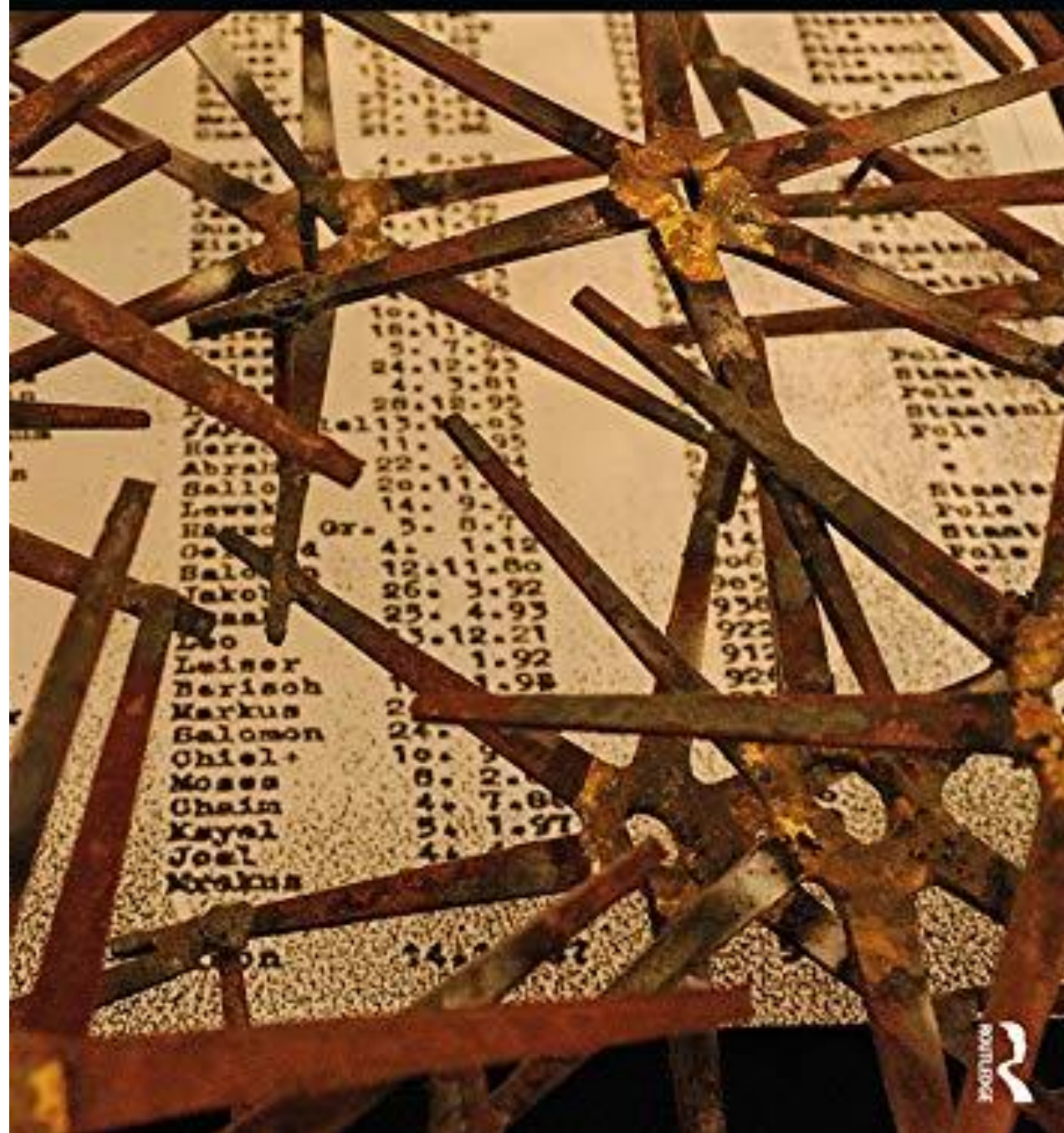


Edited by Ira Brenner

# The Handbook of Psychoanalytic Holocaust Studies

International Perspectives



## At the Water's Edge: Poetry and the Holocaust

For my father, Julius Kirchheimer z"l, and my mother, Margot Strauss Kirchheimer

### How I Knew and When

Age 8 – My father hangs upside down on a pipe that was part of a fence that separated our street from the next. All of his change falls from his pockets. He looks so young.

Age 15 – “There were one hundred and four girls in the Israelitisch Meisjes Weeshuis orphanage in Amsterdam. Four survived,” my mother says.  
“I remember Juffrouw Frank, the headmistress. She made us drink cod-liver oil each morning. She said it was healthy for us.”

Age 17 – My father tells me his father and sister Ruth got out of Germany and went to Rotterdam. They were supposed to leave on May 11, 1940, for America. The Germans invaded on May 10.

