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# L I T E R A T U R E

## The Poetry of Paul Celan and the Bukovinian *Exceptionalism*

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**T**WO DIRECT references made by Paul Celan to his roots became so famous that their excessive repetition has rendered them devoid of meaning, thus transforming them from the evocation of the significant “*lieu de mémoire*” that Bukovina was for him into a mere commemorative cliché. “*Es war eine Gegend, in der Menschen und Bücher lebten*” (It was a region in which human beings and books used to live), Celan said about the world in which he was born and raised, in a speech held in Bremen in 1958, when he was granted the Literary Award of the Hanseatic city.<sup>1</sup> This formula, both concise and expressive, whose effect is due mainly to the metaphor of the ‘living’ books—a defining metaphor for Celan’s relationship with his own poetry, thus illustrating the power of literature to be at the same time one with the poet’s life and with the life of

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his neighbours, of the people—was also interpreted as a direct allusion to the “people of the book,” in other words, to the spiritual force that nourished the existence of the Jews who lived in Bukovina, to whom Celan felt that he belonged directly, through ethos and destiny. Furthermore, in the preceding sentence of the same speech held in Bremen, the native landscape is associated with “those Hasidic tales” about the wise and miracle-working rabbis, surrounded by those who shared their belief in the ecstatic power of the word—the same one that poetry may claim, in keeping with the Orphic tradition. Its very (dramatic) historical fate, which Celan mentions in the next sentence, had conferred upon his native land a mythical aura, which was in its turn a source of fiction and poetry. This whole semantic repertoire, which seemingly conveys an autonomous and unitary message, received mainly in a nostalgic register, also seems to suggest a fault line that deliberately shifts the accent from what Celan called the “Zirkumflex—ein Dehnungszeichen—des Ewigen” (circumflex—marking length—of the eternal) towards the “Gravis des Historischen” (grave accent of history).<sup>2</sup> Because, as Celan stated before the audience present at the ceremony in Bremen, the legends about the ‘Hasids’ in Bukovina became known because they were retold, “for us all” (Jews and Germans) “in German” by none other than Martin Buber, who had once celebrated the fecundity of the symbiosis between the German and the Jewish spirit, ruined by the Nazis.<sup>3</sup> Celan claimed to have read, during his youth in the “former province of the Habsburg monarchy”, the *Ode mit dem Gramatapfel* by Rudolf Borchardt, the antimodernist and conservative poet rejected in Hitler’s Germany because he was a Jew. Celan also claimed to have enjoyed the elegant publications of Bremer Presse, the publishing house of Luther, Fichte and Goethe, of Hofmannsthal and Rilke.

In direct relation with this allusive evocation of the German-speaking environment in Czernowitz during Celan’s youth, we find his return to the image of his native Bukovina two years later, in a speech held in Darmstadt on 22 October 1960, when the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung granted him the Georg Büchner Award.<sup>4</sup> However, on the “meridian” that he claims to have found while seeking “the place of my own origin,” which had disappeared from the map during his feverish search—an “immaterial” trajectory, similar to that one of language, but enabling his eternal and circular return to origins—he finds his “countryman” Karl Emil Franzos, whose name is related symbolically to the famous phrase “Halb-Asien,” which he used with colonial smugness for the fringe territory (in terms of its civilisation and morals), located on the Eastern borders of the Habsburg monarchy.<sup>5</sup> Out of this “cultural desert” just Bukovina, according to Franzos, had allegedly been able to escape, only due to the “deutsche[r] Geist, dieser gütigste und mächtigste Zauberer unter der Sonne” (German spirit, the most benevolent and powerful wizard under the Sun), which

turned it into a “blühende[s] Stücklein Europa” (flourishing bit of Europe).<sup>6</sup> Celan could not forget that the idea of the Bukovinian “exception,” confirmed by Franzos, the Galician Jew educated at the Middle School of Czernowitz and who went on to become a German writer, was inseparable from the association he had promoted obstinately in the name of the paternal legate: “Du bist deiner Nationalität nach kein Pole, kein Ruthene, kein Jude – du bist ein Deutscher, aber deinem Glauben nach bist du ein Jude” (In terms of nationality, you are neither Polish, nor Ruthenian, nor Jewish—you are German, and in terms of your faith you are Jewish).<sup>7</sup> This apparent compatibility also maintained the illusion of the “German–Jewish cultural symbiosis,” significantly cultivated by the Jewish middle class of Bukovina, eager for emancipation and westernization.

However, while pointing out here<sup>8</sup> the error committed by Franzos as the editor of Georg Büchner’s work, when reading in the original manuscript of the play *Leonce und Lena* the adjective “*commode*” (accommodating) as “*kommende*” (coming) religion,<sup>9</sup> Celan speculates ironically on the foretelling virtues of language: would the “accommodation” associated with something “yet to come” dissimulate intentionally—taking into account Franzos’s apostolate in favour of the cultural “Germanization” of the Jews—the seeds of the future tragedy of the European Jews, even of those who trusted the values of “assimilation”? Celan promises to himself to stay away from such confusions—he had stated two years prior, in Bremen, that upon reading “durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede” (through the thousand darkness of death-bringing speech) without finding the right words “für das, was geschah” (for that which happened), the German language of his poetry had returned to where it began, but “angereichert von all dem” (enriched by all this).<sup>10</sup> Celan also increasingly felt the urge (“Akut des Heutigen” [the acuteness of the contemporary])<sup>11</sup> to explain to himself—a man who had experienced directly and painfully, through the death of his parents deported to Transnistria, the anti-Semitic persecution turned genocide—and to others, once more, the option to write poetry in German and, on a more general level, his individual relationship with the German language and culture. The poem *Engführung* (*Stretto*), which ended the volume meaningfully titled *Sprachgitter* (*Speech-Grille*),<sup>12</sup> reprised in a diction firmly opposing the “artistry” of *Todesfuge* (*Deathfugue*)<sup>13</sup> the motif of “the latest rejection,” as a meditation on his own poetic language which, in its attempt to leave musicality behind and become “more grey,” breaks down, crumbles into a “whirl of particles.” After the crisis caused by the plagiarism accusations made by Claire Goll and circulated by a German press that had no sympathy for the poet whose “origin” was deemed (by Günter Blöcker) as a handicap in his relationship with German language,<sup>14</sup> the poem *Eine Gauner und Ganoovenweise* (*A rogues’ and ganifs’ ditty*), on which he worked for almost two years, between

