

Dos Zenen Unruhige Teg: Historical and Cultural Context in Rosa Lebensbaum's Writing

דאס זענען אונרויאגע טעג: ההקשר ההיסטורי-תרבותי בכתיבתה של רוזה לבנסבאום

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Tel Aviv University

In Fulfillment of the Requirements for The Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

This work was carried out under the supervision of

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(February 2023)

Research Summary

The purpose of this research

Historical events and global affairs are made of the mosaic of individual lives, private people who took an active part in shaping these happenings and were influenced by them, living under circumstances and experiences that manipulated their own private lives. Such a dynamic, between the universal and the individual, between the global history and the experience of a single person characterizes the life story of the writer Rosa Lebensbaum, better known by her pen name, Anna Margolin.

The purpose of this research is to provide a context, a more comprehensive depiction of the places, events, and people that influenced, inspired, or made Rosa Lebensbaum the famous, much-appreciated literary persona she became. Each aspect this study explores represents a part of her identity, creating a new broader context for reading her whole corpus. All the different parts of this interdisciplinary research, separately and combined, illustrate a much-needed, all-inclusive understanding not only of Rosa Lebensbaum's personal story but that of her Jewish contemporary zeitgeist as well.

In 1927 Rosa Lebensbaum was already a known Yiddish journalist and editor, her poetry, under the name of Anna Margolin was well appreciated by readers and critics alike. Her biography received a respectable mention in Zalman Reisen's *Lexicon Fun Der Yidisher Literatur, Prese un Philologie* - the influential personalities lexicon in the Yiddish literary world.¹ Reisen introduced the information under her given name, Rosa Lebensbaum. He began by saying she was born in January 1887 in Brest-Litovsk and in 1906 arrived in New York, where she joined the Yiddish craze

¹ ווילנע: ווילנער פארלאג פון ב' (לעקסיקאן פון דער יידישער ליטעראטור פרעסע און פילאָלאָגיע, זלמאן רייזן, 209-210. (קלעצקין, 1927).

of the intelligentsia and took part in Chaim Zhitlowski's activity. She became a professional writer in the New York Yiddish press world. Between 1910-1911, Lebensbaum left for Warsaw, where she married Moshe Stavsky and followed him to *Eretz Israel*. She returned to New York in 1914, joined the Yiddish *אזער טאג Der Tog* newspaper, and began writing poetry in her refined, personal style. Reisen pointed out that Rosa wrote a column on women's fashion and in 1920 adopted the pseudonym Anna Margolin. The lexicon's review presented the author's character while hinting at many other sides of her multifaceted personality.

Rosa Lebensbaum lived through multiple historical events, social changes, and ideological revolutions that characterized the 20th century. A poet, a mother, a wife, and a journalist she was also a pioneer who witnessed the first years of the *New Yishuv* (the new settlement in the turn of the 20th century *Eretz Israel*) during the second immigration wave and became one of the leading women in the world of Yiddish writing in New York. A contemporary of the suffrage movement which struggled to achieve equality for women in society and the domestic sphere, Lebensbaum's personal life, creative work, and points of view allow us to examine different intimate aspects documented in the different genres she wrote. Such close reading enables a better understanding of the turbulent historical-cultural events and their impact on the people who lived and experienced them.

Four major aspects of Lebensbaum's life story serve as foundation for this research; first aspect explores motherhood; the social changes in the perception of the experience, as well as intimate expressions of pain and longing as translated into Lebensbaum's poetic verse. The second aspect investigates her search for influence and the fashioning of the poetic self, specifically based on close intimate connections with men writers she shared her life with. The third aspect explores the importance of

spaces and traveling in Rosa Lebensbaum's writing. The fourth aspect deals with notions of loneliness and detachment that distinguished the generation of immigrants in general and the Jewish poets who wrote in Yiddish in particular. These four aspects are supported by the findings kept in the private family archive in Israel, and the YIVO archives in New York, some never addressed before.

Research Methodology

This investigation originated with the opening of Lebensbaum's family private archive. The family of Rosa Lebensbaum preserved a collection of letters dated back to the first decades of the 20th century, beginning with the meeting of Lebensbaum and her future husband, Moshe Stavsky (later Stavy). The family archive consists of dozens of letters and postcards sent and received by Moshe Stavsky and their only son, Naaman Stavy. Yet this correspondence does more than tell the story of one family, it mirrors a historical-cultural, pivotal era in the lives of Jews worldwide. The newly discovered letters fill a crucial gap in the life of Rosa Lebensbaum, the Jewish American writer, however, they also serve as invaluable documentation which reflects the socio-cultural currents in her contemporary Jewish nation. The letters from the family personal archive complement the Anna Margolin collection housed in the YIVO Institution in New York. They include responses to letters written to her, newspaper clippings that were kept by her ex-husband and notes preserved by her son Naaman. In addition to the significant learning of the complex life of one Jewish family, the disclosure of the documents strengthens the study of the relationships between the various Jewish communities in the newly built Land of Israel and in the United States - a significant Jewish center at that time. These research findings shed light on a richer mosaic of this timeline of Jewish history.