Age 21 – My mother tells me Tante Amalia told her that on the Queen Elizabeth to America in 1947, after she and Onkel David were released from an internment camp on the Isle of Man, she was so hungry she ate twelve rolls every day at breakfast. She said it was the best time she ever had.

Age 24 – My father tells me, “Otto Reis got out of Germany in 1941. He took a train to Moscow, the Trans-Siberian railroad to Vladivostok, a boat to Shanghai, a boat to Yokohama, a boat to San Francisco, and a bus to Philadelphia, his wife and three sons staying behind. Carola Stein signed affidavits for them, but the government said she didn't make enough money.”

Age 31 – My mother's cousin refuses to accept money a rich woman left him. Says the money has too much blood on it. My mother tells me that in 1939 her cousin had asked this woman to sign affidavits for his wife and two daughters. She said no.

Age 33 – My father asks me to dial the number. His hands shake. He asks my cousin if she wants to send her three children out of Israel during the Gulf War. She says she can't let them go.

Age 42 – A waiter in a Jerusalem hotel tells my father he should come to live in Israel, because it's home. My father tells him, “Home is anywhere they let you in.”

As a poet, I am often asked to explain poetry. *Webster's New Riverside Dictionary* (1996, p. 527) defines it as: 1. the art or works of a poet, and 2. writing in metrical verse. Although true, such definitions do not do justice to poetry. To paraphrase Yvor Winters, a poem is a statement in words about a human experience with particular attention paid to the emotional connotations of language. Edward Hirsch, (*Poet's Choice*, 2006, p. XV) writes about poetry: "It moves and dances between speech and song. These words rhythmically strung together, these electrically charged sounds, are one of the ways by which we come to know ourselves." Robert Frost in his essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" (*Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, 1966, p. 20) asserts, "like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." And poetry is as simple and complicated as that.

Born in a small village in Germany, my father hid, along with his parents, older sister, and younger brother, in the cellar of their home during Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, on November 9, 1938. The next morning, he was ordered to report to town hall. Along with nine men, he was arrested and sent to Dachau. He was sixteen years old. In 1942, my father's parents, sister, and brother were deported to Westerbork, and then to Auschwitz, and murdered upon arrival. My mother, also born in Germany, was six years old when she was backed up against a wall at school in 1936. Her classmates threw rocks at her and called her Jude – Jew – because she refused to say, "Heil Hitler." Her parents got her out to the Jewish girls' orphanage in Amsterdam, the Israelitisch Meisjes Weeshuis.

I consider myself lucky. My parents answered all my questions about the Shoah and what happened to their families. Some of my friends told me their parents refused to discuss it. When I was young, I remember visiting a childhood friend of my father. They would stand off in a corner speaking about the Holocaust in low voices, stopping when I came by. But I wanted

to know. In my teens, I asked what happened. My father and I made lists of the transports of Jews from his village; we talked about Kristallnacht and Dachau; about the watercress his mother planted each spring near the house and used as a border around the *kartoffel salat* (potato salad); how his younger brother wrote in one of his last letters, "...with God's help, we will come to America." One night at the kitchen table, my mother sang me "The Song of Lorelei" that she learned as a young child." She then told me her mother threw out her gold and silver jewelry from the window of a train after Jews were ordered to turn it in, saving only her wedding ring; that she had to come back to Germany, to the American Consulate to get her visa for America; that she only spoke Dutch and could barely communicate with her mother; how after coming to America her father walked home from work in the blizzard of '47, collapsed, and died in her mother's arms.

I didn't set out to be a poet. As a kid, I was a voracious reader and thought when I grew up I'd write short stories about the Holocaust. I can still see the change falling out of my father's pockets. All the fathers in the neighborhood were much younger. I knew from a young age that my family and I were different, though I didn't understand why. We were the only Jews in the neighborhood; we weren't American in the ways the other kids and their parents were. It took years to realize I was being raised more European than American.

I grew up in two different worlds – one that doesn't exist anymore and one in which I don't, many times, feel at home. Like other children of survivors, I struggled with the culture of America. I remember trying to explain to some non-Jewish friends that my parents were German Jews. They couldn't understand how one could be both German and Jewish. Even though they were Irish- or Italian-Catholic, it was only possible for me to be defined by one identity: Jew. I felt I was on the outside looking in. There were many times I wanted to jump into the melting

pot, blend in, be an American kid sitting on a porch swing eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but I couldn't. Neither could most of my friends who were children of survivors.

There are cultural identities that choose us, and there are cultural identities we choose. The Holocaust chose me, and I chose to keep it. I tried to run away; but each time I tried, the stronger the pull was to come back. Finally, I stopped running. My childhood fueled my desire to write, as did my shyness and the longing to enter other landscapes created by writers. It would take me many years to understand that being a poet is how I came into this world.

