

1998

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Recommended Citation

Bower, Kathrin M. "Rose Ausländer (1901-1988): Austria-Hungary/Germany." In *Women Writers in German-Speaking Countries: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Elke Frederiksen and Elizabeth G. Ametsbichler, 47-55. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.

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ROSE AUSLÄNDER (1901–1988)

Austria–Hungary/Germany

KATHRIN BOWER

BIOGRAPHY

Rose Ausländer was born Rosalie Beatrice Scherzer on 11 May 1901 into a German-speaking Jewish family. She spent her childhood in Czernowitz, the capital of Bukovina, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After World War I, Bukovina was incorporated into Romania, and at the end of World War II was annexed by the Soviet Union. Rosalie Scherzer studied literature and philosophy at the university in Czernowitz but never completed a degree, largely because of the family's poverty after her father's death in 1920. To help alleviate this economic situation, she emigrated to the United States in 1921 with Ignaz Ausländer. The pair settled initially in Minnesota, then moved to New York City, where they married in 1923. The marriage was short-lived: they separated in 1926 and divorced in 1930.

During the years following her separation from Ausländer, Rose became an American citizen, worked as a secretary and a bank clerk, and wrote poetry in her spare time. She also travelled to Germany and Romania, where she spent a year in Czernowitz caring for her ill mother, then returned to New York in 1928. She began publishing her poems in German-American newspapers, but returned to Czernowitz in 1931 because of her mother's worsening health. In Czernowitz, Ausländer worked as an advice columnist for the daily paper and became active in the rich cultural life of the city, where she found both publishers and a receptive public for her poetry. Her first volume of poems, *Der Regenbogen* (The Rainbow), published in 1939, was well received in Romania and Switzerland but ignored in Germany. Friends in New York, recognizing the growing threat posed by the Nazis, encouraged Ausländer to return to the United States in 1939, but her desire to escape to safety was outweighed by her dedication to her mother, who now required constant care. The Nazis occupied Bukovina in 1941; Ausländer and her mother miraculously survived the brutal ghetto years in Czernowitz during which 90 percent of the city's Jewish population was systematically exterminated. Under these conditions she began to

regard her writing as a strategy for survival: "Getto, Elend, Horror, Todestransporte . . . Schreiben war Leben. Überleben." (*Gesammelte Werke* [Collected Works] III 286; Ghetto, hardship, horror, deportations. . . . Writing was life. Survival.). Her poems written immediately after the war bear witness to her experiences of the Holocaust, an event that would continue to resonate in varied forms throughout her later works.

After fleeing from Soviet-occupied Bukovina in 1946, Ausländer, the perpetually uprooted outsider, returned to New York, where she worked as a foreign correspondent for an export company. Her poetic production was sporadic: she wrote in bursts of creative energy followed by lengthy periods of inactivity. During this self-imposed exile in New York she entered a prolonged phase in which she wrote solely in English. The conscious or subconscious avoidance of her native German was catalyzed by her mother's death in 1947: the shock of this loss culminated in an incapacitating nervous collapse. After a seven-year interval during which she was unable or unwilling to write in her mother tongue, she returned to composition in German and displayed a surprising faith in the capacity of that language to express the multivalence and contradictions of human experience: "Dieses Doppelspiel/ Blumenworte/ Kriegsgestammel" (V 26; *This double game/ flower-words/ war-stammering*). By the mid-1960s she had overcome aversions to the country that had spawned her tormentors and left New York for Düsseldorf, where she settled permanently in 1965. There she worked as a secretary and translator in order to support her writing, which underwent a marked transformation from the rhymed, traditional style characterizing her prewar lyric. She published several volumes of poetry, and by the early 1970s her spare and pithy verse had become somewhat of a poetic sensation in Germany. Critics compared her with Else Lasker-Schüler, Nelly Sachs, and Gertrud Kolmar, and she was awarded numerous literary prizes. Because of her deteriorating health, she was forced into early retirement and spent the last ten years of her life a bedridden invalid. Her poetic spirit and determination persisted despite her illness, however, and she did not stop writing until two years before her death on 3 January 1988.

