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**“Smoke Rising Day and Night”:  
Exploring Chava Rosenfarb’s Implicit Mysticism in  
“Edgia’s Revenge”**

## Abstract

*The central preoccupation of Chava Rosenfarb's "Edgia's Revenge" is an escape from a perceived outward Jewishness. That Rosenfarb's protagonist is never afforded this vital flight is one of the story's key dramas that plays out in the form of a power dynamic between two Holocaust survivors, Rella and Edgia. On the surface, this failure can be attributed to Rella's anxiety and guilt about her former role as a kapo in a concentration camp. This article argues, however, that Rella's failure to rid herself of her Jewishness and her past is exemplified through the use of mountains as sacred zones in "Edgia's Revenge."*

## Résumé

*La préoccupation centrale de « Edgia's Revenge » de Chava Rosenfarb est d'échapper à une judéité perçue comme extérieure. Le fait que le protagoniste de Rosenfarb ne puisse jamais s'offrir ce vol vital est l'un des principaux drames de l'histoire qui se joue sous la forme d'une dynamique de pouvoir entre deux survivants de l'Holocauste, Rella et Edgia. À première vue, cet échec peut être attribué à l'anxiété et à la culpabilité de Rella concernant son ancien rôle de kapo dans un camp de concentration. Cet article soutient cependant que l'échec de Rella à se débarrasser de sa judéité et de son passé est illustré par l'utilisation des montagnes comme zones sacrées dans « Edgia's Revenge ».*

A story about a staunch atheist, written by a staunch atheist, seems hardly the place to mythologize a modern Canadian city in a manner befitting the biblical, mystical, or hagiographical Jewish writing of the past. Yet, according to Goldie Morgentaler, “vestiges of Jewish tradition and belief enter the work of even the most secularised Jewish poet, if not through the front door then through the back, transmuted sometimes into other themes, but still remaining manifestations of belief.”<sup>1</sup> It is notable, then, that Morgentaler writes this in reference to the work of Chava Rosenfarb, whose short story “Edgia's Revenge”—a somersaulting tale of role reversal, escape, liminality, ascension, and descension—is the subject of this article.

Morgentaler states further that Rosenfarb worked under the “assumption that literature and religion are close cousins, and more broadly, that literary culture itself is a form of religion.”<sup>2</sup> This is evident in some of the language Rosenfarb uses, especially in her poetry, but so, too, in her stories. Language and surface-level biblical references, however, are only the “front door” of Morgentaler's analogy; in fact, there is much more to discover by looking through the back door at those transmuted themes of which she speaks. One of those themes, the symbolic power of mountains in Rosenfarb's Montreal, is my central focus here.

The chief preoccupation of “Edgia’s Revenge” is an escape from an outward Jewishness, which is perceived religiously, culturally, historically, geographically, and linguistically. That Rosenfarb’s protagonist is never afforded this vital flight is one of the story’s key dramas that plays out in the form of a power struggle between two Holocaust survivors, Rella and Edgia. On the surface, this failure to escape can be attributed to Rella’s anxiety and guilt about her former role as a *kapo* in a concentration camp. There are, however, more implicit markers of her failure to escape. These markers appear geographically as Rella attempts to shed her guilt-ridden identity by escaping to places that she believes to be at a remove from her Jewish roots and her past, such as an ashram in the Laurentian Mountains, or Mount Royal’s summit with Edgia and her husband Lolek’s apartment at its foot. In reality, these mountains were known to hold cultural and spiritual significance for Jewish authors in Montreal. Thus, Rella fails to escape in part because she unwittingly seeks out spaces that are already marked with power and significance in the cultural imaginary of Jewish Montreal. This exploration of “Edgia’s Revenge” will show that Rella’s failure to rid herself of her Jewishness and her past is exemplified through Rosenfarb’s use of mountains as sacred zones.

