

## Else Lasker-Schüler on The Lost Bridge Between Jews and Christians

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Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945) ranks among the greatest German poets, Jewish or non-Jewish, women or men. She grew up in an upper-middle class family in the Rhineland, married a physician and moved to Berlin. Here she entered the burgeoning avant-garde around 1900, and with her second husband Herwarth Walden, stood at the center of the Expressionist movement before World War I. After her divorce she remained in Berlin, by now an admired literary figure. In 1932 she received the Kleist Prize. Four months later she fled to Switzerland, which she was forced to leave in 1939. She spent the last six years of her life in Palestine.<sup>1</sup>

A visitor to Else Lasker-Schüler's last exile-abode in Jerusalem remarked that apart from her own books, there was not a single book to be seen anywhere. Among the few books that the poet still owned at the end of her life was a thin volume, admittedly easy to overlook. It was *Das Evangelium als Urkunde der jüdischen Glaubensgeschichte* (The Gospels as Document of the History of the Jewish Faith), published in 1938 by the chief rabbi of Berlin, Leo Baeck, a man much admired by Else Lasker-Schüler.

Leo Baeck was one of the leading figures of Jewish liberalism. He saw in Judaism the highest expression of an ethical worldview. In terms of its teachings, it was universalist in concept; as it developed in its historical setting, however, it was a religion very much bound to the Jewish community. He called Christianity the "romantic" religion, and even used that word in the title of one of his major works. Why "romantic?" Because it was a religion of feeling (*Religion des Gefühls*) as opposed to Judaism, which he saw as a religion of action (*Religion der Tat*).

In his short book on the gospels, Baeck gives an interpretation of "the first record"--based on Jewish and Christian Bible research, as it were, in archeological uncovering. This is the way he defines what the generation after Jesus relates about his life and teachings. He regards these early transcriptions as an important piece of Jewish history, "a piece of Jewish belief."<sup>2</sup>

The original tradition was oral. For many who passed it on, and also for many who heard, it carried more weight than written testimony. Up to the third century, however, there were as well numerous written accounts, of which the Church selected 27, and declared these to be canonic and apostolic. Among these were the four gospels or "good messages," a term taken from prophetic writings. Why four gospels? To correspond to the four points of the compass, according to Irenaus of Lyon in the year 170 C.E. Moreover, the prophet Ezekiel had seen four wondrous animals in the skies, which later became the emblems of the evangelists.

In the transmission of a religious text, Leo Baeck explained, one person can project his own pious fantasies on to others. In this way past may become present, and present past. The pupil often identifies with his teacher through love. Thus it can come about that the thoughts and wishes of the disciple appear to him as his master's. And what the pupil finds alienating or questionable can disappear more and more in the course of transcription.

This occurs most notably in times of strife or hardship. Someone steps out of the past and addresses the concerns of the living. Conversely, their suffering serves as a mirror to the past. That was as true at the time of the Old Testament, claimed Baeck, on hand of textual comparisons, as when the New Testament came into being. Biblical figures become friends or foes in this process of contemporizing. The words of the prophets are understood as commentaries on the present. Because every generation, even in post-Biblical times, wishes to see itself in Biblical happenings. Similarity and analogy determine the associative manner of thinking in the transmissions. An event brings to mind a Biblical verse; one event calls up another.

It is in this tradition that the story of the life of Jesus as recounted by the evangelists belongs as well. It too orders itself within an oral, pre-configured succession of events, from creation to the end of time. It too is rich in miracles, as so many stories of Biblical figures are. And in it too the transcribers infuse their own wishes and anxieties. And for them too the holy script of the Old Testament is the lodestar.

The original gospel was, according to Leo Baeck, intended as a message to the Jews. Not so by the time we get to the canonic texts. In the Gospel according to John, somewhat more, with Matthew less. They no longer speak of a Judaism that is to be re-newed, but are openly against Judaism. They set forth not so much what Jesus said, hoped and experienced, but rather what the societies around the year 100 believed, hoped and experienced. This was the time of Roman rule in Palestine, the time of hope in the coming or second coming of the Messiah. The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. is the crucial event of the epoch. The evangelists' Jesus would appear to have known all about it. Corroborative statements are put into his mouth. Baeck cites places in the New Testament - e.g. the speech reprimanding the Pharisees and the scribes (Matth, 23). It draws, however, on events in the year 68. For example, Jesus mentions Zacharias, who had been slain by Temple zealots, an event reported by Flavius Josephus in his book about "The Jewish War." This event, which obviously occurred after Jesus's death, is conflated, by the evangelists, with the second Temple destruction which took place two years later. People listening to Jesus speak would not have been able to make sense of these references. The Christian community, however, saw the destruction of the Temple as the punishment of the Jews for their guilt in the death of Jesus and at the same time as proof of their own innocence. They understood these insinuations in the gospel according to Matthew very well.