MAJOR THEMES AND NARRATIVE/POETIC STRATEGIES

Rose Ausländer's collected works, consisting of poems and a small number of short prose texts, fill eight volumes. The multitude of her writings reflects equally numerous concerns: war and alienation, peace and childhood, homelessness and exile, Judaism and the Holocaust, language and identity, love and death. She herself described the wide range of themes in her work in an afterword to the 1976 edition of her collected poems: "Meine bevorzugten Themen? Alles—das Eine und das Einzelne. Kosmisches, Zeitkritik, Landschaften, Sachen, Menschen, Stimmungen, Sprache—alles kann Motiv sein" (III 287; *My preferred themes? Everything—the single and the singular. The cosmic, criti-*

cism of modern life, landscapes, things, people, moods, language—everything can be a motif). Since an analysis of these myriad themes is beyond the scope of this entry, I will focus on three inseparable influences that informed Ausländer's development as a poet and are inscribed in varied forms in her postwar works: her relationship to her mother, her sense of Jewish identity as a witness and victim of the Holocaust, and her poetological faith in language.

The bond and intimacy Ausländer shared with her mother emerged as a powerful affective force in her poetry, echoed in her repeated repossessions and transformations of the maternal imago as mother, refuge, muse, goddess, self. These multiple variations on the theme of maternity evidence not only the strength of her biographical connection to her mother but also her artistic dependence upon a maternal figure as a means of defining and measuring herself. The boundaries between daughter and mother, poet and muse, are represented as permeable and liquid, and the lyrical self often dreams of immersion in a maternalized sea as a longed-for union with primal nothingness that would bring her the peaceful oblivion of dissolution. The quest for the maternal that reverberates in Ausländer's verse offers a literary illustration of Nancy Chodorow's description of the mother–daughter relationship, advanced in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and refined in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989). Chodorow distinguishes the mother–daughter bond from the oedipal mother–son dyad by its longevity and ambivalence, and maintains that the daughter never fully overcomes her connection to the mother, but instead continues to oscillate between dependency and autonomy along a continuum of desire.

The enduring and intimate relationship Rose Ausländer shared with her mother indelibly marked both her life and her poetry. In a poem entitled “Meer II” (II 306–7; Ocean II), a portrayal of an elusively erotic voyage into the sea, the lyrical daughter-self fantasizes a union with the watery, maternal element of origin. Here Ausländer also anticipates Julia Kristeva's theory of semiotic *jouissance* in poetic language in her use of rhythm, tone, wordplay, and visual undulation. The poem glides along peaks of vocalic and consonantal alliteration, interrupted by syntactic breaks where isolated words hang suspended like solitary flecks of sea foam. The choice of *Meer* as the title for this colloid of words and images plays on the crosslingual associations it inspires. As a homonym of the French homonyms *mer* (ocean) and *mère* (mother), *Meer* borrows and then assumes, both metaphorically and tonally, the attributes of a maternalized ocean. This metaphor is reinforced by the structural staggering of lines that serves as a visual echo of cresting and falling waves. The poem culminates in the lyrical daughter's sensual submersion in a phallically maternal ocean that impregnates her in inverted fulfillment of a wish later expressed in “Wieder” (IV 85; Again): “Mach wieder/ Wasser aus mir” (Make/ water out of me/ again).

The penetrating ambiguity of the mother–daughter union in “Meer II” (“du wächst in mir/ flüssig und hart” [II 307; you grow in me/ fluid and hard]) foreshadows the transgression of gender boundaries by the maternal figure in “Beichten” (VI 211; Confession): “Meine Mutter ist/ mein Beichtvater” (my mother

is/ my father confessor). The mother is all things to the daughter: poet, lover, father, child/self, and the other who is simultaneously the same. Their relationship is so intimate that their roles become (con) fused and interchangeable: "Mutter mein Kind" (VI 227; mother my child). The lyrical dialogues with an absent (m)other are simultaneously attempts to construct a substitute for the lost through language: the mother tongue, endowed with a body as text, becomes the sought-for refuge and compensation for the loss of both mother and mother country. In this constructed textual space, the poet avails herself of linguistic maternal agency as a tactic to combat fragmentation and nurture her own visions of her self and the world: "Mutter Sprache/ setzt mich zusammen" (III 104; mother tongue/ puts me together). The poetic subject is a subject-in-process, a fluctuating construction of fragments held together by the writer's implication in the procreative cycle of language: "von Geburt zu Geburt" (VII 103; from birth to birth). Rose Ausländer, in later years rooted to her bed as an invalid, but ever the rootless, wandering exile, sublimated her longing for the security, trust, and intimacy that had characterized both her relationship to her mother and to the homeland she had lost into the poetic word: "in meinem Mutterland/ Wort" (V 98; in my motherland/word).

