



# The Poetry of Ilana Shmueli within the Cultural Context of Chernivtsi and Bukovina

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## SYNOPSIS

This study focuses on presenting the specific Central European region of Bukovina, in its day the last crown land of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which today is divided between Ukraine and Romania. A specific national-cultural situation formed in its capital of Chernivtsi at the beginning of the twentieth century: the Jewish minority, using standard German as its language of communication and sensing the approach of its annihilation, clung to literary creativity, consisting primarily in intensive poetry writing. After the Second World War, the literary work of these authors was published in the diaspora. In addition to the name of Rose Ausländer, the poet Paul Celan especially gained renown, and it was from his late work, written towards the end of his life, that the Israeli poet Ilana Shmueli, originally from Chernivtsi, took inspiration. The work of both these authors is directed towards hermeticism and cipher, but this is in no way detrimental to the intensity of the poetic communication of the tragedy of the Shoah.

## KEYWORDS

Ilana Shmueli; Paul Celan; Bukovina; poetry; holocaust.

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## 1. CHERNIVTSI AS A MODEL OF CENTRAL EUROPE

Central Europe is a term that can be defined socio-culturally rather than geopolitically. In a certain sense it concerns a concept of harmonious coexistence, which in practice never functioned over a longer period of time. However, within the history of Europe we can find a region whose genius loci was so exceptional in its time that it represented a kind of real model of Central Europe on a miniature scale. This is the Eastern European territory of Bukovina — a region in which a number of different nations lived alongside one another in peace and mutual prosperity, where none of them enjoyed a pronounced majority and therefore could not assert its cultural dominance. The modern discoverers of Bukovina (in German Buchenland) invented a series of metaphors for the region: a ‘melting pot of nations’, a ‘model of a united Eu-

rope', or a 'Jewish Eldorado of old Austria'; its capital Chernivtsi was referred to for example as a 'poetic Atlantis' or a 'European Alexandria'.

Bukovina, bordering on the historical territories of Galicia, Bessarabia, Moldavia and Transylvania, is today divided between Ukraine and Romania; a forested and mountainous region on the foothills of the Carpathians spanning an area of a little over 10 000 km<sup>2</sup>, which in the year 1775 had a population of a mere 75 000. Its significance and exceptional nature thus consisted primarily in the plurality of local cultures. Eminent writers of several European nations either hailed from here or associated their work with this region: the classic authors of Ukrainian literature Yuriy Fedkovych, Ivan Franko, Osyp Makovei or Olha Kobylianska, the Romanian late Romantic poet Mihai Eminescu and the Polish poet Aleksander Morgenbesser, as well as a series of authors of Jewish origin writing in Yiddish, such as Elieser Steinberg, Itzig Manger or the last Chernivtsi Jewish writer Josef Burg (1912–2009). In 1880 the Czech writer Otakar Theer was also born here.

However, the most marked contribution to European literature from this region was made by authors writing in German, all of Jewish origin, and names such as Karl Emil Franzos, Rose Ausländer, Paul Celan and Gregor von Rezzori became an integral part of world literature. With something of a delay, a series of poets also made their mark on the history of modern German literature, of whom we shall name the most important: Moses Rosenkranz, Alfred Gong, Alfred Kittner, Immanuel Weißglas, Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger and Georg Drozdowski.

The key to the multicultural identity of Bukovina is provided by the historical development of the region: In antiquity this territory was inhabited by the Dacians. In the Middle Ages it was ruled first of all by the Pannonian Avars, but later settled in by Slavs, and Bukovina became a part of the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia. In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries the territory belonged to Kievan Rus', and from the 14<sup>th</sup> century Bukovina was part of the Principality of Moldavia, though Poland also laid claim to the territory. Then from 1514 until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bukovina found itself under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. After the retreat of the Turks from the Balkans, the territory was occupied by the Austrian armies, and in 1775 Bukovina was incorporated into the Austrian monarchy, falling under Galicia — and it was only at this point, upon the initiative of Emperor Joseph II, that a more pronounced assertion of the German element entered the territory, together with the forced Germanisation of all the ethnic communities living here. The most prestigious period in the history of the region is indisputably the years of 1849–1918, when Bukovina was an independent crown land of the Habsburg monarchy. At that time the territory was inhabited by half a million people of a number of different nationalities.

