CANADIAN JEWISH WOMEN'S POETRY
SOME MAJOR THEMES

by Janis Rapoport

Poetry, is perhaps, then
only
a state of mind
that leap from memory
to imagination
—Miriam Mandel

... a word is the memory of its meaning.
—Anne Michaels

Memory is a means that empowers the written word: whether first recor-ded as a result of individual exper-ience or more indirectly through family, society and oral or recorded history.

For Rachel Korn (1898–1982) memory is largely of a fugitive past. If any of its central elements still exist, their connection to the present is only by a single filament of a spider's web. The overtones are melancholy, tied into a dark knot while the narrator can still evoke what in reality she acknowledges is no longer there. Her happy recollections of childhood learning are through the fragrance of wild poppies and ripening wheat, tragically transformed into the charring and smoke at Belzec and Maidanek.

A blind alley is memory for Miriam Mandel (1930–1982) where the garbage of the past is disguised/covered up by images of traditional women's clothing of the 1920s and '30s. Such clothing figures as well in the selective memory of a narrator who in the work of Sharon H. Nelson (1948–) journeys to a landscape that appears to be perfect but from which much has been unconsciously deleted.

Libby Scheier's (1946–) memory, in poetry, is emotion-centred and often associated with fire that "flare[s] into snapshots and faint / recordings and the tactile...." Carole Leckner (1946–) looks back "deep in a frond of yesterdays."

In Miriam Waddington's (1917–) "memory box" the strongest metaphor is of a green-finned fish who "prods the slumbering worlds to wakefulness." For Anne Michaels (1958) memory, also associated with water, "... insists with its sea voice, / muttering from its bone cave. / Memory wraps us / like the shell wraps the sea." Memory is inscribed in the human body as well; organically, above and beneath the earth and through time that is both geological and historical.

In the poetry of Adeena Karasick (1965–) memory is fractured, mirrored and refracted "as the memory of memory // is mimesis mêmes {the Hebrew letter mem}:" even the "I" is perceived as a resonating image of its own memory.

... where I lived
my song
—Miriam Waddington

Interpreted through contemporary linguistic theory, identity for Karasick is celebrated through "this design of a sign // ... assigned to a sign // or this ayin {the Hebrew character ayin}": the sounding of the first letter of her name in Hebrew. Her place is within the Hebrew alphabet encoded in meanings, shapes, combinations of letters and a system of signs. Her Jewishness is rooted in sound, regardless of divisions among languages as we know and use them: "jouissemantics of de-sire, I am jewish. Je joue jouir." The self is "... always virtual" and essentially "an intertextatic syntacticism."

Through a more traditional approach Miriam Waddington identifies with Jews she describes as "soft touches" and equates with "the soft/ yellow not- / especially-Jewish-touch / of a daffodil." To arrive at that point she reaches back through a "long ancestral geography," wishing she could apprentice with a mystical Jew who practises levitation as well as meditation. Helene Rosenthal (1922—) also connects her Jewishness to a flower by its root. She is the outgrowth of the "fierce blossoming" of her ancestors.

Jewish identity for Donia Blumenfeld Clenman (1927–) is intertwined with guilt as she lived "on the edges of [the] Holocaust." Clenman is still asking who she is, does not yet know what ethics to embrace, what heritage to follow. Jewish heritage survives for Sharon Nelson, but through "a smattering of old tongues / disintegrating in the suburbs / foreign to young ears." As late as 1978 Miriam Mandel was writing about the concealment of her heritage and the fear of her Jewish identity being revealed.

Although "being born Jewish" appears as a line in a section of a poem by Libby Scheier that begins "some accidents that occurred yesterday:" her identity seems to be more connected with the body and the transformation of the body through negative and/or positive experiences.

Rhea Tregebov (1953–) confesses through her poetry, perhaps somewhat ironically, to being completely in love with herself and wants "to stop being wonderful." Although Tregebov sees herself as both a simple and (more) complex being, through her first name she identifies with avatars. In the present tense her Jewishness is seen as a shadow; the Jews of her past "... slotted themselves into streets named / Selkirk and Salter."

It all lies there, *in the woven strands of blood.*
—Rachel Korn

As an extension of self perhaps, Rhea Tregebov has written at length about her son, as has Libby Scheier. Susan Glickman (1953–) has written about infants and from the point of view of young children.

Virtually all the writers whose books are under consideration for this essay include the bittersweet aspects of family life in their poetry. As described by Jill Solnicki (1945–): "we leave our imprint on others: / their frayed edges, their torn seams." Arguments sometimes leave scars in Susan Glickman's family poems when the only smiling is "in photographs and even there / someone's always out of focus." But "it is {also} only parents who believe anyone / can be protected. / After all, that's their job." Carole Leckner perceives other writers as her family: they spar like siblings, "fighting in blood / ancient as the dawn."

