

Writing in the Family

Lil Blume

Writing seems to run in my family. Two of my brothers have written scripts for film, television, and theatre. My youngest brother is a rabbi writing Torah commentary. In addition to being writers, my sister is a librarian and I became an English teacher. We all work with texts of one sort or another.

Writing is not for everyone, yet it seems as necessary to me as breathing. Writing journals, stories, memoir, or poetry gives order to experience and meaning to random events. When I don't write, my life feels like a dream I can't quite remember.

I often wondered about writing in the family. Why are there so many writers? Where does our storytelling instinct come from? What creates the desire to shut out the world and enter the imaginative places where our stories live? Several of my ancestors had also been writers. In my mid-50s, I yearned to find more of their writing. If I could read their stories, I might better understand their concerns, values, and dreams and learn more about the writing impulse in my family.

I already had a few items: a 1902 book written in Hebrew by my great-grandfather lamenting the Jewish Enlightenment and predicting the doom that would come to the Jewish people if they became less orthodox; a suitcase filled with letters exchanged between family in Canada and my uncles fighting overseas in the Second World War; articles by my grandfather published in 1940 in *The Ottawa Citizen* decrying Stalin's propaganda; stories written by my father in the late 1940s while recovering from wartime injuries; and my mother's diaries from the war years.

These items showed me opinions, polemics, and passion—but I realized that I most needed to hear from my grandmother, Esther Halpern. My mother told me that her mother had been a writer and that her work had been published in the New York and Montreal Yiddish press. No relative seemed to have any more to say on this topic.

My mother grew up in Montreal during the depression. Sometimes, waking up early, she would tiptoe out of her room and find that Esther had been awake for hours, writing at the kitchen table in their St. Urbain Street walk-up. With four small children and an unpredictable husband, the early morning was the only time Esther had the peace and quiet necessary to write. My grandmother died in 1947, before I was born, before my parents even married. What did she write about? How would I ever find her work? My mother could not answer these questions, but in 2006, my uncle randomly mentioned that Esther published in *Der Keneder Adler*, a Montreal Yiddish newspaper. A Jewish genealogy website led me to this:

“*Canadian Jewish Eagle* ("Der Keneder Adler"), a Yiddish daily published in Montreal (1907-1980). . . .Microfilms are available at the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives (1907-1944) and the Jewish Public Library of Montreal (all years).”

This was my first concrete lead. I sent an email to the library telling them about my search and received a response ten minutes later as if they had been waiting to hear from me. They informed me that, in the 1930s, *Der Adler* had been a daily publication, 20 to 50 pages each issue. The librarian connected me with Erian Harris, a researcher who was experienced searching *Der Adler* microfilm. I hired him, but he needed a precise date to start his search and wanted to know what exactly he was searching for. My mother and uncles were vague about when Esther might have started publishing in the North American Yiddish press, and in disagreement regarding her topics. My mother thought she wrote stories, like those of Sholom Aleichem. My uncle said she wrote articles about the intellectuals of Warsaw.

In the fall of 1926, my grandmother and her family left Warsaw for Halifax, continuing by train to Montreal where their cousins were. Esther had three children under six and a husband who was both radical and restless. (“*Er hat kein zitzfleish*,” Esther would say of him.) My mother was born on January 1, 1927, a few weeks after settling in Montreal. Esther faced a new city, culture, and language; financial hardship; and long, cold winters. With a new baby, when could she start writing? I was also told that after 1939, her arthritis was so bad she could no longer write. I asked the researcher to search the microfilm from 1934 to 1939.

Harris checked 1934 and 1935. He phoned me once to report on his hours. He had found nothing and wanted to know whether to continue. I was discouraged, but told him to carry on. Before starting on 1936, he thought to check a book called *The New Yiddish Literature*. There, he found an entry about my grandmother. Here is the translation:

Esther Halpern (1884-1947); born in Warsaw, Poland. Her father, Yechiel Meir Perelman, was a well-known Jewish bookseller, a close friend of all the famous Jewish and Hebrew authors in Poland. Esther Halpern received both a Jewish and general education. In 1926 she immigrated to Canada, and until the Second World War lived in Montreal, where she was actively involved in the Jewish and cultural life of the city. She was a close friend of the poet Y.Y. Segal, who introduced her into literary society. The articles she wrote about the Jewish authors of Warsaw, which were published in The Canadian Eagle (Montreal), aroused much interest and very lively discussion among the local population. She also published literary criticism and short stories in The Canadian Eagle, and The Jewish World (Toronto). Her memoirs of Jewish book dealers and book collectors in Warsaw (reprinted in Yivo Bleter, NY 1951, p. 240-244) gives great pleasure to the reader and enlightens him with regards to Jewish life in Poland at the time of the Renaissance. During the Second World War, she moved to Ottawa, and died there.

This led Harris to the Montreal Jewish Library’s collection of the *YIVO Bleter, Journal of the Yiddish Scientific Institute*. The library had the 1951 volume. Harris photocopied pages 240-244 and mailed them to my, then, 79-year-old mother, Mary Halpern Blum Devor. Mary translated the story her mother had written at least 70 years earlier. My daughter, Aharonaw, born in 1984 – 100 years after Esther – transcribed my mother’s longhand translation and emailed it to me. Four generations of women working together finally allowed me to get a snapshot of my grandmother’s inner landscape.

Written in the 1930s, with a post-war note added at the end, then mysteriously reprinted four years after she died, the story dealt with Esther's recollections of life in Warsaw in the 1890s. As a 10-year-old, Esther helped her father in his bookstore. With charm and humour, she recalled her father's business, named the scholars he encountered, and examined their behaviours, obsessions, and preferences in collecting antiquarian Jewish books. By the end of the war, the world Esther described was gone forever.

I like to believe that Esther wrote this story for me, her future granddaughter, to show me where she came from, what her childhood was like, and what influenced her to live an intellectual and literary life. As well, it seems entirely possible that, in her mid-50s, active in the Montreal Yiddish writing community, Esther Halpern wondered about writers in *her* family and what influenced her to become a writer. Thinking about these questions—perhaps the very questions I considered many years later—she recreated her father's bookstore and his many literary connections in her writing.

The translation of Esther Halpern's story, "Recollections of Warsaw Jewish Book Sellers and Rare Book Collectors" is published in From Sinai to the Shtetl and Beyond: Where is Home for the Jewish Writer?, an anthology of poetry and prose created to accompany the conference of the same name held in Hamilton, June, 2009.

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