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MILK AND ASHES POETS PAUL CELAN AND NELLY SACHS CONFRONT THE TRAUMA OF THE SHOAH

Abstract

Both Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs were survivors of the Shoah who emerged deeply traumatized by the phenomenon. Both poets were thus displaced from their country of origin and linguistic environment. Their poetic strategies post-Holocaust were defined by the unspeakable enormity of the crime of genocide and the (contradictory) need to bear witness. In Celan's famous poem "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue) the poet adopts the voice of a prisoner in a German death camp. Celan subsequently abandoned traditional formal poetic devices. His poetry became increasingly hermetic. The title of Celan's poem contains the word "death," as does that of Sachs's first post-Shoah cycle "In den Wohnungen des Todes." it is the unspoken thread in their work. Sachs turned to her Jewish background to construct a historical vision of the people of Israel and applied the notion of metamorphosis (Verwandlung) to articulate her status as a survivor. In his poem "Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa" Celan links his fate to that of Marina Tsvetaeva, adumbrating his future suicide. Sachs survived the trauma, by embracing a solid set of religious values.

Keywords: *Celan; Sachs; Shoah; trauma; suicide*

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Literature Review

In the case of Paul Celan, the most authoritative source on his life and work is the book by John Felstiner *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. As an authoritative work, it suffers, however, from several defects, principally that the poems are almost always quoted only in Felstiner's English translation. Moreover, the Suhrkamp five-volume *Gesammelte Werke* is not referenced. Essentially Felstiner tries to do too much: the book is mostly biography, but with forays into analysis and translation studies. As an extraordinary work of factual research, it is nevertheless indispensable. In the case of Sachs, the equivalent source is the illustrated biography *Nelly Sachs: Flight and Metamorphosis* by Aris Fioretos, in which the life of Sachs is documented in detail; as in Felstiner's book, it is regrettable that the poetry is reproduced mostly in English translation. Also important is the volume *Nelly Sachs: The Poetics of Silence and the Limits of Representation* by Elaine Martin, which covers important ground in the area of the reception of Sachs's work and offers in depth critical readings of certain poems. Martin examines the poetry from the point of view of the "representation" of the Shoah. In fact, since Sachs was not an eyewitness, it can be argued (as with Celan) that her poetry is not so much representation as imagining the Shoah as part of the process of dealing with her trauma and finding a way to stay alive and continue to write poetry.

The Purpose of this Article

The issue of trauma has occupied considerable attention recently. It is now recognized that soldiers who have been in battle, as well as civilians who have lived through the violence of war or genocide, generally suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).[i] The purpose of this article is to trace how the stress inflicted on two Jewish poets by the Shoah shaped the meanings

of their poetry, and how they survived as poets and found ways to write, as Theodor Adorno put it, "after Auschwitz."

Text of Article

Both Celan and Sachs lived within the tension created by the need to speak about the Holocaust and the need to stand silent in the face of it. Though this tension weaves itself in and out of their poems, it was also a part of their lived experience (Petersen, 2000, p. 199).

On November 9th, 1938, a young Jewish man named Paul Antschel from Romania changed trains in Berlin on his way to France, where he was to spend a year, ostensibly studying in Tours, but also visiting Paris and London. In Berlin he smelt the smoke from the burning synagogues, shops, and businesses belonging to Jews. It was Kristallnacht, the night when the SA and SS, together with the help of the Hitler Youth, launched a massive campaign of terror against the Jewish members of German society. Antschel had experienced Romanian antisemitism in school and was aware that many Jews, sensing the coming catastrophe, had emigrated from Europe – including an aunt in Palestine. What Antschel could not know, was that there in Berlin lived a Jewish woman some thirty years older than him, who would later become a close friend and colleague, and who, like him, would survive the cataclysm and, like him, seek to respond to the trauma of genocide in her poetry. That woman was Nelly Sachs, the daughter of a well-to-do businessman who had died in 1930 and left his daughter Leonie (as she was called in the family) and his widow Margarete to face alone the nightmare that began in 1933, when Hitler came to power and the ever more sadistic Nazi race laws gradually deprived them of their property and freedom and threatened their lives.

Paul Celan

Born in 1920, Antschel was a native of the city of Czernowitz in Bukovina. The city was a crossroad of cultures, the largest ethnic group in the city being Jews, followed by Romanians, Germans, and Ukrainians. This cultural diversity was embodied in Antschel, who grew up in a household where his mother insisted on her son speaking correct high German and encouraging him to read classical German literature. His schooling included a Jewish school, where he learned Hebrew, a Romanian school, where he was the object of antisemitic harassment, and, finally, a Ukrainian high school, where he felt more comfortable. In addition to the languages he learned in these different settings, he became fluent in French, an essential component of a middle-class education, and Yiddish, spoken by many of the Jews in Cernăuți, which he became more acquainted with in the forced labour camps to which he was assigned with other Jews during the war years. He also knew Russian, which he learned when the city was occupied in 1940 by the Soviet Union, and the name changed to Chernovtsy (Russian) and Chernivtsi (Ukrainian) – the official name of the city today. After 1945, when he lived for two years in Bucharest, he altered his last name to Celan, an anagram of Antschel, since in Romanian the letter "c" before "e" is pronounced like the German "tsch." The linguistic constant in Celan's life, however, was German, quite literally his "mother tongue." Yet at the same time the fact that he grew up in such a meeting place of cultures and acquired such a spectrum of languages enabled him to translate into German throughout his career many authors from different languages, for example Apollinaire, Breton, Mallarmé, Mandelshtam, Blok, Esenin, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, et al.[ii]

