

Portraits of Women in the Poems of Lotte Kramer

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A large portion of the readers of the world are women. Therefore it is to be expected that works of literature will take up themes concerning women. Women readers want to learn about the hopes, struggles and adventures of other women. So in this paper we will consider the panoply of women described in the poems of Lotte Kramer.

To begin with we will see a young girl carrying home a “smell of freshness” in the poem *A Lettuce With Herbs*. Another poem, *For Bread-1920s*, tells the story of a widow and her friend whose fable-world collapses. Portraits of Lotte’s family members will follow. We will be introduced to her *Grandmother*, her *Aunt Essie*, her Aunt Sarah in *Saved* and her mother in *Shutting the Door*.

After that will follow the stories of a never to be forgotten acquaintance in *The Shoemakers Wife*. Next will be Lotte’s dearest childhood friend in Mainz, Germany, Greta Trempers Berdolt, in

Friends and also later in *Post War V*.

There will also be poems about two older women under whose protection Lotte spent adolescent years. One was a benefactress and rescuer whose “fingers unpinned a stepping fugue.” The other was an Irish woman “whose voice was melodious” and “who was quiet bohemian in every way.”

Josephine is the tale of a young woman “thieving as a consolation for loss.” *Cissie* is the heroine of a ballad of a woman who “could tell a tall full of sex and ale as the mangle wheeled her story.”

Each poem is a story that is drawn differently, but with the same care and attention to feeling and detail. Just as Lotte most probably must have done, let us now attempt to see the world through the eyes of these diverse heroines.

A Lettuce With Herbs

I was sent down the hill
To the green grocer's shop
To buy a lettuce with herbs

That smell of freshness
Of chives, borage, dill,
As electric then as now

As I cut those couriers
In my garden bed
Filling my senses

With currents of joy.
Their fragrance invites
That dusty street

Snaking down the hill
And I skipping up
With a bundle of greenness.¹⁾

A woman is recalling her younger self. We can suppose that this is Lotte herself in England remembering the 1920s when she was a girl in Mainz.

The cue for the flashback is: “That smell of freshness, of chives, borage, dill, as electric then as now”. The older woman snipping herbs in her garden visualizes her former self...a girl “skipping up” the hill “with a bundle of greenness.” People who skip are perhaps happy and carefree. People who skip uphill are surely young. This girl might be Lotte at the age of 15~10 or even 5 and still living at home with her mother and father.

After the girl has bought what she had been sent for, she is on her way back home. “That dusty street” is “snaking down the hill.” The child, however, is skipping and going up. This contrast might

symbolize something. Or perhaps it is there to make the freshness and greenness of the bouquet of lettuce with herbs more vibrant.

Poems on paper do not exude fragrance, but this is the sensuality evoked here. Chives, borage and dill...the child seems borne by the fragrant “currents of joy” as she is skipping up the street.

For Bread---1920s

Not lust but hunger made them use this ploy
To live together as a family:
Two children, man and wife. Her heavy body
Adequate as male in tweeds and boots, ready

For labouring. They wanted bread, and bread
Meant work. The queue of unemployed was curling
Round the block. She stood there cold and waiting
With other men. Her husband dead.

A factory was wanting a strong man
And took her on as handy caretaker,
Also as night watchman. But then a fire
Flared and she was wounded by a falling stone,

Was rushed to hospital covered in blood.
The wife and children silent by her bed
To fear and hear their fable-world collapse

When sneering nurses named her secret sex.²⁾

Lotte, having been born in 1923, would at some point have heard of the harsh economic realities of the common people in the 1920s, the epoch when “the rich got rich and the poor got...” poorer. As a child she herself might have been sheltered from these realities, but growing up she would have come to understand the problems that can be unleashed by economic instability on a world-wide scale.

The subject of this poem is one example of how that suffering played out in the lives of two women and two children. The nurses at the hospital believed the women to be lesbians. People, nurses included, will “sneer”, snicker or even laugh outright at people whom they perceive to have different values or different sexual preferences. The phrase that originated in San Francisco of the 1970s: “Gay rights are human rights,” had not yet been proclaimed as law.

In this poem, however, Lotte Kramer says that it was: “Not lust but hunger made them use this ploy.” The unemployment problems of the 1920s, the great number of war widows, the need for women to take over jobs that had previously been given to men only...these were all important sociological factors of the day.