February 1961 and November 1962, contains in the extension of the title a relevant identity-related self-recommendation: *gesungen . . . von Paul Celan aus Czernowitz bei Sadagora (sung ... by Paul Celan of Czernowitz near Sadagora)*.<sup>15</sup> Henceforth, for the native son of the German-speaking Czernowitz, a member of the “assimilationist” Jewish middle class, the Bukovinian metropolis would only be a suburb of Sadagura, the little *stetl* nearby, the residence of the rabbinic court of the *Tzadik* Israel Friedman and of his followers, who turned it into the capital of East-European Hasidism.<sup>16</sup>

**O**N 23 NOVEMBER 1920, when Paul Antschel was born in Czernowitz, the former Habsburg province of Bukovina had been part for almost two years of the Kingdom of Romania, and the new authorities made great efforts to level down its *exceptionalism* and “normalize” it by using the common pattern of the unitary state, governed from Bucharest in the name of the majority Romanian “nation.”<sup>17</sup> Officially, they had re-established the borders that Austria had shifted in 1774 when, with the approval of the High Porte, it had annexed around 10,500 square kilometres of land within the north-western part of the Principality of Moldavia, which later united with the Principality of Wallachia (1859–1862). In the 144 years of Austrian domination, the population of the province, initially of Romance origin for the most part, increased ten times, up to around 800,000 inhabitants, and its demographic and ethnical composition changed substantially. In order to stimulate the economy, the Habsburg administration also encouraged the immigration of Ukrainian villagers from Galicia, and the settling of German colonists, Catholics and Protestants from Bohemia, Swabia and Zips, mostly farmers, craftsmen or miners. On the other hand, the urban class within the cities and towns of Bukovina—with Czernowitz taking full advantage of its status as district and then provincial capital, thus reaching around 1900 the size of a respectable provincial metropolis, comparable to Innsbruck or Brunn—was gradually shaped within the same paradigm of cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity as in all the other centers that were emerging (due to modernisation) in Central Europe, where the engine of capitalism was represented mostly by the Jewish middle class. The ‘hybridisation’ process advanced in Bukovina faster and easier than in other regions of the Habsburg Monarchy, where the local cultivated classes had been able to resist, but those classes were very anaemic here. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Austrian censuses, defining “nationality” according to the “spoken” language reported by the subjects, already recorded a rather mixed landscape, with no clear “national” majority, unlike in the other provinces: there was a relative balance between Romanians and Ukrainians, with each of the two “nationalities” accounting for about 35% of the entire population. In ac-

cordance with the ideology of the Habsburg state, which favoured territorial solidarities to the detriment of the “national” ones, the harmonic ideal of a *homo bucovinensis*, the local version of *homo austriacus*, had as its communicational link the German language, in the context of the tolerated linguistic diversity.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, as a both “national” and supranational marker, the German language, declared at the last Austrian census (of 1910) as the “mother tongue” by more than 20% of the inhabitants (around 12% Jews and 9% Germans, from an ethnical perspective),<sup>19</sup> but used as *lingua franca*, known and spoken very well by many of the Romanians, Ukrainians or Poles who lived here, also had in this far-eastern province of the former Empire a very special destiny when compared to other “non-German” lands of old Austria.<sup>20</sup> Whereas initially the soldiers, the public officials and the few teachers sent from Vienna were the only ones who spoke the language of the ‘Center’ on the territory annexed “on the fringes” in 1774, to which the German colonists of the rural areas were added around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the integrationist mirage of the German culture spread rapidly among the Bukovinian Jews. Mostly in Czernowitz, the small but burgeoning town which acquired a western air and which was thus already compared in 1840 with a Viennese suburb, the emancipating message stirred a significant echo, because the urban Jews understood that their access to prosperity and to civil rights passed through acculturation. The competition between the assimilationist class, who founded German–Jewish schools even with their own money, and the traditional isolationism propagated by Rabbinic Orthodoxy and by the Hasidic courts of Sadagura (Sadhora), Bojan (Boyany) and Vyzhnytsya was decided in the subsequent decades in favour of the former. Already after 1860, but mostly after 1867, when the new Constitution granted Jews full citizenship rights in Austria, the Jewish middle class—which had consolidated its economic position in Czernowitz and in all Bukovinian towns—no longer doubted their German-speaking cultural identity. This was proven by the ‘assault’ on schools and on Franz Joseph University, founded in 1875 in Czernowitz, where the teaching language was German, with a few exceptions. The aforementioned constitutional provision, defining “nationality” according to the language spoken by the citizens, automatically included the speakers in the category of the “German” nationality, given that the Yiddish language was only considered a “jargon.” It is quite plausible to say that in Bukovina—in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to the First World War—due to the interest of the Habsburg power, who found loyal allies in the Jews who deluded themselves with the so-called “German–Jewish cultural symbiosis,” and due to their political-cultural influence per se, augmented by their economic power, the weight of Austria’s “cultural mission” in Eastern Europe gradually shifted in the direction of the Jewish community. The thesis of a Bukovinian *exceptionalism*