Chernivtsi was occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940; then in June 1941 German forces invaded Soviet territory, reaching Chernivtsi in early July, and the Jewish population of the city became the object of terror and repression, mitigated by the fact that the territory reverted to Romania, and the Romanian mayor of the city did as much as he could to help the Jews. Only in June 1942 did transportations begin. On June 27 Antschel's parents were deported to Transnistria, where they were both to die – his father of illness, his mother apparently shot because she was too weak to work (Felstiner, 2001, pp. 15-16). A month later Paul was himself sent to a forced labour

camp in Romania. He spent 19 months in the camps. In his free time, he wrote poetry and translated from French, Russian, and English. When he was released from the camps in early 1944 Antschel returned briefly to Chernivtsi, now under Soviet occupation. Cognizant of the risk of arrest and deportation to Siberia, in 1945 he changed his name to Celan and moved to Bucharest. As a poet writing in German, however, here too he was an outsider. This fact was another aspect of the Celan's dilemma: not only was he an orphan, but he also had no homeland. Germany was deeply alien to someone who had grown up in the afterglow of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had no connection to the Reich and its ideology. In 1947, he left for Vienna, then moved on to France, where he eventually became a citizen and spent the rest of his life. His later occasional visits to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), to read his poetry or give acceptance speeches for awards, were traumatic and caused considerable mental anguish.

"Death Fugue"

Celan had begun to write poetry in his teens, inspired by such poets as Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Éluard, and Guillaume Apollinaire. During WWII his poetry exhibited a tendency to abandon the now outdated and inadequate conventions of meter and rhyme. These were to disappear completely by 1945. It was during his sojourn in Bucharest from 1945-47 that he finished work on his most famous poem, "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue).[iii] Formally, in its use of anaphora and repetition, the poem is somewhat reminiscent of Paul Éluard's "Liberté" (1942), to which it is a kind of antiphony. The striking phrase "schwarze Milch" (black milk), which is repeated insistently, can be understood as a reference to the German language, literature, and culture, as intimate to the poet as his mother's milk, its blackness an expression of the poet's disgust at the crimes of the Third Reich. Speaking (or writing in) his mother tongue is likened to drinking contaminated, poisonous milk – blackened, perhaps, with the soot from the chimneys of the crematoria. Yet German is the language of his poetry. In this way the image can be read as a metaphor for the trap in which the poet finds himself, as one who can express himself poetically only in that language. Poets are nourished by the language and the literary tradition that it conveys, just as children are nourished by their mother's milk. The intrusion (twice) of the word "Deutschland" (Germany) is as jarring as the black milk metaphor, a reminder of the fact that the horrors of the Holocaust were perpetrated in the name of that country.

The title of the poem "Death Fugue" ("Todesfuge") requires comment. First, the word "fugue" refers to the fact that the Nazi guards in the extermination camps forced the Jewish inmates of the camps, many of whom were musicians, to play for their entertainment and amusement. The word "fugue" evokes classical eighteenth-century music, especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach, so that the title contains a grotesque juxtaposition of beautiful, life-affirming music and death, echoing the tragic oxymoron "black milk." At the same time, it may be read as a metapoetic comment on the fugue-like repetitions of phrases and images in the poem. Another possible reading is that the Shoah was one episode out of many in the persecution and death of Jews in history, and that these episodes repeat themselves with subtle differences like the repetition of motifs in a fugue. In the text the nameless German tormentor incites the Jews to play "for the dance." This seems strange, since the fugue is not usually dance music. In a Romanian translation of the poem made by Celan's friend Petre Salomon (and the first version of the poem to be published), it was titled "Tango of Death" ("Tangoul mortii"). (Felstiner, 2001, p. 32) [iv] Hence, "Tango of Death" (Todestango?) was apparently the title of Celan's draft of the poem, which he had begun to write in Chernivtsi in 1944 before moving to Bucharest. He changed it before it appeared in print in German, despite the dissonance between "fugue" and "dance." This initial title more strongly supports the erotic undertone, since a tango is a sensual and passionate dance. The eroticism is present here in the references to golden-haired Margarete (the heroine of Goethe's *Faust*, but also referencing Heinrich Heine's "Lorelei" combing her locks on a rock

overlooking the Rhine) and ashen-haired Shulamith,[v] who is traditionally considered to be the heroine of the "Song of Songs" and hence the Jewish ideal of love. Her name is the last word of the poem and thereby acquires huge importance. It suggests that any potential Jewish love of the poet has been transformed to ashes, as, also, has his mother (Ostriker, 2017, p. 406.)