### **"Edgia’s Revenge"**

Rosenfarb’s story revolves around the somersaulting power dynamic between Rella and Edgia. Rella lives with the guilt and shame of having been a *kapo*—a prisoner assigned to oversee and supervise other prisoners—at Auschwitz. Though she was not as cruel as many other *kapos*, her only memorable act of mercy and decency during her time in the camp was to save Edgia from certain death. After wandering for a period following the war carrying enough sleeping pills with which to end her life if she so desired, Rella settles in Montreal. One day, after a decade of adjusting to her new life, Rella encounters Edgia. A dilemma arises as Rella realizes that Edgia’s existence is a double-edged sword: she is the only person who can identify Rella as a former *kapo*, while also serving as Rella’s only connection to her one moment of humanity from that time, since it was Rella who saved Edgia’s life in the camp. The two women establish a relationship and share a social circle with other Montreal Holocaust survivors.

Rella is well-loved in the group; she is cultured, strong, intelligent, fashionable. The same cannot be said for Edgia. Rosenfarb writes of Edgia: “there was something in her manner which cancelled her out. She belonged to that type of woman who blends into her surroundings like an object to which the eye grows quickly accustomed and stops noticing. She was there and yet not there.”<sup>3</sup> Edgia is so insignificant that she spends all her time totally forgotten in the kitchen during the group’s gatherings, which in turn permits Rella to start a public romantic affair with Edgia’s husband, Lolek.

When Lolek dies suddenly, Rella and her group lose touch with Edgia, though Rella thinks of her constantly. When Rella next meets Edgia, the latter is hardly recognizable; she has become a successful career woman, cultured and fashionable—in fact, she looks just like Rella. Edgia then reenters the group and, to Rella's dismay, usurps Rella's role as the beautiful, cultured member of the group. Nonetheless, the two women form a strong bond that carries on until Edgia, in her new role as Rella, starts an affair with Pavel, a married man in the group. Pavel divorces his wife to marry Edgia. Edgia then takes on the role of her deceased husband, Lolek, while her new husband, Pavel, takes on Edgia's former subservient role. As time wears on and Pavel's health becomes a concern, Edgia ends her "sick . . . poisonous . . . impossible friendship"<sup>4</sup> with Rella once and for all, leaving Rella alone in the world without her one connection to her own humanity. Rella ends the first-person narrative by proclaiming that she cannot go on without Edgia in her life, and so intends to overdose on the sleeping pills that she has kept on her person since she left the camps.

### **Creating a Zone of Alterity in "Edgia's Revenge"**

The major themes that appear throughout the story are escape, reversal, liminality, and verticality. Though it is presented in a matter-of-fact way—nothing metaphysical occurs throughout the narrative—the author approaches these themes with language that conjures up a zone of alterity that is otherworldly in its imagery. Discussing Rosenfarb's poetry, Morgentaler tells us that the author "uses biblical motifs in a variety of ways. Sometimes she evokes a spiritual atmosphere rather than an explicitly religious or biblical motif."<sup>5</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in "Edgia's Revenge."

Through motifs of wandering, sleeplessness, and haunting memory, Rosenfarb creates the story's distinctive atmosphere of liminality, betweenness, and marginality. Of Rella's period of wandering after the war, the author writes: "I then drifted from one end to the other of that devastated German countryside, trying to escape from myself and from others."<sup>6</sup> Rella then joins a group of other former inmates "who were wandering from one camp to another in search of relatives,"<sup>7</sup> and finds herself "sitting on the edge of an unploughed field" with her "group of wanderers."<sup>8</sup> This image of souls wandering through the countryside, in search of remnants of their former humanity, is reminiscent of the best-known wandering soul of Jewish folklore, the *dybbuk*. In the same way that dybbuks were living souls of the dead, cursed to wander between worlds because of their sins, so, too, does Rella wander between life and death, her trusty sleeping pills available at any moment.