(*Sonderweg*)—initially formulated in no uncertain terms by Karl Emil Franzos, whom Celan mentioned in his Darmstadt speech—is based precisely on the way in which the identification of the local Jewish middle class—following the model of the one in the Metropolis—with the prototype of *homo austriacus/homo bukovinensis* was able to generate a social, political and cultural configuration with *exceptional effects* (when compared to all the other provinces of the monarchy) on the integration of Jews into the state apparatus, from the Landtag and the municipal councils, through the bureaucratic system, law enforcement, the magistrate corps, to their presence in the university, schools or in the editorial staff of newspapers.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that the same Karl Emil Franzos saw as a symptom of the cultural Bukovinian “exception” the very early emergence, through a (suddenly discovered) artistic impetus, of several local German-language “poets”—which he tried to help launch their careers through a publication called *Buchenblätter*, printed in Czernowitz in the early 1870s.<sup>22</sup>

**I**LANA SHMUELI—called Liane Schindler at that time—the childhood friend of Paul Celan, whom he encountered and befriended again in the last years of his life, reflected in her memoirs—which included a criticism of the “elevated” social setting she came from—on the awareness of this *exceptionalism* in the daily life of Bukovinian Jews, before and after the First World War.<sup>23</sup> It is intriguing that an essentially social function was assimilated and interiorised at both a collective and an individual level: in Czernowitz, Ilana Shmueli noted, “they spoke a good deal of great talents, one child or another was even described as a genius.”<sup>24</sup> According to her own words, as a young woman she was constantly puzzled by the artifice of a certain “Kultur-Kult” (cult of culture), occidental/German, of course, including its tendency towards an acute separation from reality (“this culture imitating the west”),<sup>25</sup> towards an “illusionism” bordering on blind mimetism (“als ob”), all meant to legitimise, naturally, the grounds of the “exceptionalism.” On the other hand, Ilana Shmueli also noted that this atmosphere fuelled, through its desire to “be different,” through its “high intellectual demands,” sometimes without any measure, “an authentic power and a strong spiritual effervescence . . . a true spiritual drive that would lead, later on, for some of us, to unusual and partly remarkable personal development.”<sup>26</sup>

When speaking about the “human beings and the books” of his Bukovinian homeland, Celan also thought of the people’s ardent desire to read anything that was new in the German or Austrian journals and publishing houses, persuaded that such readings would change their lives and confirm their image of ‘Occidentals’ in the East. Ninon Ausländer, the daughter of a renowned lawyer in Czernowitz, while still a student, was so impressed by *Peter Camenzind*, the first novel (published in 1904) of the young Hermann Hesse, that she immedi-

ately wrote to the author; years later, she became his wife and the writer Ninon Hesse.<sup>27</sup> A law student at Franz Joseph University, Abraham Altmann, one day talked to Ferdinand von Saar, whose works he had read exhaustively, and offered to comment on his texts. Ironic in regard to the “spiritual aristocracy” of the Bukovinian city and its “inferior” intellectual level, he sent several poems to the short story writer, which he claimed to have written in a state of full reverie—he seemed to be familiar with Novalis, with impressionism, with the aesthetics of the Viennese “Secessionists.”<sup>28</sup> The figure of the “poet” exerted considerable fascination in Czernowitz around 1900 and even later, because it consecrated the exceptional features, the visionary genius that many wished to attain and to illustrate. To oppose the influence of certain ‘authorities’ within the local cultural and journalistic world, with more or less mediocre literary tastes and allergic to any openness towards modernity, young people with non-conformist literary ambitions preferred to seek success far away from Bukovina (e.g., Kamillo Lauer, Erich Singer, or Victor Wittner).<sup>29</sup>

Right after 1918, when the traditional hierarchies of the German-speaking cultural milieu in Bukovina seemed reversible precisely due to the new political constellation that came to power after the annexation of the province by Romania, several educated young people—led by Albert Maurüber—founded a journal called *Der Nerv*. They meant it as an act of intellectual defiance against artistic compromise, false values and even against the dominant “deceiving morals” of the local middle class. The open plea for intellectual “activism” of the Berlin-based group of the so-called “geistiger Arbeiter” (workers of the spirit), led by Kurt Hiller and Ludwig Rubiner, on one hand, and the repeated critical statements vehemently made by Karl Kraus against the corrupt “materialism” of the bourgeois press, on the other hand, announced the desideratum of a new “logocratic” order, based on the *exceptionalism* of an intellectual elite.<sup>30</sup> The juvenile enthusiasm of the young people, especially Jews, gathered to listen and to discuss the lectures on the ethics of Spinoza and of his later disciple, the Berlin-based philosopher Constantin Brunner, at an impromptu “Ethisches Seminar” (ethical seminar)<sup>31</sup>—an enthusiasm also highlighted by Rose Ausländer, also in attendance, when describing the atmosphere in Czernowitz post 1918, full of “Schwärmer und Anhänger” (admirers and followers)<sup>32</sup>—says everything about the wishes and hopes for social and moral reform of a generation which, after the experience of the war, was ready to deny its middle class roots, to change reality, and invest its energies in the power of the spirit. *Der Nerv*, a publication that was a late Bukovinian echo of Expressionism, failed after only 14 issues, due to the increasingly violent conflicts within the German-speaking middle class of Czernowitz, obviously disturbed by this attack coming from an intellectual faction derived from its own ranks. However, the ‘rupture’ produced in the revolt

