Paul Celan readings

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SELECTED POEMS AND PROSE OF
PAUL CELAN

Translated by
JOHN FELSTINER
After the Hitler-Stalin pact, Soviet troops in 1940 occupied Czernowitz. Besides ridding Celan of any Communist certainties, their presence prompted him to begin learning Russian. Then on July 5, 1941, (*Einsatzkommando* 10B) entered his homeland. Avidly abetted by Romanian forces, the Germans set about destroying a centuries-old Jewish culture by plunder, burning, murder, the yellow star, ghetto, forced labor, deportation. In late June 1942, his parents were picked up in an overnight raid and sent over the Dniester and Bug Rivers into western Ukraine. Celan, away for the night, came home to find the door sealed—although friends of his underwent deportation and exile alongside their parents. He never recovered from that abrupt loss, however much his words, his voice, might probe it: “Taken off into / the terrain / with the unmistakable trace: // Grass, written asunder... / Read no more—look! / Look no more—go!”

From July 1942 through February 1944, Celan endured forced labor in Romanian camps. He kept a 3” × 4” leather notebook for poems, sending copies to a woman he loved back home and aiming distantly, desperately, for a book. Bit by bit he learned his parents’ fate: his father had perished from typhus, his mother was shot, sometime in fall and winter 1942–43.

Returning in the wake of the Red Army to his Soviet-occupied homeland in 1944, Celan took up life again, a raw orphan with literally nothing left but his mother tongue. Friends got him a job in a psychiatric hospital tending to Soviet airmen. In a little-known letter of July 1, 1944, he wrote to his Czernowitz boyhood friend Erich Einhorn (the word *Einhorn* appears in a later poem, “Shibboleth”), who’d fled to Russia in 1941 and not come back:
A word more needs to be said about the mode of Celan's witnessing, as it differs markedly from that of other Holocaust writers, and that difference itself is what makes possible the visionary stance I am so insistent about. Despite the presence throughout the work (or better maybe, below the work) of the events of the Nazi years, especially the murder of his mother, there is a strong refusal in Celan to let his writing become simply a repository for a narrative of the Shoah, in profound contrast to most Holocaust writers, a major part of whose endeavor has been to dwell again and again on the past in order to chronicle with as much accuracy as they could muster the events of their lives during those fateful years (Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi come to mind but also poets like Abba Kovener or Abraham Sutzkever). Not only did Celan not write such an autobiographical prosopopoeia, but, according to all accounts, he refused steadfastly to speak in public or in private about the events of his life connected with the Shoah. Symptomatic for this reticence is the following biographical comment from 1949: "With the exception of a one-year stay in France, I, for all practical purposes, never left my native city prior to 1941. I don't need to relate what the life of a Jew was like during the war years." This decision not to relate, not to dwell on those years — no matter how much they shaped his early life, no matter the shadow they threw on the rest of his life — informed the stance of his writing for the next quarter century. One way to see this is to examine his rewriting of "Death Fugue" in the poem "Stretto," which I do later in this introduction. But let me now turn to a closer look at Paul Celan's life, before addressing some of the issues his poetry raises.

Celan was born Paul Antschel in Czernowitz, capital of the Bukovina, in 1920. He was raised in a Jewish family which insisted that young Paul receive the best secular education, with his mother incul-
cating her love of the German language and culture, and also that he remain firm in his Jewish roots: both his parents came from solid orthodox and, on one side, Hasidic backgrounds. His father had strong Zionist convictions, and his mother, notwithstanding her great admiration for classical German culture, kept the Jewish tradition alive in the household on a daily basis: it was a kosher household in which the Sabbath candles were conscientiously lit every week. In this, the Antschels were not very different from most of the more than fifty thousand Jews of Czernowitz during the tail end of those "golden years" for Bukovina Jewry — years that started under the benign though calculating Austrian-Hungarian regime with the "emancipation" of the Jews in 1867 and began to decline after the fall of the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918 and the incorporation of the Bukovina into Romania, the government of which immediately began to try to "romanize" the province, though with relatively little success. Czernowitz retained its "pulsing Jewish life which resisted all anti-Semitic attempts to undermine it" until 1940.3

In November 1938 Celan traveled by train from Czernowitz to Paris via Berlin, where he arrived at a fateful moment — the morning after Kristallnacht — later remembered in a poem set by its title in Paris ("La Contrescarpe") but alluding to the stopover in Berlin:

Via Krakow
you came, at the Anhalter
railway station
a smoke flowed towards your glance,
it already belonged to tomorrow.

3. Much of the information for this section is indebted to Israel Chalfen's Paul Celan: A Biography of His Youth (New York: Persea Books, 1991) and to Wolfgang Emmerich's Paul Celan (Reinbek by Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999).

