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*Confronting Nationalisms,
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Aesthetics of Reconciliation
and Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger
in Western Ukraine*

Irene Silverblatt / Duke University

Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, a German-language poet, died in a Ukrainian SS labor camp in 1942 [1]. She was 18 years old. Never published in her life-time, Selma left behind a

hand-written album of 57 poems that miraculously survived the war. Although Selma's poetry was first published commercially in 1980, over the last ten years Austrian and Germany playwrights, mimes, avant guard composers, popular musicians, literary specialists, and human rights/tolerance activists have taken her work and her life to heart. Today some teachers, students, and professors in Ukraine are doing the same.

Selma Meerbaum was born in Czernowitz, today's Chernivtsi, Ukraine; and, like many of the city's pre-War, non-ethnic Ukrainian artists, Selma has only recently gained reknown in the city of her birth. Public acknowledgement of her gifts was made in 2004, when a combination of German and Austrian literati, an Austrian NGO, Chernivtsi National University professors, and some city council members, organized a commemoration in her honor. This short essay comes out of personal concerns, broader political goals and ends up asking questions than are not yet answered: Why do some Chernivtsi residents now acknowledge that they and Selma have shared histories? What is the significance of these new understandings? And, although Selma is lauded by some, why do other Chernivtsi residents find little, if any, common ground with a German-speaking, Jewish poet who walked on the same streets that they walk today.

Chernivtsi has seen several national flags over the course of the last century, emblems of its tumultuous and difficult past. When Selma was growing up, the city was under Romanian rule; Selma's parents, however, were Austrians. Prior to World War I, Czernowitz was the capital of the Bukowina, a Hapsburg crown colony, on the Eastern edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Renowned as a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic city, some see Czernowitz, as a kind of cosmopolitan ideal, where Romanians, Ukrainians, ethnic Germans, Jews, and Poles shared life [2]. Like Selma's family, many

Czernowitzers tried to adhere to multi-lingual traditions after the Bukovina region was absorbed into “Greater Romania” following the Hapsburg defeat in World War I. But the multicultural milieu would not endure. Home-grown Romanian nationalists, bent on destroying the city’s long-standing, multi-ethnic traditions, imposed strict limitations on language, religion, and political thought before World War II; and, once allied with Nazi Germany, murdered and deported Jews with impunity. [3]

National boundaries were again redrawn at the end of World War II and defeated Romania lost its claim to the northern Bukowina. Chernivtsi, with its substantial Ukrainian population, was incorporated into Soviet Ukraine in 1944. Nationalist fervor also gripped Ukraine, and Ukrainian nationalism was a significant political force in Western Ukraine throughout the interwar and Soviet periods. With Ukrainian independence, Chernivtsi took on its last political banner, becoming the official capital of Chernivtsi Oblast in 1991.

Inter-war conflicts between norms of cultural pluralism, on the one hand, and brutal ethno-nationalism, on the other, have found a rude echo in current tensions over history and political morality. Today, Ukrainian and Romanian nationalists turn to the inter-war period to bolster their dreams for the 21st century, while advocates of a new cosmopolitanism are inspired by Czernowitz’s years as an ethnic mosaic. Romanian nationalists, a growing presence in Romania as well as among Chernivtsi’s ethnic Romanians, dream of returning their city (Cernauti) to a “Greater Romanian” homeland. A comparable ethnic and linguistic nationalism marked Western Ukraine – and mark it still. Memorials lay bare the contradictions of the region’s cultural politics: Chernivtsi’s buildings house plaques to its well known citizens that, taken together, are a monument to

the city's cultural achievements and multi-ethnic history. Chernivtsi Oblast also proudly sports a statue to Stepan Bandera, the nationalist hero who demolished Polish villages in the name of Ukraine and who believed that all Jews should "go to the gallows"[4].

Brochures from the Romanian based Carpatair, now flying to Chernivtsi, talk about the city's "Romanization" period in the 1930's – early 40's; fascism, however, continues unremarked. Silence is also part of the story.

The resurging interest in Selma Meerbaum's life and poetry is tied to current debates over Chernivtsi's past – and future; it connects broad questions over how to – or whether to –publicly represent, atone for, or bury one of the modern world's most horrifying episodes with current frictions over nationhood, moral obligations, and political vision. Chernivtsi residents live in a city marked by communities with troubled, shared and diverse histories -- and diverse histories of facing the past. Selma presentations and performances are part of an aesthetic negotiation of public memory and embody the discord of unresolved pasts and an unsettled present. They also embody a hope, utopian, perhaps, for reconciliation and understanding.