The sense of affinity Ausländer felt for her native German, both her mother tongue and the oppressor's language, was not without ambivalence. Despite her efforts to create a substitute refuge for herself by translating her needs and desires into poetic language, she never overcame her feelings of homelessness in the outside world. In "Selbstporträt" (V 203; Self-portrait) the poetic persona begins her nomadic odyssey by identifying herself as a German-speaking Jewish gypsy raised under a multinational flag. With this self-categorization she seeks to lay claim to the complex of identities that define her and thereby gain some form of control over what is otherwise an existence-in-flux, in which she is pushed around by the borders that divide countries and cultures. In her own carefully constructed realm of language, she has the capacity for self-determination and the freedom to fantasize a self-creation that transcends geographical boundaries. This self-portrayal as an exile is one that Ausländer consciously promoted with the retention of the surname "Ausländer" (foreigner) and experimented with in recurring poetic depictions. As an aging and immobilized invalid, she continued to assume the persona of the rootless wanderer, reexperiencing her many paths and travels via the word. In the late poem "Heimatlos" (VII 66; Homeless), the lyrical self recounts her endless voyage in search of sanctuary and concludes: "ich bleibe heimatlos" (I remain homeless).

These poetic portrayals of the lyrical self as an exiled and eternally wandering "Jew" did not appear in Ausländer's work until after the Holocaust. Forced by the Nazis' genealogical politics of segregation to confront her Jewishness, she engaged in a dialogue with her cultural heritage only to find herself alienated by traditional Judaism's failure to address the contemporary trauma and suffering of her people ("Im Ghetto:/ Gott hat abgedankt" [II 17; In the ghetto/ God has abdicated]). In her view, Judaism had no consolation to offer the victims

and survivors in a post-Holocaust environment of uncertainty and fear. In "Sabbat I" (II 61; Sabbath I), the poetic persona expresses her consternation at the incomprehensibility of the Law of the Fathers. The disillusioned lyrical self explicitly rejects the paternal God who failed to rescue His children from the ashes in "Vater unser" (VI 274; Our Father). She counsels instead a reliance on language as an alternative realm offering the constancy and security that are absent in contemporary society: "Bleib/ deinem Wort/ treu" (VII 87; Remain/ true/ to your word).

Although Rose Ausländer may not have chosen or shared the faith of her people, she was given no choice in sharing their fate. The history of the Jewish people is marked by recurring catastrophe, and her experience of this most modern and comprehensive version of the apocalypse remained forever inscribed in her memory, inspiring both identification and resistance: "wir lassen uns nicht vernichten" (VIII 226; we will not let ourselves be destroyed). In works about the Holocaust that she wrote years after the event, she began to experiment with form and expression in an ongoing effort to transform memory into poetry. She was influenced by the stark postwar spareness exemplified by poets such as Paul Celan, and developed a laconic and simple style more powerful and poignant than the traditional structured and rhymed rigidity of her ghetto poems of the 1940s.

In later poems such as "Aber" (III 31; But), "Fragebogen" (III 229; Questionnaire), "Verwundert" (III 43; Astonished), "Wo waren" (IV 92; Where were), and "Überhört" (VIII 117; Overheard), she offers insights into the complexity of the victim-survivor's experience, at once compelled to bear witness to the memory of those so cruelly murdered and pulled toward rebuilding a life in the present. In "Aber" the lyrical self questions the simultaneity of beauty and destruction by juxtaposing an observation of the sunny fertility of summer with a series of images that evoke fire, shadows, ashes, and death. "Fragebogen" thematizes the victim's loss of identity that accompanies the eradication of all she or he once identified with. The cold bureaucracy of the questionnaire's demand for a signature from one who had survived a torturous ordeal characterized by the systematic erasure of individuality is presented with clipped irony. The lyrical subject remains caught in a system of persecution in which she has no address, no homeland, and no name: the survivor, like the victim, is marked by anonymity. The uniform of anonymity that paradoxically identifies the victim in "Fragebogen" is worn as a ghetto dress by the female persona in "Verwundert." Despite the sensual delights and the atmosphere of celebration that surround her, the poetic self cannot shed the memories of formless smoke that cling to her like a garment: "Noch nicht abgestreift/ das Gettokleid" (not yet shed/ the ghetto dress).