After the First World War the territory was incorporated into the Kingdom of Romania. Nevertheless, alongside Romanian, German continued to be recognised as an official language until 1924, and the cultural heyday of the region, which took its cues from the Jewish community, did not abate. However, the atmosphere of peaceful co-existence was disrupted by the advent of the Second World War — in June 1940 the northern part of the territory was annexed by the Soviet Union, deportations of Jews were commenced and the German speaking population began to leave Bukovina en masse. In June 1941 the entire territory was occupied by the fascist Romanian army, supported by SS units. There followed mass deportations of the Jewish population to





concentration camps in Transnistria beyond the river Bug, and a ghetto was established in the capital. Chernivtsi was conquered by the Red Army in March 1944. Of the 75 000 transported Jews, only 9 000 returned to Chernivtsi. The present proportion of the Jewish population in Chernivtsi (population approx. 250 000) is a mere 0.6 %.

In 1947 Bukovina was partitioned: the northern part, including Chernivtsi, became incorporated into the USSR, and today constitutes the Chernivtsi region within independent Ukraine. Southern Bukovina, with its capital of Suceava, is part of Romania. Since the 1950s the former Chernivtsi main synagogue has housed a municipal cinema. The Armenian church, built according to the design of the Czech architect Josef Hlávka, serves as an organ hall for the Chernivtsi philharmonic.

To this overview of historical milestones it is necessary to add the ethnic diversity of the region, which was conditioned by these events during the period when it belonged to the Habsburg monarchy. Initially the most numerous group were Romanians, who settled in the region from the curve of the Carpathian mountains. The Slavic element was represented by Ukrainians settling in the region from the north, who by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gained predominance within the population. To these we can add the sometimes separately viewed Eastern Slavic ethnic group of the Hutsuls. The third most widely represented ethnic group at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Jewish community, who made up 13 % of the population in the region but almost one third of all inhabitants of the capital. It was precisely the Jewish population, represented primarily by intellectuals, who made a fundamental contribution to the cultural heyday of the region. The fact that the Jewish population spoke predominantly German and felt themselves to belong to German culture often caused them to be automatically classified within the group of the German population — however, ethnic Germans represented a separate, relatively numerous group (approximately 9 %). Also living in the region were Poles, to whom the Armenians living in Bukovina felt an affinity. It is necessary to classify as separate groups the Lipovans, who formed closed communities, as well as the Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs and Roma.

A specific position within the Bukovina region is occupied by its capital Chernivtsi, which spreads out over a number of hills on the banks of the River Prut, and was the cultural and intellectual centre of the entire region. Assimilated Jews — especially merchants, bankers, lawyers, teachers and officials — declaring themselves to be ethnic Germans, formed a full three quarters of the German population, and brought a range of impulses into the city: in the year 1808 the first German grammar school was opened, from 1839 a theatre operated within the city, and from 1905 the theatre building was used by both Germans and Romanians. A separate Jewish theatre was established in Chernivtsi by the Soviets in 1940.

The establishment of the Franz-Josephs-Universität-Czernowitz (today the Yuriy Fedkovich Chernivtsi National University), a connecting element of the entire region, dates back to 1875. It was at this university for example that the first departments of Ukrainian and Romanian languages were opened. Since 1950 the university has been housed in a distinctive complex of buildings which were also designed and constructed in the period of 1867–1874 by Josef Hlávka, originally as the seat of the Metropolitan Bishop of Bukovina. The retrospectively eclectic style employed herein organically interconnects features of Romanesque, Byzantine, Moorish and Gothic



with elements of Bukovina folk architecture, and thereby draws attention to the diversity of cultural influences in this city, which is home to temples of four different religious faiths. (Incidentally: four Czech students also enrolled in the first year at the university, and during this time Chernivtsi had a direct train link with Prague.) In 2011 the building was registered in the UNESCO world cultural heritage list.

By itself, the ethnic diversity of the city would not be so fascinating from today's perspective had it not been supported by the idea of belonging and peaceful co-existence. These endeavours for integration were again primarily but not exclusively promoted by Jews. From the 1870s the daily press also enjoyed an unprecedented heyday — three independent daily newspapers and several journals were published by Jewish presses. It is no surprise that during this period the city's own inhabitants proudly nicknamed it 'little Vienna'.

