac lying on the sacrificial altar of the world and that with our sacrifice we were ensuring a better future for our people and for humankind as a whole; that after us would

come a breed of men and women who would be good and would have it good. We hoped that after the storm the world would be cleansed of hatred, and that there would be brotherhood between the peoples of the world. This hope helped us live — and it helped us die.

How naïve we were and how bitter has been our awakening! How shocking the reality that we have come to face without any illusions! Finally, it has become clear to us that the world has learned nothing from our tragedy. After the horrendous cataclysm, everything reverted to business as usual, as if nothing had happened. The world has not stopped its wars. The clank of knives being sharpened can still be heard, if not in one place then in another. There have even emerged crackpot historians who claim that the Holocaust is a hoax, a figment of the Jewish imagination. Anti-Semitism has not disappeared from the face of the earth. Instead, it seems to be flowering anew. Its poisonous scent has not failed to reach our nostrils even on the North American continent.

And yet, we have no right to draw the curtains and separate ourselves from our surroundings. We must not turn our backs on the world, echoing the words of the heartbroken Yiddish poet, Yakov Glatstein, who exclaimed, *a gute nakht dir, velt!* [Good-night to you, World!]. Like it or not, our fate is tied up with that of the rest of humanity. We must constantly hold the truths of the Holocaust in front of its eyes, like a mirror, so that the world might recognize itself in the reflection; recognize the degree of baseness to which humankind may sink, but also the moral heights to which it may rise when it does not permit itself to be robbed of spiritual integrity. We mourn the annihilation of an entire Jewish world, a world with its own traditions, its own way of life, its own creativity and ideals—our world. *Viavku ha'am*, the people are weeping. But in our collective sorrow, there is firmly planted the affirmation of our existence.

I have many times tried to escape the subject of the Holocaust in my writing, but I have never succeeded. No matter which road I take, it invariably leads me back to the destination

that I most want to avoid. My personal life and my literary life have forever been divided into two eras; the era before and the era after the Holocaust, and only from this perspective am I capable of viewing both my own life and human history.

I have often been asked what message I, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto, of Auschwitz, Sasel and Bergen-Belsen want to transmit to those who have not been there and to their children? The question confounds me. From which bag of highfalutin, well-sounding, hollow phrases do I take my response? What response exactly will satisfy my interrogator's expectations? Would not *any* answer tarnish the memory of those who had not survived the bondage of the darkest Egypt that ever existed? The only answer I am capable of giving is to echo the passage in the Passover haggadah, that says that in every generation, each individual must regard him or herself as having personally come out of Egypt. I would say that in every generation, each individual must regard him or herself as having personally survived the Holocaust, and each individual should transmit this awareness to the sons and daughters of the next generation.

Translation: Chava Rosenfarb and Goldie Morgentaler

NOTES:

[1] *Miriam Ulinover* (1890–1944) was a Yiddish poet whose 1922 collection of poems *Der bobes oytser* [My Grandmother's Treasure] was published to great acclaim. A second volume of poems was projected, but never appeared due to the outbreak of World War II. Ulinover was incarcerated in the Lodz ghetto during the German occupation of Lodz and there, despite the hardship of life in the ghetto, carried on a kind of literary salon. She was deported to Auschwitz in August 1944 and perished there. She appears as Sarah Samet in Rosenfarb's trilogy of the Lodz ghetto, *The Tree of Life*.

[2] *Israel Leizerovitch* (1902–1944): Poet and painter in the Lodz ghetto. He too hosted a literary salon in the Lodz ghetto. He was a hunchback, which undoubtedly contributed to his meeting his death in Auschwitz after his deportation from Lodz some time in August 1944. He appears in *The Tree of Life* as the painter Guttman.

[3] *Emanuel Hirshberg* was originally from a town near Lodz. He became a Reform rabbi in Danzig. He was also a poet and journalist. When the Nazis came to power he returned to Lodz and was incarcerated in the ghetto along with his daughter. The Nazis made him the head of *Wissenschaftliche Apteilung* [the Scientific or Research Institute], a Nazi project to document the culture and folkways of the Jews once they had become extinct. (For more on Emanuel Hirshberg and the Institute, please see the following essay on "Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch, the Poet of the Lodz Ghetto.") During the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto in August 1944, Rabbi Hirshberg was sent to Auschwitz and murdered there.

[4] *Kapos* were concentration camp inmates who policed their fellow prisoners in the camps. They were often petty criminals recruited from the local prisons or members of violent street gangs. They had absolute power over the other camp inmates. In return for carrying out their duties with the required brutality, the Germans gave them privileges, such as extra food rations, or better sleeping quarters. Some of these kapos were Jews and thus played a part in the larger Nazi scheme to put Jews in charge of the destruction of Jews. After the end of the war, these Jewish kapos presented their fellow Jews with a moral dilemma. They were generally considered to be complicit in Nazi war crimes and many were tried and convicted in Israel. But it was also true that the Jewish kapos had themselves been victims of Hitler's murderous regime, which made their culpability morally ambiguous.

Chava Rosenfarb's long short story "Edgia's Revenge," told from the point of view of one such Jewish kapo, deals with this ambiguity. The story is based on Rosenfarb's own interaction with a kapo in the labour camp at Sasel, where she risked her life by slapping a

kapo who had been abusing her friend, Zenia Marcinkowska. The slap forced the Jewish kapo to examine her own brutality and in the end she not only spared Rosenfarb's life, but made sure that Rosenfarb and her family were given extra rations for the duration of their stay in the labour camp.

[5] *UNRRA* stands for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which provided relief to Holocaust survivors after World War II. It shut down in 1947.

[6] This friend was Henekh (later Henry) Morgentaler, Rosenfarb's future husband. Once settled in Canada, Henry Morgentaler became a doctor and the leader of the campaign to legalize abortion. This campaign was successful in 1988 when the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the ant-abortion law. As of today, Canada has no laws criminlizing abortion.

[7] The *Jewish Labour Bund* was a secular Jewish socialist movement that agitated for equal rights for Jewish workers in Poland. It was anti-Communist and anti-Zionist and became the major political force among Polish Jewry in the period between two world wars. It also had a cultural component that privileged Yiddish and Yiddish culture.

[8] The voyage had to be clandestine because Palestine was in British hands and the British had put a stop to Jewish migration.