

A Whole Story

The Life of Esther-Chave Gutfeld Enushevsky

by L. S. Weintraub

Cette entrevue entre grand-mère et petite fille raconte en détails l'arrivée de la grand-mère au Canada et sa participation

"Returning on the train, we declared our love to each other with sign [body] language, not like they say these years. My husband said, "Why do I have to go searching, and you go searching?" We talked and we became engaged."

dans la vie communautaire juive des villes ontariennes de Galt et de Welland.

These are condensed excerpts from a lengthy taped conversation with my grandmother, Esther Enushevsky (1889–1980), several years before her death. Esther begins her story in Russian Poland, describing family and Jewish life in Novogrod, where she was born to Rivke Asch and Beryl Gutfeld. Rivke sold special Sabbath foods, while Beryl taught. Esther admired her communally active and learned mother, but refused to study with her, insisting on attending a small Jewish school, a decision later regretted. Rivke's orthodoxy prevented Esther from becoming a dressmaker, because she would have had to sit with men, a resented prohibition. Instead, she learned the hat trade in her teens, working in tiny home-based factories in Bialystok and Warsaw, settings scrutinized by Rivke to ensure Esther's safety. Esther decided to go to New York because without a dowry, she would be unable to make a satisfactory marriage: "I had to go away from home and see what I could do for myself."

Esther, like thousands of Jewish women who left impoverished European homes, sailed to New York in 1909. She lived with one sister for three years, working in Brooklyn's sweatshops, until she was sent to Canada to discover how another sister was faring in a *kley n shtetl*, a small town. That trip was the start of her Canadian sojourn of more than half a century, mostly in the small communities of Galt and Preston (now Cambridge), and then Welland. Esther was closely involved in Jewish communal life in those small Ontario towns, in the context of the twentieth-century international events that so radically shaped that life.

There is a community centre in northern Israel commemorating Esther's long life, adjacent to a youth centre

commemorating the life and premature death of her granddaughter Paula Segal Hurwitz. They are both in Metulla, a small farming town established around the time of Esther's birth in the Jewish Europe that is no more, and that is the beginning of Esther's "whole story." What follows is just part of that whole story, where we find her leaving New York on the eve of World War I.

Destiny in a small *shtetl*

"I had a sister in Canada, and my mamme and another sister in Europe were always writing letters to me to go to see Chayye-Sorre in Galt. My brother-in-law lived in Cobalt before and he had a friend there, in business in soda-water, very well-off. He thought it was a good match and he had my picture there. So I went to get the ticket to Cobalt. The man selling the tickets said, "How could a young girl like this go to a town when it's not for a girl? This is a *vildernish*, it's a wild country there, why do you have to go there?" So he talked me out of it.

But my sister and my mother didn't stop bothering me. When I came by train to Galt, they had never seen a girl dressed like that. I came with a big black velour hat, a black straw sweater, nice suits, and dresses. But after that I didn't wear them because it's a small town and it didn't fit.

[After a two-and-a-half mile walk to the Enushevsky farm] there was my [future] husband, Moishe. At that time they were taking the hay from the fields, and it was very hot. My husband, what should I tell you? A little boy, dark and slim, very tanned from the sun, sitting on a big stack of hay. He was helping his father on the farm that summer.

Moishe had two sisters nearly my age. They were lonesome and they liked me, a New York girl, they wouldn't let me go. They also worked by hats. In Galt there was a hat factory. I didn't want to work in Galt. They went with me to Toronto, where there was a Jewish factory from hats, but I didn't like it. In New York, I had all my family, my sister and my brother, a lot of friends and cousins. I had a good time there, and Galt was a small town.

Meanwhile, they were making matches. I stayed in Galt, I didn't work, but I helped Chayye-Sorre. She had a baby, the fourth, a boy. I took care of the three children and I baked and cooked for the *bris* (circumcision ceremony). All ten families were there. And never could they wonder how a girl could make such a *bris*. Till today I know all that I cooked and baked. And then there was a wedding by Moishe's cousin.

From the wedding, returning on the train, we declared our love to each other with sign [body] language, not like

they say these years. My husband said, "Why do I have to go searching, and you go searching?" We talked and we became engaged. That was a *zivig* (destiny). Before we got married I had saved up a little money. We bought a little house in Preston, a beautiful home with a garden outside.

"I used to read in Yiddish about sex. My mother didn't tell me anything. It wasn't the style to talk about it, a mother with a daughter, 'till after the chuppah, but I was inquisitive. We didn't have a honeymoon. But we done good."

We made the wedding ourselves. A friend of mine learned me how to bake. No machinery. We *klapped* (broke) the eggs by hand. We made all the sponge cakes and the other cakes. My hand was sore for a long time. They didn't do anything without me, even the fish to make. I set the table, my sisters-in-law helped me. They were from a small *shtetl*, they didn't know anything about different things.

We had a big hall near the market for the dinner. The *chuppah* (wedding canopy) was in a different place. There wasn't many cars, but there was a lot of horses. It was a hundred and fifty people. I danced a whole night with everybody. I was very tired, I had worked very hard.