On the other side of the river was the town of Sadagora (Sadhora in Ukrainian), today part of Chernivtsi. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Sadagora became a centre of Hasidism, the movement of Jewish folk piety with elements of mysticism, and tens of thousands of devout Jews flooded here from the whole of Eastern Europe. After 1842 the town was home to the legendary miraculous rabbi Israel Friedmann, known as Ruzyner, the founder of several Hasidic dynasties. The significance of Sadagora for Chernivtsi is attested to for example by the somewhat frivolous title of a poem by the town's most famous native Paul Celan, from his collection *Eine Gauner- und Ganovenweise gesungen zu Paris emprès pontoise von Paul Celan aus Czernowitz bei Sadagora* (No One's Rose: A Rogue and a Villain's Song Sung by the Paris Emprès Pontoise Paul Celan of Chernivtsi by Sadagora).<sup>1</sup>

Much about the history of Chernivtsi is recounted in the stories of the local monuments. During the times of the Austrian monarchy a monument to Friedrich Schiller stood in front of the theatre here, during the Romanian period it was replaced with a monument to the poet Mihai Eminescu, and today a monument to Olha Kobylianska is located on the same site. The latter two lived in Chernivtsi and wrote their texts here — among other languages also in German. Friedrich Schiller had a series of devoted admirers in Chernivtsi, and his works appeared regularly in the repertoire of the local theatre.

## 2. THE CULTURAL PHENOMENON OF BUKOVINA

The 'cultural phenomenon' of Bukovina has several roots. Above all it owes its origin to the unique historical-political and social circumstances — in addition to the multi-ethnic composition and background provided by the Habsburg monarchy, we could mention in particular the integrative role of German language, which enabled the various different ethnic groups of Bukovina to maintain contact with contemporary European culture, and was at the same time a tool of everyday communication. At that time in Europe, regular national movements here were substantially weakened as a consequence of the more or less equal status and distribution of all ethnic

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1 To understand this poem it is necessary to know that Sadagora was not only a quarter inhabited by devout Jews, but also by thieves and vagabonds.



groups. The Jewish community had successfully assimilated and brought cosmopolitan tendencies to the entire region.

Knowledge of several languages was the norm — there are well known examples of writers incorporating not only lexical but also for example syntactical elements of another language into their own literary style, and at the same time virtually all the Bukovina authors wrote their works in a number of languages. An as yet little-researched subject is the massive translation activity that virtually all the Bukovina authors were engaged in as a matter of course. Bukovina represented more than a mere literary topos; it constituted a cultural phenomenon based upon an endeavour to facilitate an understanding between the nations living here, which was of course manifested also in the natural reception and further cultivation of literary traditions and motifs from other European cultures.

The German-written literature from the territory of Bukovina originated in what was a peripheral area of the Habsburg monarchy, and reached its apex at a time when the region now represented an island within a foreign language-speaking territory. It was ultimately virtually extinguished by the Nazi despotism, when its foremost representatives were either murdered or driven into exile. It is precisely these circumstances that make it a utopian cultural landscape, a 'Central Europe on a miniature scale', which more so than in reality had always lived in the visions and texts of the local literati. In this myth of Chernivtsi the fantastic intertwined with the everyday, and fatefulness takes on anecdotal features, as documented by the following quote from a text by the German journalist Georg Heinzen:

*Chernivtsi, half way between Kiev and Bucharest, Krakow and Odessa, was the secret capital of Europe, in which the daughters of butchers sang coloraturas and cabmen held forth on Karl Kraus. Where the pavements were swept by bunches of roses and where there were more bookshops than bakeries. Chernivtsi, an unremitting dialogue of cultures, which every morning thought up a new aesthetic theory, to be refuted in the evening. Dogs here bore the name of Olympian gods and chickens scratched Hölderlin's verses into the earth. Chernivtsi, a pleasure boat with a Ukrainian crew, German officers and Jewish passengers sailing under an Austrian flag, crossing between East and West (Heinzen 1991, p. 18).*

In the German-written literature from Bukovina it is possible to distinguish two currents: 'provincial' literature, of a regional character and significance, and literature which can be boldly placed within the context of the contemporary Austrian-German literature. The first of all to represent the latter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Karl Emil Franzos, a prose writer who spent the last years of his life in Chernivtsi, and whose later literary work was heavily influenced by the multicultural atmosphere of the city.

It was only after the First World War, when Bukovina became part of Romania and German ceased to be the official language, that an unprecedented number of young, German-writing poets with their origin in assimilated Jewish families arrived on the Chernivtsi literary scene. Following on from the best traditions of German literature and (often unwittingly) Jewish culture, on a number of occasions they enhanced their poetry with Romanian and Ukrainian folklore (Firges 1998, p. 94). Similar socio-

cultural mechanisms took effect here as in inter-war Prague — Jews, who had been protected by the emperor during the times of the monarchy, found themselves in social, linguistic and religious isolation, thus in a period of permanent insecurity. Pressure was exerted on them both directly and indirectly in the political and economic realms. The result was their gravitation towards the realm of culture and the increased intensity of their literary production.