Celan's poem presents a descriptive imagining of the implied lyrical hero speaking in the first-person plural and voicing the feelings of the detainees in a German death camp in a form of prosopopaeia.[vi] The theme of captive Jews being forced to play clearly echoes the beginning of Psalm 137:

> There we sat down and cried—
> by the rivers of Babylon—
> as we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung our harps,
> for it was there that our captors
> asked us for songs
> and our torturers demanded joy from us,
> "Sing us one of the songs about Zion!"
> How are we to sing the song of the LORD
> on foreign soil? [vii]

The only individual voice heard in the poem is that of the German overseer. Apart from the other connotations listed above, the fugue in the title can be read as a symbolic representation of the rhythm of time in the camp: "Black milk of dawn we drink you at evening / we drink you midday and morning we drink you at night / we drink and we drink." Hence, the presence of music is verbal or descriptive. This poem (which was first translated into English in 1955[viii]) might well have inspired the Canadian poet and song-writer Leonard Cohen to write the song "Dance me to the end of love" (1982), with its references to Babylon and a "burning violin."[ix] In a radio interview given in 1995 Cohen commented that the song "came from just hearing or reading or knowing that ... beside the crematoria, in certain of the death camps, a string quartet was pressed into performance while this horror was going on." Cohen further comments that the line in the song "Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin" means "the beauty ... being the consummation of life, the end of this existence and of the passionate element in that consummation.... it is the same language that we use for surrender to the beloved..."[x] Thus, in the song of Cohen, a Jewish poet who was deeply affected by the Holocaust, the motifs of love, dance, and death in Celan's poem combine with the music in an intense fusion.[xi]

Celan's work in subsequent years developed further in complexity, with broken syntax, lines consisting of one word, and associative leaps between images. Avoiding direct descriptions of the Shoah, he made it the unspoken essence and context of the poetry. Images – water, stone, almonds, hair, eye(s) seemingly have a simple objective correlative. Water, for example, seems to connote death – especially the collective death of the victims of the Shoah. There may, however, be additional resonating meanings: in the case of water, from the Bible, such as the flood in Genesis, but also the passing of the people of Israel through the parted waters of the sea in Exodus.[xii] In addition to poetry, Celan devoted a considerable amount of energy to poetic translation: his translations from seven languages occupy two large volumes of the five-volume edition of his collected works.[xiii] Despairing of what he felt to be rampant antisemitism in the FRG, in the late 1950s Celan began to turn his attention to the East, specifically to Russian poets. He began by translating the poetry of Sergey Esenin, and also Aleksandr Blok's poem "The Twelve," then went on to translate the poetry of Osip Mandelshtam, with whom he identified because of his Jewish identity and because, according to Felstiner, he believed the Russian poet had been killed by the Germans (in fact Mandelshtam died in a Gulag camp in Siberia).[xiv] He also translated Yevgeny

Yevtushenko's poem "Baby yar."

In 1962 Celan acquired the Russian miscellany *Tarusskie stranitsy* (1961), which became the ostensible object of a poem "Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa" ("And with the book from Tarusa").[xv] The poem is included in the cycle titled *Die Niemandsrose* (*The No-One's-Rose*), 1963). In his commentary to the cycle Jürgen Lehmann offers a range of connotations for the mention of the rose in the title of the cycle (Lehmann, 1997, pp. 40-41). Some of these appear convincing, e.g., the association of the rose with the feminine in the Song of Songs (already present in the last word of "Death Fugue," noted above); with Jesus or with the Mother of God; with the Zohar in which the rose is ultimately associated with the people of Israel (Lehmann, p. 40). One connotation that Lehman omits is the German Christmas carol "Es ist ein Ros entsprungen," in which the myth of the Old Testament descendance of Jesus from Jesse is recalled. The myth of the "Tree of Jesse" from which, through Jesse's son David, Jesus "sprung," derives from Isaiah 11.1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." In medieval iconography the Branch is the rose – represented either as the Mother of God, or as Jesus. These associations clash with the other element of the title: "No-one's," which seemingly excludes them: they are nobody's rose, not wanted. They are the rejected sons of Jesse, i.e., the Jewish people, excluded from Christianity.

