

# The Saga of Melitta Urbancic

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**ABSTRACT:** Very few Jews fleeing from the Holocaust in Central Europe between 1937 and 1945 managed to reach the safety of the shores of Iceland, which was not a major player in this catastrophic event, but was also not a non-participant. Melitta Urbancic, a Viennese Jewish author and actress, was one of these very few. Under dramatic circumstances, she was allowed to settle in Iceland in late 1938, where she remained for the rest of her long life. As we now know, when she died in Reykjavík in 1984 she left behind a voluminous oeuvre of German-language poetry, a selection of which appeared in 2014 in the bilingual Icelandic-German book *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, edited by Gauti Kristmannsson, which contains the only works of Melitta Urbancic that are in print in any language. This review article presents the adventurous saga of Melitta Urbancic, includes some of her poems in German and in English translation, and looks at the special quality of her relationship to Iceland, her writing style, and the content of the poetry as it changed from that of a traumatized refugee in a very foreign environment to someone who gradually found a new home.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Entre 1937 et 1945, très peu de juifs fuyant l'Holocauste en Europe centrale réussirent à atteindre la sécurité des côtes de l'Islande, pays qui ne fut pas l'un des principaux participants à ces événements catastrophiques, mais n'en fut pas moins l'un des participants. Ce texte raconte l'histoire de l'une d'entre eux, Melitta Urbancic, une écrivaine et actrice juive de Vienne qui, dans des circonstances dramatiques, obtint fin 1938, la permission de s'installer en Islande où elle vécut jusqu'à la fin de ses jours. Lorsqu'elle mourut à Reykjavík en 1984, nous le savons désormais, elle laissa derrière elle une oeuvre volumineuse de poésie en allemand, dont une sélection apparaît en 2014 dans le livre bilingue Islandais-Allemand *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, édité par Gauti Kristmannsson et contenant les seules oeuvres imprimées de Melitta Urbancic. Cette revue présente la saga des aventures de Melitta Urbancic, inclut certains de ses poèmes en allemand et leur traduction en anglais, explore la qualité spéciale de sa relation avec l'Islande, ainsi que son style d'écriture, et enfin, le contenu de sa poésie qui évolue progressivement de celui d'une immigrée traumatisée évoluant dans un environnement totalement étranger, à celui d'une personne qui trouve progressivement un nouveau chez soi.

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On 8 June 1946, the Viennese newspaper *Zeitspiegel* published an article that announced the reappearance of the Viennese author (and sculptor) Melitta Urbancic, spelled Urbantschitsch at the time, whose survival during the war was clearly a matter of some surprise in Vienna.

It is with great relief and delight that poetry readers have just found out that the Viennese poet and sculptor Melitta Urbantschitsch survived the Nazi terror while spending the war years in Reykjavík, Iceland, in that land of volcanoes, glaciers, and the lonely isolation of a remote island.<sup>1</sup>  
 (“Vom Rand der Welt,” 13)

A note of almost disbelief creeps into this article since it contains the information that Iceland had served as a place of refuge during the war for a Jewish author from Vienna. The “Kingdom of Iceland,” as it was named between 1918 and 1944, was at the time a constitutional monarchy in personal union with Denmark, and was arguably the most remote place in Europe that might serve as a safe haven for the European Jews who were attempting to escape annihilation in the Holocaust. This name remained in effect during the years in which Denmark was invaded and controlled by Nazi Germany (1940-1944) and while Iceland was occupied by Great Britain in May 1940, replaced by United States troops in July 1941, five months before the USA officially entered the war. The name “Kingdom of Iceland” only ceased to exist on June 17, 1944, after a referendum in May 1944 overwhelmingly called for the establishment of the independent Republic of Iceland.

For almost forty years during her life in Iceland, Melitta Urbancic wrote a large amount of poetry in German, and while the manuscripts were not unknown in Iceland, little attention was paid to them, no doubt because they were in German. However, this changed in 2014 when she was “rediscovered” and a bilingual German-Icelandic selection of her poetry, *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, appeared in Reykjavík, which was edited and given an illuminating commentary by Icelandic scholar Gauti Kristmannsson, from which much of the information in the short biography that follows is drawn. Gauti Kristmannsson lends the reader a very helpful hand by establishing a wider context for the poems, showing how they reflect the psychological issues that must have challenged all refugees in foreign exile, while recognizing the special case of exile in Iceland. Included in the edition are fine translations into Icelandic by Sölvi Björn

Sigurðsson of the fifty-one poems selected. It is the first publication of any of Urbancic's literary works in book form, and for potential readers it remains the only in-print source of any of her poems, all of which were written in German.