The gospel according to John came into being after Hadrian's War. It was a time when the Christian community, in Baeck's words, "wanted nothing less than to be confused with Judaism."<sup>3</sup> This gospel goes so far as to speak of the Jews "as an alien people." Something

Jesus had never done. It goes so far that the Jesus of John's gospel will say, "Ye are of *your* father the devil." Paul, on the other hand, writes, before the destruction of the Temple, in his Letter to the Romans, (11,1): "Hath God cast away his people? God forbid."

Paul plays a decisive role in the development of the Christian community. He came as Saul from Tarsus. There, in Asia Minor, a confluence of eastern and western concepts had taken place in mysticism and gnosticism. To these beliefs belonged the miracle-rich mystery of a God, celebrated in Tarsus, who had died young and was resurrected. A sacrament of water and blood, bread and wine united all who believed and partook of this mystery with their God. And it bestowed on them eternal life.

When Saul came to Palestine, he heard of a man about whom the same had happened as to the God in Asia Minor: early death and resurrection. Even the pagan sacrament, familiar to Saul from Tarsus, corresponded to the holy consumption of bread and wine, that the man in Palestine had given to his disciples to eat. He too had promised to those who believed in him eternal life. Baeck calls it a "deification" of a human being, which took place through the sacraments established by this person. For Saul these correspondences must have seemed like a revelation. Judaism and paganism came together in the mystery of the resurrected man. In his sacrament he had bequeathed to men something which had not been found in the Bible heretofore. Baeck calls it "the achievement of the final goal, salvation, grace."<sup>4</sup>

Thus Saul arrives at a new belief and a new theology, which he preaches as Paul, "passionate, zealous, and impatient."<sup>5</sup> It was no longer the teaching of Jesus, who had announced that the kingdom of God belonged to the poor and oppressed. It was the teaching about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and a belief in him and the sacrament which he proclaimed.

Leo Baeck demonstrates, with many examples, how additions and embellishments in the original gospel cover up the similarities with Judaism and seek to set up barriers between the two. These must be torn down, however, in order to recognize the gospels as a Jewish book, "because, and only for the reason that the pure air that fills it and which it breathes and which is the holy scripture, because Jewish spirit, and only such, governs it, because Jewish belief and Jewish hope, Jewish suffering and Jewish pain, Jewish knowledge and Jewish expectations, and only these, ring through it - a Jewish book in midst the Jewish books."<sup>6</sup>

We do not know whether Else Lasker-Schüler read Baeck's book or not. She need not have read it in order to have come to the same conclusion as he did. The poet had always pointed out that Christianity grew out of Judaism, that Jesus was a Jew. Her letter to Martin Buber, from December 23, 1942, is remarkably similar to Leo Baeck's words about the original gospel.<sup>7</sup> In it she speaks of the difference between Paul and Jesus, and calls Paul "a Roman rug-weaver." She compares his language with "weaving or kneading - so strange, twisted, and ending in knots and loose threads. Hard to follow in all its stitches and colors." The heathens distanced themselves from Paul, she says, because they were less contorted in

their thinking. And she is altogether uncontented when she writes of Paul, who, as the rejected one, would ask the heathens: 'Can't you love me just a little?' - as opposed to Jesus, who in the eyes of the poet is more visceral, than Paul. He didn't try to coerce people, "and if we only knew of his simple teaching, there would be Jew-Christians today and they would be a bridge between Jews and Christians."

These are the very same attributes that Leo Baeck ascribes to Paul - only stated more poetically. Paul the zealous proselytizer, is set against Jesus, who didn't want to coerce people. The "brilliant scholar," as she calls Paul in the same passage of her letter to Buber, is juxtaposed to the earthy, more natural herald, Jesus. The complicated theological system of Paul stands in stark contrast to the simple teaching of Jesus.

It is noteworthy that Else Lasker-Schüler comes so close to the judgment of the young Leo Baeck, as put forth in his book, *The Essence of Judaism* (1905). The book appeared five years after the liberal protestant theologian, Adolf von Harnack, held his lectures on "The Essence of Christianity." Harnack, just like Baeck, had said only the father, and not the son, belonged in the gospels as preached by Jesus. The young Leo Baeck stresses in his book the split between the teachings of Jesus and the theology of Paul even more emphatically than in his treatise of 1938. Later, he tended to see Paul as someone who participated in the mission and task of Judaism.

