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-I am hungry.

-Our last meal, I cannot recall.

-This bus ride is so long.

-Nothing like travel in wooden walls.

-I am tired.

-Sleep is a luxury nearly unseen.

-I am uncomfortable.

-What does comfort even mean?

-I am so bored.

-I wish I could be so.

-I just want to get there.

-Our destination, I do not know.

*A poem dedicated to Chava Rosenfarb and all of the poor souls who endured the terrifying train ride of deportation.*

**Roses are Red, Victims are Blue**

Studying the literature that has arisen from the survivors of the Holocaust is not a way to exaggerate one specific event that has occurred in history. Instead, grasping an in depth understanding of such a catastrophic event through individual’s personal experiences may serve a couple of purposes. Listening to the stories of survivor’s and attempting to really hear what they are trying to express can create awareness of the capabilities of human kind. These literary pieces can also serve to inform future generations of the measures to be taken to avoid the repetition of such disasters. Studying the literature resulting from the Holocaust opens a human’s understandings of the ways humans develop prejudices and the ways that individuals cope with inhumane circumstances. Reading survivor literature of the Holocaust can give the average person a firm and well-rounded perspective of what it means to suffer. Focusing on multiple works by authors of different genders gives insight into the various differences in experience for male and female victims of the Holocaust. Although we primarily studied Chava Rosenfarb for her poetry, many comparisons can be drawn between her writing and Primo Levi’s novel *Survival in Auschwitz*. Analyzing literature from both male and female perspectives better informs the reader of the crucial differences within the personal experiences of each of those writers, along with the gender specific experiences they endured. This semester I read *Exile At Last* by Chava Rosenfarb, edited by Goldie Morgentaler as part of my group presentation assignment. Reading authors like Chava Rosenfarb provides both powerful insights into the female perspective of the Holocaust experience, as well as evidence of the benefits of poetry as therapy for people enduring truly unbearable living situations. Analyzing multiple survivors’ writing is key to gain a balanced interpretation of the experiences and methods of coping during the traumatic experience of World War II.

A major fan of the power exhibited within the works of feminist women writers, I felt drawn to focus on Chava Rosenfarb’s *Exile At Last* when analyzing the benefits of poetry as therapy. Rosenfarb is the last of the great Yiddish-language novelists and has dedicated her life to writing in the language she grew up speaking, despite the diminishing readership (Morgentaler). Most of Rosenfarb’s poems have since been translated to English, however her attempt to keep Yiddish alive attests to the dedication survivors of the Holocaust often have to remaining connected and grounded to their cultural roots. After the war when Rosenfarb eventually moved to Montreal, she was able to flourish as an author in a city that served as a home for a vibrant community of Yiddish poets, novelists, scholars and journalists (Morgentaler). Rosenfarb’s poetry demonstrates the struggles faced by victims of the Holocaust therefore allowing us to grasp an understanding of her own personal experiences.

Rosenfarb established herself as a literary hero in her quest to reconstruct the poems stolen from her on the railway platform at Auschwitz. She had composed a series of poems within the walls of the Lodz ghetto when she was a member of the writers group at the early age of 17. Despite the frustration of losing her works, she managed to find a pencil and she recreated the poems from her memory on the ceiling above her bunk at the Sasel labor camp and then dedicated what energy she had left over from the day to memorizing them.

Amongst this collection of poems written and then rewritten, is her first poem written in the ghetto. During the winter of 1940 Rosenfarb began writing what would eventually become a collection of poems with her 3-stanza poem entitled *Freedom*. This poem serves as a proper introduction to the collection of poems featured in *Exile At Last* with its clear comparisons of the world within the barbed wire of the ghetto and life outside. The first stanza of the poem reads, “Far, on the other side,/ there is your freedom,/ crossed out a million times/ by barbed wire./ There, on the other side,/ Time untamed pulsates/ in lively rhythms./ People live there.” This poem, the first Rosenfarb wrote within the Lodz ghetto, depicts the two separate worlds being experienced in Poland at that time. This is the first stanza; however Rosenfarb wastes no time to begin telling the audience that where she is, what she is doing, within the barbed wire walls, is not living. The words allow us to experience the pain of confinement that Rosenfarb was struggling to cope with. The words themselves are that outlet of coping for Rosenfarb.