As mentioned before, in spite of growing celebrity in Austria and Germany, literary figures like Selma were unknown to most Ukrainians until Independence. Two principal factors, tied to Soviet censorship, inhibited a more comprehensive understanding of the past. One was linked to Soviet misrepresentations of history: Soviet teaching ignored the cultural and literary accomplishments of Chernivtsi under Hapsburg and Romanian rule and diminished the Jewish (as well as other "racially"-based) dimensions of the Holocaust. The second factor was linguistic: German-language

literature was not seen by many to be part of Ukraine's literary culture; moreover, as long as it remained untranslated, German literature of the Bukovina was simply not accessible.

Since Independence, cultural institutions from Austria and Germany have played a crucial role in increasing Chernivtsi's awareness of Czernowitz's German-language and Jewish presence. Austria's historical relationship with the region no doubt spurred the creation of Chernivtsi's first German-language institute. The Bukovina Center has worked nearly two decades to make German-speaking authors from the region important figures in Chernivtsi cultural life. A German institute with a similar charge (Gedankendach) was established two years ago; it, too, has fostered programs that highlight the Bukovina's German-language talent. Now Chernivtsi professors, with newfound access to Selma's poetry, can teach her words. With support from Austria and Germany, they are creating possibilities for others in Chernivtsi to address Selma's poems and have opened the way for the region's acclaimed poets to gain a place in the nation's cultural history.

These institutes are two of several that have made Chernivtsi's German-language/multi-cultural/Jewish past more evident. Theatrical groups, literary societies and cultural NGO's have also travelled to Chernivtsi where they play key roles in resurrecting some of the Bukovina's most admired German-language authors. A performance piece built on Selma's life, mounted by the State Theater Company of Fuerth, Germany, is one the most moving. "Around the Table" was the name of this production incorporating memoir, poetry, reminiscence, confession, and music. Around the Table had its initial run in Germany, and sitting around the theatrical "table", were

Selma and her poetry, a survivor who was one of Selma's dear friends, a German actress who revealed her own difficult relationship to the past (her grandfather was an SS official); and a composer whose current life's work is to create music to the words of Bukovina poets (Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, Paul Celan, Rosa Auslander).

Fuerth's State Theater and Czernowitz's Theater Hall are architectural twins, and the German company, as a consequence, seems to feel a particular bond of historical accountability toward Czernowitz. After a run in Germany, the Company took "Around the Table" to the Bukovina. They showed the piece to a Chernivtsi audience that knew almost nothing about its multicultural past; an audience that knew little about the targeting of Jews during the War; an audience that, for the most part, would have been hard put to recognize Selma as a fellow Chernivtsi native. According to the University's German professor, members of the audience left the theater deeply touched, but also disturbed, perplexed and searching.

Several years later, much of the impetus behind the 2004 commemoration was still from abroad: The Bukovina Center, representatives of an Austrian literary journal, and an actress/ Green party member of Vienna's city council spearheaded the effort to have the poet from Czernowitz, honored in Chernivtsi. However, we must remember, that they could never have been successful without the support of officials, professors, and others involved in Chernivtsi's cultural life. A majority of council members backed the event and now a plaque to Selma, placed on the apartment building where she grew-up, is visible on the road to the train station. The woman who now lives in that apartment seemed genuinely delighted that Selma is gaining recognition. She talked to us about the tourists who made pilgrimages to her house and bemoaned the fact that Selma's poetry

was hard to get in Ukrainian, or even English -- a more commonly understood language than German today.

The German professor who participated in the ceremony honoring Selma is the principal – perhaps only – translator committed to making the region’s German-language poetry accessible to today’s Chernivtsi . He has devoted his intellectual career to the Bukovina’s contribution to German literature and his efforts to translate Czernowitz poets at least makes it possible for that past, along with its literary riches, to be more widely known.. Because of him, students throughout Ukraine can read Paul Celan, considered one of the premier, German-language poets of the twentieth century; and, as we found out last summer, Paul Celan is now part of the national curriculum. The professor’s translations of Selma’s poems means that they too can be part of the curriculum, as they are in some of Chernivtsi’s high schools.

Serendipity has placed a remarkable teacher in the same gymnasium that Paul Celan attended, a teacher who is adamant that a more comprehensive Ukrainian history be taught to today’s youth. Her classes include extensive discussions of the multi-ethnic past long ignored by Soviet and previous Ukrainian administrations. Taking advantage of teaching in Paul Celan’s alma mater, she has also established a small museum inside the school that is dedicated to Chernivtsi’s renowned authors. Courageous and truly extraordinary, she encourages students to explore the city’s complex, pre-World War II history, along with the fascist assault on Chernivtsi’s Jewish population. One of her pupils wrote a moving – and winning -- essay about Selma Meerbaum for an international contest about Jews in the Holocaust.

