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The Correspondence between Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Larsson

Chava Rosenfarb sent her first collection of poetry, *Di balade fun nekhtikn vald* with a dedication to her childhood friend Zenia Marcinkowska in Stockholm. Chava and Zenia had been together in the Lodz ghetto, in the cattle car to Auschwitz and at the liberation in Bergen Belsen in May 1945:

‘Who will better understand the poems than you. Do you remember the days when I sang them for you and cried? May this book be sacred for me and you. Your Chava Rosenfarb, Bruxelles, February 1947.’

More than a year earlier they began an exchange of letters in Polish that would continue for half a century. The first letter from Chava to Zenia is undated from late 1945, and the last letter from 1996. This unique correspondence between two Jewish women writers and survivors -- one settling in Sweden, the other in Canada -- is the topic of our presentation. Both created a significant body of works in Yiddish and Swedish that addressed their experiences before, during and after the war in documentary novels, essays, poetry and memoirs. The post-war correspondence between Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Larsson is unique documentation of the life-long friendship of two women survivor writers who lived through the post-war period in two very different national contexts. Conducted in Polish, the correspondence addresses their personal and artistic lives, which deepened their friendship and their emotional dependence on one another.

Zenia Marcinkowska arrived in Sweden as a refugee after being liberated from Bergen Belsen in May 1945. Following her marriage to Per Larsson, a Swede, she published a trilogy of Swedish documentary novels in the early 1960s under the name Zenia Larsson. The

trilogy portrayed her experiences in the Lodz ghetto; her sojourn in Bergen Belsen after the war was over; and her arrival in Sweden and the challenges of her integration into Swedish society. Larsson's work introduced a generation of Swedish readers to the genocide of the European Jews, and to the challenges the refugees faced as they adapted to their new country.

Theirs was a generation for whom letter- and diary writing was a customary way to reflect and communicate with one another and oneself. Their correspondence became a laboratory for their creative work and enabled them to address the emotional trauma caused by their experiences in the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz, and Bergen Belsen. They parted from one another at Bergen Belsen in May 1945, and didn't see each other for 24 years. In a letter dated August 1962, Zenia wrote:

"In our letters we have found a bridge where we can meet. There we can look at the future, talk about the present but also find a way back to our youth, to common roots, to the war years – and the period that gave us our darkest experiences. And what are our letters if not quiet reflections, thoughts one does not usually express in words, and after image of moods, momentary fancies? I write as much to myself as to you, but in the certainty that you will understand. Is it not the same with you?" (179)

In 1972 Zenia published *Brev från en ny verklighet* (Letters from a New Reality), which included her own translation into Swedish of most of her letters to Chava. She disguised the identity of Chava and her family by giving them Swedish and American names. The name changes were part of Larsson's strategy of domesticating her Polish-Jewish world in order to make it more accessible to the Swedish readers. In contrast, writing in Yiddish for a Jewish readership, Rosenfarb could fully express her Jewishness and explore uniquely Jewish issues

of victimhood, collaboration and resistance during World War II. In a letter dated April 1948, Zenia bemoans her lack of Jewish knowledge and proficiency in Yiddish:

“I missed the most elementary fundamental knowledge in my Jewish education, and I experienced this as a great personal tragedy. I suffered from my ignorance of Yiddish; I knew nothing of Jewish culture and literature nor of Jewish history and tradition – and the religion was for me something completely strange.” (85)

The idea for the publication of Letters from a New Reality originated with a librarian in the Swedish town of Vesterås who wanted to create an archive to document the psychological, cultural and linguistic aspects of post-war immigration to Sweden. Zenia’s decision to provide the librarian with her personal letters as source material for research was meant to document her Polish Jewish background and her difficulties of integrating into Swedish society. Zenia asked Chava to return her letters but did not explain why she wanted them, which caused a rift in their epistolary relationship.