In her presentation of the daily lives of camp inmates, Rosenfarb continues to develop this zone of alterity through vivid imagery related to the senses, and again through the motif of lost souls wandering back and forth:

A sandy, smoky phantasmagoria whirled ceaselessly before my eyes: whistles, shouts, the barking of dogs, barracks, chimneys—and faces. Faces like stones, stones like faces revolved before my eyes like the dislodged cobbles of a disintegrating pavement. From pre-dawn twilight until late into the evening the five hundred women of my barrack loaded stones onto lorries and transported them from one place to another.<sup>9</sup>

In this short passage, Rosenfarb provides a sensorial experience of this zone: sight (the phantasmagoria whirling before Rella's eyes); sound (dogs barking); smell and taste (smoke and chimneys); and touch (faces like stone).

Myriad references to sleeplessness and waking nightmares reinforce this atmosphere of otherness. The doctor, who first offers her the sleeping pills she holds sacred, tells Rella, "After all that you've lived through, you must be having nightmares even in the daytime when you are wide awake."<sup>10</sup> Later in the story, Rella reveals, "it was at this time that I really began to suffer from insomnia. During the course of the day I wandered about as if I were drunk. I found myself inhabiting two worlds at the same time, tormented by all kinds of visions and hallucinations."<sup>11</sup> Later still, she confesses that "terrifying hallucinations tormented me throughout the day . . . My sleepless nights were steeped in horror."<sup>12</sup>

The story's theme of verticality coheres with the persistent motif of mountains. Many important episodes take place on mountains, but these are not the only examples of verticality in the narrative. Early on, Rosenfarb makes a point of incorporating images of ascension and descent. When, for example, relating the loss of Rella's family at Auschwitz, she writes, "in the camps I saw my entire family float heavenward with the smoke from the crematorium chimneys."<sup>13</sup>

Rosenfarb also connects verticality to the passage of time (or lack thereof), another notable aspect of the story. Rella describes her sexual affair with Albert, a German criminal and fellow *kapo* in the camp:

The newly born demon within me gave me a sense of freedom in the midst of slavery, a sense that one day of life was an eternity, that the concentration camp was the universe, and that there were no roads leading away from this point. Of course, we spoke and dreamed of real freedom, but no one really believed in it. The smoke rising day and night from the chimneys confirmed the finality of existence.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the smoke that rises from the chimneys acts as a continual reminder of the world that Rella inhabits, one in which "the concentration camp was the universe." The insistent vertical presence in the opening portion of the story, which is set in the

camps, is soon transferred to Montreal, where the story unfolds around the constant presence of Mount Royal, a subject to which I will return shortly. For Rella, the concentration camp remains her universe for the rest of the story.

Rosenfarb shows a keen preoccupation with the outdoor staircases that are a hallmark of Montreal architecture. Rella makes sure to describe the staircase when describing Edgia and Lolek's upper-floor apartment, and it is on another such staircase that Lolek eventually plunges to his death. Not only is Rella concerned with the verticality of the world around her—chimneys, staircases, mountains—but she is concerned with her own verticality, as well. Regarding her time at the camp, she says, "in my lost former life—as close as yesterday and yet as distant as a dream—I had been vain of my statuesque figure and my healthy, well-developed body. Now my height became my greatest curse. It was not possible to hide or melt into the crowd."<sup>15</sup> Consistent with this theme, Rosenfarb describes her protagonist as literally head and shoulders above her peers.

### **Rella's Escape**

While the aforementioned motifs create the atmosphere of the world through which Rella moves, it is escape that serves as the central theme of "Edgia's Revenge." In reality, the Jewishness from which Rella attempts to escape is the stigmatized projection of her Nazi oppressors, rather than the positive culture which she hints at in limited musings about her childhood summers in the Carpathian Mountains. Nonetheless, escape—from the camps, from guilt and shame, and, most of all, from Jewishness—is the obsessive preoccupation not only of Rella, but of her entire social circle.