### How to Spot One of Us

We're the ones who didn't know our relatives  
spoke with accents, the ones whose parents  
got nervous if we didn't come home  
on time, were afraid to let us go  
places by ourselves, who  
told the neighborhood kids the numbers

on their forearms were their phone numbers,  
who won't visit Germany, who wake up  
night after night from dreams, who never talk  
about the past, or never stop  
talking about the past, and we're the ones

who dream about big families, who  
wish words could just be words, wish "camp"  
or "selection" didn't make us flinch,  
and sometimes we're the ones  
who do everything we can  
so you don't know who we are.

I took a short story writing workshop, but my stories were not very good. The teacher told me, “I think you’re a poet, not a short story writer.” Less than six months later, I was in a poetry workshop, and my life changed.

Poetry allows me to say what I can’t say in other forms of writing. It allows me to live in ambiguity. Eliza Griswold, in an interview in *Poets and Writers* (Eliza Griswold’s Wideawake Field, May/June 2007, p.64) said, “What poetry allows for is dealing with ambiguity, which is impossible to deal with in a nonfiction article....There are paradoxes that are essential to understand what’s going on. There are experiences that there’s no other language for, no other place for.” According to *Wikipedia*, Ambiguity....an attribute of any idea or statement whose intended meaning cannot be definitively resolved according to a rule or process with a finite number of steps.

The Holocaust and its after-effects can in no way be resolved according to a rule or process. There is no process of finite steps to comprehend it. Each new piece of history I learn leads to another maze. Only when I was in a workshop, did I realize that poetry was the way I could encounter and write about the Shoah, my family, and myself.

#### Town Hall

“What for?” my father asked. “What did I do? I’m only sixteen,” and the gendarme told him if he didn’t

like it, if he asked any more questions, he could go home, they’d arrest his father instead. And he saw his father paying his tax bill in the next room,

and he didn’t call out, afraid they’d arrest him too, afraid his father would want to take his place, and the gendarme said he had a job to do, a quota of ten men,

and he didn't care how he filled it. And my father  
knew the gendarme, went to school with his daughter.  
He was told to empty his pockets, turn

in any money and weapons, and he turned in  
his pocketknife, and told the gendarme he had to go  
to the bathroom, and another gendarme, Wilhelm,

took him, and he knew Wilhelm too. He told Wilhelm  
not to worry, he wasn't going to run away, and  
Wilhelm said he knew, but he was doing his job.

As my father and nine men were loaded on a truck  
that said "Drink Coca-Cola" he turned and saw  
Wilhelm crying like a child.

For all the stories I heard from my parents, I always knew much could never be spoken. I  
knew things were held back. And I knew I couldn't ask. Poetry was the way to bridge the  
chasm between that which could be spoken and that which could not. Learning the craft of  
poetry – the word choices and their connotations, the music of the line, the breath, line and  
stanza breaks, and more – allowed me to write about that maze of twists and turns brought up by  
wrestling the Shoah. Poet and writer Kahlil Gibran (*Sand and Foam*, 2008, p.26) wrote, "Trees  
are poems the earth writes upon the sky, we fell them down and turn them into paper, that we  
may record our emptiness." Delving into the Shoah leaves us empty. It leaves us bereft of  
humanity. How can it not? There have been extraordinary writers who have chronicled the  
Shoah in academic work, memoir, fiction, and more. Poetry is the way I try to figure out the  
world and my place in it.

## Dogs

"I came across something," my father tells me  
as I'm driving him to cardiac rehab, "in my mind,"  
as if his mind were a filing cabinet  
or the dish where coins and keys are kept.  
It was something an old man told him when he was a boy,

how the stones freeze in winter, but the dogs  
who chase you don't, and two days later we're sitting  
on the back porch on Rosh Hashanah afternoon,  
and he tells me that the way of life  
he grew up with in southern Germany  
no longer exists, and if he thinks about it too much  
it will make him crazy and is not worth  
the consequences, and I want to tell him that I can hear  
the hazzan singing in shul, and I can smell the raisin challahs  
his mother baked for a sweet New Year.  
But it will not stop the dogs, so we just sit there  
and watch the birds that have gathered at the feeder.

My father and I would talk about the Shoah: about what would his life have been like had  
Hitler never come to power; would he have made Aliyah to Israel (then Palestine); what would  
his profession have been; would his parents, older sister, and younger brother still have been  
alive, what would our family life have been like?

There are so many ifs when attempting to understand the Shoah.