The Tarusa miscellany roused Celan's evidently long-standing interest in the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, some of whose poetry was published in the volume for the first time since she left the Soviet Union in the 1920s, and the Russian river Oka, evoked in one of her poems included in the miscellany. As is typical for Celan, there are important indicators of the poem's underlying meanings. The first is the epigraph of the poem: a quotation in Russian: "All poets are yids" («Все поэты жиды»). This is taken, as Felstiner notes, from Tsvetaeva's long poem "The Poem of the End" ("Поэма конца," 1924), written during her sojourn in Prague on the occasion of her breaking off a relationship with her husband's friend Konstantin Rodzevich. The title of her ostensibly refers to the end of the relationship. On a deeper level, however, it suggests the end of life. The stanza from which the epigraph is taken reads: "The ghetto of chosennesses! Wall and ditch. Do not expect mercy! In this most Christian of worlds, poets are yids!"[xvi] Here the notion of exclusion from the Christian world in the title of the cycle is invoked. Although the image is undoubtedly that of the famous Jewish cemetery in the centre of Prague, the sense is that of poets – Jews and non-Jews – being eternally despised outsiders. It is, however, not just this predicament of Celan as a poet *and* a Jew that is the central meaning of his poem, but rather the fate of Tsvetaeva. Having returned to her native land in 1939, following her husband Sergey Efron, she found herself doubly estranged – as a poet and as outsider in a country where there was a reign of terror and many would not dare speak to her. In reality, the country of her birth no longer existed – as Celan's did not. Finally, in 1941, after Efron had been shot by the NKVD and her daughter sent to the Gulag, Tsvetaeva committed suicide. Already in "The Poem of the End" she had contemplated such a step, addressing the famous bridge over the Vltava in Prague: "Ble-ssed fate / of lovers without hope: / Bridge, you are like passion: / conventionality: all in-between-ness."[xvii] Tsvetaeva clearly references Apollinaire's poem "The Mirabeau Bridge" ("Le Pont Mirabeau"): "Hands in hands let us stay face to face / While beneath / The bridge of our arms Passes / The wave so tired of eternal glances."[xviii] In her poem she develops this metaphor: the bridge is a symbol of love – two hands joined, as she writes, "conventionally," across the void, and at the same time a physical object from which lovers can throw themselves when the precarious relationship ends: "Bridge! You are on our side! / We feed the river with bodies!"[xix] In his poem Celan references both Tsvetaeva and Apollinaire: "Of – the bridge- / ashlar, from which / he [Appolinaire] into life sprang / across, fledged / with wounds, off / the Pont Mirabeau. / Where the Oka does not join the flow. Et quels / amours! (Cyrillic, friends, that too / I rode over the Seine, / rode it over the Rhine.)."[xx] Thus, Celan adds to this imagery an additional metaphorical meaning: his poetry and translations had been constructed like a bridge, "like passion: / conventionality: all in-between-ness," over the Oka (Russia), the Rhein (Germany), and the Seine (France). Apollinaire, who had been wounded in WWI, was, in Celan's metaphor, carried across the Seine "on the wings of his

wounds."[xxi] Celan's poem portends that time when the bridge of his poetry will break, his loves (plural) will end, and he will spring, not into life, but into death, by throwing himself from the Pont Mirabeau in Paris, which he did on or about April 20, 1970.

Nelly Sachs

Leontie Sachs was born in Berlin in 1891. After 1933 she gamely tried to continue a literary career, focusing on plays for children and rather conventional poetry. Having suffered indignity after indignity at the hands of the Nazis (after an interrogation by a Gestapo officer, she stated that she was unable to speak for three days), in May 1940, she received the order for her and her mother to present themselves for transportation. Sachs, partly through the good offices of Selma Lagerlöf, with whom she had corresponded in the 1930s, had received Swedish visas for her mother and herself. On the advice of a friendly SS officer, she and her mother Margarete immediately took a plane to Stockholm. It was there that Nelly Sachs was to spend the rest of her life.

In Sweden Sachs began to write anew. She worked at night, her days being taken up with tending to an increasingly sick mother. Her poetry changed deeply: thematically, to write the Holocaust, to give those murdered a voice; and formally, under the influence of the modernist Swedish poets whose work she began to translate into German and who were themselves engaged in translating and internalizing the work of the English modernists. The profound change in her poetics is documented in the poem "Nacht" ("Night," from her second book of poems titled "Sternverdunkelung" ("Eclipse of the Stars," 1949). Its first stanza conveys the horror and the torment of those nights:

NACHT, NACHT,
daß du nicht in Scherben zerspringet,
nun wo die Zeit mit den reißenden Sonnen
des Martyriums
in deiner meergedeckten Tiefe untergeht –
die Monde des Todes
das stürzende Erdendach
in deines Schweigens geronnenes Blut ziehn –

[Night, night, / lest you shatter into fragments, / now that time with its ferocious suns / of martyrdom sinks into your sea-covered depths – / the moons of death / drag the earth's plunging roof / into your silence's congealed blood.][xxii]

The structured meter and rhyme of her Berlin poetry had disappeared, although some of her poems on the subject of her unnamed lover "Gebeten für den toten Bräutigam" ("Prayers for the Dead Bridegroom"), who had been killed by the Nazis, still retained those formal characteristics. The principal formal device is the line ending, usually at a syntactical break, or grammatically separating subject from predicate, and at other moments producing an enjambment to highlight a startling phrase, as in the above passage: "mit den reißenden Sonnen / des Martyriums." By contrast, the second stanza of the poem, beginning "Nacht, Nacht, / einmal warst du der Geheimnisse Braut / schattenliliengeschmückt" recalls the traditional nocturnal theme of German romanticism, notably Novalis's "Hymnen an die Nacht" ("Hymns to the Night"), when night was "the bride of shadowed lilies" and "love had offered you the blossoming of its morning rose." The past tense here reflects the poet's definitive break with the Romantic tradition. Thereafter, unlike Celan, Sachs's poetry is devoid of the erotic. Her poetry written in Sweden began with a direct response to the Shoah, as did Celan's "Todesfuge." There is a group of poems where the poet uses prosopopeia to give a voice to the victims of the Shoah – the "Chorus of the Children," Chorus of the Orphans," and so on. Thereafter it becomes more contemplative, with a coherent vocabulary of images: sand or dust, redolent of ashes, but also referencing the vulnerable dust of a butterfly's wings; the universe, with its stars, its moons, its sun; and the ocean, with its connotations of a journey (Enzensberger, p. 8). Two dominant overarching themes emerge in her later poetry. First,

the salutary coherence of an invisible but real universe, as she writes in one of her later poems:

IN MEINER KAMMER
wo mein Bett steht
ein Tisch ein Stuhl
der Küchenherd
kniet das Universum wie überall
um erlöst zu werden
von der Unsichtbarkeit –
Ich mache einen Strich
schreibe das Alphabet
male den selbtsmöderischen Spruch an die Wand
an dem die Neugeburten sofort knospen
schon halte ich die Gestirne an der Wahrheit fest
da beginnt die Erde zu hämmern
die Nacht wird lose
fällt aus
toter Zahn vom Gebiß –

[In my chamber / where my bed stands / a table a chair / the stove / kneels the universe as everywhere / to be released / from invisibility – / I make a line / write the alphabet / paint the suicidal saying on the wall / from this the newly born sprout straightaway / already I hold the stars firmly to the truth / then the earth begins to pound / the night becomes loose /
out falls / dead tooth from jaw –][xxiii]

Thus, Sachs envisions the process of her poetry – making real the invisible universe with its laws and its outward manifestation in the stars, nature, and time. The poet came to this vision through a deeper acquaintance with Judaism. It is a vision grounded in her belief in God and the people of Israel, persisting through time. It is also her way of distancing herself from thoughts of suicide: painting them on the wall, and hence neutralizing them.

Sachs's second theme is metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*) – in the first instance, her own. She has passed through untold pain, and has achieved a certain fragile serenity. The reference is evidently to Franz Kafka. His situation was analogous to that of Sachs and Celan. A Jew writing in German, he found himself a member of a linguistic and ethnic minority, especially after 1918 in newly created Czechoslovakia, a fragment of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In his short story, ("Die Verwandlung" ("The Metamorphosis," 1912), the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, wakes up to find he has turned into a beetle. Sachs clearly references this work in her succinct recollection of Jewish life under the Nazis titled "Leben unter Bedrohung" ("Life under Threat"), when gradually the Jews' humanity was stripped away until they became un-people: "Who dictates? Everyone. With the exception of those who are lying on their backs like beetles before death." (Fioretos, 2011, p. 98). Kafka's metaphor was realized by the Nazis – both in the transformation of Jews into nameless "vermin," but also in the choice of Zyklon B, an insecticide, to murder them in the gas chamber.

Sachs's lyrical hero undergoes a happier metamorphosis: she is transformed into a butterfly, as expressed in one of her poems:

SCHMETTERLING
Welch schönes Jenseits
ist in deinen Staub gemalt.
Durch den Flammenkern der Erde,
durch ihre steinerne Schale
wurdest du gereicht,

Abschiedswebe in der Vergänglichkeit Maß.

Schmetterling
aller Wesen gute Nacht!
Die Gewichte von Leben und Tod
senken sich mit deinen Flügen
auf die Rose nieder
die mit heimwärts reifenden Licht welkt.

Welch schönes Jenseits
ist in deinen Staub gemalt.
Welch Königszeichen
im Geheimnis der Luft.

[Butterfly / What a lovely beyond / is painted in your dust. / Through the flaming core of the earth, / through its stony shell / you were conveyed, / a farewell weave in the mass of transience. // Butterfly / good night of all beings! / The weights of life and death / sink with your wings / down onto the rose / that withers with the homewards ripening light. // What a lovely beyond / is painted in your dust. / What a kingly sign / in the secret of the air.][xxiv]

A fragile creature has passed from chrysalis through metamorphosis into a new life. The dust/sand/ash that run through Sachs's poetry (the transformed body of Israel) is here changed into the beautiful dust of the butterfly.

In 1966 Sachs received the Nobel Prize for Literature *ex aequo* with the Israeli writer Shmuel Agnon.[xxv] In her brief Nobel speech, delivered in German, Sachs recalled her youth, when her late father eagerly anticipated the announcement of the names of awardees of the Nobel Prize. She called her presence there the realization of a "fairytale" (*Märchen*),[xxvi] and concluded by reading a poem containing another development of the "metamorphosis" trope:

In der Flucht
welch grosser Empfang
unterwegs –
Eingehüllt
in der Winde Tuch
Füsse im Gebet des Sandes
der niemals Amen sagen kann
denn er muss
von der Flosse in den Flügel
und weiter –
Der kranke Schmetterling
weiss bald wieder vom Meer –
Dieser Stein
mit der Inschrift der Fliege
hat sich mir in die Hand gegeben –
An Stelle von Heimat
halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt –

[In flight / what a great welcome / underway – // Wrapped / in the winds' blanket / feet in the prayer of the sand / which can never say amen / for it must keep / on from fin to wing / and further – // The ailing butterfly / soon knows again from the sea – / This stone / with the fly's inscription / has given itself into my hand – // Instead of homeland / I possess the metamorphoses

of the world –[xxvii]

Celan and Sachs

Although they knew each other's work and corresponded from about 1954, it was only in 1960 that Celan and Sachs met. She had been awarded the Droste Prize, which is awarded each year to a German-speaking woman writer by the city of Meersburg (situated on Lake Constance). Since Sachs did not feel able to spend the night on German soil, she stayed in a hotel in Zürich, and Celan came from Paris with his wife Gisèle Lestrange and their son Eric. Naturally Sachs and Celan had much to talk about. The conversation was immortalized by Celan in a poem "Z:

Zürich, Zum Storchen (German)
Für Nelly Sachs

Vom Zuviel war die Rede, vom
Zuwenig. Von Du
und Aber-Du, von
der Trübung durch Helles, von
Jüdischem, von
deinem Gott.