Rosa Lebensbaum's understanding of how restless and complicated her reality was guided her writings and her continuous dialogue with her colleagues. In order to establish a direct reciprocity between the creativity of Anna Margolin and the events in the life of Rosa Lebensbaum, this research presents an extensive study of Lebensbaum's letters and writings. The family's private archive in Israel envelops authentic material offering personal, historical, and cultural contexts which allow for a wider and much deeper reading of her poetry and prose. This thesis centers on an integrated reading of Rosa Lebensbaum's letters, which were written, as noted by her partner Reuben Iceland, as true poems in themselves, and which present the possibility of a new understanding of her life and the events that drove her writing. In addition, the uniqueness of the historical and personal events in and about which Rosa Lebensbaum wrote gave her poetic writing a context in which the historical-cultural weft is interwoven with the creative process.

Letters and correspondence form a central source for this research, particularly those which were previously not made public. Apart from the painful correspondence with her son Naaman and his father, Moshe Stavy, other letters in Rosa Lebensbaum's archive files reveal the rich life that inspired her poetry. A close reading of the findings in the Stavy family archive together with those found in the YIVO archive in New York reveals that Rosa Lebensbaum wrote to her son continuously. She sent him letters that Moshe Stavsky translated, and occasionally scribbled notes of melancholic longing, which were never meant to be sent. Her archives contain rephrased texts which allow to track her thoughts and deliberations while writing. Using Rosa Lebensbaum's own works as the best and most authentic account of events, feelings, and states of mind provide an overview of the private history of one family.

Another noteworthy example is the excessiveness with which Lebensbaum wrote her postcards to her second husband Hirsch-Leib Gordon. Their correspondence lets the reader into her everyday life, private experiences, impressions, and thoughts. Many of the postcards are short messages that tell all about Lebensbaum's love for concerts and music, her eagerness in supporting Gordon during his studies and her interest in the Bible. The importance of these detailed correspondences to a research on Lebensbaum appears already in Iceland's memoirs where he opens his chapter on Anna Margolin with a statement saying that "The complete picture of Anna Margolin will be revealed only when someone is found who will read, sort, and put into order the hundreds of letters she left behind, which fill quite a large valise"² Although any of these notes and letters were left untouched but, others indeed help clarify Rosa Lebensbaum's different points of view on daily matters, illuminating various qualities of her creative work.

The issue of Lebensbaum's different names is yet another critical focal point in my research. The decision to refer to Rosa Lebensbaum by the American version of her name was based on two main reasons. First, the various names she used to publish her different writings required one specific reference. Second, the specific spelling of Lebensbaum was found printed on her father Menahem Lebensbaum's official business stationery. Menahem Lebensbaum's two letters found in the Stavy archive in Israel were never published before and may serve as the only remnant to their intricate connection. Lebensbaum is also the same spelling Rosa used when writing Moshe Stavy her address in her letters to him. It was the official name she was called during her life in the United States and will be the one used in this dissertation.

² Reuben Iceland, *From Our Springtime: Literary Memoirs and Portraits of Yiddish*, trans. Gerald Marcus (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 122.

The Stavsky-Lebensbaum marriage is rarely granted more than two sentences in any article dealing with either Margolin's poetry or Stavsky's writing; nevertheless, it is a liaison worth exploring further since it illustrates the different perspectives characterizing Jewish society during those days of the early 20th century. In his article regarding diversions in Jewish thought and culture at that time, historian Ehud Manor notes that difference between Jews who chose to settle in *Eretz Israel* and those who immigrated to America.³ Manor argues that while the Zionists were striving to reconstruct the ancient Jewish identity, reviving its language and creating new traditions, the immigrants to America arrived from Yiddish speaking environments, struggled to maintain their language and embrace the American life and identity.

Rosa Lebensbaum and Moshe Stavsky embodied these two binary ideas. Manor's description conveys the reasons for some of the irreconcilable differences between Lebensbaum and her husband. Stavsky considered himself an enthusiastic Zionist pioneer. All the ideas and ideology concerning the return of Jews to the Promised Land, settlement, and rural life, enticed him. He became an active figure in the life of the developing country, but more importantly, he continued writing prose and poetry in Hebrew. Consequently, Stavsky became a well-known, prolific poet and author whose work was published and praised. In contrast, his wife Rosa became a foreign entity, belonging to a completely different culture and an altogether divergent ideology.