Who then were the Jew-Christians, of whom Else Laske-Schüler speaks in her letter to Martin Buber? Doubtless they were those early Christians from the time of the original gospel, or possibly even contemporaries and disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, who were at the same time Jews. Were they to exist today, the poet maintained, they could serve as mediators between Jews and Christians.

In 1930, after reading Max Dienemann's paper "Sunday and Christian Holidays in their Dependence on the Sabbath and Jewish Holidays" (Sonntag und die christlichen Feste in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Sabbat und dem Jüdischen Festen) in the paper of the Jewish Community of Berlin (Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde Berlin), she visited the author, then rabbi in Offenbach to discuss this all-important topic with him.

Else Lasker-Schüler was Jewish and never thought of giving up the Jewish faith. She professes her Jewishness too often to leave any doubt. Witness the repeated remark, "I am a Jew. Thank God!"<sup>8</sup> She called herself "the poet of the Jews" who bestows "honor on our people."<sup>10</sup> She was nevertheless better acquainted with Christianity than most Christian writers are with Judaism. She was in fact very knowledgeable about the New Testament, and it is striking how often she quotes from or alludes to it. Speaking to the Catholic theologian Karl Sonnenschein, she said: "I love and revere early Christianity [...] And I love and revere the apostles, the disciples and the first followers, who were persecuted and who did not themselves persecute others."<sup>11</sup>

How did Else Lasker-Schüler arrive at her knowledge of Christianity and her love and reverence for early Christians? There was of course the Christian environment in which she grew up. This is described in the autobiographical prose about her childhood in Elberfeld in

the Wupper valley. What strikes one is how the Catholic minority with its church festivals and processions especially impress her. Else Lasker-Schüler was familiar with Catholic rites and customs, for example the widespread cult of the Virgin in the Rhineland. In her essay "Sterndeuterei" (Astrology) which appeared in 1911 in Karl Kraus's periodical, "Die Fackel" (The Torch), she writes: "Think of Maria through whom God stepped [...] She suffers the highest holiday in her welcoming of God, seven swords pierce her heart."<sup>12</sup> "The highest holiday" may mean Easter as it is celebrated in the Catholic Church. The "seven swords" is a reference to the "seven sorrows of Mary", a holiday celebrated since medieval times, as well as to the representations of Mary with her heart pierced by seven swords.

Else Lasker-Schüler loved the Christmas rituals. She decorated a Christmas tree for her little boy each year. She gave presents to her friends at Christmas, to the best of her ability, and she sent out Christmas cards. In 1939 on her third trip to Palestine, she told fellow-passengers, "Christmas used to be celebrated in the capital on the Spree [Berlin] by Christians and Jews alike, before these sorrowful past seven years, - a child's birthday party for the whole community."<sup>13</sup>

More significant than her Christian surroundings in influencing her thought, however, was the exposure to different religions, including Christianity, which she got from the poet, Peter Hille. He was her first, and indeed, her only mentor, and what impressed her most was his openness to all religions.

In her *Peter Hille Book*, she speaks of Hille and his friends and "disciples." In the posthumous essay, "Anti-Semitism," written in her last years, she recalls this circle of friends as a "string of equally precious Christian and Hebrew emeralds."<sup>14</sup> Hille and his circle of friends came closest to her notion of Ur-Christians. Without worldly ambition, in some cases poor, like Hille himself, they accompanied their revered Peter, someone whom one must imagine as a kind of guru of the turn of the 20th century, on nature outings, or gathered for celebrations in gardens or at the homes of well-to-do patrons. On Christian holidays they went to churches. On Jewish holidays Hille went with his friends into "the temple of Jehovah"<sup>15</sup> and at the meetings with his disciples, he explained Buddhism to them. She lays special emphasis on his veneration for Biblical figures, and says of him: "The psalms of David sounded exalted to his ear; he spoke powerfully and reverently of Moses, as he did of all the prophets of "God East (Gottosten)."<sup>16</sup> In her essay, "Astrology," she reports that Hille even spoke with Jesus of Nazareth and with Buddha.<sup>17</sup> And finally, summing it all up in her prose piece, "St Peter Hille," she writes, "That I, as innermost Jew, should look to Peter Hille, the Catholic, proves that there is only one God, one creation, one heaven."<sup>18</sup>

Else Lasker-Schüler draws attention with equal fervor to Peter Hille's text, *The Mystery of Jesus*. It appeared for the first time after his death, in the expressionist periodical, *Der Sturm*. Herwarth Walden, Else Lasker-Schüler's second husband, was its editor and one can assume that the poet had recommended Hille's *Life of Jesus* for publication. It is considered his loveliest work, and is viewed as a hymn of praise to a single religion for all people.