If

schoolkids hadn't backed my mother, six years old at the time, against a wall, thrown rocks at  
her, and called her *Jude*.  
my aunt hadn't escaped to Holland and worked as a maid to make enough money to get my  
mother out of Germany.  
my mother hadn't had to live in an orphanage in Amsterdam and wait until my grandparents  
could get immigration visas.  
my mother hadn't had to return to Germany to meet her parents so she could get her visa for  
America.  
my father hadn't had to leave his home and family to immigrate to America.  
the United States government hadn't had immigration quotas.  
the United States hadn't made him, a seventeen-year-old, fill out affidavit after affidavit after  
affidavit.  
the Germans hadn't invaded Holland one day before his father and sister were to leave for  
America.  
the boat they were supposed to be on hadn't been bombed in the harbor.  
they hadn't been sent to the left instead of the right.  
life didn't depend on if.



Perhaps the Shoah was the perfect storm of ifs – if my father’s sister’s visa number wasn’t too high; if my father’s invitation to go to England on the Kindertransport wasn’t stolen; if my mother’s uncle wasn’t taken to Stutthof, murdered, and his death certificate sent to his family; and if and if and if and if and if....

My parents would never have met in Germany. If the Holocaust had not happened, I would not have been born.

### The Photograph in My Hand

My mother, four years old, blond curls,  
wearing a smocked dress, in a field of goldenrod,  
her doll on her lap and her dog at her side.

Two years later, the girl in the photograph  
would be backed up against a wall at school,  
by kids in her class for refusing to say “Heil Hitler,”

and they would throw rocks, beat her up, call her *Jude*,  
her dress would be torn, and her parents  
would have to find a way to get her out of Germany.

She would be sent to an orphanage in Amsterdam,  
and they would wait two years for their visas  
to America. I want to ask the girl what

would have become of her if her parents hadn’t  
found a way out? Would she have survived?  
Would she have been experimented on like her cousin Hanni

who returned home after the war and rarely  
left her room, or would she,  
like another cousin, Bertl, have tried to cross the Pyrenees

into Spain and never be heard from again? What if Hitler had never come  
to power, would she and her parents still have come to America?  
Would she have met my father, and who would  
she have married if she had stayed in Germany, and  
who would she have become and what would have become  
of me? I cannot let go of it.

Poetry rises and falls on ambiguity. Poetry without it isn't poetry; it's prose with line breaks. We don't speak poetry in our daily lives. It's manipulated language. The poet leads the reader. The word choice, the resonance(s) each word conjures, the line and stanza breaks, whether the poem is formal or free verse and, as poet Cornelius Eady stated in a workshop about twelve years ago, how much information the poet chooses to reveal and withhold; and there is so much more that goes into writing a poem.

H.L. Hix states in "Ambiguities that Clarify" in *The Writer's Chronicle* (February 2017, p. 65), "If the world were made, first and foremost, of things, then in our language uses...we would want always to disambiguate. We'd want to analyze, to take things apart so we could see each *thing* on its own, separated from the rest, taken *out* of its relationships.... If, however, our world consists not so much of things as of relationships, then we *want* ambiguity. We *need* it. Only ambiguity, itself a *relationship* between meanings, could hope to signify relationship in a manner adequate to its purpose. We can't say what holds between things if we're too exclusively intent on *separating* things. What we're after is, ultimately, not analysis but synthesis: not taking things apart but putting them together. We don't want to *eliminate* ambiguity, we want to *get good at it.*"

The Shoah is filled with ambiguity. We can study history and posit the conditions that allowed it to happen; but each time I wade in, I drown. It's why I believe poetry is one of the best ways to attempt to understand the Shoah. Poetry doesn't deconstruct; rather it puts things together. It can hold contradictions and make us want to dig deeper. Hix, (ibid, p. 66) continues, "The poem is both closed (in the sense that it tells us what to think) *and* open (in the sense that it leaves us to decide for ourselves what to think)". The poet leads the reader, yet at the same time lets the poem work on more than one level.

I am not equating poetry with Torah, but I think my own writing and study of poetry is analogous to studying Torah. Torah, like the poetic canon, is so vast, has so much to show us, that a lifetime of study would not yield more than a drop in the ocean of what it has to teach. Poetry, using metaphor and a variety of other literary techniques, gives the reader more than one way to view the text. Torah, with its seventy faces of interpretation, gives us the opportunity to view the text from many different angles and points of view. Poetry and Torah employ some of the same literary techniques. They both invite us in to have that initial reading (*p'shat* in Torah study) and then call us to dig deeper, to explore, and learn more (*d'rash*).