This young woman’s essay lets us see Selma through the eyes of an age-mate;

helps us better grasp why Selma's life – and her poetry – were so absorbing to fourteen year old Ukrainians. Struck by their similarity in ages and hearing echoes of Anne Frank, the young woman voiced outrage at the human cruelty that truncated such a talented life. This teenager recognized other, personal truths as well: she felt the longings and bewilderment – in love and in the world's political horizon -- so plaintively expressed in Selma's poetry. She also saw Chernivtsi in Selma's Czernowitz: saw the beech trees in their many colors, the sorrowful rains, the frightening nights, the roses frozen before they could bloom. Because of her teacher's dedication to making Czernowitz part of Chernivtsi's history, students' eyes have been opened to Selma's poetry and to the city's complex and avowedly multicultural times.

We can better comprehend why Selma's writings, as well as her life-experience, could resonate with Ukrainians who might never have seen a connection between Czernowitz and Chernivtsi before.

A combination of historical ties, demography, business interests, political objectives and moral passions are instrumental in making Chernivtsi's multicultural history, including its Jewish past, more visible than in other towns and cities in Ukraine [5]. Now that travel to Ukraine is possible, Austrians, Germans, Poles, Israelis, and Americans can be seen walking through Chernivtsi streets, looking for physical markers of the city's complex history; some tours make a point of visiting the Jewish cemetery in homage and in repentance. A museum of Bukowina Jewry opened in 2008 in conjunction with the 600th year anniversary of Chernivtsi's founding and there you can find panels on Selma and Paul Celan. According to the director, most of the museum's visitors have

come from the United States, Germany, and other European countries; nonetheless, she added, over the last year more locals are attending, curious about their forgotten past.

Chernivtsi's past is easy to romanticize and to capitalize on, whether for profit or to win political points from a skeptical European Union. In the words of one tourism expert, government officials are ready to embrace a multi-cultural history if, "it comes at little cost." Nonetheless, as one student told me, "tourism is good; tourists show us other ways of doing things and understanding the world"; According to another, even if the holocaust industry is alive and well in Chernivtsi, it is still forcing Ukrainians to see other ways of life, other passions, other visions of a decent and meaningful present. Chernivtsi – as tourist destination – promotes local pride and local curiosity, too.

Poetry is a distinctive road to buried pasts in Chernivtsi. In September, hundreds of Ukrainians, many Chernivtsi college students among them, attended a poetry festival, "Meridian-Czernowitz" held in honor of Paul Celan. The festival's organizers -- entrepreneurs and poets -- got wide backing from the city as well as international support. The festival was a three day long poetry party and it revered the past as it celebrated the present: over the course of the festival, Czernowitz's principal synagogue, now a movie theater, was, by means of video tricks, returned to its original façade; in a ceremony marking the Austrian contributions to the city, a street, once again, took on its Hapsburg name; kletzmer music, a Czernowitzer specialty, was heard on the city's main street. It was astonishing, profoundly moving, to watch Chernivtsi youth boisterously claim Paul Celan as a literary ancestor: a recently published edition of Celan's correspondence was presented at the festival and, an astonishing theatrical performance – a musical mime built around Celan's landmark, "Todesfugue", was performed by Chernivtsi theater

students under the direction of a Hungarian ensemble. In the course of this wrenching and glorious work, actors threw origami birds out to the audience, and the audience received the birds, standing as one, like Celan's "heartfelt" shore receiving poems, put in bottles, and thrown into the sea, with hope. Perhaps this work best embodied the dialogue between present and past, between Celan and today's contemporary poets: German-language poets heard their poems read -- and sung -- in Ukrainian and Ukrainian poets heard theirs read -- and sung -- in German. Having fun, joyful, and intensely serious, those who attended were on a journey to establish, for themselves, a past that was new.

The Gedankendach, while only in Chernivitsi for several years, has made a lasting mark in the city's intellectual and cultural communities. Last year the Gedankendach sponsored a smaller, more modest theatrical production based on Celan's poetry. And, on March 31, 2011, they supported another performance, this time a reading of Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger's poetry in a building that had been the "Jewish House" under the Hapsburgs. Iris Berben, a prominent German actress, recorded Selma's poems in an audio book that Hoffmann und Campe Press released in 2006. In 2011 Iris Berben travelled to Chernivitsi, for the first time, in order to read Selma's poems in the city where they were written. She told reporters at Die Welt, "it was so touching...the encounter with the people in Ukraine, working with such joy and enthusiasm, in maintaining this piece of culture."^[6]

Debates over the past are tied to conflicting, ambiguous political visions and Ukraine's troubled past haunts its present, at times in jumbled ways. Commemorations around Selma are part of this negotiation of public memory. Some find hope in