In contrast with the German-writing Jews of Prague, whose works tended to be of a sweeping, epic character, the Chernivtsi Jews found themselves in a situation in which they had already ‘had their day’, and felt their oncoming demise. As a result they clung to poetry in its classic form, directed on one hand towards the vanished world of the Habsburg monarchy, and on another towards utopia — a dreamed of, romanticised world of harmony, which contrasted harshly with their reality in the homeland where they had become foreigners. Poetry became a tool of stabilisation and of overcoming social antagonisms. This generation of poets, whose peak years can be dated to approximately 1930–1940, focused in their poetry primarily on the landscape and genre scenes from nature.

A younger generation of Bukovina literati attempted to define itself in opposition to this current. These writers had been marked by the experience of exile during the First World War, and attempted to bring new, avant-garde impulses into Bukovina literature — for example on the pages of the eminent expressionist journal of its time *Der Nerv* (established in 1919 by the poet and columnist Albert Maurüber), which took inspiration both from Berlin (Franz Pfemfert’s magazine *Aktion*) and from Vienna (Karl Kraus’s magazine *Die Fackel*). However, even these authors soon found that in a situation in which their very language was a foreign element it was not possible to appeal to readers through literary experiments, and they again began to gravitate towards traditional forms of expression. This formally traditional poetic vision of the world, by turns of a consciously and an unconsciously epigonic character, was nonetheless enhanced by the specific exoticism of the local flavours to such an extent that it rather represents a unique phenomenon within the framework of German literary history. But even in this form, the Bukovina authors were unable to transcend the boundaries of the region, even despite the intensive endeavours Alfred Margul-Sperber, the organiser of Chernivtsi literary events and the discoverer of many talents, the editor of the daily *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt* and himself a prolific poet.

Poetry from Bukovina did not gain international recognition until after the Second World War, in the work of the authors of the generation whose literary expression was formed by the period of the Holocaust, by life in the ghetto, deportation and forced labour in concentration camps. The Holocaust further multiplied by several times the intensity of the experience and expression of their oeuvre. After the war, the great majority of the surviving Chernivtsi Jews decided in favour of life — though painful, but with regard to the intensity of their work of key importance — in the diaspora. Only two names made a pronounced impact on world literature — those of the poets Paul Celan and Rose Ausländer. However, it would be a mistake to consider their poetry composed in exile as the sole relic of the Bukovina literary oeuvre. On the contrary, hints of the later greatness of their literary work can be seen already in their literary beginnings. Numerous anthologies of the







poetry of this region published since the 1980s document that interest in Bukovina poetry is continuing to grow.

An interesting phenomenon of Bukovina German-written poetry, familiar also from the Prague German-Jewish literature, is the parallel appearance of certain collocations, metaphors and entire motifs in the work of several authors. This common sharing sometimes even takes on the features of a quote; however, they rather represent a new conception, natural and specific in the given situation. So, for example, we find the renowned metaphor of 'black milk' from Celan's *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue) far earlier in poems by Rose Ausländer or Alfred Margul-Sperber, a 'tomb in the air' from the same poem in texts by Immanuel Weißglas or Moses Rosenkranz — without this in any way diminishing the artistic power of Celan's composition (Wiesner — Wichner 1993, p. 165). Another frequent motif and at the same time a key word in Bukovina poetry is the image of a well, which it is necessary to regard on an entirely concrete as well as a symbolic level. A natural, commonplace piece of scenery is thus simultaneously a female element, a womb offering purification, as well as a mystical link to this world. It is not by chance that images of an abandoned or filled-in well, or indeed a well of tears, appear in post-war Bukovina poetry.

The poetry of the Bukovina poets of Jewish origin that originated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in exile is — more or less consciously — a vain aspiration to recover a lost homeland. This search takes on a range of forms: whether it concerns the nostalgic images of Rose Ausländer, the 'topographic' texts of Alfred Gong, or whether the author — as in the case of Paul Celan — takes the route of intentional silence and confirmation of the irretrievability of the experienced loss.