“Just as water is from heaven, as it says, ‘At the sound of His giving, a multitude of waters in the heavens’ (*Jeremiah 10:13*), so the Torah is from heaven....Just as [the downpour of] water is accompanied by loud thunderings, as it says, ‘The voice of the Lord is upon the waters’ (*Psalms 24:3*), so the Torah was given with loud thundering...” (Jacob Neusner, *A Theological Commentary to the Midrash: Song of Songs Rabbah (Studies in Judaism)* 3rd Edition, 2001, p. 43). When I study Torah, I try to keep in mind that all I know is that Torah, like water, is a source of life, and I don’t know what will happen, what I will discover. What an amazing gift Torah gives me—it folds and unfolds like origami before me, and invites me to see more and more each time I engage with the text. Martha Collins (A Conversation with Martha Collins, *The Writer’s Chronicle*, May/Summer 2011, Vol. 43, Number 26, p. 27) writes, “I really believe that poetry is a dialogue between oneself and the poem....For me, it’s the poem on the page—it’s talking to me and I’m talking to it.” There are times when Torah comes to me with loud thunder, and I have moments of clarity and think I understand; but mostly I have these quiet moments, ice melting slowly on the page, that elucidate a word or, if I am lucky, a sentence. Torah is talking to me, and I am talking to it.

In her Bechtel Prize-winning essay (*Teachers and Writers*, 2006, p.3), “The Pen Has Become the Character: How Creative Writing Creates Us,” Sarah Porter writes, “To be a writer means, perhaps, exactly this: surrendering the defined, expressible self to the wider possibilities of the page. It means giving up the belief that you know who you are, in exchange for a chance at discovering who you are, again and again; after all, the self that jumps up at you from your writing might exceed anything you had previously imagined. For me, and I believe for most other writers, the exhilaration of writing comes exactly when the words pick me up and carry me with a will of their own: when I look back, dizzy with momentum, and can hardly believe that I’m the one who wrote the lines I’m reading....By giving us a new perspective on ourselves, a new point of view, the words we read are helping to create us: they promise to make us bigger, freer, more authentic human beings.”

Poetry and Torah allow me to discover myself over and over again, to be dizzy with momentum from wrestling with the text, to gain new points of view, to grow in ways I had not previously imagined. My study of Torah has been enhanced by engaging with its poetry, and my poetry has been informed by Torah. Torah is sacred, and I believe that all great poetry reaches toward the sacred.

Martha Collins then states (*ibid*, p. 25), “I’m from a family of musicians; I played piano and violin. But I hated to practice because I could always hear in my mind what I was supposed to be playing before I could play it. That was not interesting to me. What I discovered when I began writing poetry—unlike a term paper where you plan and then write it, unlike a sonata where you know what it sounds like before you can play it—was that I never knew what was going to happen when I started. That was exciting.”

My poetry about the Shoah starts with a word, idea, or a story I've heard, something that knocks me off balance. Once I start writing, I have no idea where the poem will take me. I write each poem first as prose and cry every time. Then, I can get to work: to craft the story into a poem.

David Biespiel addressed poetry in *The Rumpus*, "Ten Things Successful Poets Know" (December 12, 2013). The following is my paraphrasing: "Poets jump off bridges of the known, the imagined, the felt, the lived. We freak out about unanswered or unanswerable questions concerning life and death, joy and sorrow. Poets embrace negative feelings – they can inspire us; we know they are part of a poem's emotional potential. Self-disappointment in the process of writing is a constitutional right. We let negative thoughts pass through our heads; writing poetry is participating in one of the most ancient arts of human experience. We're okay with writing that is difficult and joyful. When we're disappointed in our writing, we are experiencing what Jacob experienced in his dream – wrestling with the angel of the poem's life. Poets are fascinated by the mind's quiet, as well as by the jazz of the world around us. Poems come at any time and from anywhere. We resign ourselves to reality. It's where lives are lived, where dreams are born, where memory makes its bed. Reality is where history impacts the imagination. It is the stuff of poetry."

What I know as a poet writing about the Shoah is that I am embarking on something very difficult. I want to honor the victims, the survivors, and their descendants. I am wrestling with something of epic proportions, and I am working with and resigned to reality. I am a witness to history, and history is a weighty task. There is no making the poem up. As Edward Hirsch stated in an interview for *AFTER*, a documentary I am producing about the Shoah and poetry

(2016), “One of the jobs of poetry is to bring the dead to life.” That is my reality, the stuff of my poetry.

I couldn’t force poems about the Shoah. I had to let them come to me. And once I did that, the poems wouldn’t stop coming. It took years, but I wrote more than 100 poems. I would see poetry everywhere – choosing not to get on a crowded subway car, watching a German shepherd walk toward me, dreaming about getting a number at a concentration camp, or a snowstorm.

#### At the Picture Window

The snow falls  
and I watch my father  
shovel the driveway  
and the more he shovels  
the more snow  
falls and he  
can’t clear away  
the snow and I  
can’t stop the snow  
from turning to ashes  
before it falls to the ground.