According to the research of Nasrin Arian Parsa and Saba Harati, students studying at University Science Malaysia, “Among all the therapies, art therapies and more specifically poem therapy has taken up its place [pharmacological therapies] as one of the most effective and efficient procedures to treat depression in recent decades” (Parsa and Harati). Rosenfarb, although writing since age 8, clearly used her poetry to endure life and maintain hope within the ghetto and later the concentration camp. The traumatic hardships that Rosenfarb was forced to experience would have been impossible to overcome without her stump of a pencil that she had scavenged for, in order to have a way to scratch the lines of her poetry above her bunk. Living within the artistic community of Montreal while writing was beneficial to Rosenfarb during the years following the war. Participating in writing within a culture of many other Yiddish artists allowed Rosenfarb to transition back into the world after living in the Aushwitz concentration camp. The community of supporters and artistic influence allowed her to finish and publish her stories and poetry. Amongst her publications was her epic novel of the Lodz ghetto called *The Tree of Life*, which was clearly an important theme to Rosenfarb as she also published a poem titled *The Tree of Love*.

Rosenfarb’s poem *The Tree of Love* says, “They did not know/ that love is like a tree/ of fragile, precarious luck:/ that a branch chopped from its lifebearing trunk/ would never grow back.” This metaphor of a tree being chopped up depicts a common theme of both Rosenfarb as well as most Holocaust survivor author’s writing, as can be seen within Primo Levi’s opening poem in *Survival of Auschwitz.* The theme she depicts is the image of dehumanization, clear in the second stanza, “They wonder why/ every smile on their lips/ resembled an open sore;/ and did not grasp that a trunk with no branches/ is a tree no more.” Rosenfarb addresses the fact that those who were smiling, probably the Gestapo, provoked pain again. The smiles were negative smirks, reminding her of the horrors they had caused in her life. She concludes with the image of a tree being stripped of its identity as the branches are being chopped, that it no longer qualifies as a tree. Her intention seems to be a comparison to the victims’ loss of identity. As they were forced to wear weathered old ratty striped uniforms, shave their heads, and behave as animals being ordered around by their master, the victims of the Holocaust experienced having their identity chopped off- one branch at a time. Eventually, without branches, the victims of the Holocaust were no longer human. This poem specifically speaks to the necessity of writing in order to create and communicate as a way to help Rosenfarb cope with the experiences she has endured during the Holocaust. The poem clearly describes the helplessness felt by Rosenfarb as her human rights were diminished.

This poem correlates to Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*. We read *Survival in Auschwitz* this semester and learned that the original title of the book had been *If This Is a Man*. Not merely a coincidence, this indicates the common experiences of authors who survived the Holocaust in drawing again to mind the image of a human stripped entirely of their identity. Levi is direct in his need to depict the image of a dehumanized victim by opening his book with a poem that questions whether a body, “without hair and without name/with no more strength to remember,” can be recognized as a human. Both Rosenfarb and Levi are direct in drawing the question of whether a person stripped of all human qualities can still be regarded as such through their poetry. Each author used their pen to express their feelings of being transformed from human to less than human during their experience. His poem demands that the reader must repeat the stories and remember the events that survivors underwent. He threatens the reader to secure that they understand the necessity of recognizing what victims went through by stating that if they do not pass on the knowledge of such events, “…may your house fall apart,/May illness impede you,/may your children turn their faces from you.” Sharing this concept with us informs the reader of the effects that circumstances such as the Holocaust can have on the human psyche and how imperative it is that it is not overlooked. It is unfortunate, however we gather an understanding of what it must have felt like to be treated as they were within the ghettos and concentration camps. The intense urgency within the opening poem to pass down the message of victims’ experiences informs the reader of the guilt and pains the war left lingering within Levi.