It has become virtually a platitude to state that the poetry of the Bukovina authors thematising the persecution of the Jews and their mass extermination clings to an aspiration to identify the unspeakable in verse, often again in a traditional poetic form — as if in defiance of the famous statement by the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1983, p. 34). However, precisely in this conscious act it is necessary to see an endeavour on the part of the poets from this region (in an unprecedented number and with the greatest intensity) to return the validity of poetic language to German, the 'language of murderers' ('Mördersprache'), and to demonstrate the indestructibility of the poetic expression of the mother tongue ('Muttersprache'). In the second plan, rather unintentionally than intentionally, this aspiration represents an attempt to dismantle the trauma connected with the Holocaust. The paradox that this flourishing culture, with its origins in German language, was destroyed precisely by German Nazism, is defining for the entire post-war situation of the Bukovina authors.

The outlined antagonism is manifested in poetry for example in sarcastic word-play or grotesque absurdity (in the work of Immanuel Weißglas or Alfred Kittner), by divorcing words from their natural context in the form of powerful, innovative metaphors (in the case of Rose Ausländer) and the most radical, systematic alienation of poetic language by means of ciphers, the remoulding of the traditional poetic lexicon and the disruption of established linguistic structures in Paul Celan or Ilana Shmueli (Luther 1987, p. 263).

In his celebrated speech given on the occasion of the presentation of the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in 1958, known as the 'Bremen Prize

speech', Celan clearly denominates two spaces of his poetry — the real and the spiritual. He does not speak the name of his lost homeland, but coins a widely-quoted description of it:

*The land from which — after such detours! if they can be said to exist whatsoever: detours? —, this land from which I come is most probably unknown to most of you. It is a land in which no small number of Hasidic tales, retold to us all in German by Martin Buber, have their origin. It was, if I may add further to this topographic sketch something which is now, from a great distance, floating before my eyes — it was a land inhabited by people and books (Celan 1983, p. 185).*

### 3. THE LAST OF THE CHERNIVTSI DIASPORA

The Israeli poet Ilana Shmueli was born in Chernivtsi as Liane Schindler on 7 March 1924. The future poet was a member of the German-speaking assimilated Jewish minority in the city. She came from a well-to-do family — her father, after studying in Vienna, brought his wife to Chernivtsi, where he established a furniture factory. Liane and her sister spoke standard German, but they also learned Romanian, Latin, French, Hebrew and English. After the occupation of Bukovina by the Soviet armies in 1939 she was forced to transfer to a Jewish school, where she learned Yiddish, but after the retaking of Bukovina by the Romanian armies in 1941 a ghetto was established in Chernivtsi, and the transport of Jews to labour camps in Transnistria was commenced.

Her sister took her own life, while in 1944 the remaining members of the family succeeded in fleeing to Istanbul under dramatic circumstances, and there they obtained permission to travel to Palestine. Liane subsequently studied music and social pedagogy, and later worked as a criminologist and social pedagogue in Tel Aviv. In 1953 she married the musicologist Dr. Herzl Shmueli, and in 1956 she gave birth to their daughter. It was only after her retirement that she began to devote herself to literary and translation activity. She died on 11 November 2011 in Jerusalem, to where she moved after the death of her husband.

Already during her youth in the Chernivtsi ghetto, Liane visited literary events held by the poet Rose Ausländer. It was here that she first met the young Paul Antschel, who was to become the eminent German-writing poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). Her relationship with him and their repeated meetings in Paris in 1965 were of defining importance not only for her later work, but also for her life in general. Ilana visited the poet a number of times in the French capital, and became his guide during his crucial journey to Jerusalem in 1969, when Celan openly confronted his Jewishness. Their mutual correspondence, later published, attests to a deep humane, artistic and amorous relationship which had bound together both friends since the times of the Chernivtsi ghetto. In April 1970 their amorous relationship escalated into a form which was no longer acceptable to either party, as documented by a letter written by Ilana Shmueli, dated 8 April:

*Paul, I wrote to you on Sunday, today is Wednesday. You can see that I'm trying not to pester you with my letters too often, and I also don't go to my letterbox every*







day — even that's an indirect form of pestering. I'm trying to get through my days with a certain degree of self-control, and somehow fulfil my tasks. Not many, not well, but I do it.

After our talk, after your last letters, I can't see many ways out of our labyrinth. After all, desire also remains a labyrinth — and the blundering around inside it — and my 'truthfulness', as you call it, is nothing other than desire — and that also remains truthfulness [...] (Shmueli 2019, p. 112).