The indifference of Allied countries and the apathy of bystanders is the theme of "Wo waren" (IV 92). The tone is reserved, neither vengeful nor accusatory but tinged with sorrow and disappointment that human beings could have both overseen and overlooked a catastrophe of such magnitude: "Wo waren/ die laut

schweigenden/ Menschen" (Where were/ the loudly silent/ people). The silence of the onlookers escalates from indifference to complicity and willful execution in "Überhört," where the screams of the victims and the outcry of protest from the poetic self-as-witness fall on deaf ears. In this poem, Ausländer clearly associates power and discourse: the perpetrators, in control of the dominant discourse, have excommunicated their victims from the realm of language both by ignoring their entreaties and by torturing them into pain beyond words. The word leaders (*Wortführer*) create a dichotomy of otherness and then systematically destroy their own construction by depriving the designated other of a voice—and ultimately of a body.

Rose Ausländer's poetry demonstrates her perception of and belief in language as fundamental to human experience, as constitutive of power relations and subject formation. She recognized the potential for manipulation inherent in language's ambiguities and acknowledged its appropriation for both creative and destructive purposes: provocative and alluring as a substance of poetry, violent and dehumanizing in the ideology of National Socialism. In spite of her own very real experiences of the consequences of the Nazis' strategic manipulation of the language she revered, she remained almost blindly loyal to her mother tongue. More and more toward the end of her life, her poems reflect her persistent search for an idiom commensurate with her own personal vision and desire despite her recognition that she would ultimately never find it ("Das Wort/ fällt mir nicht ein" [IV 154; The Word/ does not occur to me]).

SURVEY OF CRITICISM

To date, the critical analyses of Rose Ausländer's work have been limited to essay-length studies ranging from literary reviews, to general introductions, to close interpretive readings of individual poems. Several of these essays have been collected in a volume edited by Helmut Braun and published in Germany in 1991 (*Rose Ausländer. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*). Braun introduces the book with a lengthy and thorough discussion of the poet's life and development as a writer, providing a solid corrective to the multitude of errors that had marred earlier accounts of Ausländer's life. The majority of the essays he presents in the volume, like most existing criticism on the poet, are concerned with drawing parallels between her biography and her writing, focusing especially on her Jewish heritage and her experiences of exile and the Holocaust. Despite the popularity and repute Ausländer attained in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, her expansive oeuvre has only just begun to be explored and examined by scholars in the field of German studies. There is no single monograph-length critical study of her work. Theoretical analyses are largely lacking among the scattering of secondary literature: in Braun's anthology only Gerhard Reiter offers a more theoretical perspective, examining the influence of Constantin Brunner's philosophy on the structure of her poetry. One of the few available interpretive essays in English is an article by Jerry Glenn that offers

little in the way of theoretical critique but provides a coherent, general treatment of themes and influences and assays a few conclusions on her technique and writing strategies (her preference for personifying metaphor, the increasing laconicism of her texts, and her playful use of language).

Rose Ausländer's style and use of language also have been the object of speculation and debate. In her later works, she turned more and more to poetological reflections on language, which for her embodied a potential for expression undiminished by the abuses and contortions it had undergone as an instrument of terror under National Socialism. This seemingly naive faith in the unspoiled creative capacity of language serves as a point of controversy in critical reviews of her work. Some praise her style as unique and refreshingly free of conceit (Eva Zeller), whereas others see it as evidence of a specifically feminine and German-Jewish relationship to language (Herbert Andreas), and still others find her metaphors archaic and completely out of touch with contemporary concerns (Günter Kunert). Although Bernd Witte and Renate Wiggershaus can be credited with pointing out the importance and significance that her affection for her mother had for her life and writing, they do not go beyond passing references.

Rose Ausländer's diverse works weave a tapestry of intersecting identities and overlapping nationalities, echoing a life that bears witness to her strength and perseverance. As the reflections of a poet who survived and experienced such a breadth of historical and cultural change, her writings both deserve and await further study.

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