Melitta Urbancic (née Grünbaum) was born in 1902 to Jewish parents in Vienna and in many ways the upcoming pattern of her life must have seemed preordained at the time of her birth. Her father was a successful lawyer, and the family was reasonably well-off and assimilated into the society of splendid fin-de-siècle Vienna. The Jewish population, while still being subjected to the anti-Semitism of the drawing room, and governed by the decidedly anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger, continued to hold down a position of economic and cultural power that couldn't be matched anywhere else in Europe. Viennese cultural life was dominated by Jewish musicians, artists, scientists, and authors—Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schoenberg, Stefan Zweig, Arthur Schnitzler, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Kraus, Theodor Herzl, among others—many of whom had moved to the Austrian capital from the provinces of the Habsburg Empire in order to be in the most congenial place in Europe for them. But for a Jew born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire around the turn of the twentieth century, everything was going to turn out much differently in the 1930s than anyone could have imagined around 1900. And this would be the fate of Melitta Urbancic.

Despite the desperate crisis that enveloped Austria, and especially post-war Vienna, in the wake of World War I and the total collapse of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, young Melitta was able to pursue a rather traditional academic route for a gifted, enlightened, young, Jewish, bourgeois Viennese woman. It led through the University of Vienna, where in 1924 she met her future husband, the Roman Catholic music student from Vienna, Victor Urbancic, before she went on to study philosophy and literature under Friedrich Gundolf and Karl Jaspers as well as theatre at Heidelberg University, receiving her doctorate in 1927.<sup>2</sup>

This was followed by several years of moderate success as a promising author and actress in provincial German-language theatres. In 1930, during an engagement in the theatre in Koblenz, she once again met up with Victor Urbancic, who was now music director in the theatre in nearby Mainz. In the same year the two former student colleagues from Vienna got married, and in the following year the first of their four children was born. Under normal circumstances, by 1937, with two more children, they would have been able to feel that they were reasonably well situated to contemplate a future with family and promising careers in the music and theatre worlds of Central Europe.

But the times were anything but normal, thanks to the rise to power in Germany in 1933 of the radically anti-Semitic Nazis under Adolf Hitler. Sensing that Victor's position as a musician in Germany was becoming untenable because his wife was Jewish, the Urbancics made their way back to Austria in 1933, where Victor continued to find respectable positions in his field. But when Nazi Germany marched into Austria and incorporated it into the Third Reich in the spring of

1938, Victor's employment as a musician also became impossible in Austria as Melitta was considered to be "Jewish" by the Nazis despite having recently converted to Roman Catholicism. Desperate attempts by her husband to find a position in Switzerland or North America proved futile and the future for the family certainly must have looked bleak.

By one of those extraordinary quirks of fortune that determined fates in those years, a colleague of Victor's suggested to him that he contact the composer and conductor Franz Mixa, an Austrian national who held down one of the leading positions for classical musicians in Iceland. He had been hired, among other things, to organize the music for the national millennial celebration of the establishment of the Icelandic parliament, the Althing, and was well-respected in Iceland for his contribution to the music scene. He thus possessed an Icelandic work permit, and Victor's colleague had the feeling that Mixa might be interested in an exchange with Victor that would allow Mixa to return to Vienna and Victor to take over his position in Iceland, a place where Victor had never been.

Mixa was in fact very much interested in this proposal and ultimately the exchange took place in 1938. In August of that year, Victor traveled on his own to Reykjavík, a city with only 38,000 residents at the time, to see if this was a reasonable place of employment for a classical musician from Vienna. While it certainly wasn't Vienna as far as the classical musical scene was concerned, he found it acceptable and urged his wife to follow him to Iceland with their three children before it was too late. As irony would have it, during the same years when Victor Urbancic was desperately trying to escape from the Nazis, Franz Mixa had already been a member of the then illegal Austrian Nazi Party since 1932. He remained in Iceland until 1938, only returning to Vienna when the Wehrmacht marched into Austria.<sup>3</sup>

