

Poet relives personal 'pain and fire' of Holocaust

by Rachel Liebgott

Remembrance Day was about a month ago. Some of us were melancholy. A few sported red ribbons or poppies on coat collars. And some of us simply forgot. Sam Simchovitch will never forget. Every day is Remembrance Day for one of Canada's most prolific Yiddish writers.

The author of several books of poetry, a novel and a biography, Simchovitch writes about the mystery of life and of death, but his special focus is the Holocaust—which 50 years later, he still finds incomprehensible.

"I am the only survivor. I still feel guilty for surviving and not sharing the fate of my family. This is the inspiration for many of my poems."

Born in Otwock, Poland in 1921, Sam (or Simcha) Simchovitch fled from his hometown at age 18 and escaped to Russia. He never saw his family again. The sorrowful events of that night are recounted in *Selected Poems* (1990), his first book in English.

"That frightful night when I left my home, my town forever—inscribed in my memory in script of pain and fire.

September seven thirty-nine, our world begins to crumble; German planes roam the sky,

Author **Simcha Simchovitch**
Luminous Autumn
Selected Poems
Stepchild On the Vistula

spread fear, death and ruin"

Simchovitch spent the war in Russia, where he says he was treated with kindness.

"In general I have good feelings about the Russian people who often shared their bread."

In 1949, he immigrated to Canada with his wife Freda. Sam and Freda were from the same town and had grown up together on the same street. They reunited in Russia and married at the end of the war. Simcha and his wife had to adapt to the Canadian way of life.

In Canada he found solace. He was able to practice his art without fear of arrest or deportation. A year after his arrival in Canada Simchovitch published his first book of poetry, *Thus a Youth Perished*.

Also a teacher and a scholar, Simchovitch graduated from Woodsworth College at the University of Toronto with a B.A. in Humanities and received a masters degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. Simchovitch taught in Hebrew for many years and was also the curator of the Beth Tzedec Synagogue Museum until his retirement in 1988.

Simchovitch has been critically acclaimed by renowned writers Isaac

Bashevis Singer, Elie Wiesel, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, George Woodcock and James Deahl, to name a few. His published works—many of which can be found in the Scott Library at York—are extensive and varied. He has written four books of Yiddish poetry: *Thus a Youth Perished* (1950), *In The Hour of Prayer* (1958), and *Sorrow and Consolation* (1989), for which he won the Harry and Florence Topper award for excellence in Yiddish Literature and the prestigious I.J. Segal award. *Luminous Autumn*, his latest book of Yiddish poems, was written in 1990. His first English book of poetry, *Selected Poems* was well received; it won two Book Committee awards for Yiddish Literature from the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto. Two poems from this book were published in a 1967 edition of *excalibur*.

His most recent work, *Stepchild On the Vistula*, is a novel about a Jewish youth growing up in Otwock, Poland. It addresses issues of assimilation (the Polonization of Jewish youths) and the growing threat of anti-semitism. Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel's introductory letter begins the novel, stating:

"Your book is permeated with Jewish nostalgia, as if you intended to bring Otwock back from the Abyss."

In the letter Wiesel inquires about a sequel as he is curious about the fate of the protagonist. Simchovitch is considering this. In the meantime he

is working on an English translation.

At an early age, Simchovitch was influenced by a public school teacher who introduced Yiddish literature to his Jewish religion class—which at the time was forbidden. Yiddish, then the language of most central and Eastern European Jews, is composed of several languages: Old German, Hebrew and English. Simchovitch regrets it is being used less and less.

Sam Simchovitch is an essential writer. His work is a condemnation of past events but it is also a celebration of life. He has resurrected "a vanished way of life" and in so doing has preserved it for future generations.

More Hits 'n' Bits

continued from page 18

the moss experience of your life. Don't go to Wonderland, that doesn't open til 1994. Two words. **Body Count.** Two more. Go get tickets now. One date. Monday Dec. 21 at the Concert Hall. Twenty bucks; available at TicketMaster. A CPI/Garys production, by the way. Along with Ice-T's dangerous band is D.R.I., Exodus, and Propane. Man, don't it sound frightening just reading the names?

continued on page 20

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