Rosenfarb writes from a female perspective while Levi’s opening poem in *Survival of Auschwitz* indicates his understanding of gender differences experienced by victims of the Holocaust. Within Rosenfarb’s poem “Child,” she says, “Once I would spin languid songs/with a lilt of barely heard chords./Today my best poem’s a child./My silence sings brighter than words.” Her words indicate the maternal aspect of being a woman while expressing remorse for the days once experienced when she could simply relax and sing. These lines are full of typical images of a woman. There is the sweet image of a mother singing to a child, as often mothers may peacefully sing children to sleep with a lullaby. She lovingly attributes her child with the qualities of being her best poem. This indicates that the mother believes the most beautiful thing she has created is this child. However sweet her depiction of her child, eeriness overcomes the tone of the poem as she informs that now her silence is more vivid than words, due to the darkness behind what she has to say. In Levi’s opening poem he chooses to address differences in both men and women by questioning whether the losses experienced by each gender leaves them a human. Levi urges us to consider whether the following depicts a man, “Who works in the mud/Who does not know peace/Who fights for a scrap of bread/Who dies because of a yes or no,” demonstrating the hard physical labor expected of men. He creates the image of man in mud, gruesomely fighting just for a taste of bread. He exhibits the trivial death that men faced on account of a mere yes or no. Then he continues his poem exploring whether this is a woman, “Her eyes empty and her womb cold/Like a frog in winter.” This powerful line leaves the reader trembling at the image of a poor woman who is completely unable to keep a child warm inside her hollow womb. Women living under normal circumstances typically desire to have babies. Within the terrifying conditions of the concentration camps women suffer the effects of starvation and lose their periods along with the ability to carry a child, making them feel powerless and worse, meaningless. Levi’s lines allow for us to see that while there were two sides during the war in regards to perpetrator and victim, it was much more complicated. Both Rosenfarb and Levi inform us that gender altered the experience of the victims of the Holocaust.

Again Rosenfarb and Levi show a strong similarity in their use of alluding to artwork as a way to express their thoughts where words do not say enough, while indirectly informing the reader of their cultural knowledge gained prior to the start of the war. In “The Woman,” Rosenfarb references Botticelli’s Venus, a painting from the Italian Renaissance dating about 1486. Her reference of Venus reminds of the discussion of Primo Levi’s allusion to Sadoma’s San Sebastian held in class this semester. Levi references the painting while describing Henri, one of Levi’s fellow prisoners during the war. His point with comparing Henri to the painting was the never-ending suffering that Henri seemed to be capable of enduring. However, Levi does not idolize or like Henri. His description of Henri clearly states that he is not interested in seeing him again, as Henri was sneaky and uninterested in taking action in order to benefit anyone except for himself. The comparison to Sadoma’s San Sebastian indicates that Henri was shot multiple times, in the many ways that the Nazis would dehumanize and abuse him, but Henri remained standing, just as San Sebastian in the painting. Levi explicitly states that Henri survived through a combination of, “organization, pity and theft.” Levi did not approve of Henri and found that the image of San Sebastian’s “delicate and subtly perverse body,” seen within the painting was an apt description of Henri. Comparing Henri to this painting allowed Levi to inform his reader more specifically when trying to convey one of the many characters he came across during his time in Auschwitz. The use of alluding to these classic Italian Renaissance paintings clearly allowed each author to use the artwork to speak many words that they had not the space to write. The allusions also contribute to the authors’ resistance to the Nazis as they are clearly demonstrating their vast knowledge of culture and art while the Nazis attempt to strip the authors of their human traits. An appreciation of art is a human trait that Levi and Rosenfarb maintained a connection to throughout World War II while referencing such art allowed them to create very specific portrayals within their works.