In the "first ten years" of her life in Montreal, Rella attempts to eradicate all vestiges of her European Jewish identity by mastering English, but falls short: "my teacher good-naturedly teased me with the assurance that I would never lose the accent, so I had better make peace with it. But for me this was not a laughing matter. The accent prevented me from becoming a new person."<sup>16</sup>

The most notable way in which the members of Rella's group attempt to escape their Jewishness is through cultural immersion in their adopted home. Rosenfarb makes this clear in a lengthy passage that describes the group's activity:

We were immersed up to our ears in modern culture and its achievements. Most of us had lost the last vestiges of religious belief in the camps, and since we required some form of faith to hold on to after the liberation, we seized on the idea of modern culture and allowed that to take the place of religion in our lives. This was the luminous bridge which we threw across the dark abyss of barbarous savagery that had once swallowed us. For this reason, there were no

greedier, more avid readers of the most-recently published books than we were. We threw ourselves at every best-seller as soon as it appeared on the best-seller lists. We ran to all the modern and postmodern experimental performances. We enthused over pop art and op art. We even had a few marijuana smoking sessions when that became fashionable. We practiced Hatha Yoga and regularly visited a guru in his ashram in the Laurentians.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than underlining the desire to rid themselves of their Jewishness, Rosenfarb instead emphasizes the cultural desires of her characters. The frantic pace of this attempt at eradicating all semblance of their Jewishness seems only to be rivalled in this story by the ever-present shadow of the crematoria's chimneys. She continues:

In our zeal we tried to effect a spiritual escape not only from the outmoded Jewish *shtetl* but also from the Jewish mentality that had once inhabited the East European metropolis. If culture symbolized a bridge, it had to be a bridge that led away from the past, no matter how sweet the memories that still bound us to our childhood and youth. We were frightened of the dampening effects that such memories could have on our present positive attitude towards life. We wanted no part of the past.<sup>18</sup>

In Rosenfarb's Canadian stories, Morgentaler explains, "Canada becomes . . . the land of the postscript, the country in which the survivors of the Holocaust play out the tragedy's last act."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the survivors in this story attempt to mentally and spiritually complete the work that their Nazi oppressors had begun back in Europe. By immersing themselves in modern Western or pseudo-Eastern culture (for instance, the guru and his ashram in the Laurentians who is mentioned once more a few pages later), Rella believes they can finally move on from their former lives. There are three central locations to which Rella consistently escapes to take part in such activities: Edgia and Lolek's apartment on Esplanade Avenue at the foot of Mount Royal; the summit of Mount Royal itself; and the Laurentian Mountains just north of Montreal, first to the ashram and later on weekend trips with Edgia and her second husband, Pavel.

## Rosenfarb and Religion

As we have seen, Rosenfarb explores themes of liminality and verticality by using religious and otherworldly language and imagery to expertly craft a numinous atmosphere—what I have called a zone of alterity—in "Edgia's Revenge." This atmosphere is both spiritual and religious, the result of repeated references to "the mark of Cain"—an allusion to the original biblical wanderer—used to illustrate the way the term *kapo* has been stamped on Rella's soul.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere we read, "in the camps, the word *kapo* elicited the kind of awe reserved in ancient times for the priests and priestesses who guarded the sacred flame."<sup>21</sup>

As previously noted, however, Rosenfarb's relation to religion was complex. Morgentaler comments that "Rosenfarb was a lifelong atheist . . . But she was a religious atheist, by which I mean that she was drawn not to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but to the god of Art, Culture and Literature. A part of her had an almost mystical belief in the power of art to heal and uplift."<sup>22</sup> Beyond her belief that religion and literature were "close cousins" and that literature and art have the power to heal, Rosenfarb uses religious themes and motifs, sometimes explicitly and sometimes symbolically. Morgentaler considers this part of a time-honoured "typological tradition in Jewish literature of appropriating biblical stories and themes in order to speak about current events or personal happenings."<sup>23</sup>

Though most prominent in her verse, an interest in biblical style, structure, and themes is also evident in "Edgia's Revenge" via Rosenfarb's use of geography. Through her projection of a Jewish landscape onto their adopted city, Rosenfarb places her characters in a biblical Montreal, complete with holy mountains, sacred symbols, and numinous spaces.