I knew a lot. Absolutely. I used to read in Yiddish about sex. My mother didn't tell me anything. It wasn't the style to talk about it at that time, a mother with a daughter, 'till after the *chuppah*, but I was inquisitive and I used to read. We didn't have a honeymoon. But we done good. How do you like that?

I made my life there, only two Jewish families in Preston, ten in Galt. Everybody used to go on Sundays, the cousins from Guelph, people from Galt, to my father-in-law and mother-in-law, or to Guelph or Kitchener to make picnics. We enjoyed it for the seven years.

Moishe had a second-hand store by the brothers and a junk shop too. Then they bought a little yard and they peddled. My husband was buying from the Galt factories and my brother-in-law used to take care of the shop. We didn't have a car; we used to share the milk cart.

When I came to Canada I had to start to learn English because I didn't come in a Jewish place. I wouldn't say I'm a perfect English speaker, but I get through. I make mistakes, but some people don't notice. My children do. They correct me, but not the English people.

Ten months after I was married I had Pearl, born in the

house. I was very glad. We had a nurse for a little while and then fifteen months after Pearl, Ruth was born. My mother-in-law took care of Pearl and I was in the Galt hospital for two weeks. Then I took care of both children. I used to get up six o'clock in the morning. Nine o'clock I was ready with all my work. When the kids were sleeping I had a sleep and then in the afternoon I took them out.

But after, I was a little smarter. I had the others four years apart, so it wasn't hard. Every child was precious and good. After four years I had Julius, he was born in the house too. I had my sister, *aleveh sholem* (may she rest in peace), from New York, she stayed with her boy for a whole month. That was a beautiful time for me.

We stayed seven years in Preston and then the war was finished.

The fourth child was Bunny (Bernard), born in Toronto, in the General Hospital. Pearl was then six years old. When we moved from Toronto, Bunny was a year old. The fifth child, Rita, was born in Galt. When we moved to Welland, she was thirteen months."

After Preston, the family moved to Toronto, where they bought a business. They lost everything and even needed family help to resume their former life. Esther refused to move back to the Enushevsky farm, as her children would have been too isolated to attend *cheder* (elementary Hebrew school). Instead, they moved back to Galt and Preston for another four years. Throughout this time a number of Esther's relatives were brought over from Europe, on boat passages purchased by contributions from various family members. In 1928, Esther's husband bought another business.

Welland and the later years

"I nearly wanted to throw myself out from the car. I was crying and I said, "I don't want to go. To Brantford I'd like to go, to Guelph, but not to Welland." But Moishe said, "We have to go to Welland and you'll see we'll make it good."

For 15 years I took care of my children, my husband. I didn't know anything about business; I was a working girl. When I came to Welland I had to go into business because my husband had to peddle. Not only the little second-hand store in the front of the house, but the junk business in the back too. Boys used to bring me paper, iron, brass. I had to tend all the things, take care of the house, and the five kids. I had my mother-in-law but she didn't stay very long. It was too bad, she died too early.

When I came, I didn't know anything from brass, copper or lead. There was one plumber, very honest, he

learned me a lot. After my husband peddled a little, we had two telephones. I used to go to the other telephone to listen what he was talking to the people from the factories. In case he went away I should know how to answer. And I learned.

We worked very hard because the time was so bad, times that we didn't have even a dollar to go to the market. But we were never hungry. I used to cook, bake, do all my canning, they never were hungry, I used to make them good meals.

[Eventually] we built up the little second-hand store



Esther-Chave Gutfeld Enushevsky, 1906

into a big furniture store and took in new and second-hand furniture. I did it myself, the junk and the store. Till Josh¹ came from the war and came in to help.

Thirty-five Jewish families were here when we came. The first year, there was no [Jewish] teacher. A rabbi from Port Colborne used to come for a day or two to learn in the house with the kids. I said that's not the way to teach children, I have to have a rabbi in Welland.

My sister from New York had a *landsman*² from Israel who needed a job. He stayed in my house for 23 months. Then he had a friend from Glace Bay who stayed in Welland for four years. He was a very good rabbi too. We used to have plays with the kids. He was a *shoichet*,³ they

were both the *shocketim*,⁴ they used to go from house to house to *shecht*⁵ the chickens. After that there were different rabbis, a year, two years, rabbis all the time. Till we gave up rabbis—no children.⁶

Then everybody had four, five children, a very nice community. We had a nice old synagogue on Fifth Street, the *cheder* near, and the Kultur Club, a hall near the synagogue. We used to have a lot of good lecturers, concerts, we used to enjoy like one family. Some were Communist, some were Zionist, some were different kinds, but we came all together.

A lot of people came from New York to Toronto so we invited them to stop in Welland to give lectures. [The Yiddish poet] Peretz Hirshbein came. Moishe told him that we had all kinds of people, he should know how to talk and he didn't talk politics. [The Yiddish dramatist] Leivick was a very nice man. Every week we used to go to the Club.