Czernowitz's multicultural past, believing that its myths and poets suggest an open, cosmopolitan Ukraine. Yet, historical understandings and their translations into the present can be anything but straightforward. We have noted that in a ceremony supported by the Bukovina Center, Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger was recognized by city officials, University professors, gymnasium students, and other Chernivtsi citizens as a prized daughter of Chernivtsi. At the same time, Chernivtsi natives – college graduates, employees in the emerging tourism industry, shop owners, hotel workers, teachers -- even employees of the Bukovina Center -- with equal passion deny that Selma, as a German speaker and a Jew, could be considered part of Ukraine's "true" history. Some students have put forward the idea that their university should be renamed for Chernivtsi's most famous literary figure, Paul Celan. Others, including a young man who helped organize the essay contest on the Holocaust, was deeply offended by that suggestion: after all, he pointed out to us, confident in the obviousness of his argument: "Paul Celan wasn't Ukrainian".

....

As a border city whose political allegiance changed four times over the course of the twentieth century, Chernivtsi is wracked by confusions of nationalism, nationality, ethnicity and religious identity. These conflicting layers of cultural belonging add to the complexities -- and possibilities -- of memory-work -- including reconciliation, ignorance and silence. Independence opened up space for new historical inquiry, but it also exacerbated Ukraine's historical frictions, expressed in long-standing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic tensions. Ukrainians are struggling to define the nation to which they belong and conflicting visions of the significance of the past – including Austrian

legacies and the tremendous population displacements that followed World War II -- reflect these tensions. Nonetheless, Chernivtsi officialdom and citizenry seem to honor -- or at least acknowledge -- the city's Jewish past in ways that stunningly surpass other Ukrainian cities, where a Jewish presence has been reduced to fragile hints and traces.

So paradoxes remain on Chernivtsi's walls and in Chernivtsi hearts. For some Chernivtsi residents, like the teacher from Paul Celan's high school and her student, or the Professor of German at the University responsible for so many of the translations, or the head of a volunteer organization working to clean up the Jewish cemetery, the celebration of the city's multicultural traditions is an existential and ethical issue; it is a visionary outline of a tolerant, cosmopolitan nation. Yet, at the same time, other Chernivtsi natives -- teachers, college graduates, and even employees in the emerging tourism industry -- with equal passion, assert that neither Selma Meerbaum nor Paul Celan, as German speakers and Jews, could be "true" Ukrainians. Finally, for today's Romanian nationalists, Chernivtsi is simply not Ukraine.

The resurgence of Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger's life and poetry -- the ways they have been made into living pieces of art and part of living memories -- is one road focusing awareness of history. With Selma Meerbaum as a fulcrum, I have tried to suggest the complexities of history and reconciliation: we cannot brush out the still bitter disputes over national definitions and visions, over historical responsibilities, over claims to and on history, over history's owners and inheritors, over the structures and significance of history itself, and, not least, over its silences. This is also an essay of political morality and hope: a 21st century (utopian) dream that sees in recovering the "multiculturalism" of decades past -- as well as its literary beauty -- a way to confront the

nationalisms and malice of the present. Questions will always remain and stories are still to be told.

This project is also a personal one. My mother is Selma's closest living relative, and, because of our kinship, my sister, mother, and I were invited to be part of the ceremony commemorating Selma in 2004. Before this occasion, we knew about Selma, but knew remarkably little about her life and poetry. We were deeply moved to realize how much Selma – and her words -- meant to the professors, students, teachers, literature-lovers, current residents of her apartment building, journalists, and the city council members who were honoring Selma, too. We are grateful to those who have given Selma back to us, who have made Selma a living presence, and who are struggling to make Selma's history into Chernivtsi's history. They are teaching me how to take Selma to heart – and to understand why.

Notes

[1] I deeply appreciate Txetxu Aguado's invitation to contribute to Dissidences. It made think in different ways and I am grateful. For a more extensive discussion of Selma's life and the extraordinary discovery of her poetry see Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, Harvest of Blossoms: Poetry of a Life Cut Short, Introduction and edited by Irene Silverblatt and Helene Silverblatt, translated by Jerry Glenn, Florian Birkmayer, Helene Silverblatt and Irene Silverblatt, Northwestern University Press, 2008

[2] Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945 (New York: Penguin), 2006, p.8

[3] For a history of Czernowitz under Austrian and Romanian rule see Albert Lichtblau and Michael John, “Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz: Two Divergent Examples of Jewish Communities in the Far East of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy”, in Jewries at the Frontier, edited by Sander L. Gilman and Michael Shain (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press), 1999, pp. 29-66. Also Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2010

[4] Aharon Weiss, Jewish-Ukrainian Relations in Western Ukraine during the Holocaust, in Potichnyj, Peter J. and Aster, Howard, Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective, (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta), 1988, pp. 409-420.

[5] See Omer Bartov, Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present Day Ukraine (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2007

[6] Die Welt online, May 6, 2011.