### **Mountains in Montreal's Jewish Fiction**

The motif of mountains as sacred spaces has a long and storied history in the Jewish cultural imaginary. In the Hebrew Bible, holy mountains, such as Mounts Sinai, Carmel, and Moriah, abound. Much later, the hagiography of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, documents his fondness for mountains and his sense of their fundamental enchantment and otherness. During his seven years of wandering and seclusion before revealing himself as a *tzaddik*, the Baal Shem Tov would bring brandy to his wife each evening before retiring "into seclusion in a house-like crevice that was cut into the mountains."<sup>24</sup> In some Hasidic tales, he was known to have had the ability to move mountains as he wandered deep in thought. In one such story, robbers watch as the Baal Shem Tov wanders close to the edge of a cliff: "When he came near the edge, the other mountain moved towards him and the ground became level. He continued to walk, and the two mountains divide behind him to where they had been previously. On his return, when he came to the edge, one mountain moved toward the other and it became flat. And so it happened several times during his walk back and forth."<sup>25</sup> These stories of the Baal Shem Tov take place in the Carpathian Mountains, the same range that Rosenfarb mentions several times in her Canadian short stories, including "Edgia's Revenge."

Morgentaler remarks that "drawing inspiration from Scripture and retelling biblical stories in order to cast light on personal or topical issues is a common occurrence in Jewish literature and can be seen even in the works of writers as linguistically and geographically diverse as the Yiddish-language bard Itsik Manger, who transmuted the Book of Esther into contemporary terms, and the modern-day Canadian

poet/songwriter Leonard Cohen—the latter, like Rosenfarb, a long-time inhabitant of Montreal.”<sup>26</sup> I.L. Peretz, another Yiddish writer, compares two famous rabbis—one Hasidic and one Mitnagdic—to two great mountains in his short story “Between Two Mountains,” a tale of dreams, visions, journeys, and alterity.

Rosenfarb is not the only Montreal author to conceptualize Mount Royal and the Laurentian Mountains as sacred spaces. A.M. Klein, invoking an academic who occupies the protagonist’s mind in “A Myriad-Minded Man,” writes:

Alone, sometimes, in the solitude of my office . . . or again, when upon my brief vacation, I find myself alone upon a peak in the Laurentians, with nothing to think about except space, time, man, God and the next meal, the curious and absurd figure of Isaiah Ellenbogen will rise before me, to puzzle and bewilder me with the mysticism which emanated from him and from the thought of him.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, in his novel *The Favourite Game*, Cohen attributes great power to Mount Royal and the Laurentians as constant reminders of his Jewish heritage and the fundamental alterity of his very Jewishness. In one such moment, Cohen writes:

The rain hazed the electric lights isolated here and there. An indescribable feeling of shame overwhelmed him. His father was involved in the hills, moving like a wind among the millions of wet leaves.

Then an idea crushed him—he had ancestors! His ancestors reached back and back, like daisies connected in a necklace. He completed circle after circle in the mud.

He stumbled and collapsed, tasting the ground . . . Something very important was going to happen in this arena.<sup>28</sup>

These Montreal Jewish authors explore the strange power of their characters’ Jewishness by placing them on or near mountains—either at their summit or at their feet. Rosenfarb, too, takes part in this tradition to illustrate Rella’s desperate efforts to escape her own Jewishness.

### **Mountains in Rosenfarb’s Canadian Stories**

In her analysis of “Edgia’s Revenge,” Morgentaler discusses Rosenfarb’s use of Mount Royal, but homes in on the cross that sits atop the mountain. She writes that it “alludes obliquely to the place of the Jews in Western history as well as to their victimization, which culminated in the Holocaust . . . It is also a statement of incompleteness, of a lack of closure. On this level, it seems to allude, not merely to human sacrifice, but to the never-ending need for resolution.”<sup>29</sup> While this is undoubtedly true in “Edgia’s Revenge,” where the cross is a prominent image, Mount Royal itself acquires

symbolic power throughout Rosenfarb's Canadian stories.

