

Literary and social activist: Nora Gold

Award-winning Canadian author discusses the skyrocketing of antisemitism since October 7

• ATARA BECK

Prize-winning author Nora Gold has recently released *18 Jewish Stories Translated from 18 Languages* (Cherry Orchard Books, 2023), an anthology of Jewish literature from around the world. The first collection of translated multilingual Jewish fiction in 25 years, it already has received glowing reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and renowned authors Cynthia Ozick and Dara Horn, among others.

Gold, founding editor-in-chief of Jewish Fiction .net, a free-of-charge online journal that publishes international Jewish fiction, and founder and coordinator of the Wonderful Women Writers Series at Toronto Public Library (Deer Park branch), received a Canadian Jewish Book Award for her first book, *Marrow and Other Stories* (Warwick Publishing, 1998), which was also shortlisted for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award.

A former professor of social work at the University of Toronto, Gold, a native Montrealer, is not only a leading literary figure but also a social justice activist and a fervent Zionist. She and her husband live six months a year in Jerusalem.

Her first novel, *Fields of Exile*, won the 2015 Canadian Jewish Literary Award for Best Novel. (The CJLA is different from the Canadian Jewish Book Award.)



NORA GOLD just released '18 Jewish Stories Translated from 18 Languages.' (Yael Herman)

Through the protagonist Judith, a left-wing Zionist and social justice activist, the novel focuses on the virulent “new antisemitism” on North American campuses parading as anti-Zionism, based largely on the author’s experiences.

Her second novel was the internationally acclaimed *The Dead Man* (2016), published three years later in Hebrew by Carmel (*Ha’ish Hamet*) and launched at the official residence in Tel Aviv of then-Canadian ambassador to Israel Deborah Lyons.

Following are excerpts of the interview.

How surprised are you by the unspeakable horrors of October 7?

I am not surprised at all. Prior to October 7, I was already familiar with the depth and intensity of the antisemitism and anti-Israelism in our world, including in the academe and the social justice movement. The fact that – unlike most of the progressive Jews I know – I am not surprised by the most recent virulent antisemitism does not mean that I do not find it extremely disturbing, especially given its timing.

Many Jews are now experiencing secondary victimization, where the trauma of October 7 and its aftermath are compounded by the antisemitic responses to these events, such as the trivializing or delegitimizing of the initial trauma, and even conveying the message that the trauma of 1,400 slaughtered innocent civilians was somehow these victims’ own fault and therefore deserved.

All this, along with the other manifestations of antisemitism occurring worldwide now, are vicious, hideous, and horrifying, but – sadly, perhaps – not at all surprising to me. This is the world we live in at the present. I hope it improves.

ON OCTOBER 2, just five days before the massacre, renowned Israeli author, professor, and educator Alice Shalvi – a close friend of Gold’s – passed away two weeks shy of her 97th birthday. Shalvi began her position as rector, acting president, and executive council chair of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem at age 72, while Gold, now 70, has her own plans. Both women, talented writers, have been activists for basically the same causes.

Can you tell us about your relationship with Shalvi and how she may have influenced you?

Alice was one of my closest friends. We loved each other, and I am in deep mourning for her. We had a lot in common. We shared a passion for what she called her ‘triangle’ of primary commitments: Judaism, Zionism, and feminism. We also both had a joint background in literature and social work. And we spoke all of each other’s languages: not only Zionism, feminism, and Judaism, but also love of nature, music, social justice, and literature.

We were also in the same place politically and ideologically, and we were both very actively involved in the New Israel Fund – Alice in Israel, obviously, while I was one of the founders and leaders in Canada. That’s how we originally met.

One thing that not many people know about Alice is that she was a fiction writer, like me, so we shared that, too. She wrote some wonderful stories. Maybe, with her family’s permission, at some point I’ll publish one or more of them in Jewish Fiction .net, my literary journal, or help assemble them in a book.

I know Alice had a huge influence on many people’s lives... She was never my teacher or mentor, though. She was my friend, and I will miss her terribly. I go to *shul*



because I don’t know what else to do with my grief, and all around me people are standing and saying *Kaddish*, and all I can do is sit there and quietly cry...

But it does strike me how in Judaism, all the Jewish mourning rituals are designed only for family, as though one can only be in real, deep mourning if the person who died is family. I think there really is a need for a mourning ritual and a mourning structure for when you lose a beloved friend.

You were a professor of social work and have remained an activist, even after stepping down from your position. Can you describe your activism? On which issues?