Hille's representation of the life of Jesus is conceived altogether after the fashion of the original gospel. Jesus's contemporaries are Jews and Christians, consequently true "Jew-Christians." Thus he says of Mary: "Her essence was distilled by Israel's God alone."<sup>19</sup>

Lasker-Schüler's concept of Jesus is more complex than Hille's, and of Leo Baeck's as well. It is also more poetic. However, it does not contradict the image of Jesus presented in the writings of the Jewish theologian. To give an impression, once again, of the urgency of Baeck's language, here is a passage from *The Gospels as Document of Jewish Faith*. In the same manner in which he showed the gospels to be a Jewish book, he presents Jesus here as a Jewish man among his Jewish fellow-men. The similarities with Lasker-Schüler's representation of Jesus are striking.

In the old gospel, a man with noble features stands before us, a man who lived during tense, emotional times, who was active, who helped others, who suffered and died, a man of the Jewish people, who walked in Jewish paths, in the Jewish religion, and in hope, whose spirit dwelled in the Holy Scripture, who wrote poetry and meditated, and who spread the word of God and taught, because God had given him the gift of listening and preaching. Before us stands a man who won disciples among his people, who were seeking the messiah, the son of David, and found such a one in him, and insisted so vehemently in their belief until he himself began to believe it [...]

These disciples believed so firmly in him, that after his death, their belief still provided the foundation of their lives, and they became convinced that - just as the prophets had foretold - he 'arose after the third day.' In this old document we see a man before us who bears all the characteristics of a Jewish sensibility, a man so pure and good, one who could only have come forth out of the ground of Judaism, and only out of this ground could he have found disciples and followers, a product of Jewish yearning and confidence, a man who could only have lived and died in this Jewish realm - a Jew among Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Just a few years after Leo Baeck wrote his work about the evangelists as witnesses to Jewish belief, his idea would find support through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These offer renewed evidence that the teachings of Jesus are only to be understood in the context of Jewish religious and cultural history, and that Christian theology must be distinguished from the life and thinking of Jesus in many important ways.

The Jesus whom Leo Baeck describes has two essential elements in common with Else Lasker-Schüler's. The scholar calls Jesus a poet, and says of him that his spirit dwelled in the Holy Scriptures which inspired him to write poetry and meditate. Similarly, Lasker-Schüler names Jesus together with other "Heaven-blessed ones" namely poets and founders of religions. In her novel, *Mein Herz* (My Heart,) she ranks him with Buddha, Goethe, Nietzsche, Heine, and of course, Peter Hille. Art and religion were, for her, inseparable.

The most important aspect common to the two treatments of Jesus, that by Leo Baeck, and that by Else Lasker-Schüler, is his Jewishness. In the course of time, and with the growing anti-Semitism of the 20s and 30s, this aspect would take on ever more significance. In her first mention of Jesus, he is a great and unique figure, a cosmic event in the human universe. In her essay "Astrology" she puts it this way: "Jesus of Nazareth worked miracles, he grasped the nascent stars and separated them from the rotten ones, and awoke the dying

[...]. The Nazarene wandered through the constellations of humanity and experienced the world so deeply, and entered into God, and God into him, -- that this explains why still today he is confused with God..."<sup>21</sup>

When Else Lasker-Schüler speaks of Jesus in the years following, it is always as Jesus of the Jews. Usually she calls him Jesus of Nazareth, in order to characterize him as a Jew among Jews. He will also be called "the eternal Jew,"<sup>22</sup> the "noble Jew,"<sup>23</sup> the "Jew of God"<sup>24</sup> and "the gentle and yet mighty Jew."<sup>25</sup>

Like Leo Baeck, Else Lasker-Schüler considers it a great loss for Judaism if Jesus is not recognized as part of its own tradition. But equally she considers it a great loss to Christians when they manipulate Jewish tradition to suit their needs, and can only accept Jesus as a non-Jew. In "Astrology," it says: "In casting off Jesus, the Jews discarded the most perfect vision of the world [...] The Jew who rejects the heavenly one only proves that he is a bourgeois, a philistine" as are the Christians who do not recognize him as Jew.<sup>26</sup> The clearest formulation of her judgment upon the manipulation of the Jew Jesus by the Christians is to be found in her essay "Anti-Semitism." There she says: "After his death they baptised him."<sup>27</sup>

Else Lasker-Schüler's image of Jesus was primarily of one who gave comfort and solace. This reaches back to her childhood. The prose text, "St. Laurentius," describes the religious customs in Elberfeld during the 19th century. A large number of different religious groups lived there together, more or less peaceably. She describes how she too was taunted with the anti-Semitic "hepp hepp" of Christian children. And already then it was a kind, sympathetic priest who explained to her that it meant "only" that Jerusalem was lost. And in fact "hepp hepp" is the abbreviation of the first letters of 'Hierosolyma est perdita'. However the true comfort comes to the child only in a dream, where Jesus appears and reassures her: "Jerusalem is not lost, since it lives in your heart."<sup>28</sup>

