

Relative values and poetic licence

Harry Jarvis

I recently attended a weekend meeting of the RSGB Southern Region on genealogy, at which lecturers from the JGSGB were emphasising the rewarding task of annotating the family tree with stories which add flesh to an otherwise skeletal listing of names. Somehow I must have felt instinctively for this to be important [1] and I have always been a meticulous collector of all details ever since I took my first uncertain steps as a budding genealogist in 1938. To search was like shining a pencil beam of light onto a black canvas: as the light beam widened so the area of contact with the unknown increased.

When she was released from a concentration camp in Transnistria in 1944, my mother returned to Bucharest with a dying husband and endured the loss of her 17-year-old daughter in an



My father

air raid. At the end of the War she came to England, studied law and was called to the bar in 1959. She was an avid writer of short stories, some of which were published. A collection of poems written by my sister Sonja during internment has been deposited by me at Yad Vashem. With my mother's help I was able to produce my maternal tree, which was the source of the theme I intend to develop [overleaf].

The interesting features in this tree are the photographs. There is one of my second cousin Erich as a highly decorated Austrian officer, and one of my father as a medical officer in Austrian uniform, serving in Romania. Jews have always been loyal soldiers of their country, only to be disillusioned by their subsequent maltreatment.

Later I received information from Erich's friend and neighbour in Czernowitz, Erna Flüssig. She corresponded with friends in Moscow using a veiled, semi-coded language, because Erich had married a non-Jewish high ranking political officer, Nadia Dimitrieva, and was in constant danger of being arrested, deported or killed. The reason I had not been able to find him in Moscow was that both flat and telephone were in Nadia's name. I set off for Moscow and searched, unsuccessfully, for Erich. On my return, I learned from Erna that he had recently died at an early age.

Ten years ago, after German re-unification, I heard—from Erna again—that his daughter, Marina Dimitieva-Einhorn, was teaching at the University of Heidelberg, and later in Bremen. On my visit to Bremen I met her family and Erich's wife, Nadia, who told me that Erich had worked with her after the War as an interpreter in Vienna, and later as a newspaper editor in Moscow under constant threat from the vicissitudes of the Stalinist regime. Passing reference was made to his very close friendship with Paul Celan.

An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* (17 January 2001), reviewing a translation of a new book of *Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* [3], aroused my curiosity sufficiently to encourage me buy the book. My reward was finding numerous references to my cousin, as well as a letter he sent on his release and a poem specially dedicated to him.

Celan (né Paul Antschel) was born of German-speaking Jewish parents in Czernowitz (as I was [2]). Before the war he joined my cousin in a Zionist group which was sympathetic to the left in the Spanish Civil War. After a brief occupation of Czernowitz in 1940 by Soviet troops,

the German *Einsatzkommando IOB* occupied it and Celan was detained in a Romanian forced labour camp.

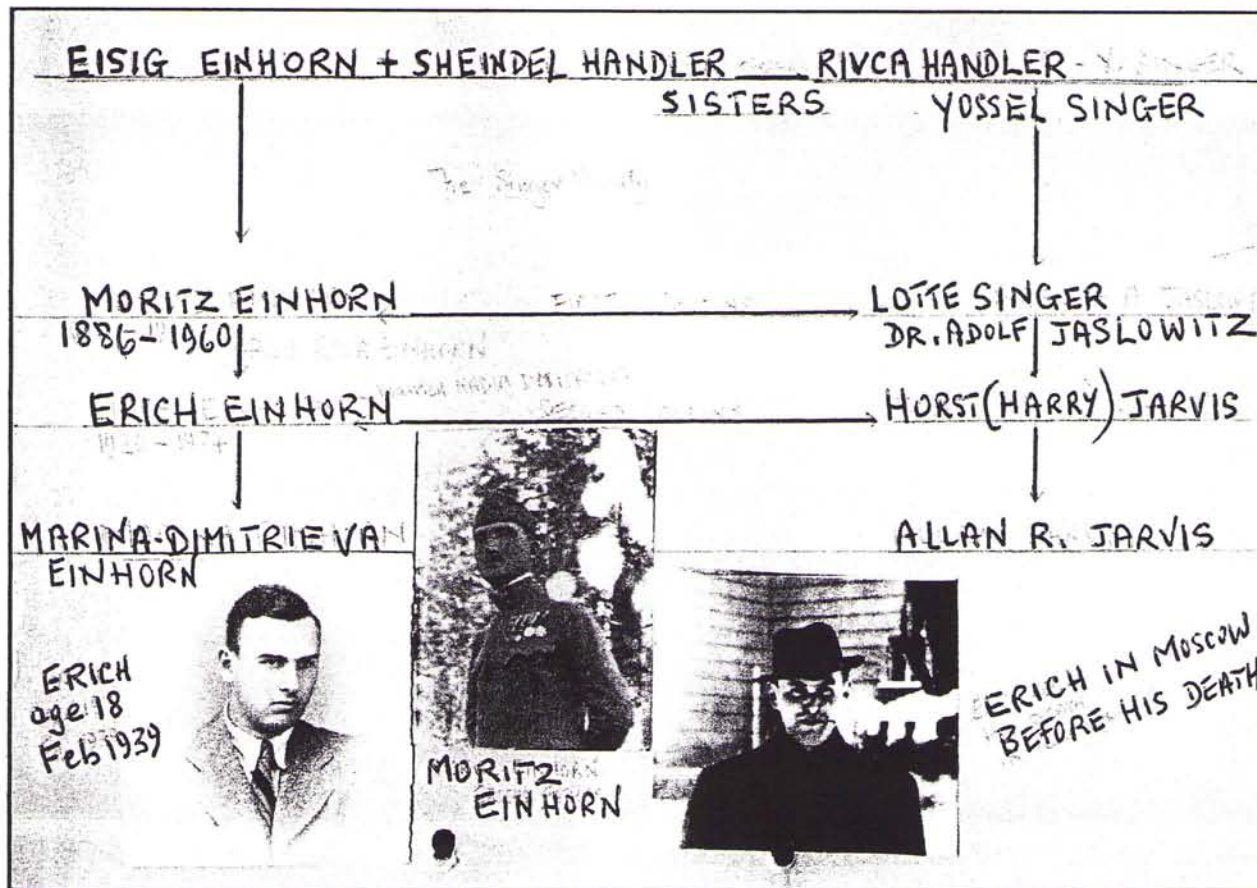
Returning home in 1944, he wrote to Erich of the fate of his parents, a matter which disturbed him profoundly:

Dear Erich, I've come to Kiev for two days and I'm glad of the chance to write you a letter. Your parents are well, Erich, I talked with them before I came here. That's saying a lot. Erich, you can't imagine how much. My parents were shot by the Germans on the Bug River at Krasnopolka. Erich, oh Erich. There's much to tell. You've seen so much. I've experienced only humiliations and emptiness, endless emptiness. Maybe you can come home?

This letter expresses the unimaginable grief that permeates all his writing. His friend Erich did not come home. Celan migrated to Bucharest, fled to Vienna and in July 1948 settled in Paris for the rest of his life.

What about Celan, the writer and poet? He was befriended and supported by Nobel Prize laureates, among many others. German composers set his *Todesfuge* to music and a recital of it took place in the Bundestag on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht. The fugue's chilling refrain is *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*—"Death is a master from Germany".

In Berlin the new Jewish Holocaust Museum includes a special Paul Celan Court. His close friend and admirer, Primo Levi, was author of the autobiographical book *La Tregua* (*The truce*), which was made into a film in 1966 and shown on British TV. Levi admits borrowing from Celan the phrase "a grave in the air". Levi, like Celan weary and depressed with the world's cynicism and



insensitivity, committed suicide in 1987. Similarly Celan, his psychic wounds unhealed, drowned himself in the Seine at the age of 49.

I was very lucky to have had parents who were university graduates and I remember, as a child, our large library of classic and scientific books and a home where literary soirées were de rigueur. Another recollection was these German verses:

Vom Vater hab'ich die Natur
Zum lernen und studieren
Vom Mütterlein die Frohnatur
Und Lust zu fabulieren

which I translate as:

I've father's height and serious drive
For study and tradition;
I've mum's desires, the love and joy
Of poems and composition.

Still, a love of poetry and writing hardly turns one into a literary critic. Celan's poetry, although lyrical, I find very obscure. Dozens more qualified than I have evaluated his work, none better than John Felstiner, lecturer at Stanford University, who has spent almost a lifetime on the study. For this mammoth task he has had world-wide support, including such a prestigious body as the Rockefeller Foundation. I have his permission to quote from the book.

My aim has been twofold: to show the facility of combining genealogy and story telling; and to draw attention to Celan, now regarded as one of the world's greatest Jewish poets since the War. In the last verse of *Shibboleth* he refers to my cousin, his boyhood friend with whom he supported the Republican cause in Spain:

Einhorn:
you know of the stones,
you know of the waters,
come,
I'll lead you away
to the voices
of Estremadura.

Finally, a few lines from the last faded, long letter from Erich describing life in Czernowitz within months of the outbreak of World War II. From the February 1939 I lost all contact with him.

Dear Horst,

You'll have to excuse me for not having written all this time. It was always my intention to travel to Paris, hoping to write to you from there. However frequent postponements due to delays in the issue of my passport meant that I eventually lost my registration [at the university]. The matter turned rather sour for me and I am particularly peeved for two reasons. First, I lost an entire year loafing around without any definite plan and second, I was so sure that, had I left in November, I would have have been with you in England for Christmas.

How galling—you can hardly imagine my present mood; and now, what the bloody hell am I to do? Czernowitz is as dreary as when you left in spite of having trolleybuses. Nothing sensible left to do; the cinema and books. I attend lectures in English by a quite amusing Mr Thompson. ...

Well, that's the way things are. I should have liked to write several pages but I lack inspiration at the moment. Regards, Erich.

PS: Reply immediately and let us create a basis for regular and frequent correspondence. You can either place my letter in an archive or use it as toilet paper.

- [1] Harry Jarvis: "My family 60 and 200 years ago", *Shemot*, 5,1, April 1997
- [2] Harry Jarvis: "A visit to post-Glasnost Chernovtsy", *Shemot*, 2,4, October 1994
- [3] John Felstiner: *Selected poems and prose of Paul Celan*, W W Norton & Co, London, 2000

ADVOCAT
DR. M. EINHORN
CERNĂUȚI
(ROMANIA)

CERNĂUȚI, 1 Februar 8 2 Februar 1939

Lieber Herr,

Du mußt mir verzeihen dass ich Dir so lange nicht geschrieben habe. Ich habe immer gedacht dass ich nach Paris fahren werde und dass ich Dir schon von dort schreiben werde, habe immer aufgeschoben, habe dann die Inscriptions verspätet (weil mein Pass zu spät fertig wurde und so ist aus der ganzen Sache Etwas geworden. Mich ärgert es aus 2 Gründen: Erstens habe ich ein Jahr verloren und dich nicht hier herum ohne genau zu wissen was ich aufzupacken werde, und zweitens war ich sicher dass, wenn ich im November fahren werde, ich Dich zu Weihnachten besuchen werde. Essig. - Kannst Dir schon vorstellen wie es mir jetzt summt ist. Indist war man sicher man fährt ins Tal! Ah! Das Schloss soll es treffen.