against the cultural monopoly of a conservative “field of power”—now delegitimised (politically) after losing the support of Vienna—had decisive long-term effects, because it shifted the weight of the “symbolic capital” of the Bukovinian German-speaking culture from the dominant heteronomy of a mainly journalistic culture of consumption towards the pole of aesthetic autonomy, tending towards alienation (*Entfremdung*)—social, linguistic, cultural—in artistic sublimation (*Verfremdung*).<sup>33</sup> Alfred Margul-Sperber explicitly underlined in a series of articles in the *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, published in 1928 under the title “Der unsichtbare Chor: Entwurf eines Grundrisses des deutschen Schrifttums in der Bukowina” (The invisible choir: An outline of German writing in Bukovina), the role played even in 1919 by *Der Nerv*<sup>34</sup> in producing the “miracle,” the *exceptional* situation, whereby “in der Bukowina, selbständig und losgelöst von jedem Zusammenhang mit dem Ursprungsgebiete, erst jetzt im Herzen eines mit aller Macht assimilierenden Grossrumänien ein Zweig der deutschen Sprache schöpferisch rege zu werden beginnt” (in Bukovina, independently and without any relation with the territories of origin, and within the borders of a strongly assimilationist Greater Romania, a branch of the German language began to show the signs of a fertile revival).<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, programmatically, the rigorist character of the *exception* promoted at *Der Nerv* would be revived in an ideological and more radical version by the journal of the social-democratic left called *Die Gemeinschaft* and edited by the same Albert Maurüber, who rejected in the name of social revolution any formal concession stemming from the ideal of a middle class and the consumerist aesthetics of the affirmative ‘delectation’ with Beauty, and who recommended the novelty of the absolute negation promoted by the avant-garde as the single artistic alternative.<sup>36</sup>

**I**N THE year 1918, the Bukovinian Jews welcomed the change imposed upon their status—from “homo bucovinensis” to “civis Romaniae,” as proclaimed by one of the Romanian nationalist leaders of the time<sup>37</sup>—with mixed feelings. The desire to assert a *national* identity, which had long been refused by Habsburg officials—a common denominator for the various Jewish political trends manifest in Bukovina at the end of the Great War—, was accepted ab initio as natural by the Romanian administration. In the subsequent years, by signing the minority protection treaty (December 1919) that accompanied the Paris peace treaties, and then through the provisions of the 1923 Constitution, accompanied by the Citizenship Law of 1924, Romania offered full citizenship rights to the Bukovinian Jews, just like it did to all the other Romanian Jews.<sup>38</sup>

But in reality, of all the geographical ‘factions’ of the more than 800,000 Jews living in Greater Romania, the Bukovinian Jews were the ones who struggled the most to adapt to the new institutional and political configuration of Greater



Romania. These struggles entailed much frustration at the level of both collective and individual identities. Numerous contemporary accounts attest to it, literary accounts included. Manfred Reifer, a Zionist activist and politician, later remembered that the sudden collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and the annexation by Romania gave Bukovinian Jews the feeling of having been “misled” and “rushed” by a history that was ungrateful for their patriotism and their attachment to Austria.<sup>39</sup> He recalled that before the war, they had been discontent because their “national” Jewish identity had not been acknowledged and that the political commitment to obtain this recognition had taken into account the constitutional framework in Cisleithania and the redefinition of the Jewish confessional community as a “nationality” alongside and benefiting from the same rights as the others. However, the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination—which inspired the actual dissolution of the dual empire—had favoured in the successor states precisely the domination of a majority nation. Thus, it transformed the minority members into “second rank,” “third rank” or “lowest rank” citizens, as another “witness” of that time, the journalist Philipp Menczel, pointed out.<sup>40</sup> The Bukovinian Jews—beyond their social, political and cultural differences—experienced more acutely than their fellow believers in the other territories annexed to the Old Kingdom after the First World War (Transylvania/Banat on one hand, Bessarabia on the other) a deep crisis of adjustment to the realities of the minority condition. This crisis did not come to an end; on the contrary, due to the anti-Semitic pressure, it became worse in the two decades until the outbreak of the Second World War. This was also due to the collective memory of the *exceptionalism* indissolubly related to their previous experience as citizens of a multinational Austria, a deeply different experience than that of the Jews in Romania before the war, in the national Hungarian state, or pursuant to the discriminatory laws in imperial Russia.

The members of the National Jewish Council in Bukovina were happy that the Jewish “ethnic group” was included among the other nationalities within the province recently annexed to Romania in the census ordered by the Romanian administration in February 1919.<sup>41</sup> In fact, for the Bukovinian Jews, the first separate registration of Jews and Germans marked the beginning of a systematic policy of the Romanian local and central authorities. This policy delegitimised the German linguistic and cultural preponderance in Bukovina, traditionally maintained there by the Jewish urban class, thus deconstructing the ‘specific difference’ of the Bukovinian Jews within the broader framework of the Jewish community in Greater Romania, which the Romanian governments treated as a single minority. The abrupt measures of the new administration regarding the Romanianisation of the state and justice system—as public officials were obligated to speak Romanian, pursuant to the Law-decree of 18 December

1918<sup>42</sup>—had partial and short-term consequences. This was due to the fact that in the private sphere and in the public space, such restrictions produced effects only indirectly, even if most local Jewish leaders—starting with those of the Israelite Community—advised the people to gradually renounce the common use of German and learn Romanian. On the long term and despite warnings from the educated Jewish class against the creation of “national ghettos”—the *privilegium odiosum* once mentioned by Gomperz—and the rush to become “estranged” from the German language,<sup>43</sup> the structural modifications of the public school network were the ones that counted. When the government had the initiative of creating parallel Jewish classes in primary schools and of founding a Jewish high school—an initiative claiming to meet the demands of the National Jewish Council in Bukovina—they separated the German children from the Jewish ones. Only the continual disagreement between the representatives of the Zionists and of the Social Democrats within the National Jewish Council on Hebrew or Yiddish as teaching language in Jewish schools—in a famous session of 24 August 1919 of the National Jewish Council, the former received more votes than the latter—kept German as the teaching language in Jewish schools for a while. The practical impossibility of ensuring a regular education in Hebrew there—although teaching the classes in Yiddish was imaginable—facilitated the gradual Romanianization of the syllabus of the Jewish schools and high school. They subsequently implemented the unifying provisions of the Education Law, valid for the whole of Romania.<sup>44</sup> An unfortunate milestone, which erased any illusion of a just treatment of minorities and which augmented the feeling of insecurity among them, occurred in 1926: of the 94 Jewish candidates for the high school graduation examination at Aron Pumnul High School in Czernowtiz, 92 were rejected, and during the subsequent public protests, a Jewish high school student was killed by a Romanian extremist, who was later acquitted in court.<sup>45</sup>