Although a great deal has been accomplished in the literary analysis of Anna Margolin's poetry, a careful study of Rosa Lebensbaum's newly discovered private correspondence adds a critical mass of knowledge about her as a woman, as a mother,

³ Ehud Manor. "A source of satisfaction to all Jews, wherever they may be living". Louis Miller between New York and Tel Aviv, 1911, in "Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC", N.2 October 2011

and as a partner, during an era of exceptional events, in many different places. This research will provide for the first time a comprehensive reading of Rosa Lebensbaum's correspondence and its relationship with her selected writings and poems in order to demonstrate how personal, quotidian text illuminates the poetic, artistic one.

Only one published poetry collection carries the name Anna Margolin yet Rosa Lebensbaum herself was in fact quite prolific. Under various pseudonyms, she wrote a newspaper serial novel, numerous newspaper columns, and hundreds of letters, postcards and notes which together form a baseline for interpreting her poems. In fact, Anna Margolin emerged out of the reality Rosa Lebensbaum had to face: a reality combining key elements of the historical, cultural, and social realities at the turn of the twentieth century. As a writer, Rosa Lebensbaum operated in an era of great social-political revolutions; the rise of socialism in the European arena inspired the newly established Zionist movement and created shifts in cultural thought which permeated Jewish American poets. The very idea of growing as an author within the Zionist vision, which strongly encouraged masculine poetry production in *Eretz Israel*, seemed quite improbable.

In her active years as well as after her death, it was the men around her, critics such as Aaron Zeitlin, Itzik Manger, Reuben Iceland, and Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, who wrote about her, praising her skilled and professional poetic style. In this context, “The anxiety of authorship”, as coined by Gilbert and Gubar⁴, help interpret the entangled relationship partners conducted while writing side by side. Both her partners and the other fellow poets who accompanied her creative work did not

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar. *No Man's Land*, Vol. 1; 199

remain indifferent to Lebensbaum's "experienced hand"⁵, the ideas, the vocabulary, and the rich imagery.

The connection between the poems in *Lider* to historical events and people is possible because Rosa herself ordered the poems thematically according to the ideas that inspired them. This dissertation explores the connection between real life and poetic documentation of events and the places where they happened. In addition to documenting historical events or personal occurrences, poetry is yet another vital layer that complements the intimate and personal side of the general public narrative sequence—the individual's point of view who experiences reality and responds to it.

A historical cultural context

Rosa Lebensbaum's writing is deeply influenced by the major forces that characterized the early 20th century; the first World War, the future of the Diaspora Jewry in view of the immigration alternative to *Eretz Israel* or America, the women's rights movement emerging at the end of the 19th century, and in particular the innovative ideas regarding women's alternative choices outside the household, and last but not least, the breach of boundaries in the arts as known in contemporary western culture. The Zionists believed Jewish life should be re-established in the holy land, meaning *Eretz Israel*, revive the old Hebrew language and embrace the Jewish diaspora around the world. The other ideological movement wished to maintain a modern Yiddish culture, reorganize their people, and gain the status of a national minority. Rosa Lebensbaum's restlessness as portrayed in her many letters and poems illustrates the words of Gaston Bachelard referring to memories which are translated into history. "Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as

⁵ Anna Margolin, *Lider* (Novershtern ed. And commentator), VII.

those of home" writes Bachelard who adds that these memories become supplementary to our dreams. Dealing with the trope of the private space, specifically the idea of 'home', Bachelard claims that our memories are stored with our dreams, thus moving us a little closer to becoming poets.⁶ Similarly, Lebensbaum's writing is charged with descriptions of external and internal spaces that withhold an abundance of memories yet, within the poetic fashioning of her own different homes, Lebensbaum pens images that stimulate a collective memory as well as collective longing. Lebensbaum translates the search for the Jewish home in her contemporary history into a poetics that connects her readers to her through the most basic common denominator - shared nostalgia. Lebensbaum shares her intimate experiences building a bridge for others to associate with.

