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"It's vital for all of us people of faith to focus on the good we can do together instead of our differences," said Bishop Vetter. "My prayers are with Montana's Jewish community for God's blessing in this new endeavor."

Jewish life in Montana dates back to at least the 1860s, when Samuel Schwab, born in Bavaria, rode the first stagecoach from Salt Lake City to sell materials to gold miners in the boomtown of Banack (now a ghost town).

He was not alone. Lewis Hershfield opened a bank in Virginia City (also now a ghost town), and was the first banker to trade gold dust for currency. Of 78 Jews listed in an 1888 survey of Helena, 14 were sales clerks, 17 were clothing mer-

chants, four were tobacconists, and one was a saloonkeeper. Jews served as state representatives and city council members. Henry Lublin Frank, a successful liquor wholesaler, was mayor of Butte from 1885 to 1887. The Fligelman sisters, Frieda and Belle, were born in Helena in the 1890s to the successful proprietor of the "New York Store" and his wife. The sisters were suffragists and devoted their lives to equal rights for women and minorities.

Montana's Jewish population also has its share of shady characters. "Jew Jake" Harris, born in Prussia, gambled his way through the state, shooting an opponent who brandished two razors after accusing him of cheating. "Jew Jess" was another such figure, a sex worker and drug addict skilled in picking pockets. She was said to know the law well enough to serve as her own counsel in court cases. Nonetheless, the historical picture of Jews in Montana is a positive one.

"Jewish residents...were not only respected but really embraced by the Gentile community," says Baumler. "Jews were lawyers, doctors, judges, bankers, merchants, service providers and business partners with non-Jews."

After its Depression-era decline, the Jewish population is on the rise again, drawn by Montana's "Big Sky" open

spaces and unhurried lifestyle. Today, the state's Jewish population is about 1,500. However, this rebirth comes at a time of growing antisemitism both nationwide and in Montana: The Mountain West region has long been a breeding ground for white supremacists and the (antise-mitic) Christian identity movement.

Stanfel recalls her teenage son having pennies tossed at him and being subjected to vicious Holocaust jokes at school. Earlier this summer, the neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement announced a demonstration in Missoula that set local law enforcement and the community on edge. (The net result was three adherents with signs in front of a mall during a fierce rain-and-hail storm. They live-streamed the event and disbanded.)

"We know our work is only starting," said Julie Bir, a member of the Montana Jewish Project's board of directors, in a statement. "We can't wait to fulfill our mission, to create a statewide center for Jewish life, enhance interfaith opportunities, combat antisemitism in Montana schools, and bring to reality the Jewish value of 'repairing the world.'"

**Read the full story at
momentmag.com/montana-jewish-project**

ON POETRY **JOSHUA WEINER**

Nelly Sachs and the Poetry of Flight

In my childhood memories, my grandparents are sitting around the dining room table in Boston (we were "Newton Jews") with extended family of their generation, and I'm hiding under the table, listening to them banter in a mix of English and Yiddish that I couldn't understand and didn't wish to learn. They were foreigners to me; even those born in the United States seemed different, other, not fully knowable. I was from here, and of here—an American kid of 1960s suburbia who identified mostly with Max, the boy protagonist of Maurice Sendak's

Where the Wild Things Are, who sails days and nights in his imagination to an island populated by creatures both strange and intimately familiar. These beings were modeled on the writer's own elders, who affectionately threatened him as a child with the ultimate love, "I'll eat you up!"—thus providing Sendak with the uneasy and deadly serious repartee of his "Wild Things." But what young person wants to be consumed by the past, even the living past, with its fearful teeth and big eyes and funny sounds?

My grandfather, Samuel Weiner, fled Kyiv sometime between 1919 and 1921, between the ages of 10 and 12, after the orphanage where he lived was bombed during the Ukrainian War of Independence. With the help of HIAS (the He-

brew Immigrant Aid Society), which helped Jews in Eastern Europe and Russia flee pogroms, Sam made his way to Canada by way of Liverpool, where he joined his father, Charles, who'd left earlier to establish himself.

Or did Sam flee when he was 7 years old, in 1916? How did that become a different version? Why would the Red Army have bombed an orphanage in 1916? Sam's aunt traveled with him through Europe, *my* aunt says (and she's a rabbi, so that carries some weight), but then was stopped at the border with Hungary because she was cross-eyed. My aunt remembers Sam telling her he was only 7 years old at the time. But rumor has it that he heard Lenin's famous "Peace, Land, and Bread" speech on the radio in 1917.