It might be useful here to look at what the author actually thought about the three central locations that I mentioned earlier: Mount Royal's summit, Esplanade Avenue at its foot, and the Laurentian Mountains north of Montreal. Rebecca Margolis maps Rosenfarb's Montreal through the cultural institutions and gatherings that most excited her and kept her in touch with her Jewish (and specifically Yiddish) identity. As Margolis describes, Rosenfarb "formed part of an active and dedicated group of creators and supporters of Yiddish literature for whom the culture represented a forward-looking expression of Jewish identity."<sup>30</sup> Notably, the three places Rosenfarb identifies as most important to her are the three central locations in "Edgia's Revenge." She writes, "The [Jewish Public] Library was on Esplanade [Avenue], across from the Mountain. But we met on the Mountain, the writers went there and discussed all kinds of literary topics . . . At that time, the Library was a second home to us. It was an atmosphere that I thrived in."<sup>31</sup> When speaking of famous international Jewish authors, like the Singer brothers who visited Montreal and the Jewish Public Library, Rosenfarb writes, "they joined us for promenades on the Mountain, and came along on excursions to the Yiddish literary chalet in Ste-Agathe in the Laurentians."<sup>32</sup> All three of Rella's loci of escape are marked by Rosenfarb as loci of Jewish advancement and enrichment.

In her other Canadian stories, Rosenfarb marks not only the Laurentians but a variety of other mountains and ranges as sacred zones. In fact, this motif becomes something of a literary obsession of hers, playing a central role in several stories. In "Cottage in the Laurentians," we read:

In their memories, the pre-war childhood vacations which they had taken in the sub-Carpathian regions of Poland stood out like the images of a paradise lost. The Laurentian Mountains reminded them of those enchanted spots, and so, even at a time when they could scarcely afford it, when their children were still small, Victor and Sonia had rented a cottage in the Laurentians when the summer heat made Montreal unbearable.<sup>33</sup>

In her story "Last Love," about an elderly Jewish woman named Amalia whose last wish is to make love to a young Frenchman, Rosenfarb uses another Canadian mountain range as the setting of a disturbing climax. Morgentaler notes that "in possessing Amalia, the young Frenchman has become possessed by her . . . He leaves his fiancée in France, and goes adventuring in Canada, driving across the country to the Canadian Rockies. There he plunges his car off a cliff, seeing in the towering mountains the beckoning form of the old lady to whom he had once made love."<sup>34</sup> In both of these stories, mountains are heavily imbued with Jewishness, one in a positive manner and the other in a more negative or ambivalent way.

A third story, “François,” about an imaginary lover and a loveless marriage, further exemplifies the hypnotic power that mountains seem to hold for Rosenfarb. Morgentaler identifies the symbolic use of the Canadian winter in much of Rosenfarb’s work.<sup>35</sup> Still, it is interesting to note that on three occasions in “François,” when the author makes mention of the winter weather, she refers to “mountains of snow.”<sup>36</sup> When Leah’s imaginary lover first appears to her in her car and puts his hand on hers, she asks where the road he is taking leads. He responds, “it leads to the Laurentians. I own a cabin on Mont Tremblant, the trembling mountain, the mountain for those with tremors in their souls.”<sup>37</sup> Once again, the Laurentian Mountains are mythologized as a sacred zone in Rosenfarb’s writing.

The climax of “François” takes place in the Andes mountains. Having ventured through the Amazon, Leah and her husband Leon are so taken with the mountains that they decide to spend an extra night there so they can watch the sun rise. Of the moment that they first gaze upon the summit on which Machu Picchu sits, we read, “as soon as they reached the summit, they came face to face with a reality that surpassed even the loftiest flights of imagination. The gigantic top of the mountain seemed to have been lopped off to leave a plateau, flat like a plate under the canopy of the sky. It looked like God’s open palm cradling the last vestiges of a vanished civilization.”<sup>38</sup>

The following morning, watching the sunrise together, Leah finally finds clarity and realizes that her marriage to Leon is over. She tells him so by using the formation of the mountains as an illustration: “Do you see those two mountain peaks over there, straight across from us, Leon? They are so close to one another, and yet they never reach each other.”<sup>39</sup> Walking away from him, “She noticed a narrow high rock protruding from the ground in the distance. It was the tallest rock in the vicinity and towered over its surroundings. People wandered all around it . . . There was room for only one person at a time to stand on its summit at the edge of the precipice. Leah put herself in line.”<sup>40</sup> It is when Leah makes her way to the highest precipice on the sacred mountain that she dissolves her need for her imaginary lover, flinging him off the cliff, an action that underscores the theme of verticality.