Another major issue to consider was the fatal war of languages. In a speech delivered by Jewish literary scholar Dov Sadan in New York in 1969, he considered it relevant to lecture about one of the greatest controversies the Jewish immigrants to pre-state Israel experienced. The rift had split the people into two fierce parties; those who called for the preservation of Yiddish as a national language, and the opposition who regarded Hebrew as the modern Zionist language to be spoken in the newly built *Eretz Israel*. The dispute did not pass over the Lebensbaum-Stavsky family. Rosa Lebensbaum's first years in New York passed at the side of Chaim Zhitlowsky, a popular Jewish social activist who passionately believed that Yiddish was essential to the upcoming socialist change in society: "The socialists do not speak to the people in a language that they have long forgotten. They also do not borrow the language of their neighbors. They speak *mame-loshn* and bring ideas that mothers could have

⁶ Gaston, Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space – The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Translation by Maria Jolas. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6

learned by heart and repeated to their children every day—ideas that teach us how the poor, oppressed, and abused segment of human society can free itself from its pitiful situation"⁷ This example presents Zhitlovsky's most essential understanding of the significance of language. It is not only a cultural choice but a moral loyalty to the most basic relationship a person has. That of a motherly love. To preserve the Yiddish language according to Zhitlowsky was an imperative action mothers hold towards their children and children towards their mothers. It is a reciprocity the Jewish people owe their ancestors. Working by his side, Lebensbaum was fascinated by Zhitlowsky, his eloquent speech, and his dramatic character. His ideas regarding the future of Jewish culture, and the Yiddish language, were deeply rooted in her mind. Although Lebensbaum wrote numerous poems and other types of writings in Russian, she insisted on writing her letters to her son in Yiddish, while he passionately asserted he would never use “that jargon” of hers. Naaman's reaction only accurately mirrored the aversion to Yiddish by the new Zionist pioneers in *Eretz Israel*, due to its being a symbol of the old Jewish tradition. Rosa Lebensbaum's corpus provides an insight into the world of Jewish poets in the early part of New York's twentieth century yet her connections to her family in *Eretz Israel* allows for a broader perspective.

Zhitlowsky was only one of the influential people Lebensbaum associated with throughout her life. It was her father who made sure she studied in the most prestigious central gymnasium in Odessa to get a thorough education, later, he was also the one to send her to America. A long and detailed letter penned by Menachem Lebensbaum to his beloved daughter Shoshana⁸ was sent to guide her as to the behavior expected from her, sending her money and warm regards from her loving

⁷ Chaim, Zhitlovsky. “‘A Jew to Jews’ and ‘Why Only Yiddish?’”. In *Jews and Race: Writings on Identity and Difference, 1880–1940*. Edited by Mitchell Hart and Bryan Brandeis, 103

⁸ Menachem Lebensbaum to Rosa, 1907. The Stavy archive, Israel. The letter begins with the Hebrew greeting ביתי יחידתי שושנה שלום. (Shalom to you my one and only daughter Shoshana)

father. Afterwards, Lebensbaum's work during her voyages in Europe working with leading personas such as Peter Kropotkin, enriched her thought. Furthermore, her personal connections with fellow associates in the different Yiddish newspapers, such as Zalman Dingal for instance, Finally, her personal life alongside Moshe Stavsky, Hirsh Leib Gordon, and Reuben Iceland, her long-life companion, were powerful, impressive, and influential in her thinking, her perception of herself and her writing.

Three major topics shaped both the life and the doing of Lebensbaum, all three maintain a crucial kinship between them. The first is the historical era during which Lebensbaum worked and created, the first decades of the 20th century; the second is the literary milieu, in Europe as well as in New York, that influenced and helped shape her work; and the third is her own individual perception of the people and events around her. Exploring these three topics together with the close reading of her poetry collection as well as her other writings, personal and public ones, reveal a sense of disparity, a gap that had opened between the poet's vision and her actual inability to turn fantasy into reality. A break between private desire, the individual's range of beliefs, and a reality that did not allow fulfillment. Lebensbaum phrased private emotions of suffocation and impotence, loneliness and alienation in her work, playing on lyrical content vis-à-vis an authentic portrayal of the reality, allowing a more intimate glimpse into how poets and writers perceived themselves and their inner worlds, and how the society they lived in regarded them. How did they experience success or failure, and how were these private understandings reflected in their poetic work.

Rosa Lebensbaum experienced in her character, as well as her work, a clash of identities: a secular Jew, a nationalist with no homeland, and a woman torn between marriage and loneliness, motherhood and desertion, prolific creative writing, and

complete artistic drought, despair, and hope. A rare possibility for research is found within her life story and creativity that can simultaneously be narrowed down and distilled into the life and art of one solitary Jewish, female, immigrant writer in times of historical, artistic, and personal turmoil. Rosa Lebensbaum's story is a chronology of solitude. Solitude that she chose for herself. Social and personal disconnection as a surrender to social forces and events in front of which she felt herself powerless. This thesis creates a broader view of the Jewish experience amidst the changes of the 20th century by exploring the travels and writings, the interactions and deliberations of Rosa Lebensbaum and illuminates a concrete and detailed example of the hardships of an entire generation of women writers. The findings which emerge in the conclusion of this study will create a broader context and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the shaping of the modern Jewish nation, territorially and culturally, during an extraordinary historical, momentous era.