Else Lasker-Schüler had such dreams, or even, visions later as well. King David appeared to her on one occasion, as she told Leo Baeck, - and Jesus too. In an extraordinary letter from the year 1927, to the French writer, Marcel Brion, she describes such a Jesus vision. She sees herself standing with friends at Golgotha. "Then a voice said to me, 'Separate yourself from the two others and seek him alone.' And then through an opening in the rock, I saw Jesus of Nazareth sitting with his disciples at the holy supper. I moved closer and breathed in the whitest and strongest light that radiated from Jesus of Nazareth and became so strong that I was afraid someone would come and give me their hand, because he would have to die from my strong grip."<sup>29</sup>

The extent to which she encountered rebuttal within Judaism can be seen from a letter which she received in 1926 from the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (Jewish Family Paper) in Hamburg. She had sent the journal a manuscript, possibly the essay with the title, "Versöhnungstag" (Day of Atonement, Yom Kipur). In it she makes her loveliest avowal of her Jewish belief. It is tucked away in recollections of her Elberfelder home and family, where the highest Jewish holiday was celebrated as a family holiday. Looking back, the poet

sees it as an experience epitomizing paradisaical innocence and total warmth and security. Jesus is mentioned in this text too. She writes that the Messiah “walked on earth already once,” and that neither Jews nor any other peoples were ready or mature enough to appreciate the genuineness of his being; „he came not to overthrow the laws but to fulfil them. He tested the condition of his people's blood, cleared up its murkiness, and got rid of its half-heartedness, and tried as well to heal its disputes.”<sup>30</sup>

The Jewish Family Paper, however, could not bring itself to publish the piece. In a letter to the poet, dated 5 October 1926, they write: “Dear Frau Lasker! To our sincere regret, we are returning herewith your submission. We had not realized, when we requested the essay, that you had expressed yourself in this fashion. Perhaps you will understand that a Jewish paper is not the proper organ for airing such subjective gestures of submission to the founder of the Christian church.”<sup>31</sup>

On September 14th, 1934, however, during the poet's exile-years in Switzerland, the Jüdische Pressezentrale in Zurich printed “The Day of Atonement”. One can see from the cuts and changes what was unacceptable even to this publication. The passage about the Messiah, who had walked the earth once before, and for whom neither the Jews nor any other people were yet ripe or ready, is missing. Instead, after the word 'Messiah', we read: “the longed-for savior of mankind.” The cut included the quotation from Matthew, 5, 17: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” The verse represents in its essence the original gospel. That Else Lasker-Schüler should have chosen to quote it in her “Day of Atonement” shows once again how very much she was in agreement with Leo Baeck, that the original gospel belongs to the history of Jewish religious belief.

Very early on, the poet recognized the dangers implicit in National Socialism for the Jews of Germany. In 1926 she turned the question “Is There a Christian Art,”<sup>32</sup> into one of her strongest condemnations of anti-Semitism, adding a personal statement of her own identification with Judaism along with a forceful reminder of the Jewishness of Jesus. “Already as a child I recognized the depth of the Jewish religion; learned of the unseeable God through the prophets, and absorbed the essence of the holiest Jew: Jesus Christ. [By the same token,] his Jewishness manifested itself not just in his love for the Jewish people above all others, and his choice of his disciples from them: The baptised people of Europe keep forgetting that. As do most Jews.” This was Else Lasker-Schüler's complaint. Thereupon she rejects the notion of the collective guilt of the Jews for the death of Jesus, and remarks that the “pogrom propagandists” do not as a rule think in terms of historical contexts. However, persecutions have “always come about through chance circumstances,” in the course of which thousands upon thousands, including children, have been crucified. Jesus Christ asked that the children be brought before him. He would have meant these children as well. He, who came down from heaven and entered this world out of Miriam's heart.”

Only in the last sentence of this article does Lasker-Schüler return to the question about art and religion and ties her act of faith in Judaism to her act of faith in art, which is not



time-bound and always religious in essence. "I am glad to stem from the people of Jesus Christ. He loved David especially, and just as he took pleasure in his psalms, so would he love my psalms which I composed to the Father in the silver halo of Jerusalem's evening."

In 1931/32 the poet wrote her *Arthur Aronymus's works: the prose piece, Arthur Aronymus. My father's Story*, and the dramatised version, *Arthur Aronymus and His Fathers*. The prose text could still be published in 1932 in Germany. The play did not have its premiere until 1936 at the Zurich Schauspielhaus. Many emigres took part in the production or were members of the audience, the author among them.