Donia Blumenfeld Clenman writes tenderly and perceptively about a daughter's teenage years: "She is Jewish, / Botticelli. / How far did you dip into history / to paint my daughter?" And through an imagined dialogue she manages to restore her Polish grandfather "in an ecstatic circle dance."

Phyllis Gotlieb's (1926–) grandparents, for her, were "two faces of despair. // ... {who} cultivated / in the scoured yard of their love / a garden of forget-me." Both love and humour inform Robyn Sarah's (1949–) recollections of her grandfather: "in the hospital, settling his account / with cancer, he replied / to all who inquired, 'I'm just / waiting for a visa,' he would say. / 'Tell them, I'm waiting for a visa.'"

Not surprisingly, among the most sentient poems are those concerning mothers. In a poem of Miriam Waddington's, "The Milk of the Mothers" belongs to all who nurture, but its existence is endangered and continually threatened by environmental abuse that can also be politically motivated. Rachel Korn identifies with "... the voice of my mother's tears, / ... the sound / of her weeping."

Within the context of generational differences, shifting mores, misperceptions and, in time, role reversals, Sharon Nelson examines the conflict between mother and daughter throughout her writing. In the midst of such turbulence, however, Nelson writes that her mother tells her to "Stop cleaning your house: / Write poems!" Through a series of rendered snapshots, letters, telephone conversations and visits both real and imagined, Marvyne Jenoff (1942–) evokes the essence of an often strained daughter-mother relationship.

Adeena Karasick displaces/deconstructs the process of her mother's dying in a language of "ciphered access" and "through the interstices / where interest is / about / the a b / a way out / maybe."

For Anne Michaels, "My mother's story is tangled, / overgrown with lives of parents and grandparents / because they lived in one house and among them / remembered hundreds of years of history." Her central image for a family is that of "plate-tectonics, flow-folding. / Something inside shifts; suddenly we're closer or apart."

> *Dear Mama ...*
> *and please, next Passover, in requiem, oh*
> *send me a mother's blessing, not a memo.*
>
> —Marvyne Jenoff

Woven into the fabric of family life, as with individual identity, are threads of Judaism manifested as aspects of rituals, symbols, traditions and culture, and drawn from the Bible, folklore, myth and legend. Both Miriam Waddington and Miriam Mandel incorporate the *seder* into poems about faith. And *Yom Kippur* becomes a poem of conscience for Donia Blumenfeld Clenman. The two strands of a *havdalah* candle form, for Sharon Nelson, "a single body // a single / source / of light." Both Phyllis Gotlieb and Libby Scheier set out their thoughts on circumcision, acknowledging the patriarchy along with the pain. As Scheier concludes: "Be careful not to be a creature whose pain is judged by others."

From Biblical images and narratives Rachel Korn has drawn meaningful twentieth-century analogies. Genesis is translated into a "somersaulting word," the beginning of a poem. The story of Lot's wife becomes a story of exile for the one who didn't turn and consequently didn't get to remain behind. And in sorrow her melancholy is as long as Samson's hair.

In her poem on Lot's wife, Miriam Waddington transfers suffering, sensuality and hope across centuries and cultures, then loops them back again through the original story. Through identification with her Biblical namesake and the impact of that namesake's younger brother the Prophet Moses, she parallels the history and geography of her own emigrant Russian family.

> *... for I bring Europe's ghosts*
> *into the well-lit living room*
> *of Canadian internationalism*
>
> *and I dream in good English too.*
> —Donia Blumenfeld Clenman

For Miriam Waddington there is a Noah's ark with more than animals on a journey into exile. She dreams "of new kingdoms / ... thrusting themselves / in a chorus of colour / from river to sky."

Testimony of displacement and exile—what Adeena Karasick would call "memorexile"—is central to the work of Rachel Korn, Donia Blumenfeld Clenman, Deborah Eibel (1940–) and the early writing of Sharon Nelson. The hands of a housemaid away from home Rachel Korn compares to "... oars / which row her life through / dark and steamy kitchens"; her new world "is tied in a thousand knots." Donia Blumenfeld Clenman's Poland is "a blood clot around my heart" but also a country where certain plants are "spinning the colour wheel of the universe." In Canada she puts "on the ointment of reason / and tape{s} heartbreak with bandaids."

Of the "... boatloads / Of learned women / On the Atlantic" whose creativity was not recognized back in

their native Vienna, Deborah Eibel accentuates the women's naive assumption of a destination—America—as a "City of Ladies" waiting with genuine anticipation for their assistance in matters literary and artistic. America is both burden and nightmare for the immigrant women about whom Sharon Nelson writes. It is a place where they must sacrifice the past for a present in which they still see themselves simultaneously as too like and too unlike their grandmothers, who have also suffered, dreamed and loved.