Victor replaced Mixa at that time in Reykjavík and settled down there. Melitta realized that she had to take advantage of the fact that she could still legally get out of Austria and join Victor in a place that was outside the Nazi sphere of influence. By then, under terms of her husband's work permit she could acquire documents that very few people would receive—Icelandic visas for herself and her three children (she had a fourth in Iceland)—which became available to her under the terms of her husband's work permit. In the fall of 1938, she took the Danish boat *Drottningen* (*The Queen*) from Copenhagen to Reykjavík. This was no doubt her last legal opportunity to escape the Nazi terror in Vienna, and she abandoned her homeland and the only cultural and linguistic world she had ever known with what must have been a mixture of great relief mixed with great sadness. Her father had died shortly after the takeover of Austria by Nazi Germany, and she had to leave her recently widowed mother behind when she boarded the train to Copenhagen, as her mother had been denied an Icelandic visa and was forced to remain in Vienna.

Victor Urbancic went on to become the music director of the Icelandic National Theatre and is considered one of the key figures in the surprising rise of Iceland to its contemporary position as a serious outpost of European classical music, with the spectacular Harpa Concert Hall, that opened in 2011 on Reykjavík's harbour. He remained in Iceland for the rest of his life, dying unexpectedly in Reykjavík in 1958, when he was only fifty-four.

Thus it was that Melitta Urbancic and her three children traveled to Iceland, a country whose language she did not speak and whose history and culture she was not at all familiar with. There is no doubt that Iceland, like virtually all European (and North American) countries, made it very hard for threatened European Jews to get entry visas as the European war began to take shape in the years before it swept into catastrophic action. In reality it was almost impossible to get the proper documents that would allow Jewish refugees to legally enter Iceland, or for that matter any Nordic country, after 1938.<sup>4</sup> Without such documents it was fruitless to try to cross the North Atlantic in an attempt to reach the shores of Iceland and then hope for the best, a situation that did not change when it became clear that any Jews still left in the Nazi-controlled parts of Europe by the early 1940s were in mortal danger.

Melitta Urbancic had become one of only a handful of Jewish refugees from mainland Europe who managed to not only gain entry into Iceland legally but also to settle down there with growing success during and after the years when the German Reich controlled most of Europe. Other German-language Jewish writers may have found themselves in even more exotic locales than Reykjavík as havens of security in a precarious world (Shanghai, various African countries, and the Dominican Republic come to mind), but perhaps no refugee had found herself in such an unexpectedly alien landscape as did Melitta in "Iceland, in that land of volcanoes, glaciers, and the lonely isolation of a remote island" to quote again the description in *Zeitspiegel* upon news that she had unexpectedly survived. As it turned out, she became one of only a very small number of Jewish citizens of Iceland in 1949, and Iceland remained her home for the rest of her life. (In recent years this handful included the great Russian-born pianist and conductor Vladimir Azhkenazy, who became an Icelandic citizen in 1972, and Brooklyn-born chess master Bobby Fischer, who gained Icelandic citizenship in 2005 and died in Reykjavík in 2008.)

For all of these reasons, Iceland has not been one of the countries that is usually included in a discussion of the Holocaust in Europe, as it was so remote that there were very few Jewish refugees who even attempted to get there. Of those who did, almost none actually succeeded in getting onto Icelandic soil between 1936 and 1945. Most who even considered it were turned back in Copenhagen, where Danish customs officials continued to vigorously control visa applications for Iceland, even after Denmark was under the control of Nazi Germany.

But as the Icelandic author Sjón has written to this author:

I think it is important to hook Iceland into the narrative of the Shoah in the Nordic countries. Even though the number of people is small—both who were allowed to stay and the ones who were turned away—it is as we know a story where every individual counts. Our rediscovery of Melitta Urbancic, her life and writings, is very important as it adds to our understanding of the plight of the exiles who ended up in Iceland and at the same time makes us face our shameful history.<sup>5</sup>

So while Iceland was not really a major participant in the events that overwhelmed civilized Europe between 1938 and 1945, the tragedy of the Holocaust also comes down to individual stories, and each one of the very few refugees who made it into Iceland during this period must have had a dramatic story to tell. This would certainly include Victor and Melitta Urbancic and their children who settled down in Iceland and where Melitta lived until her death in Reykjavík forty-six years later in 1984. Her mother, however, abandoned to her fate in Vienna when Melitta and the children left for Iceland, was murdered in 1943 in the collection and transport of Jews who were being sent by cattle car to the Terezin concentration camp, many of whom subsequently ended in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The fate of her mother resonated bitterly with Melitta for the rest of her life and is the focus of the poem that introduces her poetry in *Fra hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*.