### **Mountains in “Edgia’s Revenge”**

I have established that Rosenfarb uses the motif of mountains as sacred zones throughout her work; that three of the most prominent spaces that Rosenfarb associated with Jewish culture in her work were Esplanade Avenue (the location of the Jewish Public Library), the summit of Mount Royal, and the Laurentian Mountains; and that other Jewish authors in Montreal make a point of incorporating Mount Royal and the Laurentians into the Jewish tradition of conceptualizing mountains as sacred or significant zones. I turn now to the significance of mountains in “Edgia’s Revenge.” Lolek and Edgia’s apartment is one locus of escape for Rella:

A Montreal-style winding wooden staircase led directly from the street to the second-floor apartment where Lolek and Edgia lived and where our group's get-togethers so often took place. The apartment was long and dark. Only the living room possessed a large, wide window with a panoramic view, a view which gave out on a large sports field in the foreground and Mount Royal topped by its cross behind.<sup>41</sup>

On the night of her birthday, Lolek and Rella have plans to go out. Rella visits the apartment that Lolek shares with Edgia. When Lolek is late getting home to take her out, Rella finds herself alone with Edgia. Though Rella says earlier in the story that "as a rule, we talked about insignificant daily matters and never touched on our shared experiences, not even remotely,"<sup>42</sup> here, overlooking Mount Royal and its cross, Edgia comments that Rella was present "at my birth, or rather rebirths,"<sup>43</sup> an explicit reference to their shared time in the camps. When Lolek finally arrives home, Rella, in line with her craving for escape, desires to go to a nightclub for her birthday. Lolek, however, is steeped in "existential sorrow,"<sup>44</sup> so instead they drive up to the summit of Mount Royal and go for a walk. Here, Rella "kissed Lolek by the light of the lamps on the mountain . . . We were standing under the illuminated cross on the mountaintop."<sup>45</sup> This night, Rella consummates her total dominion over Edgia by convincing Lolek, for the first time, to spend the night at her apartment.

The following winter, after Lolek dies by falling down an icy staircase, Rella loses contact with Edgia for a period. When they reconnect, as noted earlier, Edgia usurps Rella's role in the group. The two women start to bond; they agree to meet every Saturday and Sunday morning at the summit of Mount Royal under the cross. And despite Rella's earlier claim that they only spoke about insignificant daily matters, these moments on the mountain do away with that rule as she and Edgia "sometimes also discuss . . . more serious matters of the heart,"<sup>46</sup> although they still avoid talking about the camps.

Earlier in the story, continuing the theme of escape, Rella mentions that she and her friends had moved to other parts of the city. Lolek and Edgia, however, were "still stuck on Esplanade in the district of the Mountain, as we Jews called the neighbourhood near Mount Royal. This was the part of town where we greenhorns had settled just after our arrival in Canada."<sup>47</sup> When Edgia finally moves out of this Jewish district it is to the other side of the Mountain, where the cross is still visible. At this new location roles shift again. Edgia becomes dominating and demeaning like her late husband Lolek, while her new husband, Pavel, takes on her old subservient role, complete with the nickname Loverboy, the name by which Edgia calls her much-abused cat.