The story of Arthur Aronymus reaches into the poet's own family history and a historical event in Westphalia in the 19th century. These are combined to make an urgent appeal to Christian conscience to recognize their Jewish roots. The action takes place in the Westphalian village of Geseke, where her father, the central figure of the play, was born. Arthur Aronymus Schüler grows up as the youngest of 23 children of the landowner Moritz Schüler, and he happens also to be the favorite of the village priest. One of his sisters becomes ill with St. Vitus's Dance, a children's disease that manifests itself in nervous tics. This causes the villagers to view her as a witch and a Jewish witch to boot, one that must be burned. To avoid this fate, the priest suggests to Herr Schüler that he let one of his children, preferably the little Arthur Aronymus, be baptised in the Christian faith. This would appease the agitated villagers.

Else Lasker-Schüler is making use here of an incident that actually occurred in Geseke in 1844. At that time the Catholic curate tried to convert the son of the merchant, Lowenbach, to Christianity. He succeeded: the boy ran away from his family. With the intercession of the bishop of Paderborn, who strongly criticized the priest's action, the boy returned. This precipitated anti-Semitic riots. Mobs formed and marauded Jewish homes. The unfortunate merchant broadcast about the neighborhood that he would return his son to the Catholic fathers, and immediately peace was restored.

The Arthur Aronymus story never goes to this extreme. First of all, Herr Schüler rejects the priest's suggestion both forcefully and with dignity. He says, he, himself, and his forefathers and the forefathers of his wife arrived by the direct path to God. "And I should put my son on an indirect path to His son? God protect us all from evil! אדני ישמרנו מכל רע"<sup>33</sup>

Else Lasker-Schüler defines the Jewish religious tradition as the direct path to God. But Jesus, his son, is included in this tradition just because he belongs to it. The bishop of Paderborn, who appears in both the prose and play version, does not come to Geseke because of his curate's unsuccessful attempt at conversion, but rather to set an example for the commonality of the roots of Jewish and Christian belief. Shortly before the play's end, a bishop's "Bull" is read to the joint Christian and Jewish residents of the town, in which is stated: "Do not forget in your black hatred that our savior Jesus Christ was *himself a Jew*, sprung from the blood of David."<sup>34</sup> After threat of the most dreadful punishment of Hell, the document closes with a quotation from the Gospel according to John (Chapt 16,22):

“And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

The comforting words appear to be spoken to the Jews of Geseke and simultaneously to the German Jews of 1932, rather than to the Christians. This is yet another instance of Lasker-Schüler's treating the gospels as part of a common Jewish and Christian heritage. And just as Herr Schüler speaks the words of the prayer, “May God protect you from all evil,” in Hebrew, the poet has the curate repeat the words of the gospel in Latin. “Et vos igitur nunc quidem tristitiam habetis, iterum autem videbo vos, et gaudebit cor vestrum: et gaudium vestrum nemo tollet a vobis.”

In the play, Frau Schüler will remark over and over, and with great emphasis, that “one and the same God reigns over us all.” However, when her daughter Fanny falls in love with the priest, and wants to become not just a Catholic, but a nun, her mother declares: “But one doesn't change one's belief like a cloak [...] certainly not our eternal belief in the one and only God. [...] I<sup>35</sup> And when Fanny counters: the priest's God is hers too, her mother asks: “But do you want to pray to him in an alien house among hostile people?”<sup>36</sup>

*Arthur Aronymus* is a play about the separation of Jews and Christians and the persecution of Jews by Christians. The memories of the Schüler family's grandfather-rabbi, of past persecutions, play a significant role here. Jew-Christians and with them, a viable bridge between Jews and Christians, do not exist in Westphalia in the Biedermeier period. But the poet points the way, both in the story and play version, to building such a bridge. That's what the bishop's letter that reminds the Christians of their origins in Judaism is aiming at. It is from this recognition that mutual respect arises, like that of the priest for the Schüler family's rabbi-grandfather, and the rabbi's for the honorable nature of the Christian bishop.

Similarly the Christian-Jewish names of the Schüler children build a bridge between Jews and Christians as for instance Heinrich Menachem, Julius Ahasveros, Ferdinand Simson, Katharina Deborah, Elise Naomi and, of course, Arthur Aronymus. And finally, specific gestures are intended as symbolic bridges. At the Seder, in which the bishop and the priest participate at the Schüler's home, with the parents and all 23 children, unleavened bread is dunked in Mosel wine.