Da-
von.
Am Tag einer Himmelfahrt, das
Münster stand drüben, es kam
mit einigem Gold übers Wasser.

Von deinem Gott war die Rede, ich sprach
gegen ihn, ich
liess das Herz, das ich hatte,
hoffen:
auf
sein höchstes, umröcheltes, sein
haderndes Wort -

Dein Aug sah mir zu, sah hinweg,
dein Mund
sprach sich dem Aug zu, ich hörte:

Wir
wissen ja nicht, weisst du,
wir
wissen ja nicht,
was
gilt.

[Zurich, at the Stork Hotel / For Nelly Sachs // Our talk was of the too much, / of the too little. Of you / And that other you, of / the murkiness through clarity, / of Jewishness, of / your God. // Of / that. / On the day of an ascension into heaven, the / Minster stood yonder. It came / with a smidgeon of gold over the water. // Of your God we talked, I spoke / against him, I / let the heart I had / hope /for / his highest, death-rattled, his /combative word – // Your eye looked at me, looked away. / Your mouth / Addressed the eye, I heard: // We / just don't know, you know, / we / just don't know, / what's / valid.

It is important to note that in the German the lyrical hero addresses the "you" using the

familiar "du" form – meaning that Celan and Sachs had become close friends, despite the generational difference in their ages.[xxviii] From this point on Sachs became like an elder sister to the poet, their fates deeply entwined on a very personal level. In the poem Celan buries a number of hints at the deep contexts that he leaves for the attentive reader to parse. The Shoah is alluded to in the phrase "about – that," the single German word "davon" being split over two lines: "da-von" – reflecting how Celan read his verse slowly and reflectively, word by word and even breaking down the components of a word. The "that" which they discussed cannot be expressed in the poem, only alluded to. It is the understood context of their conversation, the context of their lives – in short, the Shoah. As Celan points out, the conversation took place on Ascension Thursday – forty days after Easter and the crucifixion, when Jesus is said to have arisen to heaven. Felstiner comments that in German the word for "Ascension" is "Himmelfahrt" (literally "sky journey"), inevitably invoking references in the poetry of both Celan and Sachs to the smoke of the burning bodies rising from the crematoria into the sky.[xxix] There is a deep irony in the fact that the meeting is taking place on a day when Christians remember the crucifixion, since there is a direct historical line from the crucifixion of this one Jew through to the Holocaust. It is also ironic that the "smidgeon of gold"[xxx] is brought "over the water" by the Protestant Grossmünster visible from the hotel. It is presumably caused by the sunset reflected on the building. Felstiner links this image to notions of hope instilled in both poets by this meeting. (It is also mentioned subsequently by Celan in his letters to Sachs.) This assumption is convincing, although the irony of the source of hope – a *Christian* church, seen across the water – should be noted. Moreover, the poem ends with the word "gilt" ("is valid"), so that a rhyming echo "Gold – gilt" is foregrounded and inevitably suggests a third word "Geld" (money). This is almost certainly one of the things they talked about during the meeting: Sachs's struggle to receive the niggardly compensation paid reluctantly by the West-German government to survivors of the Shoah after considerable bureaucratic obstacles.[xxxi] For her apartment in Berlin and its contents, looted by the Nazis, after much delay, Sachs had received the paltry sum of 24,600 marks (Fioretos, 2011, p. 189). Celan was deeply aware of the recrudescence of neo-Nazism in the Federal Republic of Germany. His feeling of persecution was exacerbated by the renewal of old false accusations of plagiarism originally started by the widow of the poet Ivan Goll. On the other hand, intellectual circles in the FRG did spring to Celan's defence to refute the plagiarism claims, and he went on to win the prestigious Georg Büchner prize (Felstiner, 2001, pp. 154-155). Both Celan and Sachs were deeply wounded by the antisemitism still rampant in the FRG, to the point that Sachs found she could not even bring herself to sleep on German soil. Significantly, Celan's poem ends with Sachs's words. Their conversation has revealed fundamental differences, expressed in his phrase "your God." It was her belief in a coherent world, based ultimately on a belief in God, that enabled her to get beyond the notion of homeland (*Heimat*), and accept that all is transformation, metamorphosis. Celan, who as a young man had become a leftist and supported the Spanish Republican cause, never espoused the Jewish, or any other, God. By the end of the 1960s he had reached an emotional and intellectual dead-end – with no homeland and no deep belief to carry him beyond the trauma of the Shoah, he ended his life. Despite their deep differences, Celan and Sachs together left a remarkable legacy of poetry. Sachs was dying of cancer when word came to her of Celan's death. She passed away on the day of his funeral.