Even if the data of the 1930<sup>46</sup> census cannot be deemed as fully reliable when it comes to the spectacular decrease in the number of people having German as their mother tongue, to less than 20% of the population listed under the Israelite confession and belonging to the Jewish ethnic group in Bukovina, compared to 75% speakers of Yiddish, the tendency to change the identity profile as compared to the period before the war is correctly indicated by these figures. In 1933, in Czernowitz—the city that, according to the same census, harboured the most concentrated Jewish population (37.9%) of all major Romanian cities—five German newspapers were published. This could prove, at best, the inertial loyalty of the Bukovinian Jews for a cultural identity that was increasingly questioned by the clash with a German minority obviously influenced by the racial nationalism inspired by Hitler. Whereas in the '30s the circulation of books and journals from the German and Austrian intellectual centers towards

Bukovina had become rather easy once again, as fully proven by the reviews and the announcements of bookstores in the German press of Czernowitz, I find symptomatic the reference—constant in most local newspapers—to the authors who had to seek exile after 1933 from Germany and after 1938 from Austria; only the national-German paper *Czernowitzer Deutsche Tagespost* was fully dedicated to the national-socialist cultural propaganda. Moreover, already in the spring of 1933, a violent polemic against it was started by the liberal press, controlled by the Jewish middle class. This polemic ended in street violence and in the destruction of stores owned by Jews.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, no element indicates a significant adherence of the Bukovinian Jews to the Romanian language and culture, despite the educational experience of several generations of young people in the Romanian educational system. Only around 2,000 of the 75,533 Jews identified at the census reported Romanian as their mother tongue. The tense history of the relations with the Romanians in Habsburg Bukovina, the relatively hostile management after 1918 by both Czernowitz and central authorities of the relations with the minorities and especially with the Jews, the constant progress of the Romanian anti-Semitic far right movement, tolerated by the authorities and thus increasingly violent—all of these aspects compromised any attempts to build mutual trust. In the parliamentary elections of 1937, the extreme right parties—highly represented in Bukovina, even in the rural areas around Czernowitz—obtained almost a quarter of the votes. Consequently, the new government was entrusted to Octavian Goga, the leader of the National-Christian Party, whose program demanded the immediate “Romanianization” of all spheres of activity. One of the first anti-Semitic initiatives was the verification of the Romanian citizenship of the Jews, which made the latter even more insecure. In early 1938, the last Jewish public officials in Bukovina were dismissed, while the anti-Semitic acts of violence in the schools and streets of Czernowitz multiplied dramatically. The objective of “Romanianization” was not abandoned, however, not even after the resignation of the Goga government and the beginning of the personal dictatorship of King Carol II. The latter, following the massive territorial losses of Romania in favour of the USSR, of Bulgaria and of Hungary, had to abdicate on 6 September, thus paving the way for the anti-Semitic rule of the Iron Guard, a government presided by General Ion Antonescu, with open support from the German troops.<sup>48</sup>

**A**LL THIS social and political turmoil left deep marks on the personality of the child and later the teenager Paul Antschel. Born to a lower middle class Jewish family, he knew from early childhood the identity issues of the urban class of Czernowitz precisely because of the latent conflict

between his own parents concerning his education. His father, Leo Antschel, insisted due to his Zionist beliefs for enrolment in the private Hebrew school of Saafa Ivrija, which he hated, while his mother Friederike, born Schragar, who had taught him the German language, favoured his education in the spirit of the German culture, still dominant among the Bukovinian Jews. For the moment, however, as a student in Romanian schools, Paul Antschel learned good Romanian and French—the main foreign language taught in the educational system of Romania—while his readings of German philosophy and literature, ever more comprehensive and intense, were his initiative; he was self-taught.<sup>49</sup> His reaction towards the increasingly manifest anti-Semitic vibe in school and in the city made him politically a leftist, within the groups of young Jews with communist affinities, which were actually closely monitored by the police. Some of them even organised their self-defence against the anti-Semitic excesses which more than once turned bloody, but which the authorities used for anti-Jewish repressive measures, such as the closure of the socialist cultural Jewish center called “Morgenroi.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Celan was reluctant to embrace the Zionist ideals propagated in Czernowitz mainly by the middle class establishment. This is proven by the memoirs penned by his friend Moshe Barasch, for whom the attachment to the Jewish status was much more important at that point than the German cultural lineage with which the young Celan fully identified.<sup>51</sup> Whereas due to his political affinities he ended up reading *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx, the works of Rosa Luxemburg, of Gustav Landauer or of Karl Kautsky, his lyrical preferences concern mainly the conservative neo-Romanticism of the poets within the school of Stefan George, as well as Expressionists: Rilke, Hofmannsthal, Trakl, Georg Heym are, along with Hölderlin, among his favoured German authors.<sup>52</sup> Alfred Kittner remembered that in 1937 he received poems written by a young Celan, which he quickly labelled as pastiches after Trakl.<sup>53</sup> The first poetic texts by Celan preserved until nowadays date from 1938; the memoirists and biographers only mention the reputation of an exceptional talent built by the student Antschel, in his amicable competition with his colleague Immanuel Weissglas, as a talented poet and translator, admired by the circles of friends and acquaintances.<sup>54</sup>