The poems selected for this book were written in her first years in Iceland and reflect the brutal experiences of the Nazi rise to power and the first years of exile, which was an unavoidable theme upon arrival for most exiled writers. In Melitta's writing, however, this gradually begins to give way more and more frequently to a growing appreciation of the society that had saved her life, and those of her children, and her gradual discovery of the new spectacular environment around her. It is hard to think of another refugee from the Shoah who documented an equivalent reaction in the course of a lifetime of writing.

Just how many poems she actually wrote in Iceland is impossible to calculate, but when fifty-one of her poems appeared in this Icelandic book in 2014, no poems by Melitta Urbancic were in print, although a few had appeared earlier in obscure post-war anthologies of Austrian literature written in exile. And this is still the case. With regard to the unpublished poems, Melitta's third child, Sybil, who now lives in Vienna, has written to this writer that the selection of Melitta's poems in the book represents only a small percentage of the great number of poems written by Melitta that she, Sybil, possesses in manuscript form.<sup>6</sup>

This selection in *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, which was assembled by Melitta but not published at the time, is made up of a dedication poem, followed by fifty of her poems written in the first years of her stay in Iceland. It is divided into the earliest ones lamenting the past, followed by slightly later ones that

begin to explore the possibilities of coming to terms with the reality of her new existence in exile, even beginning to find the possibility of comfort in the present and future in a new homeland. The dedication poem “Meiner Mutter” deals with what must have been the most traumatic experience of her journey to Iceland, the abandonment of her mother who was killed by the forces that the daughter had escaped.

### **Meiner Mutter**

Komm aus deiner Finsternis und Ferne!  
 Bette meinem Herzen dich zunächst,  
 dass mit dir den Saft ich keltern lerne,  
 dessen Süsse erst am Bittern wächst.

Lerne ich doch das Leben erst geniessen,  
 seit ich ahne, welche Qual dich traf,  
 seit von diesen Tränen überfliessen  
 meine Wangen im durchträumten Schlaf.

Weil dein Blut in meinen Adern kreist,  
 Habe ich mehr als meinen Durst zu stillen -  
 weil es dir in Todesangst vereist,  
 hebt sich heisser noch mein Lebenswillen.

Komm ins Licht! Mit meinen heilen Augen  
 schau für dich den schönen Tag ich neu,  
 an ihm haftend, dich zurückzusaugen  
 aus der Nacht, dass er – in mir – dich freu.

Tilgend mit den unverdienten Gnaden  
 des Alltäglichen die dunkle Schuld,  
 darf ich meine Kraft für dich beladen,  
 meins für dein Herz üben im Geduld.

Aus dem Tale steigen schon die Schatten,  
 Reinste Linien hebt der Berg ins Licht,  
 das wir beide lang verloren hatten -  
 Wie es jetzt den Wolkenrand durchbricht,

lass mich nah dich wöhnen, deren Ferne  
 Mir schon hier die Seele schmerzhaft weitet -  
 weil dein Dunkel sie schon überbreitet,  
 dass ihr Leuchten deine Nacht besterne!

(117-118)

### **To My Mother**

Come from your distant darkness

Lie down and rest by my heart  
 Teach me to gather the nectar,  
 Whose sweetness grows from despair.

Let me relearn the glory of life  
 While imagining what pain ended yours,  
 My cheeks still soaked in sorrow  
 My dreams still drowned in tears.

As your blood flows in my veins  
 My thirst does not burn alone -  
 As your will to live froze in fear of death  
 Let mine return in flames.

Come in the light! Let my clear eyes  
 Return to you the splendour of day,  
 Lean on me. Let me draw you back  
 From the night, to bask in light again.

As the unearned mercy of routine  
 Slowly dissolves the dark guilt,  
 May I harness my power for you,  
 Let my heart beat truly for yours.

The shadows already rise from the valley,  
 The mountains take shape in the light,  
 that we both so long ago had lost -  
 as the light now breaks through the wall of clouds.

let me feel your nearness, whose distance  
 now painfully stretches my soul,  
 As the light spreads over the darkness  
 May its glow bestar your night.