Ilana Shmueli was also the recipient of Celan's last letter, which he wrote on Sunday 12 April 1970, before committing suicide by jumping into the Seine:

*I write you these lines in gratitude, Ilana. In gratitude that you think of me, that you feel with me, that you stand by me. You know that I wrote the lines: 'What happened with you / on each of the shores / enters / transposed into another image.' — Make these lines untrue, Ilana.*

*Last week, when I again began teaching, I wanted to tell you this: Today it was a good tutorial, Ilana. When I have a good day at the École, it stays with me for a long time also in other situations.*

*I've reread some of your letters, I'll reread all of them. Your phrase that truthfulness is desire affected me deeply. Here allow me to write Kafka's words: 'Elevate the world to purity, permanence, truth.' [...]*

*'Force of Light' is to be published in the autumn.*

*Allow me to inform you that I have faith in my publisher Siegfried Unseld.*

*You know what my poems are — read them, and I will sense it.*

*Paul (ibid., p. 114).*

It was not until the advanced age of eighty-two that Ilana Shmueli actively entered the world of literature, with her book of memoirs *Ein Kind aus guter Familie. Czernowitz 1924–1944* (A Child from a Good Family: Chernivtsi 1924–1944), which was published in Germany in 2006. One year later her first collection of poetry was published, entitled *Zwischen dem Jetzt und dem Jetzt* (Between Now and Now). In 2009 there followed the book *Zeitläufe — ein Brief* (Flights of Time — a Letter), in which she returns once more to her recollections of her youth in Bukovina. An insight into her relationship with Paul Celan is provided by her book *Sag, daß Jerusalem ist. Über Paul Celan. Oktober 1969 — April 1970* (Say that Jerusalem is: About Paul Celan. October 1969 — April 1970), first published in 2000, and also especially by their mutual correspondence published in 2004. It was only posthumously, in 2012, that her second collection of poetry was published, entitled *Leben im Entwurf. Gedichte aus dem Nachlaß* (Life in a Sketch: Poems from my Estate).

It was therefore long after Celan's death that Ilana Shmueli gradually began to devote herself more systematically to literary activity. She translated the poems of Paul Celan, as well as other authors of German poetry into Hebrew, and also attempted to write poetry in Hebrew herself. However, all of this was a mere prelude — it was only in her advanced years that Ilana Shmueli finally resolved not only to write but also to publish her poetry in her native German. She met with a positive reception. In 2009

she was awarded the Theodor Kramer Prize, and in Germany, where her collections were published, she became a belated literary discovery.

Similarly as in the work of Rose Ausländer, the themes have their origin in the history of Jewishness, from the era of migration to the 'promised land'. But unlike Ausländer, Ilana Shmueli genuinely inhabits this mythical land, and her poetry, conscious of its own finitude, is therefore at the same time rooted in reality and the present — as in the poem *After Seven Decades*: 'my life is leaving me / At my back is the wilderness / it is now closing in on me / I count the dunes / seven times ten // Head in the sand' (ibid., p. 55).

In the second collection especially, the focus is frequently on language, her native German, her rejection of it and subsequently her embracing of it once again as her own:

***The place where syllables meet is smouldering***

*beware of the word  
there is not just one sense  
leave the meaning  
accompany this murmuring beneath the ashes.  
(ibid., p. 56)*

The poetry of this author unequivocally grows out of the specific poetics of fragmentariness and seeming hermeticism that Paul Celan reached towards the end of his life. It is precisely in a remarkable continuation from Celan's late poetry that Ilana Shmueli also began to compose her own work, after an interval of several decades. Nevertheless, these are poems that are in no way derivative, but in which the inspiration is acknowledged; far more than an endeavour to 'match her teacher', here we can read a belated tribute not only to Paul Celan, but to an entire extinct continent of poetry which was once established in the oeuvre of the Jewish poets of Chernivtsi.

Celan's path to his own poetic expression was not simple, and his early work, which comes within the Chernivtsi period (before 1945) was still in many respects conventional, even if frequently suggestive of his future work. In the work of Paul Celan and subsequently also of Ilana Shmueli, the poetry of Bukovina finds not only its most noteworthy heirs and continuators, but at the same time also creators, who, as late participants in the Chernivtsi German-Romanian-Slavic-Jewish multicultural community and direct participants in its absolute liquidation, trace in their work a radical turn away from all the traditions to which the Bukovina poets remained faithful.



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