My father says that Sam made it to Winnipeg when he was 11 and traveled with his two sisters, both in their teens. My aunt says that the sisters refused to leave Ukraine because they were married. My brother, who interviewed my grandmother more than 40 years ago about family history, thinks that's unlikely. My aunt (Rabbi Cheryl Weiner) writes in an email, "Home was wherever they lived. The stories are what remain."

Facts are the first casualties of war. That's why documents are so important—but they're often lost or destroyed. My aunt says that on his journey, Sam carried with him the collected stories of Sholem Aleichem (physical books, totem

"Facts are the first casualties of war."

and talisman). Now we add our stories to the great Yiddish writer's when we think of our roots in the Pale of Settlement; the archive of memory is virtual.

More than five decades went by before I began exploring the psychic space of that archive in earnest, though at an unusual remove. I had dropped into Berlin in 2015 in order to write about the refugee situation in Germany, as millions of displaced families from Syria made epic journeys to the West. As I traversed the city, interviewing refugees, I was slowly getting closer, not to my own ethnic roots, but to the condition of rootlessness that was also mine. At one point, the poet and translator Alexander Booth met me for coffee and put a book into my hands—a volume of poems by Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, translated decades earlier. I opened it randomly and fell into the poem that had become her signature work, from which she read at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1966 (the year she shared the prize with S.Y. Agnon, who helped invent modern literature in Hebrew)—a poem from the book-length poetic sequence *Flight and Metamorphosis*. The poem begins, "In flight / what great welcome / along the way...."

I turned to the jacket flap; it featured an iconic photograph of the poet, who looked uncannily like one of the relatives who had sat at my grandparents' table. Perhaps it was time to come out from under and find out who they were. Perhaps I could, in some way, return to that dining room by translating this book, a book clearly of our own moment, too—a time of mass displacement the scale of which we hadn't seen for 75 years. The experience, the insight, the understanding was all there, legible on the page, but the poetry of it had gone stale in an outdated English. Poetry lives in the freshness of language, and poetry in translation is more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of change than other writing. It was time now for a new Nelly Sachs.

Born in 1891 and raised in Berlin, Sachs fled the Nazis with her elderly mother in 1940, and by the skin of her teeth found refuge in Stockholm, barely escaping arrest in Berlin. The city was still intact, but their lives had been destroyed. In their escape, they fled with nothing but a couple of suitcases and each other, and some goodwill from Sweden. In a tiny flat on Bergsunds Strand, Sachs wrote her poems through the night as her mother slept. Throughout her life in exile, she felt gratitude, fear, grief, loneliness.

Flight changed Nelly Sachs utterly and turned her into a great poet. Here, in an untitled poem from *Flight and Metamorphosis*, she moves in a different direction from that of most German-language poets after the war. (The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 had stripped her of her citizenship.) Where other poets, such as Paul Celan, risked a more radical "rubble-izing" of the German language, Sachs risks something more mystical and equally metaphorical at its core. She had finally dropped the masks that had let her speak through the murdered Jews of Europe and was writing from her own position in the world. "My metaphors are my wounds," she wrote in a letter. She speaks in her poem with the authority of experience. Even in capturing the exhaustion and despondency of the refugee, *her* despondency as a refugee, this poetry of flight has lift:

If someone comes
from afar
with a language
that maybe seals off
its sounds
with a mare's whinny
or
the chirping
of young blackbirds
or
like a gnashing saw that severs
everything in reach—

If someone comes
from afar
moving like a dog
or
maybe a rat
and it's winter
dress him warmly
for who knows
his feet may be on fire
(perhaps he rode in
on a meteor)
so don't scold him
if your rug, riddled with holes,
screams—

A stranger always has
his homeland in his arms
like an orphan
for whom he may be seeking nothing
but a grave.

When Nelly Sachs gave her Nobel acceptance speech, she read this poem and showed us how the most powerful talisman had always been there in the heavy luggage of her own life, a shared life. "This stone," she called it, "with the fly's inscription / has dropped into my hand— // In place of home / I hold the metamorphoses of the world—"

Joshua Weiner is the translator (with Linda B. Parshall) of Nelly Sachs's Flight and Metamorphosis, published in 2022. He is the author of Berlin Notebook: Where Are the Refugees? and three books of poems. He lives in Washington, DC and teaches at the University of Maryland.