With this poem, that looks backwards and hopes for mercy in the present, she sets the stage for *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, the following fifty poems describing life at the edge. The first half is assembled under the title *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen* [*Between Yesterday and Today*] and explores the pain and difficulty of finding a way through a completely alien setting that had been forced on her for no comprehensible reason. It consists of apparently simple rhymed poems probing deeply into the complexities of the traumatic experience shared by many other refugees trying to come to grips with the fact that close friends or relatives have been murdered while they, almost by chance, have not shared that fate. One of them, “Vorwurf,” copied below, also asks probing questions about the ability of language to even express the essence of the Holocaust.



**Vorwurf**

Auch heute wollen wieder Lieder keimen  
 im Herzen, das - trotz allem - überlebt,  
 wie sich die Flut mit den Gezeiten hebt  
 und jeden Morgen neu die Kelche seimen.

Ein Laster fast, geübt nur im Geheimen,  
 seitdem der Geist vor Gram und Grauen bebt:  
 was soll ihm Wohllaut jetzt noch, wenn er strebt,  
 im Worte Sinn und Leben mitzureimen?

Wer heute schreibt, während die Brüder bluten,  
 wer jetzt noch dichten kann, indess die Knuten  
 der Teufelsknechte in den Tod sie treiben,  
 färbe die Feder sich mit anderm Saft:

Kräfte zu zeigen aus zerstörter Kraft,  
 darf sie mit Blut nur oder Samen schreiben!

(141)

**Reproach**

Let the songs spring to life  
 in those hearts that – despite all – carry on  
 May they soothe parched throats  
 like the rising tide cools the shore.

Like a weight borne only in secret,  
 since the spirit trembles before pure evil:  
 What good are beautiful words  
 When they try to rhyme sense with life?

If you write today, as your brothers bleed,  
 If you try to make sense of it as the  
 whips of the devil's lackeys drive them to their death  
 colour your ink with a different liquid:

To display power drawn from destroyed strength,  
 write with blood alone or with semen.

This is a very disturbing presentation of the unfairness of fate and of the overwhelming self-hatred for having abandoned her mother to a far-worse experience than her own. The poem's almost nihilistic comments on the futility of language to describe it come five years before the presentation of precisely that theme in the much-discussed writings of Theodor Adorno and others who argued that there should be no poetry after Auschwitz. Here there is no suggestion that a new environment has in any way replaced the destroyed world of her past,

and Iceland is not even mentioned in what is essentially the exploration of a dark interior space. The splendour of the Icelandic landscape makes no imprint on the depiction of life in this new world order, and the city of Reykjavík plays no real role.

But in the second half of the work, assembled under the rubric *Hier und Heut* (*Here and Now*), twenty-five poems are presented that show a dramatic shift away from the claustrophobic interior space and the accompanying psychological withdrawal into depression that dominates the poems of the often backward-looking earlier poems. In *Hier und Heut*, the author begins to wander around and explore her new environment and takes her own advice to confront the present and consign what happened previously to a desolate past that must somehow be overcome. After a trip to the north coast of Iceland, songs of praise to Akureyri and Dalvík appear as well as a lament that she must leave the beauty of northern Iceland.

#### **Abschied von Akureyri**

Jetzt weht schon der Abschiedswind  
durch Gras und Blätter,  
Der wandelt auch geschwind  
das gute Wetter.

Noch einmal will ich gehn  
auf Gartenwegen,  
die Hänge leuchten sehn  
dem Meer entgegen –

Noch einmal, liebe Stadt,  
Dir danken, du,  
Die mich bezaubert hat  
Im seligen Nu.

Wie war'n die Tage schön - !  
Schnell wird mein Schritt.  
Ich nehm den Glanz der Höh'n  
Im Herzen mit!

(174)

#### **Farewell to Akureyri**

The farewell wind already blows  
through grass and leaves.  
It will soon drive away  
the good weather

Once again I'll take  
the garden paths

to see the shining cliffs  
 leaning towards the sea

Once again, dear city,  
 I give my thanks to you  
 who took me in its spell  
 in the here and now.

How splendid were the days –  
 My stride quickens.  
 I take the brilliance of the heights  
 with me in my heart!