Celan or Sachs were essentially Jewish poets, united above all by the deep trauma of the Shoah, with its attendant feelings of survivor's guilt; by their physical displacement from the land of their birth (and separation from the German-speaking world), and by their Jewishness (although they gave it different meanings). Moreover, both drew, not so much on German poetry, but, in the case of Celan, on the French poets, especially Apollinaire and Éluard, and in the case of Sachs, on the Swedish poetry she translated, which had been in turn influenced by the British modernists. By their choice of country of exile – France, Sweden – they saved themselves from the impossible choice of living in *Deutschland*. Neither, however, was led to see the excessively literal "homeland" of the state of Israel as an option. Standing on the same stage with the Israeli writer

Shmuel Agnon as she received the Nobel Prize for Literature, Sachs pointedly rejected the idea of a Jewish *heimat*. As she says in her Nobel poem, her people – Israel – will always be travelling – *unterwegs*.

Clearly, both poets deeply understood the need for a new poetic that would correspond to the challenge of the Shoah. They had no choice but to write poetry. It was not a pastime, but a need. Great poetry is written on the edge of the abyss. They had to explore and express their most profound feelings. It was part of the healing process for two deeply traumatized individuals, who were driven to find a vocabulary, images, and motifs that would enable them to use the language they had inherited to bear witness and to heal – or at least survive. The dangers were real: recent Israeli research on Holocaust exposure and suicide risk among survivors shows that "[t]he full direct exposure group was not at significant suicide risk compared to the indirect exposure group."[xxxii] This coincides with Sachs's assertion, which greatly upset her friends, that she suffered as much as those who went to the gas chamber (Fioretos, 2011, p. 247). Both Celan, who was in a Romanian forced labour camp, not a German death camp, and Sachs, who escaped transportation to one at the last moment, belonged to the group with indirect exposure. Celan had lost his parents and Sachs her lover and then her mother. They were orphans. They were also writing in exile, not in the language of their chosen place of refuge, which made their poetry deeply personal. Eventually, as related above, Celan ended his life; Sachs came close to doing so. It was, as I have argued, her set of values that carried her through, although she suffered a severe breakdown after her mother's death. For Celan, the loss of his mother, plus a series of transitory love affairs that evidently could not compensate for that trauma, proved in the long run fatal.

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МОЛОКО І ПОПІЛ: ПРОТИСТОЯННЯ ПОЕТІВ ПАУЛЯ ЦЕЛАНА І НЕЛЛІ ЗАКС ТРАВМІ ГОЛОКОСТУ

Останнім часом питанню травми приділяється значна увага. Нині визнано, що солдати, які брали участь у бойових діях, а також цивільні особи, які пережили насильство війни чи геноцид, зазвичай страждають від ПТСР (посттравматичного стресового розладу). Мета цієї статті - простежити, як стрес, завданий двом поетам Голокостом, вплинув на зміст їхньої поезії, і як вони вижили як поети і знайшли способи писати. Пауль Целан і Неллі Закс були, по суті, єврейськими поетами, яких об'єднувала передусім ця травма з супутнім почуттям провини тих, хто вижив; їхнє фізичне переміщення з рідної землі (і відокремлення від німецькомовного світу), а також їхнє єврейство (хоча вони надавали йому різного значення). Більше того, обидва спиралися не

стільки на німецьку поезію, скільки, у випадку Целана, на французьких поетів, особливо Аполлінера та Елюара, а у випадку Закс - на шведську поезію, яку вона перекладала, і яка, у свою чергу, зазнала впливу британських модерністів. Обравши країну вигнання - Францію, Швецію - вони врятували себе від неможливого вибору жити в Німеччині.. Їхні поетичні стратегії після Голокосту визначалися невимовною жахливістю злочину геноциду та (суперечливою) необхідністю свідчити про нього. У відомому вірші Целана "Todesfuge" ("Фуга смерті") поет говорить від імені в'язня німецького табору смерті. Згодом Целан відмовився від традиційних формальних поетичних прийомів. Його поезія стає все більш герметичною. Назва вірша Целана містить слово "смерть", так само як і назва першого циклу Закс після Шоа "In den Wohnungen des Todes", що є невисловленою ниткою в їхній творчості. Закс звернулася до свого єврейського походження, щоб сконструювати історичне бачення народу Ізраїлю, і застосувала поняття метаморфози (Verwandlung) для артикуляції свого статусу як людини, що вижила. У своєму вірші "Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa" Целан пов'язує свою долю з долею Марини Цвєтаєвої, передрікаючи своє майбутнє самогубство. Закс пережила травму, прийнявши твердий набір релігійних цінностей.

Вони мали дослідити та висловити свої найглибші почуття. Це було частиною процесу зцілення двох глибоко травмованих людей, які прагнули знайти лексику, образи і мотиви, що дозволили б їм використовувати успадковану мову, щоб свідчити і зцілитися - або принаймні вижити.

Ключові слова: *Целан, Закс, Голокост, травма, самогубство*

[i] See, for example Maté, *passim*

[ii] A striking absence from the list of poets translated by Celan is T. S. Eliot. In general English-language poets contemporary to Celan, such as Eliot, Pound, and Auden, seemed to have little resonance in his work. Yet in the case of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, written in the shadow of the colossal bloodshed of WWI, we find the famous line "A handful of dust," echoed in the poetry of both Celan and Sachs in the references to sand, dust, and ashes.