In an essay, Chava mentions how she received a letter from Zenia requesting the return of her friend’s letters. For Chava this was ‘a terrible blow’; after she mailed the letters, she received her own letters in a “neat little package. Our friendship was over.” (118) One and half years later Chava received Letters from a New Reality with a dedication to her. Zenia comments, “The story of our friendship was now out in a book, sent to the homes of thousands of strangers in a cold, far-way land, in order to warm their hearts. And so, we resumed our correspondence, which continues to this day, as does our friendship.” (118)

In the introduction to the book, Zenia reflects on her translation of her Polish letters which exposes her linguistic and existential rootlessness in Sweden:

“jag blev pinsamt medveten om att jag aldrig lärt mig svenska från grunden, att jag hela tiden rört mig på ytan utan att ha den djupgående förtrogenhet med språket som endast modersmålet kan ge – samtidigt som jag glömt polska. Plötsligt hängde jag alldeles hjälplöst mellan två språk utan att vara riktigt hemmastadd i något av dem – och utan att äga översättarens sällsynta förmåga att kunna tänka tvåspråkigt.” 14

” I was embarrassingly conscious that I had never learned Swedish from scratch, that I all the time touched the outside without a deeper familiarity with the language which only one’s mother tongue can give – concurrently I forgot Polish. Suddenly, I hang completely helpless between two languages without really being at home in any of them - and without owning the translator’s particular ability to think bilingually.”

Fifty-one years after the publication of *Letters from a New Reality*, the full correspondence is now being prepared for publication by Goldie Morgenthaler. She has added Chava’s original letters to Zenia’s book, all of which have been translated into English. It is now possible to follow their relationship as it develops over the decades. Moreover, the correspondence allows us to fill in the blanks of the creative process that went into the creation of their trilogies: Chava’s Yiddish *Der boym fun lebn* from and Zenia’s Swedish trilogy. As Ula will discuss in her presentation of her findings of the original letters of *Letters from A New Reality* and letters from the later period 1974-1996, the edition of the correspondence requires some major revisions.

In a 1967 letter, Chava mentions that “In Yiddish, I no longer feel like writing at all. My trilogy has been finished for eight years, but there is no one to publish it.” (242) That means that *The Tree of Life* was already complete in 1959, the same year that Zenia published *The Shadows over the Wooden Bridge*, the first volume of her trilogy. The reason for the delay in the publication of Chava’s trilogy was not due to a lack of publication venues in Yiddish.

Chava could have serialized part of her trilogy in the Yiddish press, which was the standard procedure of Yiddish writers. She might also have published one or more volumes in the Yiddish book series *Dos poylishe yidntum* that originated in Buenos Aires, in which 175 volumes about Polish Jewry including many documentary novels about the Holocaust were issued. However, she waited until 1972 when an Israeli publisher finally was ready to publish the volume, which exceeded 1000 pages.

I believe that the main reason for the delay was that both writers viewed the novel trilogy as the ultimate literary achievement: a monument of sorts, or an ersatz gravestone for the annihilated Jewish community of Lodz. Zenia describes this commemorative impulse in a letter: “The book is simply the monument I wanted to erect to the memory of our loved ones, to speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves. Such a monument I once wanted to carve in stone with my own hands. So now I have written a book instead.”

The new edition of the correspondence is a rare documentation of a life-long friendship between two Jewish women writers who shared some of the most intimate aspects of their personal lives in their adopted countries. The correspondence is a microcosm of the multilingual realities of the two writers. Corresponding in Polish, they repeatedly complain about the fact that they never use the language and feel estranged from it. Chava cannot read Zenia’s Swedish books and Zenia is struggling to read Chava’s Yiddish works.

The gendered quality of their correspondence is vividly displayed when they convey their very different family and writing conditions. Chava belongs to a close-knit community of Yiddish writers in Montreal and reports in the correspondence how she reads from her work at Yiddish cultural events. She is clearly part and parcel of a transnational Yiddish culture, corresponding with Avrom Sutzkever in Israel and Blume Lempel in the US, and publishing in the Israeli Yiddish journal *Di goldene keyt*. Chava’s meticulous portrayal of ten characters in *The Tree of Life*, is indebted to the documentary realism that characterized many of the

Yiddish novelistic accounts about the Holocaust as well as the Yiddish historians' focus on Jewish daily life and survival in the ghettos and camps.

Zenia has a similar artistic mission in a Swedish context, but she remains an outsider and never really manages to master the language. Thanks to her husband Per Axel Larsson who edits and rewrites her work, she succeeds in becoming an acclaimed Swedish writer. It is this asymmetry in terms of linguistic and cultural contexts that makes the forthcoming edition of their correspondence such a uniquely rich source of what it meant to be a Jewish woman writer and survivor after the Holocaust.