After seeking escape in the ashram, weekend getaways to the Laurentians continue and Edgia, who “proved the most energetic mountain climber among us,” chooses a mountain to jog on every morning.<sup>48</sup> Here, we see a reversal of the aforementioned passage from “Cottage in the Laurentians.” In that story, the couple finds the Laurentians as enchanted as the Carpathian Mountains which inhabit their memory. In “Edgia’s Revenge,” however, Rella admits the exact opposite: “when it came to the beauty of the Canadian landscape I might as well have been blind. I looked but I did not see. It was better for me that way. The landscape reminded me too strongly of the district that lies at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, where I had used to spend summer vacations in my childhood.”<sup>49</sup> Here again, at the top of a mountain, Edgia breaks their rule of never discussing the camps when she points to a cluster of wildflowers and says, “in Auschwitz no flowers grew, remember Rella? But when I was there, in order to keep up my courage, I would conjure up just such clusters of flowers in my imagination, and I would decorate the entire globe with them.”<sup>50</sup> It is no surprise that the climactic scene of the story, in which Pavel collapses, occurs while he is climbing a mountain with Rella and Edgia. Afterwards, at the hospital, Edgia decides that her relationship to Rella is toxic and decides to cut ties with her once and for all.

### **Mountains of Escape**

Throughout “Edgia’s Revenge,” mountains—both Mount Royal and the Laurentians—serve as Rella’s favourite places of escape from what she perceives as her fundamental Jewishness. But it becomes obvious throughout the story that these attempted escapes from her identity only lead Rella deeper into the heart of her own Jewishness. Her escape to the apartment on Esplanade Avenue happens to be at the heart of the Jewish immigrant neighbourhood, while the inhabitant of the apartment, Edgia, is the most prominent reminder of her former life. She escapes to the Laurentians for yoga retreats and hiking, but she fails to grasp their beauty, given that they represent a constant visual reminder of her childhood summer vacations in the Carpathian Mountains. Furthermore, her escapes to Mount Royal and the Laurentians with Edgia following Lolek’s death also end up betraying her desired outcome: these mountains serve as rare zones of honesty and openness between the Edgia and Rella, a place where they (and especially Edgia) feel comfortable transgressing their mutual taboo concerning discussion of the camps. Rather than escaping from her past in these moments, Rella meets it face-to-face.

This notion—of mountains as sacred zones of clarity and spiritual upheaval—is consistent with Rosenfarb’s other Canadian stories, which show a preoccupation with mountains as literary devices and symbolic drivers of the otherworldly atmosphere that she wishes to convey. Moreover, important narrative disruptions, both positive and negative, often take place on or in the shadow of a mountain’s peak. We also

know that in her non-fiction writing about her time in Montreal, Rosenfarb identifies Esplanade Avenue, Mount Royal's summit, and the Laurentian Mountains as three places where she felt most connected to her Jewishness.

Setting the stage for understanding mountains as zones of alterity, Rosenfarb starts "Edgia's Revenge" with an extended description of Rella's time before and after the camps. She does this through a variety of biblical and religious allusions, and through the development of what Morgentaler calls a "spiritual atmosphere." This atmosphere is evoked by recreating sensorial memories of the madness of the camps, thereby incorporating into the story a strain of dreamlike liminality. Rella makes repeated references to verticality—to the verticality of the smoke coming from the crematoria and to her own verticality as someone who stands out from the crowd because she is so tall—a theme that shapes the story. The opening of "Edgia's Revenge" serves as a declaration to readers that the rest of the narrative, despite describing a seemingly realistic set of social interactions between a group of survivors in a modern setting, is set in the same war zone into which we are parachuted at the beginning: that same spiritual atmosphere, that same numinous domain of permanent dreariness and dread that defies escape. Even across the ocean in Montreal, trauma is ever-present.

The mountains that follow the characters throughout the story become reminders of the impossibility of escape. Rella can neither leave her past behind, nor can she shake off her identity as a Jew, regardless of how many yoga retreats, English courses, films, or book readings she attends. The mountains, always looming in the background, are liminal spaces in which the façade of non-Jewish acculturation is cancelled out. In her several attempts to forget her identity as a Jew and a *kapo*, Rella runs around in circles, ending up right where she began upon release from the camps: with a death wish and a pocket full of sleeping pills.

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