My husband was working hard. He used to do everything to make a living for the family. When they finished high school, we couldn't do anything better for the girls, so Pearl went for a nurse. But it didn't work out very good.⁷ Ruthie went for teaching in Hamilton and then she got married.⁸

If Julius didn't get a scholarship, we couldn't send him to the university. I had my sister in Toronto. She would take only five dollars a week for board. When Bunny finished high school, Moishe said, "If we wouldn't send him to school he will always be mad at me." Then it was a little bit better already. When Rita went to university, it was different times. We couldn't do anything to send the first girls, we didn't have money.

[What kind of mother I was?] It's not a question. I loved my children. I tried my best. I gave them all the nice things good to eat, kept them clean, sent them to *cheder*. They went to school and they never were hungry, never dirty.

Maybe now I would have done a little bit better but I felt I done good for my children. I love my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren, they're fine kids. My children have good names, they're always with nice people. I think I raised a nice family. Without too much education. I'm working hard and because I lost my education I said I want all my kids should be educated. And I did it.

When the war was finished Moishe got sick. Bunny had finished his chemistry learning. He was married⁹ and after the war it wasn't so easy to get jobs by the gentiles. They didn't care to take in Jews, but Bunny was so good maybe he would be able to get a job.¹⁰ But Moishe said, "If you feel like it, come in to the business."¹¹

The first time we took Moishe to the hospital I was afraid even to go in a dark room. Lil¹² said, "Mum, sleep in our place" so I went one night, another night, and I made up my mind. I said I'll go home and stay home. Thank God He trained me before my husband died that I should be by myself.

Now I'm alone in the house. Thank God my children, my grandchildren they come sometimes, but lots of times I'm lonesome. The nights are long and you couldn't say I

could be happy about it, but that's the way it's got to be. I read a little bit. I praise all the time the television. Thank God my husband lived to 86. It's a lifetime.

I never was jealous. I have faith in myself. I said if he could change for somebody else, let him do it. He knew he had something good. Even the night before he died I had to put my ear to him to hear what he said: "Esther, tell me something." And I said, "I love you." And always he said he loves me, all the time until the end, and I remember his words.

In life we can't say always is glory, you have to sometimes fight. He had a lot of different circumstances. They say what's a wife if you can't take out your anger? He used to yell. In the young days I didn't have a mother, a sister to talk to, so I used to sometimes just cry for myself. But we were not mad for a long time or not talking to the other. He got better and maybe he felt sorry for that.

I had love enough to keep me warm. He was passionate. I kept him satisfied and I was satisfied and he didn't have to look for anybody else. A lot of times when I sit by [Moishe's] picture, I put on the light and look at my husband, how beautiful he looks and how nice he was. It just feels, sometimes I talk to him like he is alive. I say, "See, Moishe, how nice it was, the way we were living..."

L. S. Weintraub is a researcher, writer, and consultant in social policy, education and health policy, with Equity Resource Associates (ERA II), Toronto. She has long been an active participant in Jewish feminist groups. Laura extends her thanks to her aunts and uncles for their help with this paper, especially to Pearl Davis for patient translation of the Yiddish sections, and to Ruth and Josh Segal for technical and contextual advice.

This interview was conducted in Yiddish and English. The Yiddish sections of the conversation were translated into English by Sheyne Pearl Enusheusky Davis.

¹Josh Segal, who married Ruth.

²Yiddish for countryman.

³Ritual slaughter "to prepare kosher meat and poultry."

⁴The plural form of *schoichet*.

⁵The act of kosher slaughter.

⁶A window and memorial plaques from The Eternal Light Synagogue, useless because of Welland's diminished Jewish population, were recently "resettled" in Israel.

⁷Pearl was soon forced out of nursing by Sister M., an anti-Semite at St. Joseph's Hospital, Hamilton.

⁸Ruth taught at the time when Ontario's ads for teachers specified no Jews or Catholics. She was, however, derailed from her career not by racism but by sexism.

⁹To Edith Yanofsky who also grew up in Welland.

¹⁰Pearl's experience was not unusual. After serving overseas in the Canadian army during World War II, Julius was unable to complete his pediatric internship at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. Their quota system limited the number of Jews allowed, so he finished his studies in

Baltimore. Rita did graduate work in sociology at the University of Toronto. After her marriage to Marvin Weintraub, they were forced out of their first house purchase in the 1950s, in what proved to be a "restricted" area of St. Catharines, legally reserved for Christians and whites.

¹¹Bunny built what started as the family junk business into a large company for steel warehousing and fabrication.

¹²Lillian Janis Ennis, married to Julius.

CAROL ROSE

The Sabbath

this is where
i come alive
this every friday night
at sunset with candles
welcoming me
from weekday cares

this is where
i reconnect
with children lover
friends a world at war
with itself my resting
place of wine & loaves

this double portion
of long ago gathered
around my sofa
with a good book
& loved ones praying
for peace in Jerusalem

this is where
i return always
to the Sabbath
dancing my way back
to ancestral chambers joy
encircling my heart

Carol Rose is a writer, educator, and counsellor. She lives in Winnipeg with her husband and five children. She has been published in numerous journals and anthologies including Dandelion Magazine, Quarry, Prairie Fire, and The Jewish Women's Literary Annual.