Although Rosenfarb has written novels as well, her poetry emanates her experiences and emotions with the use of very few words. Like Ida Fink, the choice to leave out certain words and details is an artistic and literary device. Implicit writing requires the reader to engage and fill in the blanks, often leaving the reader with a much more powerful reaction or understanding of that which they have just read since they are required to put in so much effort to make sense of the few words they are presented with within the text. For example, in “Breakfast,” Rosenfarb is satirizing the distance between them (the narrator and the “you”) and breakfast. “With white innocent hands/I will break off a piece/of warm devotion-/the freshly baked sun-/and place it in front of you/on a white table, like a golden loaf.” These lines are overloaded with meaning beyond the denotation of the diction. Her consistent theme of white within the stanza indicates the innocence as white often symbolizes innocence or heavenliness. The starving hands of her and fellow prisoners were innocent when they dreamt of warm bread. She is creating the image of a delicious warm loaf of bread that they longed for within the ghetto and later the concentration camp, but tears the delicious bread away from our thoughts as food was torn from the daily routine of those who suffered within the ghettos and concentration camps. She strategically replaces “bread” with “devotion.” Women are in general regarded as charitable beings as we see within the works of Rosenfarb in her accounts of living amongst all women in the work camp. During the Holocaust, while people were tested beyond limits we can imagine, people were often given the chance to be brave or cower away. The metaphor of placing the “freshly baked sun” in front of this other hungry body indicates that even in times of despair Rosenfarb gave all she had, even if those things she gave were intangible. These are some of the interpretations and implications that the reader may wrench from below the seemingly pleasant lines of Rosenfarb’s “Breakfast.”

Rosenfarb’s poems are obviously extremely therapeutic. I believe that a good reader, and an appropriate reader of poetry, should exercise empathy as they read and reread each line that Rosenfarb carefully crafted. This approach to reading the works of survivor authors is key to grasping the content of the literature appropriately.

While delving into my group reading of Rosenfarb, I was struck when I was confronted with the fact that she came from the Lodz Ghetto in Poland. My Dziadziu was from Lesko, Poland a mere 300 miles from where Rosenfarb had lived in the Lodz Ghetto. Regardless of how close to each other they were during the years of the war, they experienced a very different wartime reality.

Rosenfarb was clearly emotionally scarred. Her poems are overflowing with pain and frustration. She is extremely bold and does not hold back from sharing with the reader just exactly how intense her experiences were. My Dziadziu on the other hand does not exhibit emotional scarring from the war. Although he was relocated and required to do hard physical labor, his body was able to regain strength after the long hours spent working under the Germans’ orders. He saw things that were disturbing and inhumane, certainly, but he did not experience them first hand as did Rosenfarb and the many other authors we have read this semester, because he was not Jewish.

Studying the Holocaust is an extremely complex and difficult task. It is extremely important to remember this time in history and recognize that as time passes it is important to update the inventory of information we are able to access about these events. While visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum I was able to view atrocities far more disturbing than I had expected which allowed for a deeper understanding of what Rosenfarb must have endured having actually been there experiencing the war through a Jewish lens first hand. It is with deep gratitude that I read and reread Rosenfarb, attempting to apply the concept of poetry therapy to her survival within the ghetto, the concentration camp, and later her survival for many years after the war.

Rosenfarb blessed us with insights into the experiences of World War II through poetry. Unlike a detailed memoir, we are forced to interpret and decipher each poem, allowing us to understand the many complexities of the war and of Rosenfarb. Her decision to publish her work is truly admirable as her poems are often so intimate or full of pain and remorse.

While reading authors who have survived the Holocaust such as Rosenfarb, we are forced to truly interpret and apply their experiences to our understanding of this world. Although history courses can explain to us the numerous wrongs that happened during the Holocaust, through studying literature we are able to have a relationship with the author and gain a first hand individualistic perspective on the experiences.

Rosenfarb’s work along with Levi and the many other authors we have read this semester, have contributed greatly to my understanding of the lives of those who lived within the walls of ghettos and concentration camps. The perspective from which I approach life will forever have been altered after reading, discussing, rereading, and dissecting the wonderful works of Rosenfarb and those other authors brave enough to share their story. It is clear that her poetry was key to keeping her alive during the Holocaust. In turn, Rosenfarb’s poetry will carry on and keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

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