[iii] *Gesammete Werke*, I, 39-42. See Hamburger's version in *70 Poems*, pp. 13-14, and Felstiner's discussion and translation (pp. 31-32).

[iv] The tango was popular in Central Europe in the 1930s. The Polish composer of popular music Artur Gold composed a tango, and when he was deported to Treblinka (clutching his violin), he played in a small orchestra with other inmates, before eventually being killed. See: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/gold&szpilman.htm> In at least one other death camp the commandant made the Jewish musicians play a "death tango" (Felstiner 28).

[v] The motif of a lover's hair is a frequent occurrence in Celan's love poems. On the complex of female images in the poem, see Ostriker, pp. 407-408.

[vi] Celan did not experience the Nazi death camps personally. He and his parents were detained in Romanian work camps – Celan in Romania and they in Romanian-occupied Transnistria. He evidently learned about the extermination camps as they began to be liberated by the Red Army.

[vii] International standard version https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+137&version=ISV

[viii] Two translations appeared simultaneously – one in England and the other in New York – each with an inaccurate bio (Felstiner 94).

[ix] I am grateful to Natalia Vesselova for this insight.

[x] Quoted in: https://oztripper.wordpress.com/2019/09/17/dance-me-to-the-end-of-love/

[xi] Interestingly, Cohen's song is a tango. For a fine performance, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJ1P3LjkE28

[xii] On the question of semantically loaded images, see, for example, Felstiner's discussion of the meanings of the word "Mandel' (almond) in the poem "Count the Almonds" (Zähle die Mandeln) (Felstiner 63-64).

[xiii] *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. IV and V.

[xiv] Felstiner 127. Most likely Celan confused Osip Mandelshtam with the émigré Russian poet Yury Mandelshtam (1908-1943), who died in Auschwitz.

[xv] *Tarusskie stranitsy* was a miscellany of works by various Russian authors published in 1961. It was one of the fruits of the brief thaw inside the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is named for the small town of Tarusa on the river Oka that had become a sort of artists' colony. Before the Revolution, Tsvetaeva's parents owned a dacha there where the family would spend their summers. The miscellany contains mostly prose works, but also some poetry by Tsvetaeva and some by David Samoilov.

[xvi] «Гетто избранничеств! Вал и ров. / По-щады не жди! / В сём христианнейшем из миров / поэты – жиды!» (Tsvetaeva, p. 473).
[xvii] «Бла-гая часть / Любовников без надежды: / Мост, ты как страсть: / Условность: сплошное между." Tsvetaeva, p. 462. (Here and elsewhere the translations from German and Russian are by the author of this article – JDC.) The echo of this mention of the bridge in the poem "And with the book from Tarusa" means that there is fourth river, unmentioned here, that Celan has spanned in his poetry and his translations – the Vltava. His poem "In Prague" ("In Prag," *Gesammelte Werke*, II, 63) inspired by the affair he had with Inga Wær in Stockholm, was, he noted, his only poem about this river (Fioretos, p. 243).
[xviii] « Les mains dans les mains restons face à face / Tandis que sous / Le pont de nos bras passe / Des éternels regards l'onde si lasse » Maupassant, p. 154.
[xix] «Мост, ты за нас! / Мы реку телами кормим!» Tsvetaeva, p. 463.
[xx] « Von der Brücken- / quader, von der / er ins Leben hinüber / prallte, flûgge / von Wunden, - vom / Pont Mirabeau. Wo die Oka nicht mitfliesst. Et quels / amours! (Kyrillesches, Freunde, auch das / ritt ich über die Seine, / ritts übern Rhein ».
[xxi] He died in 1918 of the Spanish flu.
[xxii] Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, p. 76.
[xxiii] Sachs, *Suche nach Lebenden*...p. 63.
[xxiv] Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, p. 148.
[xxv] Beginning in 1963, she had been nominated by seven different people. Celan too had been nominated eight times. In 1966 other nominees included Anna Akhmatova, W. H. Auden, Pablo Neruda, Ezra Pound, André Malraux, and Samuel Becket. Subsequently Sachs nominated Becket, who was awarded the prize in 1969. https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/list.php?prize=4&year=1966
[xxvi] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1966/sachs/25722-banquet-speech-1966/ This comment is perhaps a hidden gesture towards the shade of Selma Lagerlöf, who had herself stood there over fifty years before to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, and who drew her inspiration in part from fairy-tales.
[xxvii] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1966/sachs/25722-banquet-speech-1966/ My translation – JDC.
[xxviii] To try to capture this, Felstiner (pp. 156-158) uses the archaic English "thou."
[xxix] In the poem "O the chimneys" ("O die Schornsteine"), the very first poem of Sachs's first book of poems about the Shoah ("In the Habitations of Death") we read "when Israel's body drifted as smoke / Through the air" (Sachs, p. 21).
[xxx] "mit einigem Gold" – "einig" here meaning "a small amount, a modicum."
[xxxi] In German "Wiedergutmachung" – literally "making good again." The program (begun in 1953) was very unpopular with the broad German public, which showed no remorse or sympathy towards the Jews.
[xxxii] Lipsicas et al., p. 311; see also Lurie et al., abstract.