Both the young Celan and the young Weissglas seemed to fit, in the most natural way, in the small group of “chosen ones” who—ignoring all the threatening signs in daily political life—continued to believe in Bukovina, as an extension of the exceptional creative impulse stirred by the meteoric journal *Der Nerv*, in keeping with the lyric message of German expression. Paradoxically, the last years of peace before the Second World War coincided with an extraordinary flourishing of the lyrical production written in Czernowitz still in the German language. In 1938–1940, the windows of the Literaria bookstore of Norbert

Niedermayer displayed new poetry volumes by Alfred Kittner, Rose Ausländer, Alfred Margul-Sperber, Moses Rosenkranz, and David Goldfeld. Meanwhile, Sperber still made efforts to accomplish an old project and persuade a publishing house in Central Europe to publish an anthology of Bukovinian poetry in German, mostly penned by Jewish poets, for which he had selected texts by 32 authors, many of whom were living far from Bukovina.<sup>55</sup> In 1939, Alfred Klug managed to publish such an anthology (*Bukowiner deutsches Dichterbuch*) in Nazi Germany at Stuttgart, with poems (without any literary value, by the way) signed exclusively by authors belonging to the German ethnic group.<sup>56</sup> The qualitative difference of the ‘offer’ made by Sperber was related to the very condition of a lyric character connected to the cosmopolitan canon of modernity, opposed to the model of a provincial “country life poetry” (*Heimatlidung*). It had already evolved in the ’20s from an explicitly social theme, with apocalyptic overtones within the Expressionist repertoire, towards a trend symptomatic for the reflection on their own lyrical language, a reflection that acquired more dramatic accents as the *exceptionalism* of the linguistic identity of the Bukovinian German-speaking middle class culture was increasingly questioned. The obvious shift of the poetry written after 1930 by Alfred Margul-Sperber, Moses Rosenkranz or Rose Ausländer towards neo-Romantic lyrical patterns, where poetic language provides meaning—through stylistic, imagistic and sound effects—to individual experiences transcending in harmonies and contrasts the simple transcription of reality, is also manifested as an ostentatious return to the permanent objects of poetry, such as nature and Eros. Beyond anything that may be labelled in these poems as conventional gestures or epigone ones inspired by various readings (Goethe, Heine, Stefan George, Rilke, Trakl, or Else Lasker-Schüler, among others), it is worth noting the utopian halo, meant to preserve a linguistic space beyond time, far from the aggressive deviations and excesses of daily language—a desperate attempt to ‘resist,’ emphatically reconstructing the poetical discourse with a desired normality of communication, in the context of the extreme alienation experienced by poets as both individuals and participants in a threatened community. As early as March and April 1940, some of them still strived to send their poetry volumes to important authors in Germany and to the editorial staff of Swiss newspapers, in order to try to be perceived and acknowledged as German poets, despite the obvious collapse of their world.<sup>57</sup>

**T**HE COLUMNS of Polish refugees who crossed Bukovina in the fall of 1939, after the resounding defeat of Poland and its division between Germany and the Soviet Union, provided the inhabitants of Czernowitz with the image of the future events to occur here. On 26 June 1940, the Soviet Union, in agreement with Nazi Germany, requested through an ultimatum that



Romania cede within 48 hours Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, the city of Czernowitz included. Two days later, the Red Army seized control of the territory requested from Romania. While the representatives of the administration, as well as many other citizens—mostly Romanians, but also nationalist Jews or Ukrainians—sought refuge in Romania, many members of the Jewish community were actually relieved because this meant the end of the political pressure of the semi-official Romanian anti-Semitism, and for such relief they were willing to pay the price of fundamental social turmoil.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, the new authorities, accompanied by special units of the NKVD, had to achieve strictly and rapidly the objectives of “Sovietization,” among which the elimination of the local middle class and social ‘levelling’ through expropriation and the nationalization of all economic sectors. The shortages, the police surveillance and the political repression against “the enemies of the people”—in other words, the middle class elites who remained in Northern Bukovina: former businessmen, landowners, politicians, journalists, activists of the associations and national parties, etc.—soon became commonplace. Public life acquired Russian and Ukrainian overtones: streets changed their names, monuments were replaced, and the theatre only featured the Russian language, the Ukrainian language, and Yiddish. The university was also Russified and important teachers came from the Soviet Union, charged mainly with ideological indoctrination. The school system was reorganised using the same algorithm.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, pursuant to the agreements between the Germans and the Soviets, a vast action of “repatriating” the German population to the Reich began, which meant it was mainly moved to the lands annexed in Poland. Thus, until 8 November 1940, almost 20,000 people left Northern Bukovina. Furthermore, the action was extended to Southern Bukovina, which still belonged to Romania.<sup>60</sup> In their turn, the Soviet authorities organized a massive deportation of all potentially ‘hostile’ elements: thousands of Romanians, Ukrainians and Jews were arrested by the NKVD and sent to Siberia in sealed train cars, along with their families, in 1941.<sup>61</sup>

Like for most Jewish people in Czernowitz and Bukovina, the years 1938–1941 represented for the Antschel family a series of long challenges. Their son Paul graduated from high school and then the parents decided to send him to France to study medicine, in an attempt to protect him from danger. They believed France was an undeniable pillar of democracy and republican freedoms. More and more children from Bukovinian Jewish families were sent to French universities, mostly after Hitler seized power in Germany and then in Austria. Paul Antschel was enrolled at Tours, for a preparatory year, in order to subsequently study medicine; on his way to Paris, he experienced the moment following the “Night of Broken Glass,” the burning of synagogues in Germany, on 8 November 1938, as he was travelling to Berlin and he was waiting in the

Anhalt train station. When he returned to Romania for the summer holiday (with a priceless luggage of French literature, mostly poetry), he had to abandon the idea of going back, because Germany had attacked Poland, and its allies—Great Britain and France—had declared war on Hitler. Anyway, access to Western Europe had already become too risky for a journey from Romania. Thus, he enrolled at the University of Czernowitz, to obtain a degree in Romance studies—French language and literature.<sup>62</sup> He never managed to finish the second semester, because the Soviet ultimatum of 28 June 1940—followed by the immediate occupation of Northern Bukovina and of Czernowitz by the Red Army—also led to the closing of the Romanian university, quickly turned into a Russian-Ukrainian university, starting with the new semester, in September 1940. Probably not happy with the quality of the teachers hired to teach French literature, Paul Antschel chose to also attend the English classes<sup>63</sup> but, given the new circumstances, he also chose to study Russian intensively.