Theodor Adorno, a German sociologist and philosopher was known for his critical theory of society, and for writing: “To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.” (“An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, 1983, p.34)

In *Mindful Pleasures: A literary blog*, Brian A. Oard writes, “The original quote (always taken out of context) occurs in the concluding passage of a typically densely argued 1949 essay, *Cultural Criticism and Society*...This is a harsh, devastating idea, and Adorno eventually came to consider it something of an overstatement. In his late work *Negative Dialectics* he offers this conditional revision...I quote from the English translation by E. B. Ashton: ‘Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less

cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living--especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living.'”

After the Shoah, everything is fractured. How can we believe in God? How can we believe in His Covenant with the Jewish people? How can we write poems? How can we continue to go on?

In *Night* (2006, pp.82-83), Elie Wiesel wrote about the hanging of two adults and a child in a concentration camp.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked....

“Behind me the same man asking, “Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him, “Where is He?” “Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows....”

We can no longer believe in God after the Shoah, yet we believe in God. We can no longer have a Covenant with God, yet there is a Covenant. Poetry after the Shoah is barbaric, yet we continue to write. Everything we believed in and knew has been shattered, yet we still go on living. The world still spins after the Shoah, when perhaps it should have stopped.

The American writer Alfred Kazin was asked if there was meaning in the extermination of European Jewry. He responded, “I hope not.” (*Preempting the Holocaust*, 2000, p. XVI). What meaning can there be? Six million are dead. I never got the opportunity to meet the vast majority of my relatives. It is impossible to consider what the six million could have created and contributed to this world. I can ascribe no meaning to the Shoah, other than to work to never let genocide happen again to anyone, anywhere in this world.

Yes, Adorno is correct. To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. How can there be culture after such atrocity? Opera, writing, art, film? How can it contain meaning? But we are

human; it's all we have, all we can do. My parents had a choice after the Shoah – to love or to hate. They had every right to hate, but they chose love. They chose life. They chose to continue to believe in God, even though they were deeply disappointed in Him. They taught me to love, and I chose to love and to write, to live and to write in a world of paradox and ambiguity, and to try to turn something barbaric toward the holy.

Adorno wrote *Negative Dialectics*. The poet John Keats wrote about negative capability: “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (*The Letters of John Keats*, 1958, pp.193-4.) I take Adorno seriously. Yes, culture and barbarism can go hand in hand, but I have deep faith that poetry is capable of influencing culture for the better.

I believe we need to write after Auschwitz. I believe we need to write about Auschwitz and all its implications, not only for the dead, but for the living as well. Survivors' lives were not easy. Many felt guilty for surviving. The living had dreams and nightmares about the dead. That is what I write about. Survivors tried to shelter their children from their pain. They did not succeed. They had joy, though it was always tinged by sadness. They loved. They lived. They died. That, too, is what I write about. Poetry after the Holocaust is necessary. Christian Wiman, in *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (2007, p. 120), states, “Let us remember...that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both.”

Tell Me, Josef

Do you know that the clouds of summer still  
give way to the clear skies of fall, that at



sunset the horizon seems to tumble from blue,  
pink, and orange to black ink that spills

across the sky, and do you know that I dream  
you were liberated from Auschwitz, that you

returned to Maastricht and visited your friend Paul, and  
he returned the leather schoolbag you gave him

the night before you were deported, and  
he gave you the four postcards you sent him

from Westerbork before you were sent to Auschwitz, and  
do you know that the postcards you wrote

were given by Paul to the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam, and  
I found copies on the Internet, and do you know

I will travel to the museum this January to meet Paul and  
see the words you wrote as an eleven-year-old,

the words that are here now in place of you, and  
tell me, Josef, do you know that sometimes

in the middle of the night, I look out the window  
and watch the sky, and

I see rain begin to fall and watch  
more fall down?

This poem came to me late one night as I was thinking about Josef, my father's little brother. The family got out of Germany to Maastricht, Holland. Paul was Catholic, and it was dangerous in 1942 for the two boys, both eleven years old, to be friends.

I found out Paul had given the postcards to the Museum and were put up on the website only two weeks before I found them. That night in bed, I couldn't stop thinking about Josef; how, if he had survived, my father would have been so happy. I kept wondering what our lives would have been like if Josef and the rest of the family returned from Westerbork or Auschwitz. The words kept coming, and I couldn't stop writing. This poem gave me a new perspective on

myself, made me a more authentic human being. It is one of my favorite poems, and I am astonished each time I read it that I am the one who wrote it. I keep going back to it, seeing something different each time.

I write because I have to write. It is as simple and complicated as that.