In summer 1939 Celan returned to Czernowitz after his first year as a medical student at the University of Tours. The Hitler-Stalin Pact in August of that year put Romania on a war footing, and any return to studies in France became impossible. In spring 1940 the Soviet Union addressed an ultimatum to the Romanian government, demanding the immediate handing over of Bessarabia and North Bukovina. Romania, powerless and unable to expect any support from its theoretical allies, France and England, who were themselves now under attack from Hitler, handed over both provinces. On June 28 Soviet troops entered Czernowitz. The first year of occupation by foreign troops was relatively peaceful, but on June 13, 1941, the citizens of Czernowitz got a first inkling of the horrors to come. In a single night the NKVD arrested four thousand men, women, and children and deported them to Siberia. Then, on June 22, Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. On the southern front German troops reinforced by Romanian units pushed the Soviets back and occupied the Bukovina and Czernowitz (Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, had enthusiastically joined the German-Italian-Japanese axis in November 1940). The retreating Soviet troops helped their own civilians — bureaucrats and party officials who had joined the occupation troops — to evacuate the Bukovina, but only just before the last train was ready to leave, reports Israel Chalfen, did they make the rather lukewarm suggestion that the general population of Czernowitz should flee to Russia. Only a few committed Communists followed suit, among them Paul Celan's close friend Erich Einhorn. On July 5, 1941, the Romanian troops occupied Czernowitz, and the German Einsatz-Truppe D, led by SS-Brigadeführer Ohlendorf, reached the city the very next day. The SS had one essential job to fulfill — "Energisch durchgreifen, die Juden liquidieren," to energetically liquidate the Jews — as they did not trust the Romanians to do it thoroughly
enough. On July 7 the Great Temple went up in flames, and for the next three days the hunt was open: 682 Jews were murdered. By late August Ohlendorf triumphantly reported to Berlin that more than 3,000 had been killed. On October 11 the ghetto was created — the first one in the history of the Bukovina and of Czernowitz. Then began the “Umsiedlung” (relocation) of most Jews to Transnistria. The Romanians managed to argue with the Germans and to retain 15,000 Jews in Czernowitz to keep the city functioning. The Antschel family were among those who, at least for the time being, remained in the ghetto. Paul was ordered to forced labor on construction sites. Then, in June 1942, a new wave of arrests and deportations began, taking place primarily on Saturday nights. With the help of his friend Ruth Lackner, Paul had found a large and comfortable hideout, but his parents refused adamantly to take refuge there, preferring to remain in their own house — where Celan’s mother prepared rucksacks in case they should be deported. On one of those Saturday nights, disobeying his parents’ orders, Paul left the house and spent the night in the hideout. When he returned the next morning he found his home sealed off: his parents had been deported.

Celan continued to work in forced labor camps, hauling stones and debris from the Prut River for the reconstruction of a bridge. In late fall 1942 a letter (probably from his mother) brought the news that his father, physically broken by the slave labor he was subjected to, had died — either shot by the SS or succumbing to typhus; the exact cause of death was never established. Later that winter the news that his mother too had been killed by the Nazis reached him via an escaped family member. Paul himself was now sent to a forced labor camp some four hundred miles south of Czernowitz, where he remained throughout the next year until the labor camps were closed in Feb-

uary 1944. In April Soviet troops occupied Czernowitz without a fight. Celan was put to work as a medical auxiliary in a psychiatric clinic and made one trip as an ambulance assistant to Kiev. Another year was spent at the university in Czernowitz, now studying English literature (he had already started translating poems by Shakespeare during the years in the forced labor camps). While making a living translating newspaper articles from Romanian for a Ukrainian newspaper, he put together two manuscripts of his poems, an act that clearly affirmed his decision to become (or remain) a German-language poet.

Celan left his hometown for good in April 1945 to move to Bucharest, the capital of Romania, where he found work as a translator of Russian literature into Romanian. He also translated a number of short stories by Franz Kafka, an author who was to remain of central importance to him for the rest of his life. He started to engage in a life devoted to writing, gathering and reworking the early Bukovinan poems, writing new ones and beginning to publish. It is also at this time that he changed his name from Antschel to Celan. He sought out the most influential Bukovinan poet of the time, Alfred Margul-Sperber, who welcomed him warmly, and met Pete Solomon, who was to remain a lifelong friend. A relatively happy time, then, but one always framed by the dark past and an uncertain present and future. The work of those years is tinged with investigations of surrealism, as is most obvious in the prose poems in Romanian (the only time he used a language other than German) he wrote during that period, one of which opens the poetry section of this book.

Then, in December 1947, he clandestinely crossed over to Vienna — from the little we know, a harrowing journey on foot from Romania through Hungary to Austria. The only German-speaking place the
[WINTER]

It's falling, Mother, snow in the Ukraine:
The Savior's crown a thousand grains of grief.
Here all my tears reach out to you in vain.
One proud mute glance is all of my relief . . .

We're dying now: why won't you sleep, you huts?
Even this wind slinks round in frightened rags.
Are these the ones, freezing in slag-choked ruts —
whose arms are candlesticks, whose hearts are flags?

I stayed the same in darknesses forlorn:
Will days heal softly, will they cut too sharp?
Among my stars are drifting now the torn
strings of a strident and discordant harp . . .

On it at times a rose-filled hour is tuned.
Expiring: once. Just once, again . . .
What would come, Mother: wakening or wound —
if I too sank in snows of the Ukraine?
NEARNESS OF GRAVES

Still do the southerly Bug waters know,
Mother, the wave whose blows wounded you so?

Still does the field with those windmills remember
how gently your heart to its angels surrendered?

Can none of the aspens and none of the willows
allow you their solace, remove all your sorrows?

And does not the god with his blossoming wand
go up in the hills climbing hither and yon?

And can you bear, Mother, as once on a time,
the gentle, the German, the pain-laden rhyme?