Not only the radical changes in the social system, with the entire economic life made public and controlled, perturbed the lifestyle of the Jewish middle class in Soviet-occupied Bukovina, but also the strict language regime, which only acknowledged Yiddish as the “national” language of the Jews. As evidence for the administrative rigour of this reform, which profoundly affected the identity *exceptionalism* of the urban Jewish class in Czernowitz, I mention, among others, the elimination of all newspapers in the German language, the school system measures (the Jewish children were forcefully sent to Yiddish classrooms) and the creation of a permanent Yiddish theatre funded by the state. For the German-speaking intellectuals, access to journals and books other than those published in the USSR became almost impossible, just like the possibilities of publication or public manifestation for those for whom the German language remained, despite the new realities, their means of poetic expression.

**O**N 22 JUNE 1941 the war began between Germany and its allies (Romania included) and the Soviet Union. The German and Romanian troops conquered Czernowitz again on 5 July; accused collectively of having supported the Soviet power, the Bukovinian Jews were subjected immediately to a wave of repression: besides the massacres committed in the rest of the province by local gangs and Romanian soldiers, where around 15,000 people were assassinated, only in Czernowitz 682 Jews—among whom rabbi Abraham Mark, whose temple was set on fire—died in the first three days of the invasion, tortured or shot by German SS commandos and by Romanian troops. Through the decree, the Jews were deprived of civil rights and were forbidden to exercise their profession; their children were expelled from schools, while the men were sent to forced labour. On 11 October 1941, the almost 50,000 Jews

of Czernowitz were evacuated from their homes and crammed into a ghetto, from where, according to the “ethnic purification” program for Bessarabia and Bukovina devised by the government of Marshal Antonescu, they were to be deported in groups, just like the Jews from the rest of the province, to the territory between the Dniester and the Bug rivers, Transnistria, which came under Romanian administration. Statistics attest that in October and November 1941, around 90,000 Jews from the entire Bukovina (Northern and Southern) were deported to Transnistria. Only due to the brave intervention of the mayor of Czernowitz, Traian Popovici, who claimed that many of those targeted by the deportation decree were indispensable for the economic and social life of the city, around 17,000 people were momentarily spared. In the fall of 1941, 23,000 Jews from Czernowitz were nonetheless transported in cattle wagons towards Transnistria, while another 4,700 (among whom Paul Antschel’s parents) were arrested and deported, despite the stay permits for the city issued by the city hall, in May–June 1942. Thousands of deportees succumbed on the way, due to starvation, forced marching, and the brutality of the gendarmes and of the Ukrainian auxiliary troops. A German–Romanian agreement stated that the deportees should be gathered into concentration camps and mobilised for forced labour, until the finalisation of the military operations would allow their evacuation over the Bug, in Ukraine. In these camps, genuine outdoor prisons, foci of epidemics placed in localities devastated by the war and without any order, subjected to spontaneous or organised massacres, perpetrated with the consent of Romanian civilian and military administration, nobody doubted that the final purpose was actually the physical extermination of the deportees, who lacked any means of survival. At the end of the war, of the Bukovinian Jews, not more than 35,000 persons survived, besides those who had been allowed to remain in Czernowitz.<sup>64</sup>

At the end of March 1944, the Red Army re-conquered and restored the Soviet administration in Northern Bukovina, while the south of the province remained part of the Romanian state, repositioned as a military ally of the anti-Hitler coalition after 23 August 1944, when Antonescu was deposed and arrested by the king. The new Soviet authorities in Czernowitz were nonetheless permanently irritated by the fact that most Jewish inhabitants, either those who had remained in town during the war, or those returned from the camps, did not correspond at all socially and culturally to the ideal profile of the “Soviet man”; the urban Jewish class were, partially, people who still spoke the German language and did not seem eager to adapt to the new model of society. The Bukovinian Jews knew well to what extent they owed their survival to the Soviet offensive, but, on the other hand, the memories from the period 1940–1941, combined with the food shortages, the hostility of the officials concerning the

free practice of religion, but mostly with the fear of forced conscription to the army or to the work detachments in the mines of Donbass, were a major source of anxiety. Given that the military operations that went on for several months after 23 August 1944 and the corresponding movements of troops involved the de facto opening of the border with Romania, many Jews in Northern Bukovina (around 12,000) defied all dangers and emigrated, which was tacitly tolerated by authorities. The decision from the summer of 1945, taken at the highest level in Moscow at the initiative of the head of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, to authorise all those who had acquired Romanian citizenship to give up their imposed Soviet citizenship and to officially repatriate to Romania, was welcomed by all those who wished to leave Northern Bukovina: by April 1946, 22,307 people from the region of Czernowitz in Soviet Ukraine officially crossed the border.<sup>65</sup> Among them, the poets Rose Ausländer, Alfred Kittner, Immanuel Weissglas, and Paul Antschel, the future Paul Celan.