With her yearning for a bridge between the two religions, Else Lasker-Schüler placed a marker of her own. In her tale, *The Miracle-rabbi of Barcelona*, an abyss opens up between Jews and Christians. Even in “Arthur Aronymus” there is no bridge across this abyss. But Lasker-Schüler points the way, in her tale and in her play, to a rapprochement of the two religions. It consists first of all in mutual understanding and mutual recognition by each of the other's religion. But beyond this, there is yet another way, a path that leads not through the head but through the heart. It is the way of friendship and love, the way she signals when she brings together Jews and Christians in the Seder / Supper in the final scene of the play.

It is significant that Christian clergymen participate in this meal. Lasker-Schüler had friends among both Jewish and Christian clergy. In addition to Leo Baeck, most notably

Martin Buber. In the twenties she had met the Berlin rabbi and poet Emil Bernhard Cohn, the author of “Aufruf zum Judentum” (Summons to Judaism). He gave her advice when she was writing “Arthur Aronymus” and sent her the Hebrew text of the words spoken by Herr Schüler: “God protect us from all evil.” Among the Christian clergymen whom she knew, in addition to the above-mentioned theologian Carl Sonnenschein, there was Peter Hille's brother, Philipp, who was president of the Catholic Workers Union in Berlin. Yet another Berlin clergyman was Bernhard Stasiewski, after whom she named the young priest Bernard in her *Arthur Aronymus* works. Letters from him are preserved in her literary estate. One gathers from them that the poet talked frequently with him “about the eternal questions of the pious.” In all probability she permitted herself to be advised by him, as by Emil Bernhard Cohn, and it will be from him that she got the Latin words for her play.

These men were true Christians who revered Judaism - and the Jewish poet. They held her writings in great esteem. This helps to explain how it came about that Lasker-Schüler, during her exile in Jerusalem, upon learning of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, turned to the head of the Catholic Church. In the spring of 1940, Else Lasker-Schüler wrote to Pope Pius XII <sup>37</sup> asking him to declare publicly that no Jew nor any Jew's wife had ever drunk Christian blood or slaughtered a child. It may seem surprising that Lasker-Schüler refers to the centuries-old religious anti-Semitic conceptions about Jews rather than to the biological or racist anti-Semitism which was currently rampant in Europe. However, she knew full well that these ancient notions still stuck in the minds of the churchfolk, and prepared the ground for the seeds of National Socialist racist ideology. In this letter she also confronts the Christian hatred of Jews with the Jewishness of Jesus. She reminds Pius XII that Jesus Christ was also a son of David, “the golden umbel on David's branch.” “Jesus,” she writes, “would have loved our holy ones: Luria, Maimonides, and Spinoza and the Balchem.” So even in her letter to the pope, the poet unites the Christian tradition with the Jewish. The teachings of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides and Spinoza or the hassidic movement of the Balchem Tov are altogether reconcilable with the Christian doctrine; yes, Jesus the Jew would have loved these holy Jewish men.

Else Lasker-Schüler was a great poet of friendship. A large number of her poems were addressed to friends, and many poems were dedicated to friends as a token of friendship. She felt protected in the circle of friends and those who shared her sensibilities - these were always artists and people devoted to art . And just as art and religion overlapped for her, so did religion and friendship. For this reason she frequently chose the Lord's Supper from the New Testament as an image for this close bond of friendship. It was immaterial whether this circle of friends was made up of Jews or Christians. Usually both were represented, as in the “chain of equally precious Christian and Jewish emeralds” as she characterized the disciples around Peter Hille.

The healing power of a friendship that has been augmented through religious significance is beautifully illustrated in the prose text, “Das heilige Abendmahl.”<sup>38</sup> In it the poet describes herself in midst a small group of friends. Two of them remind her of the

apostles Peter and Matthew, that is to say of those Jew-Christians who still knew the “simple teachings” of Jesus. They are discussing the holy communion while at the same time they celebrate it by drinking together from the same glass “the yellow bitter hop beverage.” For the poet, the drink bestows “a sea of consolation” and a “oneness with you in God” as well as eternal life. Thereby she unites the comforting teachings of the Jew, Jesus with the Christian sacrament which binds men together in God.

Here we're no longer talking of knowledge about one religion or the other. The truly mystical experience of this 'agape -meal' inspired the poet to compose the poem with which the prose piece ends, “This talk with you, heavenly concert / already brings me peace.”

“Concert,” once again, is the title of the last book that Else Lasker-Schüler could publish in Germany in 1932.<sup>39</sup> The 'heavenly concert' contains her Jewish-Christian message. It can be heard where people gather together in love and fulfil that love. Then they are “the simple, straightforward Jewish disciples of the son of God, who came down from the blue hills of heaven with humble step, in order to say to the people that they should love one another. “The following lines from the Gospel according to John, (13,34): “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another - ; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another,” are quoted by Lasker-Schüler four times in her essay, “Anti-Semitism” to show that nothing is more anti-Christian than this hate. The commandment is as much Jewish as Christian, it is simultaneously the basic commandment of the Holy Scriptures and is based on the teaching that love is the first attribute of God.