... To guard love
is a way of making
it. To make it is a way of ending
it. For us no object
comes between; unnamed
love has no chart or claim,
only the inward
touch as bond, the bearing ground
—Helene Rosenthal

In the poetry of those Jewish women who first examined relationships they chose as adults, the conventional and the traditional is reflected from their history, society and culture. Rachel Korn and Miriam Waddington draw from nature to express longing, uncertainty and intervals of waiting. When Phyllis Gotlieb explores physical intimacy it is with metaphors of animals, but also with images of ships and cosmology and the terminology of a Danish sex manual apparently originally written in lyrical French.

Food is utilized in this respect by Donia Blumenfeld Clenman: grapes and pomegranates; Jill Solnicki: jujubes and chocolate-wrapped cherries; Marvyne Jenoff: cashew toes; Helene Rosenthal: an ice-cream cone, melting. Susan Glickman acknowledges, within a slightly different context, "... we are / all food!"

For Robyn Sarah love is a spirit lamp or a touchstone or a "dream of wings"; for Susan Glickman an "... act / of translation." And for Anne Michaels it's a "long journey towards each other," an experience of together "holding up the night sky in a winter field." It is also "... separation, / the membrane of the orange dividing itself, / the surface of silver / that turns glass into a mirror."

The breakdown of such relationships is expressed viscerally as "fistfuls of wind and rain" (Jill Solnicki); "shattering red fire-glass" (Helene Rosenthal); "... a blade, cutting / both ways" or "some token air" (Robyn Sarah); or intellectually and often somewhat ironically in patterns (Miriam Waddington); as a farm report or as "recipes and algorithms" (Sharon Nelson); a series of mathematical problems (Rhea Tregebov); and in a decree *nisi* (Robyn Sarah). Societally sanctioned lack of equality, abuse, denial, confusion, an inability to trust and essential differences are offered as some of the reasons.

The world is the diagram of a man
—Miriam Mandel

Chronicling the submissive role of women throughout the early history of western civilization, Jill Solnicki counterpoints some of the significant events in Roman civilization as well as in Roman mythology with the tiresomeness of being a woman at the end of the twentieth century when that woman is still cast in the role of housewife. Rhea Tregebov delineates "... the scars we carry / ... just like the history of our lives:" in a projection of elementary school readers in common use in the 1940s and '50s. Women are not considered serious; nor are they meant to be taken seriously in Deborah Eibel's pre-Second-World-War Vienna, and these same women are restricted in what they are officially allowed to learn. Phyllis Gotlieb's fifties' women live in "... houses like toyboxes emptied of their / excuses for existence" and drive "down / down / down to the dressmaker to match / buttons with great exactitude and cunning."

Writing about the women growing up in patriarchies during that period as well as about the double standards and collusion she sees practised by their mothers, Sharon Nelson describes self-silencing and evokes the psychological and emotional deaths from dealing with the day-after-day limitations of sticky cereal bowls, neverending vacuuming and the like. Re-entering "the closed universe of the body, / *woman's sphere*, a constellation still unexplored," their men perceive female independence as a threat to their own security, sexuality and the power vested in traditional male authority.

Four decades later, when women get together in a Robyn Sarah poem, they may still drink tea and work with yarn but "the rice sticks to the bottom of the pan, / and things get left out in the rain" while "... they talk / the sun down, talk stars, talk / dawn—"and "while they lean closer to peer down / into the murky water where last night's dream / flicks its tail and is gone." And thus the women's movement and the rise of feminism begins to be documented on the pages of the books of Canadian Jewish women poets.

A younger generation is not only able to dream and imag(in)e gender equality but also to celebrate being daughters, sisters, mothers, women. Freed from but also wounded by the disequilibrium of the past, Libby Scheier writes without restraint about the genital and the sexual, wanting to "...see each other with open eyes / what we really look like. / What we are."

Beyond what we now know as feminism waits Adeena Karasick's selfreflexive Feminine "Secreture (or "S'ECRITURE OF THE NIGHT" or, further, "S'ECRE(A)TURE." Detached from regulations—real and/or symbolic—a narrational "she" works "both synchronically, operating linearly along the paradigmatic axis—and diachronically—proliferating outward along the syntagmatic axis." The words are noetic, resurgent, bold, provocative; they abrogate, separate, interrogate; explore, challenge, play; they sublimate and articulate.

... and women will have come
so far that no one can see them,
even from

high office windows.
—Robyn Sarah

Transformation of the concept of self as individual and of women as an enabled part of an integrated whole mirrors the pursuit of social justice across the geography and history in communities of varying composition and sizes. Anne Michaels explores the oppression of Russian writers under the Stalinist regime. Adeena Karasick boards "the transcultural express."