In *Passwords – Teaching Wislawa Szymborska: In Praise of the “I Don’t Know,”* (*Teachers and Writers*, January – February 2001, Volume 34, Number 3, p. 4) Sarah McCarthy writes, “Wislawa Szymborska believes poets pursue truth by engaging in what she calls the continuous and unutterable, ‘I don’t know.’ In her Nobel Prize speech, Szymborska declared, ‘Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was absolutely inadequate.’ According to Szymborska this declaration of uncertainty ‘expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.’”

As soon as I’ve completed one poem and start the next, I do feel “wholly inadequate.” I have nothing to say, no faith in my writing, in my abilities as a poet. But once I allow myself to begin to write something, anything, I begin to be filled with wonder, and that allows me to keep writing, to find out what I don’t know. Writing is the journey of my life. If, at the beginning of a poem, I know exactly where I am going, exactly what the poem should be, there is no discovery, nothing to be learned. There is no reason to write.

Picnic

Sunday mornings during the summer,  
my parents would pack up our blue Ford  
and we’d head to the beach,  
my brother and I in the back seat, the trunk filled  
with bathing suits, chairs, and an aluminum ice chest.

We'd eat in the same pavilion,  
at the same wooden picnic table.  
My mother would cover the table, put out  
peanut-butter-and-jelly or baloney sandwiches,  
some flavor of Kool-Aid, and fruit for dessert.

A large Italian family sat at the next table.  
Grandmothers, dressed all in black, dished  
food from large pots.  
People were always coming to their table.  
Relatives, I'd tell myself.

Aunts and uncles yelled at the kids  
to sit at the table, the kids my age,  
cousins, playing, fighting, screaming,  
and I'd watch them from our table,  
that big family, mine so small.

I can still see that large family and the relatives coming each Sunday. When I first started writing this poem, I felt uncomfortable – I was describing my family and how each week we would eat by ourselves; and I wasn't sure I should write that poem. But I realized that I was describing my experiences. My father once told me, "You write what you feel," and always encouraged me.

He was old enough to remember much of what life was like before and during the Nazi regime and told me his stories.

Breaking Laws

Kristallnacht  
broken glass  
Nazis arrest him  
sixteen years old

Dachau  
November 1938  
a striped cotton uniform  
it's almost winter

he shares a bunk  
with a man in his fifties  
who freezes to death one night

the next morning a kapo tells him  
take off the man's long underwear  
do it quickly  
before the SS come for the body  
you will freeze at night too  
if you don't

it is the custom of some Jews  
not to wear clothes from a dead body  
and to save one's life the rabbis teach  
one must break custom

he washes the underwear that night  
places it over a chair  
next to the woodstove to dry  
sleeps on it  
still damp  
to make sure  
no one will steal it

When he told me this, I was completely knocked off balance. I took notes while he spoke, and knew I would shape it into a poem. The title, "Breaking Laws," is about so many laws being broken: Kristallnacht, arrest, sixteen years old, being sent to a county jail, then to Dachau, getting a thin, cotton uniform, (my father told me luck was getting a hat), the man freezing to death in the bunk they shared, a kapo telling him to take the underwear, breaking custom, sleeping on them so another prisoner, a fellow Jew, wouldn't steal the underwear.

In a poem, in that short amount of space, where every word is carefully chosen, so much can occur. Ambiguities can be held, and a poem can say the unsayable. How could I communicate what happened to my father and not appear in the poem – not make editorial comments? How can a reader understand what I am trying to say, and yet allow readers to bring their own experiences and interpretations to the poem? As my teacher, Mary Stewart Hammond,

told me when I first started studying with her twenty years ago, “stay out of the poem.” Even when the poems were about me, I had to let the words tell the story, to allow the poem to lift off the page and become something more than just the story.

“Poetry is what happens when nothing else can,” wrote Charles Bukowski (*new poems, book 3*, 2004, pp. 186-187). The German-language poet, Paul Celan, who survived the Shoah said, “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through.” (Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, *Celan's Collected Prose*, 2003, p. 34).

## Family History

The doctor comes in, introduces himself,  
asks questions about my health (good),  
recent illnesses (none), operations  
(tonsils removed when I was four), maternal  
grandparents (grandmother died at ninety-two from old age,  
grandfather died at sixty-six from a heart attack),  
paternal grandparents (died before I was born).

The doctor says it is important for my medical history  
to know how they died.  
So I tell him they died in Auschwitz.  
He has no more questions and tells me  
to undress for the physical exam.

Going to the doctor is routine, but for me it is anything but. What do I write for family history? How do I say I don't know what my father's family would have died from? How do I explain to a doctor all the history coursing through one short answer: gassed and burned in Auschwitz?