It is not only the geographical space that has altered dramatically but the psychological one as well. As the landscape opens up, so too does her view of her potential home as a world worth exploring. But anyone looking for breakthrough modernist works, or even modernist tendencies in post-war poetry, will not find that in the poems of Melitta Urbancic.

The complexities and the failures of language itself that drive the poetry of the most famous of the poets attempting to describe the Holocaust, Paul Celan, do not gradually enter into Melitta's poetry. Celan employed a voice in the 1950s that produced the most familiar and iconic poem about the fate of the European Jews in the war, "Todesfuge," a poem whose thundering words are crystal-clear on the question of right and wrong and whose unrelenting rhythm can have almost a martial feel to it. By the mid-1960s, however, that voice was disappearing into something that at times suggests a near-silence of fragmented words and potential sentences that end in silence. Linguistic signs, sometimes almost without interpretable syntactic context, are given the assignment of portraying a fractured universe that also was more and more applied to his own life in Parisian exile. Celan, whose mother, like Melitta's, was murdered in the Holocaust while her child, Paul, survived, eventually found his post-war exile life in Paris so unbearable that he committed suicide when he was only fifty. That world had become a shattered and fragmented one by 1970 for Celan, and the poetry he wrote in the last decade of his life reflected this shattered world through fragmented language, a stylistic choice completely foreign to the poetry of Melitta Urbancic.

The poems in *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, employ the almost folksy traditional style of rhymed verse. Although not every poem is rhymed, these poems, like those of other authors living in exile at the time, deal with the past with very simple poetic weapons rather than complex structures. This was true of authors as different as Melitta Urbancic, Heinz Politzer, Theodor Kramer, and even Georg Kreisler.

These four very different authors share some basic characteristics. They all write in the same form about very complicated and life-altering issues. They were all born in fin-de-siècle Austria, and they spent the war years in exile far from

home, forced to leave with very few possessions. If they had not escaped in time, they would probably have shared the fate of many relatives in the Nazi gas chambers. Politzer went to Palestine before moving on to an eminent academic career in the USA. Kramer was incarcerated as an enemy alien behind barbed wire fences on the Isle of Man and later lived in London. Kreisler was in the United States, even serving as a US soldier, before he returned to become a cabaret star in Vienna. And Melitta Urbancic was in Reykjavík. For all of them it was a long and difficult way back to post-war Vienna, but in a physical and psychological sense, Melitta may well have been the furthest away of them all.

Below are some opening stanzas of poetry by each of them that reflect on the consequences of their suffering in the war.

### **Melitta Urbancic**

#### **Heimatrecht**

Warum muss ich glauben ,  
 dass zuhaus ich bin  
 hier -- nach so viel tauben  
 Tagen ohne Sinn - ?  
 Schonungslosen Nächten  
 ohne Dunkelheit -  
 Dasein wie von Knechten  
 fremd und unbefreit -  
 (Urbancic 149)

### **Homeland Rights**

Why must I believe  
 that this is now my home –  
 after so many silent  
 meaningless days –  
 pitiless nights  
 without darkness  
 Slavelike existence  
 foreign and shackled -

### **Heinz Politzer**

#### **Auf die deutsche Sprache im Jahre 1943**

Oh Sprache, einst ein heilger Schrein,  
 Da Klang und Sinn sich streng verschränkt,  
 Gefäß, von Traum erfüllt und Wein,  
 Handharfe, in die Nacht verhängt,  
 (Politzer 74)

**To the German Language in 1943**

Oh language once a holy shrine  
 where sound and meaning interlocked  
 Vessel filled with dream and wine  
 Lyre played against the night

**Theodor Kramer**

**Über den Stacheldraht**

Wir standen hinterm Gittertor  
 —wie war der Abend blau und klar!—  
 scharf schob der Stacheldraht sich vor  
 und wehrte unsrer kleinen Schar;  
 erst summte wer für sich allein,  
 wir andern fielen lauter ein.  
 Wie war der Abend blau und klar!

(Kramer 68)

**Beyond the Barbed Wire**

We stood behind the wrought-iron gate  
 —how blue and clear the evening sky!—  
 the sharp barbed wire would be its fate  
 if to escape this small group should try  
 first humming solo, milling about,  
 then all of us joined in aloud.  
 How blue and clear the evening sky!