My activism has been focused on two main areas: fighting anti-Israelism and antisemitism; and fostering democracy, civil rights, and social equality in Israel. Some people mistakenly see these as being opposites – the first focus being mainstream/Right in perspective, and the second being mainstream/Left, but I see them as two sides of the same coin.

On the first topic, I’ve done academic research on anti-Israelism and antisemitism, and I tried for years to get these phenomena acknowledged and taught – alongside the other oppressions that were taught in schools of social work in Canada and the US, as social work is my field.

I also wrote a novel about anti-Israelism on university campuses: *Fields of Exile*, which was the first, and is still the only, novel on this topic. In this sense, my activism and my writing came together in this book. When I finished writing *Fields of Exile*, it took seven years to find a publisher, and I thought back then that by the time I found one, the issue that formed the core of the book, anti-Israelism on campus, would no longer be



MODERATING A panel at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, called 'When Women Write.' (Courtesy Nora Gold)

GOLD WAS close friends with respected educator and fellow activist Alice Shalvi, who passed away in early October. (Yonatan Sinda/Flash90)

relevant. Unfortunately, a decade later, it still is.

I'm happy, though, that a group of Jewish social work activists have recently picked up where I left off in terms of trying to get anti-Israelism and antisemitism addressed in social work. And I am thrilled that they will be using my novel *Fields of Exile* as a central resource in this effort – by having actors enact scenes from the novel to help educate both social work students and professors about anti-Israelism and antisemitism.

Moving on to your newly published anthology, which includes stories written in different countries and, originally, in different languages: Was there one that especially moved you and from which you feel you really learned something new?

I love, and have learned from, all the stories in this book. But one that comes to mind is "The Guest" by Varda Fiszbein, translated from Spanish by Andrea G. Labinger. This is a story set at a Seder in 1940, and it is gorgeously written. There are all these beautiful details about the dishes that are served and the way the table is set, and how everything sparkles, and great descriptions of the people there, including the grandfather, who presides over the Seder like a king, with great dignity. So, there is this love of our tradition and the beauty of our rituals, practices, and holidays.

And then something happens. I won't say anything more than that because I don't want to ruin the story for those who haven't read it yet. But this story is a painful and brilliant evocation of how our marvelous religious tradition can also have devastating effects on the lives of women and girls. And even though it's set in the past, over 80 years ago, it has resounding relevance today.

In fact, the anthology is another example of where the literary and social activist in me come together because when people misunderstand Jewish fiction and think that it is written only by English-speaking, white, middle-class, rich people, that reinforces some stereotypes about Jews... One of the purposes of the book is to help non-Jews recognize the diversity of Jewish literature – and related to this, the diversity of Jews – thereby counteracting some of the antisemitic stereotypes.

What are some of the future projects you're planning?

My fifth book, *In Sickness and In Health/Yom Kippur in a Gym* (two novellas), will come out on March 1, 2024. I also have a Novella coming out in 2026, called *Doubles*.

The other project I'm working on relates to the literary journal that I founded and edit, *Jewish Fiction .net*, which in its first 13 years has published 570 works of fiction that were either written in English or translated into English from 20 languages but never before published in English.

In fact, all the stories in my new book were originally published in *Jewish Fiction .net*. This journal is the only English-language journal in the world, either print or online, devoted exclusively to publishing Jewish fiction, and we have readers in 140 countries.

In the coming year, we will be redesigning the website of *Jewish Fiction .net* to make it more interactive, so that people will be able to use it as a cultural and educational resource. For example, soon our readers will be able to search for a specific type of story – maybe a Hanukkah story or one about bat mitzvahs... By the way, we have several dozen stories translated from Hebrew.

Growing up, were you always interested in writing or in social work? Were you an avid reader as a child and a teenager? An idealist by nature?

Yes, I was an avid reader; and even from a young age, a writer. Even before I could "write" (in the sense of holding a pen and forming letters on a page), I was doing what writers do: making up stories.

At age three, I'd sit on our living room carpet listening to "story records" – there were these thick, red or yellow records for children where someone told you a story, like *The Little Engine That Could* – and when the record finished, I'd keep sitting there and continue the story from where it had left off. Sometimes, I'd recite my story aloud; other times, I'd just think it to myself.

As for whether I was an idealist, I don't know, but I was always very troubled by any suffering or injustice I saw in the world, even as a child. And I always believed that the world could be better than it was and that I had a responsibility to help bring this about. ■