

Rosen, Ilana. *Soul of Saul: The Life, Narrative, and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*. Burlington: University of Vermont, 2011. Pp. 158. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

---

**Rosen, Ilana. *Soul of Saul: The Life, Narrative, and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*. Burlington: University of Vermont, 2011. Pp. 158.**

Reviewed by Michal Held, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Ilana Rosen has previously published influential works relating to the study of the personal narrative on both the conceptual, diachronic level and the synchronic level of the exploration of specific narratives of Holocaust survivors from Hungary and Carpatho-Russia. Her latest book, *Soul of Saul: The Life, Narrative, and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*, reflects a new path in her thinking process, deriving from the concerns she had already developed, while re-shaping them in the context of proverbs scholarship. That is to say that whereas previously she gathered and analyzed personal narratives, in this case she focuses on the study of over 300 proverbs belonging to a traditional corpus and re-incorporated into a personal narrative and to everyday spontaneous speech as an expression of the narrator's views and values.

The book adds an innovative branch to the study of the proverbial traditions of many Jewish communities conducted in Israel, for example Galit-Hasan-Rokem's study of the proverb creation of the Jews of Georgia, Joseph Chetrit's research of the proverbs of the Jews of Morocco and study of the proverbial tradition of the Sephardic Jews offered by Tamar Alexander-Frizer and Yaakov Bentolila. Unlike the studies of communal proverbial corpuses, Ilana Rosen's research focuses on a collection of Hungarian-Romanian-Yiddish proverbs received from a single man, Saul Rosenzweig (Hungary 1917; Israel 2004). Interestingly, although he spent most of his life outside his native Hungary, working as a forced laborer in Romania during the second World War and immigrating to Israel after it, the dominant part of Saul's identity reflected in his personal narrative derives from his being a Hungarian-speaking Jew. His proverbs reinforce this tendency: most of them are uttered in Hungarian, and only a few in Romanian. Some of the proverbs are either in Yiddish or echoing ancient traditional Jewish Hebrew sources, yet the representation of modern contemporary Israeli Hebrew is lacking.

The process that led to this study and is analyzed in it goes beyond the boundaries of proverb scholarship, for Saul was not an unfamiliar informant but Ilana Rosen's own father-in-law, whose proverbs were passed on in the course of a close interaction with her and with the other members of her family. Thus, we are looking at a meaningful, double-edged analysis on both the proverbial level and the level of the personal narrative, attempting at deciphering the complex reflexive folkloristic context that is formulated around it.

In the preface, Rosen relates her unique folkloristic reflexive research, pointing out that it requires a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. "When it comes to ourselves and our own families", she says, "we have a hard time getting it exactly right." (7) One may assume that as a matter of fact it is impossible to get things exactly right in a research such as the one we are looking at, for a proverb may never be fully understood when de-contextualized from its original conversational frame, and the personal narrative is by definition a constantly changing, partial re-presentation of the narrator's life. In *The Soul of Saul*, Ilana Rosen proves that the grey areas in which things are supposedly losing their "exact rightness" is actually the best way of exploring and analyzing the complex human phenomena mirrored by folk creations that are multi-faceted and ever changing.

Opening with a detailed description of Saul Rosenzweig's life history in Romania, Hungary and Israel and the communities and traditions that form its collective context, the study then moves into an analysis of Saul's creative repertoire, and concludes with the full corpus of his multi-lingual proverbs, translated into English. A personal narrative involves a selection process that echoes the narrator's identity: the parts of life that are chosen to be reproduced as a story. The intertextual nature of Rosen's study of the proverbs according to their function within the personal narrative – the larger text of which they form part of an order to convey Saul's views and beliefs – shows that the proverbs play a central part in his identity formation process.

The book offers a close reading and analysis of the following issues that Rosen identified as crucial in the personal narrative transmitted to her by her father-in-law, and that were also reinforced in interviews she conducted with his close relatives: Courtship, Marriage and Gender Relations; Old Age and Death, Earning and providing; (Un-) Productivity and Laziness; Being Pragmatic and Well-Balanced; Totalitarianism and its Discontents/Disconnected Jews. Each of these "life chapters" is analyzed in relation

Rosen, Ilana. *Soul of Saul: The Life, Narrative, and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*. Burlington: University of Vermont, 2011. Pp. 158. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

to the proverbs that Saul incorporated into the narration of it, deepening the understanding of both the personal narrative and the proverbs.