(Translation by Frederic Brainin and Jörg Thuncke, see Kramer 69)

**Georg Kreisler**

**Nichtarische Arien - Ich fühl mich nicht zu Hause**

Ich war bei meiner Schwester in Berlin.  
 Sie will ich soll auf immer zu ihr ziehn.  
 Ihr Mann ist jetzt gestorben, ein Schlemihl.  
 und hat ihr hinterlassen viel zu viel.  
 Sie hat a Wohnung, da ist alles drin.  
 Sie kennt die allerbesten Leut.  
 Doch ich sprach: Schwester wenn ich ehrlich bin,  
 mir macht das Leben hier ka Freud.  
 Ich fühl mich nicht zu Hause, zu Hause, zu Hause

(Kreisler 57)

**Non-Aryan Arias - I'll never feel at home here**

I visited my sister in Berlin  
 She says that I should stay and move right in  
 Her husband's kicked the bucket, a schlemiel,  
 and she got several million, what a deal  
 She has a villa – it is filled with stuff.  
 She hangs out with the upper crust.  
 But I said, "Sister, I've just had enough  
 This life just fills me with disgust."  
 I'll never feel at home here, at home here, at home here

What is striking about these poems is that they portray the complicated wartime experiences of refugees—incarceration, loneliness, language loss—and employ simple rhymed verse to do it, as if that would strip experiences to the bone. If you do this wrong, you write doggerel about events that determined life and death. And much of that has in fact been written. But this almost child-like poetic form is being used successfully, even movingly, in works by the authors discussed here, to convey the very threatening situations they had experienced. They all took great risks in escaping from central European homelands and landing far from home. There was not only the loss of homeland but also of the freedom they had known in their formative years, and there was the potential survival of anti-Semitism despite everything, making it difficult for them to feel at home anywhere. And in all of them, the simplicity of the rhyming scheme seems to have been felt to be the most moving way to deal in literary form with the disaster, while at the same time adding depth and accessibility to the complexity of the issue.

All of Melitta's poems are written like this, and when brought together in *Frá hjara veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt*, she creates in minimalistic form a large powerful version of the monumental story of the destruction of the European Jews and of the difficulties that confronted those who were lucky enough to escape as they tried to find a home elsewhere. Iceland may play only a small role in the epic story, but it deserves to be remembered when focusing on the big picture that dominates the stories of exile by Jewish refugees from Nazism when they landed on foreign shores. Very few environments were as alien at first as Iceland was for Melitta Urbancic. Her life as it moved from despair to acceptance to great satisfaction in a new homeland and her forty-year recording of it in poetry remained virtually unknown over all the decades. It is one that deserves a place in the literary history of the Holocaust. And the role that Iceland played in it also should find a modest place in the discussion.

#### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted all translations, including this one, are by this author.

2. Melitta Urbancic's book about her relationship with Gundolf was published in 2012; see Grünbaum.
3. During the war years, Mixa rose rapidly in the bureaucracy of the German classical music world, moving on to become a sought-after conductor, and composer. In 1949 he married one of the leading German opera singers, Hertha Töpfer, and successfully returned to his career as a composer, conductor, and teacher in Munich. Among his most popular works is the "Icelandic Symphony," written in 1949. Franz Mixa died peacefully in Munich in 1994, when he was 91.
4. Perhaps it should be noted that the position of Canada, a very large, wealthy, and unthreatened country was particularly uninviting. In *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948* Irving Abella and Harold Troper analyze Canada's appalling response to the crisis, which allowed only 5,000 Jewish refugees into Canada during the war.
5. Sjón, email message to this author, 28 October 2014. The Icelandic author and musician Sjón has been the guiding figure in the ongoing rediscovery of the life and works of Melitta Urbancic. After a reading from his works in Vienna in 2013, he was invited by his hosts to visit an exhibit in the Austrian Library of Exile Literature in the Literaturhaus in Vienna devoted to an Austrian writer who had survived the war in Iceland and for the next forty years had lived there and written poetry in German ("Immer lebst du am Rand der Welt"). As the life and works of Melitta Urbancic were previously unknown to Sjón, he made it his business to remedy this by persuading the Icelanders to present the story in an exhibition in Reykjavík and ultimately to get a bilingual edition of her works published: *Frá Hjara Veraldar. Vom Rand der Welt* is the result.
6. Sybil Kneihs, email message to this author, 13 November 2014.

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