

# ARCHIVES

## A Shtetl Feminist: Sources in the Archives of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal

**Naomi Caruso**  
Jewish Public Library  
Montreal, Quebec

### The Archives

The founding fathers of the Jewish Public Library (est. 1914) realized right from the start the importance of keeping records. They preserved not only the library's own records, but collected for posterity other types of records as well.

Today the Archives of the JPL consist of over 35 collections which fall into the following categories: archives of institutions, of which the Library's is the largest; archives of individuals, and a photograph archives. Here we shall be dealing with one of the individual collections: the Reuven Brainin Collection.

### The Brainin Collection

Reuven Brainin (1862–1939), a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, was one of the more fascinating intellectuals of his day. His career spanned sixty years, with his fame reaching its pinnacle at the beginning of the 1900s and declining in the 1920s into such disrepute that today, this great man is all but forgotten. Although the leading Hebraist of his time, he has not yet been accorded his rightful place in the history of Hebrew literature. Brainin's career fell into three distinct periods: (a) *The European Period*, from 1881–1910, when through his extensive travels, lectures and writings, he introduced a whole generation of young shtetl dwellers to Western civilization; (b) *The Plateau Years*, which began in 1912 when he settled in Montreal, and ended around 1922 in New York, during which time he was a highly respected Jewish community leader, involved in every facet of Jewish life; and (c) *The Decline*, from the mid-1920s to his death in 1939, when his life was surrounded by controversy due to his involvement with the Jewish colonization movement in the Soviet Union.

But the subject of this paper is not Brainin the man, but Brainin the collector, the archives-maker.

Brainin lived in Montreal from 1912 to 1916. During those years, in addition to being the editor of the Yiddish daily, *Der Kanader*

*Adler*, he was also intensely involved in the literary and communal life of the local Jewish population. A lasting achievement was his founding of the Jewish Public Library in 1914.

In 1916, when Brainin moved with his wife and son Joseph to New York, three of his children remained in Montreal. Thanks to them, Brainin maintained close ties with the city, ties that continued beyond his death in 1939. Complying with his wishes, his sons Joseph and Moses gave his papers to the Jewish Public Library in 1940. Today the Brainin Collection is the jewel of the Library's Archives. It contains 6.7 meters of linear material divided into five main groups:

1. Literary and editorial activities.
2. Biography and criticism.
3. Correspondence.
4. Special collections.
5. Papers of the Reuven Brainin Committee on Archives at the JPL.

### Chava Shapiro

It was while compiling an index to the Hebrew and Yiddish correspondence of the Brainin Collection<sup>1</sup> that I came across a batch of 180 handwritten letters in Hebrew by a woman named Chava Shapiro. Other sources on the life of this fairly well-known writer are few. Genazim, the Bio-Bibliographical Institute in Tel Aviv, has her diary in Hebrew, begun in Warsaw 1900 and ended ca. 1941, probably shortly before her deportation to Terezin, where she died in 1943. There are also published accounts of Shapiro's life in *Kovetz Genazim #2* and in *Hadoar #3* (17 Marcheshvan, 1952).

Chava Shapiro was born in December, 1878 in Slawuta, the Ukraine, and died in February, 1943 in the Czechoslovakian concentration camp of Terezin. It is also known that she published a book of sketches in 1908, under the pseudonym Em Kolchai (The Mother of All Things Alive), and that she wrote numerous articles over a period of 35 years for Hebrew journals such as *Hashiloach*, *Hatoren* and *Haolam*.

In many respects, Chava Shapiro was unusual for her time. Although born to Orthodox parents in a Ukrainian shtetl, she was acknowledged as brilliant from an early age and allowed to study foreign languages as well as read secular works of literature. Once married off and moved to Warsaw, she became a member of I.L. Peretz's literary salon, and David Frischman published her first literary efforts in his weekly *Hador*. She left her husband and abandoned her only child because she wanted to further her education.

From an early age, Chava Shapiro showed an unquenchable thirst for the world beyond the Russian Pale. She found the constraints of her social and religious life stifling, and she eventually broke every rule in the book in order to live her life according to her own rules.

From 1904 to 1910, Chava attended university, obtaining her doctorate in philosophy in 1910, at the age of 32. For the next four years, as a woman of independent means, she traveled extensively, touring the Holy Land, for example, in 1911 with David Frischman and her parents. She wrote many articles on such topics as "Russian Literature After the Revolution," "Hasidism and Martin Buber," and "Aphorisms," always signing herself *Dr. Chava Shapiro*.

She spent the war years, 1914–1919, traveling between Slawuta and Kiev, living through war, revolution and pogroms. In 1919, a wealthy forester who had been a friend of her father's came to her rescue and helped her and her son escape to Czechoslovakia.

### The Shapiro-Brainin Letters

The letters in the Archives of the Jewish Public Library were written to Reuven Brainin, Chava's lover, over a period of 29 years, from 1899–1928. The first group of letters, dated 1899–1914, tell of her childhood in Slawuta, her marriage and subsequent divorce, and the years she spent studying. They reveal a vibrant world filled with luxury and the good life. Chava was the only



**Reuven Brainin**



**Chava Shapiro**

surviving daughter of a well-to-do paper manufacturer. Once a year, she and her mother traveled abroad, visiting resorts and meeting friends and relations. On one of these trips, Chava met Brainin. She married and later divorced a banker's son by the name of Rosenboim in Warsaw.

The general tone of the letters is upbeat and happy. Even though Chava suffered deeply over the separation from her son, the divorce itself was a relief. She felt liberated and elated at the prospect of not being controlled any longer by either parents or husband. Her joy in her studies and her new way of life compensated for the heartache and the upheaval she had gone through.

The second group of letters, dated 1914–1920, is quite different, both in tone and in content. As can be expected, the war and the Russian Revolution caused Chava and her family many hardships and sufferings. But they were not solely responsible for Chava's mounting depression. She gradually came to realize that a doctorate was no guarantee for personal fulfillment. Her rootless existence was beginning to wear her down.

Chava's great passion for Brainin is the theme dominating both groups of letters. From the moment she first met Brainin at the age of 21 (he was 16 years older), she fell under his spell. For 15 years Brainin was her lover, soul-mate, father, teacher, and mentor. This love was never one-sided. Brainin, in spite of his wife, children, and very complicated life, found time to answer her letters and to meet her once in a while. According to Chava's calculations, they spent a total of two months together in the 15 years before Brainin left for America in 1912. Every time the bond between them weakened and threatened to break, it was Brainin who could not bear to let her go.

After 1915, Brainin stopped writing to Chava, and yet he kept on receiving her letters. He never destroyed any of them, in spite of her constant reminders to do so. Chava continued to write to Brainin till 1920. When she could not elicit a reply, she wrote to *Hatoren*, of which Brainin was the editor. The last letter to *Hatoren* is dated Prague, December 1928.

### Conclusions

The letters provide a wealth of information on many subjects for prospective researchers: the condition of women in 19th-century Poland; the mores of Jewish intellectual circles in Vienna, Berlin and Warsaw at the turn of the century; or family relationships among the first generation of emancipated Jews. But in particular, the letters throw light on Brainin's private life and provide an essential source for any future biography of the man.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>The index to Reuven Brainin's Yiddish and Hebrew correspondence is available for purchase from the Jewish Public Library, 5151 Cote Ste. Catherine Rd., Montreal, Quebec H3W 1M6, Canada.

*Naomi Caruso is the Director of Library Services at the Jewish Public Library and the compiler of an index to Reuven Brainin's Yiddish and Hebrew correspondence.*