Miriam Waddington probes psychiatrists, professors, trade-union leaders, and judges, and examines the dilemmas faced by alcoholics, drug addicts, deserters, thieves, prostitutes, prisoners and prison personnel. Carole Leckner scrutinizes city politicians and comments on grassroots social action. Rhea Tregebov takes on doctors, autism, social stratification, political activists, crimes of passion and the environment; Libby Scheier: the underprivileged, famine in the third world, rapists, AIDS, and visiting Martians. She provides disturbing statistics and quotes from outside sources on prison inmates and guards, alcoholic spouses/partners, and child abuse. She also writes about anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism as do Phyllis Gotlieb and many of the others whose books are being surveyed here.

Then why do historians run away...
On streets too narrow for parades?
—Deborah Eibel

Histories of social justice and injustice; of individuals, their families and lives, can ultimately be seen as irregularly shaped fragments of an aggregate that includes mass movements and anti-movements. Often beyond rational interpretation these huge yet intricate puzzles are among the most difficult to decode, especially by those who live—or live and die—at the conjuncture of particular events or linger on their periphery, and even by those who are born after, but who are given those stories to carry forward: commemorating, interpreting, attaining insight, rendering into art through images, sounds and words. Such an event was of course the Holocaust, and among those who continue to address its impact and legacy with sensitivity and integrity are Canadian Jewish women poets.

Amid the terror and horror, the testament of "bundle{s} of bones and bucket{s} of blood," Rachel Korn is able to write about the nuns who saved Jewish children: "Their words walk barefoot through the smoking ruins, / Their murmurous voices rise, grow luminous, / And light the darkness of a Jewish mother's grave." While "the rest of the world / was busy listening to the / overture of the death camps // ... and ... the / postman brought us valentines / stamped and postmarked *Death*," Miriam Waddington asks: "... how am I to know / That these are not my children / Scrambled and atomless, sent / To make my grief specific?" Phyllis Gotlieb recognizes the children's "books in black letters blacker / than the ovens of Auschwitz lettershapes." "The smoke of gas chambers will not settle" for Donia Blumenfeld Clenman, nor will "the bleeding sun, the bloodless moon."

"When marchers appear from nowhere ... / Historians are afraid," writes Deborah Eibel. "What if the next parade / Should stop suddenly, / Right in front of them, / And not go on?" Helene Rosenthal hears "... the pungent aroma / of Ghetto laughter ... // ... despite the choreography of death." "There is no anger in bleached bones / lamp-shades, fertile dust" Sharon Nelson notes, though "clusters of villages / somewhere in europe / hold graves of genealogy / books of tradition: / principles, ethics." "They say / this dream will pass // ... the dream will not pass."

For Rhea Tregebov "it is still there, ... / Those dead, almost all, who lived my borrowed memories." Anne Michaels writes: "The dead leave us starving with mouths full of love // ... Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist." "Revealed through layers / of a variety of retellings" Adeena Karasick inscribes both on and off the page "a memory reference / in deference / a defiant reflex:." She says, "[I will not] pass over you in silence."

MêMewars
Genrecide
—Adeena Karasick

We do not descend, but rise from our histories.
—Anne Michaels

Reminded, we remember; yet there has been a return to genocide in eastern Europe and in Africa and less public wars continue against dissidents in China and Burma, among other countries. Our own society is scored with episodes of intensifying violence. In terms of their individual sensibilities and concerns, some of the writers whose work has been discussed in this essay are already transforming such raw material into poetry, circling back and moving forward at the same time through a spiral of knowledge, and of memory.

Note: Although many of the writers whose books have been considered for this essay have published in other genres, only their poetry is mentioned here. The only writer whose work has appeared in English translation is Rachel Korn; in all other cases the poetry was originally written in English. Monique Bosco is the major Jewish writer in the French language in Canada but her poetry has not been translated and hence has not been referred to in this survey, even though many of her themes are relevant to those discussed.

Janis Rapoport (1946–) is the author of five books of poetry: Within the Whirling Moment *(Anansi Press, 1967),* Jeremy's Dream *(Porcépic, 1974),* Winter Flower *(Hounslow Press, 1979),* Upon Her Fluent Route *(Hounslow, 1991), and* After Paradise *(Simon & Pierre, 1996). She is writing her fourth play,* The Shiva Box, *an excerpt of which is being produced by the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre in December 1996 as part of a program called* 10 X 10: A Minyan Of Women.

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CARRYING ON THE TRADITION *JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS IN CANADA*

by Tamara Palmer Seiler

Students of Canadian culture are well aware of the significant contribution Jewish writers have made to Canadian literature. Whether writing in Yiddish as first-generation immigrants, or writing in English as the children or grandchildren of immigrants, Jewish writers have produced literary works that are among the best and most loved in the Canadian literary canon. The work of Yiddish writ-