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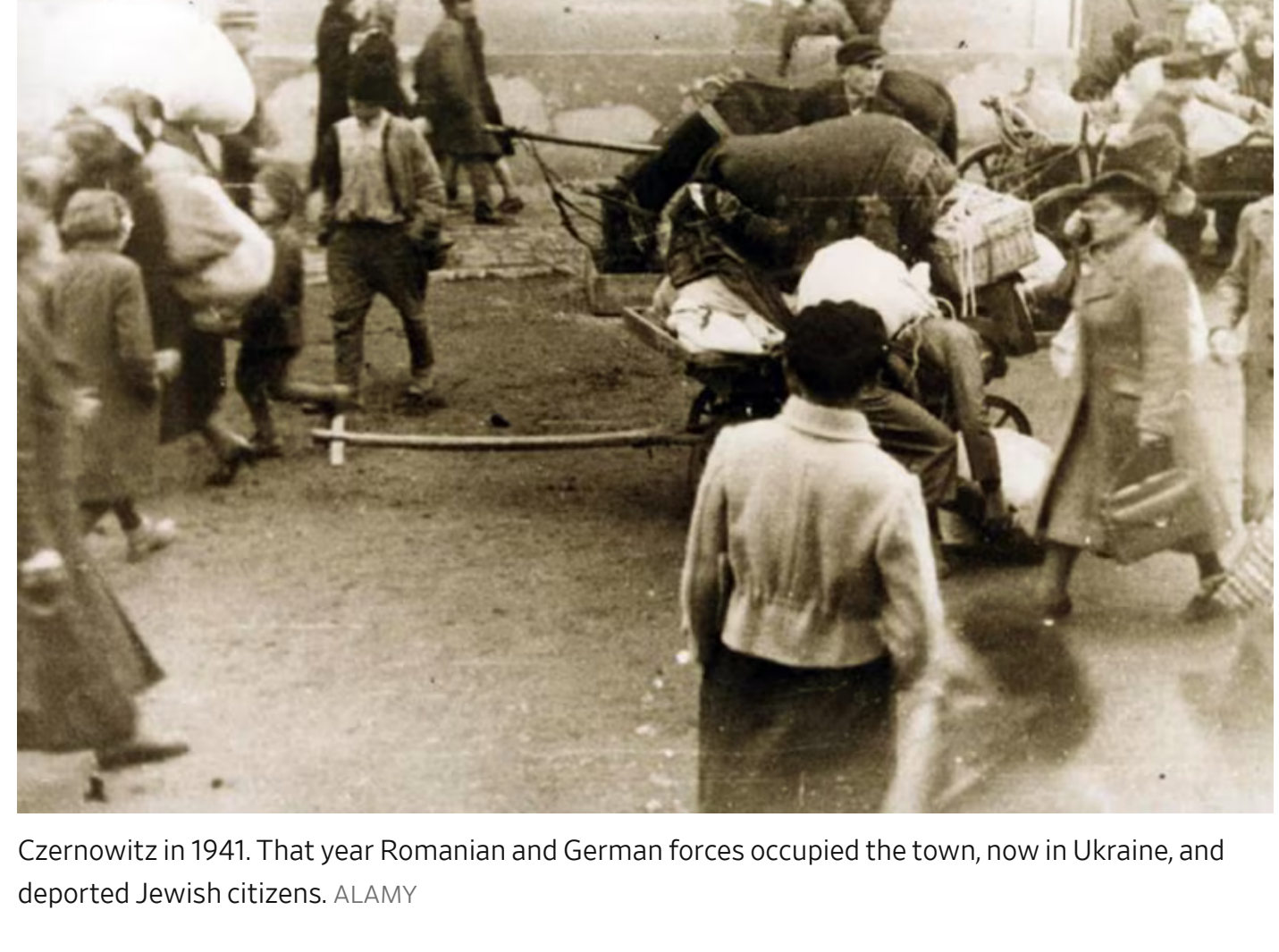
‘Paul Celan’ Review: Verse and Testimony

Paul Celan survived the Holocaust and became the most consequential postwar German-language poet.

By Benjamin Balint

June 5, 2026 at 11:26 am ET

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Czernowitz in 1941. That year Romanian and German forces occupied the town, now in Ukraine, and deported Jewish citizens. ALAMY

Paul Celan performed one of the 20th century's strangest acts of literary fidelity: He remained true to German by forcing it to answer for what had been done in its name. He never made his home in Germany, yet became the most consequential German-language poet after World War II, writing in the language that had first reached him through Goethe, Hölderlin and Rilke, and returned as the tongue of his mother's murderers. His poems can seem like black crystals; hold them to the light and they glint with ash, Scripture, lovers' voices and breath. They are difficult because a language is being compelled to testify, and because a poet is asking who can bear witness.

A biographer of Celan must decide how to come near poems that seem to resist approach, and a life that has been embalmed by its own legend. Anna Arno, who has written biographies of the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Polish activist Konstanty Jeleński, meets that challenge in "Paul Celan: A Life." By threading Celan's poems through the lived record, Ms. Arno restores a proud, wounded, flirtatious, multilingual man often romanticized by reverence. Her account, translated from the Polish by Soren Gauger, is an act of devotion without monument-making.