Rosen points out that some parts of life are less emphasized than others in the personal narrative she studied. Childhood, for example, is rarely mentioned in Saul's narrative. Interestingly enough, however, it is being indirectly dealt with in the proverbs that are interwoven into the narrative: "Even if Gypsy children fall from the sky"; "When there are too many midwives the baby dies"; "The apple does not fall far from the tree"; "I have time, I have milk, why no breastfeed?"; "An old man, may he never be born"; "The child is dead, the godfatherhood has ended"; "Small children small troubles, big children big troubles"; "To have/not to have had a nursery"; "Like mother like daughter" – proverbs relating to birth giving, children and the understanding of life as a movement from childhood to old age do exist under the surface of Saul's narrative. Bringing the two together and reading them as intertexts, Rosen enables us to reach a full understanding of both, as well as of the personality of Saul, whose creative corpus they form part of.

The book presents a detailed analysis of what may be regarded as "a proverbial personal narrative", deciphering both the textual fabric that Ilana Rosen studied and the conceptual framework that may be extracted from it in terms of its chronology, typology and style as well as the ethos that it expresses.

Naturally, his daughter-in-law's personal experiences are intertwined with those of Saul. Being so, the analysis offered by Ilana Rosen is a significant achievement based upon a complex hermeneutic effort that opens a prism growing out of Saul's proverbs and sayings. Deciphering them in the context of his personal narrative, she then considers both the proverb corpus and the personal narrative as part of her own life as a member of the family that surrounded Saul when he used and transmitted them. Ruth Behar conducted substantive anthropological heresiarch with a single Mexican woman, Eszperanza, who shared with her a rich folk creation embedded in a complex personal narrative (*Translated Woman*. XXX: Boston, 1993; *The Vulnerable Observer*. XXX: Boston, 1996). She wonders about the vulnerability of a process such as the one Ilana Rosen faced (*Vulnerable* 8-9).

We try to listen well. We write field notes about all the things we've misunderstood, all the things that later will seem so trivial, so much the bare surface of life. [...] And so begins our work, our hardest work – to bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard, and our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representations [...] Even Geertz recognizes there is a problem: 'We lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work. There seems to be a genre missing. (*Vulnerable* 8-9).

A close reading of *Soul of Saul* shows that Ilana Rosen, one of the researchers who paved the way for the study of the personal narrative in Israel in the last two decades, is now entering a new road of scholarship through studying such narratives and paying special attention to the proverbs embedded in them. Her extensive research contributes to the formation of the genre that Behar, echoing leading anthropologist Clifford Geertz, noted as missing.

Unfortunately, a review such as this one does not allow a full consideration of the book to which it relates. One of the many things I would have liked to relate to more profoundly is the non-verbal substance that lies underneath the narrative and the proverbs studied by Rosen and the meaning they add to Saul Rosenzweig's unified message about life, such as, for example, the pictures of Saul and his family that are incorporated as part of Rosen's text about him. One of these pictures appears on the book's front cover; others are concluding the book, bringing to life many of the oral representations quoted and deciphered in the pages that preceded them. In reaction to the fact that the book is framed with the pictures, one goes back to Susan Sontag's famous declaration (*On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977):

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of a gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time (14-15)

Rosen, Ilana. *Soul of Saul: The Life, Narrative, and Proverbs of a Transylvanian-Israeli Grandfather*. Burlington: University of Vermont, 2011. Pp. 158. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

---

Nevertheless, Sontag (8-9) also claims that the photograph enables family members to create a portable portrait that validates the contact among themselves. In *Soul of Saul* Ilana Rosen demonstrates an ability to overcome the potentially deadening nature of photographs, and to transform the words and pictures of an elderly family member into a tool that empowers the contacts between him and his family members, herself included. The scholarly achievement that grew out of this human experience is a true contribution to folkloristic thinking.

This review opened with an attempt to show that the power and meaning of a folkloristic research such as the one conducted by Ilana Rosen and presented in the *Soul of Saul* derives from its multidisciplinary and multi-faceted nature. I would like to conclude with one proverb of Saul Rosenzweig encompassing this simultaneously complex and rewarding world view, which for me as a folklorist and as a human being is a very important one: "Life is beautiful when it is hectic". (Akkor (Úgy) szép az élet, ha zajlik.)