The Netziv writes in the preface to *Ha'amek Davar*, (2005, Volume 1, p. 2), his commentary on the Torah, “Poetry is not simply characterized by meter, rhyme, alliteration, etc. The essence of poetry is that it contains many deeper allusions packed into fewer, more powerful words. One who treats poetry as prose will gain only the most superficial understanding of the material, and will not catch all of the allusions that the author intended us to find. Similarly, the Torah contains much depth—one who just understands the basic prose meanings will miss much of the intended meaning.”

A poem can appear deceptively simple, but it is always working on more than one plane – the simple meaning, what lies beneath, and what makes it lift off the page, as my teacher Mary Stewart Hammond stated in many workshops. All great poetry can change our understanding of the world and the language we use to make sense of it.

“I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here,” writes poet Sylvia Plath (*The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, 2008, p.144). My goal in my poetry about the Shoah is to give voice to the dead who had much of their humanity stripped away before they were murdered. I want my poems to tell them they are still here with us. I want to tell my family members who were murdered that I am still here.

Mary Kinzie in *A Poet's Guide to Poetry* (1999, pp. 13-14), writes, “The best poems satisfy by surprise, either because they reject something more familiar, or because they teeter on the edge of confusion in knowing something else. Understanding the poem we are reading is a process that moves from ignorance through partial insights to higher levels of understanding.”

Poetry comes to tell us we are not alone. We all feel emptiness. We all deal with loss in our lives.

## Learning a New Language

My father is teaching me German.  
He still speaks fluently, even though he  
escaped from Nazi Germany almost  
seventy years ago, when he was seventeen.

We study nouns and verbs.  
We study when to use the formal pronoun, *Sie*, you,  
and when to use the more familiar, *Du*.  
One must be offered permission to use the familiar.

We study dialects.  
The word *Ich*, I.  
The Berliners pronounce it *Ick*.  
Those from Frankfurt am Main, *Isch*.  
Those from Schwaben, *Ich* or *I*.

He tells me when he was a kid he and  
his friends used to say in a Berliner dialect,  
“*Berlin jeweesen Oranje jejessen und sie war so süß jeweesen.*”  
I was in Berlin and ate an orange, and it was very sweet.  
“And then we added, ‘*dass mir die brüh die gosh runterglaufe is,*’”  
with the juices running down my mouth.  
He explains: “It is in our Schwäbisch dialect.  
I should say, it was our dialect.”

My poetry about the Shoah is ultimately about human dignity and resiliency, the power and bravery to continue on, and the courage to create new lives. It is also about love – the kind of love that must prevail when hate is the other option. As I stated before, I believe we need to write about the Shoah and all its implications for the living, as well as to honor and give voice to the dead. Poetry of the Shoah asks us to look to the past to help create a better future. Poetry after the Holocaust is not barbaric; it is obligatory. “Now the time has come to forge an opening to feeling, to tumultuous emotion and to imagination, and to channel them into the world of creativity....Now the time has come to disintegrate the horror into images and word.” (“Memory Without Survivors,” Aharon Appelfeld, haaretz.com, 2005). Child survivor and writer,

Appelfeld impels me to continue writing, and now to produce a film, called *AFTER*, that explores poetry written about the Shoah by renowned contemporary poets.

The Shoah brings up more questions than can be answered. Poetry, like Torah, invites us in, to look past that cursory reading, to dig deeper, to engage with the poem, and asks us to look at the questions the poet brings up, those that can be answered and those that remain unanswerable.

### Sound Barrier

Three Israeli Air Force F-15s, invited by  
the Polish government, thunder through overcast skies,

over Auschwitz, the screech breaking its silence.  
Slowing, the jets follow the railroad tracks

leading into the camp, into the crematoria, then peel away.  
Oma, Opa, Ruth, Josef, can you hear my screech

in every line, the breath of each stanza, the hiss  
and moan of every poem?

You remain right behind my eyelids  
as I write, letting each sound emerge,

primal and piercing, as I fly  
on my own.

“These poems have come from a great distance to find you,” writes Edward Hirsch in *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry*, (2000, p. 1). My poems come to you also from a great distance, from a time long ago, and from a culture that no longer exists. My poems invite you to come along with me as I wrestle with the Shoah, its aftermath, and all its implications. They want to find you.



When I began writing this chapter, I knew two things: 1. I believe poetry has much to teach us, and 2. I had no idea what I was going to write. It can be terrifying to be in a place of not knowing—it's not how many of us are taught to navigate this world. But poetry is always there, inviting me to teeter at the edge, the edge of knowing, of not knowing. It asks me to be open to surprise, mysteries, and doubts, to stay in the not knowing for as long as I can, and to be willing to listen to all that poetry of the Shoah can teach me.

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