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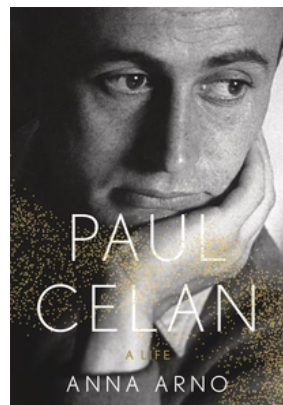
Paul Celan: A Life

By Anna Arno

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Paul Antschel was born in 1920 in Czernowitz, the old capital of Bukovina, which was once Austro-Hungarian, then Romanian, now Ukrainian. Czernowitz was by then a Habsburg afterimage: Jews, Germans, Romanians, Ukrainians and Poles, brushing past one another in schools, markets and cafes, their lives conducted in competing alphabets. In such a city, identity was less an inheritance than a layering. Ms. Arno has an eye for these civic palimpsests.

At home, German was intimacy and aspiration. Celan's mother loved German literature and insisted on speaking German in the household. His gift for languages was precocious. He moved among Romanian, Russian, French, English, Hebrew; he translated Kafka, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Paul Valéry, Osip Mandelstam and others. Translation was for him a ferrying across borders and a way of hearing one language estrange another.

Then the literal border became a trap. In 1940 the Soviets took northern Bukovina. In 1941, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, German troops and Romanian forces entered Czernowitz. The Great Synagogue was burned; Jews were humiliated, confined, deported. Celan survived forced labor, "shoveling dirt" and hauling debris. His parents were deported to Romanian-occupied Transnistria, a killing zone between the Dniester and Bug Rivers. His father died in an epidemic, likely of typhus. His mother, classified unfit for work, was killed by a blow from a rifle butt. Celan would later refer to the Shoah with the terrible restraint of "that which happened." Before mourning could begin, German had to pass through what he called "the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech."

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From that ordeal came "Deathfugue," first appearing in 1947 in Romanian translation as "Death Tango," a title that better suggests its delirious, macabre motion. "Black milk of dawn," "your golden hair Margarete," "your ashen hair Shulamit"; the poem sets German culture and Jewish annihilation to a cadence so memorable that its memorability becomes part of its danger. Celan called it a tombstone for his mother. In postwar Germany it became anthologized, useful to the rituals of remorse. When the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno doubted the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, Celan replied with the asperity of one who knew where barbarism had lodged. Adorno later reconsidered. After Celan, the dictum could no longer stand untouched.

Ms. Arno's postwar chapters are strongest when they keep catastrophe from swallowing the rest of the life. In Bucharest, where he arrived in 1945, Paul Antschel became Paul Celan, the new name an anagrammatic rebirth from the Romanian spelling of "Ansel." Vienna followed, briefly. There he entered the orbit of Ingeborg Bachmann, whose father had joined the Nazi Party, and whose relationship with Celan joined eros and guilt in a knot neither could untie; their affair ended, but the knot held.

In 1948 he made his way to Paris. "Nothing in the world," he wrote that year, "could make a poet give up poetry, even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German." In Paris he found a livelihood and literary standing. He also found Gisèle de Lestrang, the French printmaker he married in 1952, a companion whose discipline steadied him but could not protect either of them from his intensities.

Fame gathered, and with it came injury. The long plagiarism campaign sustained against him by Claire Goll, the widow of the poet Yvan Goll, struck at the ground on which this survivor-poet stood. To be accused of stealing one's poems when the poems were the last shelter of the self was an unusual cruelty. Ms. Arno treats the affair with tact, showing how persecution and paranoia can become entangled without becoming identical. Her account of Celan's mental illness—breakdowns, hospitalizations, medication—has the decency of precision. Madness, in these pages, is neither halo nor key.

Under this strain, Celan's later poems splinter. Syntax cracks. Words weld together or break apart. The lines stammer toward a listener. "No one / bears witness for the / witness," he writes in the 1967 poem "Ashglory." Again and again, the poems search for a "you," often absent or dead, divine or unknowable. He once imagined the poem as a "message in a bottle," sent out in the hope that it might "wash up on land, on heartland, perhaps."

In 1969, the son of the Diaspora finally visited Israel. Celan called Jerusalem a "caesura" in his life; he needed it, he wrote, even before he found it. The journey brought recognition and the renewal of old Czernowitz ties. It did not bring rescue. Back in Paris in April 1970, short of his 50th birthday, Celan drowned himself in the Seine. He left a biography of Hölderlin on his desk with this sentence underlined: "Sometimes this genius goes dark and sinks down into the bitter well of his heart."

Ms. Arno's achievement is to return Celan to mortal scale: ardent in friendship, hungry for recognition, capable of wounded tenderness. This restoration shows why the poems had to be so jaggedly intimate. They are shibboleths spoken at borders where a syllable can decide belonging or exile. "My poems are my biography," Celan once said. Ms. Arno's account brings us to the edge of that transformation, where the life no longer explains the poem and instead becomes answerable to it. The poems remain resistant, as they must; but their resistance now carries the force of address, a bottle sent out from wreckage toward an unknown reader.

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—Mr. Balint is the author of "Bruno Schulz: An Artist, a Murder, and the Hijacking of History."

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