Else Lasker-Schüler makes this commandment the basis of her dual and mutual religious understanding. It explains too why she saw no essential differences between Judaism and Christianity. A separation into a Jewish religion of action and a Christian religion of feeling was altogether alien to her. Instead, the poet recalled the Jew-Christians, pious in their actions and devout in their feelings. And although Jew-Christians no longer existed, Else Lasker-Schüler saw in particular individuals those qualities, and experienced in their presence moments of true transcendence. According to her, the bridge between Jews and Christians leads in both directions to eternal life.

Translated by Betty Falkenberg

This paper is the revised and expanded version of a talk given at the Else Lasker-Schüler Symposium in October 1995 at Pennsylvania State University commemorating the poet's death in 1945. The original version appeared in Ernst Schürer/Sonja Hedgpeth eds., *Else Lasker-Schüler. Ansichten und Perspektiven. Views and Reviews*. Bernan Tübingen: Francke 1999.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a complete biography see Betty Falkenberg, *Else Lasker-Schüler: A life*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Baeck: *Das Evangelium als Urkunde der jüdischen Glaubensgeschichte*. Berlin: Schocken 1938 (Bücherei des Schockenverlags 87) p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Baeck p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> ibd. p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> ibd. p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> ibd. p.70.

<sup>7</sup> *Lieber gestreifter Tiger. Briefe von Else Lasker-Schüler*. Margarete Kupper, ed. München:Kösel 1969, p. 127

<sup>8</sup> ibd. sp.112.

<sup>9</sup> ibd. p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> ibd. p. 262

<sup>11</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler: "Karl Sonnenschein." In: *Prosa und Schauspiele*. München:Kösel, 1962, p.727. In the following quoted as PS

<sup>12</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler: "Sterndeuterei." In: *Werke und Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe 3.1, Prosa 1903-1920*, p. 163. In the following quoted as KA3.1.

<sup>13</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler: "Auf der Galiläa." In: *Verse und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*. München:Kösel 1961, p., 51. In the following quoted as VPN. That this remark of Lasker-Schüler is no exaggeration can be seen in a letter of Nelly Sachs, also a Berliner, to Paul Celan. On December 16th 1958 she sends him and his family "Aller Segen zum Fest der Liebe" (all blessings to the holy day of love). Paul Celan - Nelly Sachs. *Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> VPN, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Petrus und ich im Tempel Jehovas." KA 3.1, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Sankt Peter Hille." PS p. 679.

<sup>17</sup> "Sterndeuterei." KA 3.1,p.164

<sup>18</sup> "St. Peter Hille" p. 687.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Hille, *Das Mysterium Jesu*. Leipzig 1921, p.14.

<sup>20</sup> Leo Baeck, p. 69-60.

<sup>21</sup> "Sterndeuterei." KA 3.1, p.164

<sup>22</sup> "St. Peter Hille." PS p. 683.

<sup>23</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, *Hebräerland*. PS p. 795.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 894.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 882.

<sup>26</sup> "Astrology" KA 3.1, P.166. Here it must be noted that the term 'bourgeois' was, for Else Lasker-Schüler, a totally negative one. With this one word she could utterly demolish someone. Bourgeois were for her unfeeling, unartistic people whom she held in contempt.

<sup>27</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Der Antisemitismus." VPN p.70.

<sup>28</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "St. Laurentius." PS p. 715.

<sup>29</sup> The letter of January 31, 1927 is kept with the papers of Marcel Brion in Paris.

<sup>30</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Der Versöhnungstag." PS p. 750.

<sup>31</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

<sup>32</sup> "Dichtung und Christentum." <Antwort auf eine Rundfrage>. In *Ostwart-Jahrbuch*, Viktor Kubcak ed. Breslau 1926, p. 162-163.

<sup>33</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Arthur Aronymus und seine Väter." In: *Werke und Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe Vol.3 Dramen*. Frankfurt am Main 1997, p.152.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p.152.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 162..

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* o.134.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Was soll ich hier?" *Exilbriefe an Salman Schocken*. Sigrid Bauschinger, Helmut Hermann eds. Heidelberg 1987. p. 63-64.

<sup>38</sup> Else Lasker-Schüler, "Das heilige Abendmahl." PS p. 672.

<sup>39</sup> An English translation by Jean Snook was published in 1994 by University of Nebraska Press. It also contains translations of "St. Peter Hille" and "St. Laurentius."