ON 3 NOVEMBER 1946, the young Paul Celan wrote from Bucharest to the Swiss critic Max Rychner and confessed that “it was so hard, as a Jew, to write poems in German,” imagining the nightmare scenario in which his book of verse, printed in Germany, would end up in the hands of the man who had murdered his mother. Nevertheless, he seemed convinced that “this is my destiny: I must write poetry in the German language. And if poetry is my destiny, then I consider myself happy.”<sup>66</sup> This relationship, problematic from the start, with the language of the “assassins,” was already announced by a poem of 1944, written in Czernowitz and first published in 1948 in the journal *Plan* based in Vienna: “And can you bear, Mother, as once upon a time,/ the gentle, the German, the pain-laden rhyme” (“Und duldest du, Mutter, wie einst, ach, daheim,/ den leisen, den deutschen, den schmerzlichen Reim?”—*Nähe der Gräber* [*Nearness of graves*]).<sup>67</sup>

Following the occupation of Czernowitz by Romanian troops in July 1941, the Antschel family, who had decided against all foreseeable dangers to stay put, experienced all the phases of the nightmare lived there by the Jewish population: robberies, assassinations, racial laws similarly violent to those of Nazi Germany, the bearing of the yellow star, the evacuation to the ghetto. Initially beneficiaries of a stay permit from the mayor Traian Popovici, a permit that enabled them to escape the deportations to Transnistria in the fall of 1941, the parents and their son were nonetheless included in the lists of deportations in June 1942. Paul Antschel managed to hide in the night of 28 June, when his mother and father were seized and sent with the first shipment of July 1942 to Transnistria, through Mogilev and Schmerinka (Zhmerynka), to the camp of Ladyzhyn, situated on the bank of the Bug River, in the area controlled by the Romanian

administration; from there, they were transferred in August to Mikhailovka, an even more horrible camp within the area occupied by the German troops. Leo Antschel died in the fall, of typhus or killed by the guards, and Friederike in 1943, also a victim of the guards' cruelty. The son, conscripted in a forced labour detachment in the south of Romania, learned about their deaths a little later. He returned to Czernowitz in February 1944. Following the occupation of the city by the Soviet army, he enrolled in the English classes at the university and he worked for a while in the psychiatric clinic, as a nurse. Sent by the hospital on a mission to Kiev in the summer of 1944, he traced back a part of the deportation route followed by his parents; the poem *Nähe der Gräber* was written immediately after he returned from this journey.<sup>68</sup> However, he never stopped writing poems in the German language: in 1944, his first collections of poems began to take shape, either typewritten or handwritten. One poem arrived to Bucharest before the author, ending up on the desk of Alfred Margul-Sperber—the Czernowitz-based poet who already in the early '30s saw himself as the leader of the German-speaking Bukovinian poets' school; later, he contributed decisively to the debut of Celan in the literary world of Vienna.<sup>69</sup>

The guilt complex of writing in the German language after the Second World War was permanently on the mind of the Jew Paul Celan. Whereas in 1948 he confessed to relatives settled in Palestine that he chose Europe because he had not given up on poetry and because he knew that only there, as a Jew, could he follow his destiny as a German language poet,<sup>70</sup> the memory of the dead already penetrated very early into his poems, dominated by the ceremonious and multiply adorned style of the neo-Romantic and symbolist tradition. The increasingly tormenting identity struggle after the success of his first volumes of poetry published in Germany concerns mainly the 'chains' of a poetic language in which he feels he does not fit anymore and in which he thinks his words are no longer adequate.<sup>71</sup> In the poem *Welchen der Steine du hebst* (*Whichever stone you lift*), written in that period and published in the volume *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (*From threshold to threshold*), the final lines may be read as a ruthless accusation of the German language and of its downsides: "Whichever word you speak—you owe/ to destruction" ("Welches der Worte du sprichst –/ du dankst/ dem Verderben").<sup>72</sup> The inner clarification that he intensely experienced gradually led him to the awareness of the fact that the memory of the dead, of Jewish suffering, was for him the only meaning to be conveyed to the Other, while his poetry, in order to "exist," should either find or invent the language through which he could talk about the experience of the perplex silence before the murder. This language is not related to the direct 'reference', because—as I stated earlier—Celan understood his belonging to the Jewish community not "thematically," but "pneumatically"<sup>73</sup>—as a 'state' and at the same time as an ac-



curate representation of alterity par excellence. The “biographism” inseparable from the poems of Celan also involves the dramatic character of his experience—through his attitude towards the German language itself—of the catastrophic failure of the illusion of a “Jewish-German cultural symbiosis,” within which he had been raised; as it perished, so did that of the Bukovinian *exceptionalism*. An interesting psychoanalytical interpretation of the poem *Engführung* suggests here the definitive abandonment of the link to the “maternal” universe of the “aesthetic” ideal represented by German culture and the penitence of reconverting to the severe Old Testament law of the “father.”<sup>74</sup> “Engführung” may mean the difficult crossing of a very narrow space—the appraisal of semantic accuracy and of separation from metaphors, a “textual” crossing of the concentration camp universe, as well as the piece of advice within the Darmstadt speech: “geh mit der Kunst in deine allerengste Enge. Und setze dich frei” (with art go into your very selfmost straits. And set yourself free),<sup>75</sup> another way of saying that only by learning his own identity can a poet regain his freedom.



## Notes

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## Abstract

### The Poetry of Paul Celan and the Bukovinian *Exceptionalism*

Our work intends to reread Paul Celan’s poetic work in the light of the special historical-cultural constellation in Bukovina, the former crown land in the east of the Habsburg monarchy. It was a “exceptionalism” phenomenon unique in Central Europe: in this enclave the Jews played an essential social role because of their German-language acculturation, in which most liked to express an illusionary “German–Jewish” symbiosis. The nationalisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made every effort to destroy the Bukovinian “special route” of heterogeneity and to homogenize the country and the people. After the war, the young Paul Antschel still had in the name of this “special way” thought of his German language and the traditions of German poetry—his poetry is “extraordinary” also because it arose from this reflex until he understood that the illusion had failed. It was only this disillusionment that shaped his lyrical discourse in the fundamental renewal of the “German” poetic language.

## Keywords

Paul Celan, *exceptionalism*, Bukovina, German–Jewish symbiosis