Looking at this situation from a distance in time of almost 100 years, however, we can now perhaps ask a different question. For example, what if they really had been a same sex couple? What if this story had taken place in Europe in the first half of the 1940s

rather than the 20s? Of course this is not the subject of the poem, but one wonders, doesn't one? What did happen to homosexuals in Germany during WWII? Below is a quotation from a biography of Harvey Milk, a leader of the gay rights movement in the San Francisco of the 1970s that answers this question.

Before Hitler's rise, Germany had an active gay liberation movement that pressed for legal demands and collected hundreds of thousands of signatures on petitions asking for homosexual equality. But in 1936, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler issued the following decree:

Just as we today have gone back to the ancient German view on the question of marriages mixing different races, so too in our judgment of homosexuality -a symptom of degeneracy which could destroy our race—we must return to the guiding Nordic principle, extermination of degenerates.

About a year later, Himmler ordered that gays be rounded up and sent to Level 3 camps—the death camps. Gays wore pink triangles, so they would not be confused with Jews who wore yellow stars of David. Some estimates put the number of gays exterminated at over 220,000, the second largest category of Nazi genocide victims after Jews.³⁾

Josephine

Yes, Josephine,
'Finchen' for short,
Her reference was dubious

But her unhappy story
Roused my mother's pity.

Branded a half-Jew
She had set up home
With a German Christian
Who was now in prison,
Both victims of Nazi race-laws.

So she went out cleaning
To Jewish houses
With an eye for the men,
And the teenage sons,
Her plaited hair round
The face of a saint.

On a sunny day
I saw her in town
My necklace displayed
At her naked throat,
Smiling at men
In her come-hither' way.

She had taken to thieving
As consolation
For loss of lover,
Unknown father,

Absent mother,

Parade illegally

Her cheerful acquisitions.⁴⁾

A simple tale is this, of a stolen necklace. It would appear that Josephine is the perpetrator of the crime and teenaged Lotte the victim. Which is also true. But isn't Josephine also a victim? Yes, she is. She has been targeted by the Nuremberg Laws passed between 1935 and 1936. Specifically, Josephine is a victim of the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. This law made it illegal for Jews and Gentiles to marry. At the same time another law, the Reich Citizenship Law, stripped all German Jews of their citizenship. Also people with only one Jewish parent, even people with only one Jewish grandparent were made to lose their German citizenship and the legal rights this entailed. In this poem Lotte touches upon this only very briefly. We learn that Josephine is "branded a half-Jew." She had "set up home with a German Christian who was now in prison." They were "both victims of Nazi race-laws."

From a cursory reading of this poem, it would seem that the more important "crime" is the theft of Lotte's necklace, which Josephine "displayed at her naked throat, smiling at men in her come-hither' way." Josephine, who had "the face of a saint", was seen by Lotte to "parade illegally her cheerful acquisition," the stolen necklace.

The greater crime is left for the reader to either grasp or be oblivious of. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish political theorist demonstrates that as a first step Nazi Germany deprived human beings of their citizenship so as to be able to later violate their human rights. Arendt showed that in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*), a fundamental document of the French Revolution, the rights of the people as citizens are obtained first and after that human rights are obtained. And *vice versa* This is because human rights need the protection of a determinate state.⁵⁾

Lotte and her family were also soon to become targeted by the Nuremberg Laws that were making Josephine's life difficult.

Grandmother⁶⁾

She could walk no further
Than the garden gate,
Her black skirt dusting hot sand;
Where the yellow heat
Bent down to us as it spanned
--From a sunflower's face—
Her slowing bones that belied
Her agile eyes.

In their brightness quickened

Eighty years of life:
The wisdom of long widowhood;
The time of briskness;
The stride to the waterpump;
To the bales of cloth
She had wound and unwound like
Multi-coloured snails.

Her look hunted hardship:
That barbed-wire gaze
That had governed her five sons
Still ruled without words
From a filigree frame.
And the linen she wove
With a sun-shy hand still cools
And calms my face.⁷⁾

The grandmother with “the wisdom of long widowhood” used to calm and sooth the grandchild. This poem: “Grandmother” was published in Lotte’s third book of poetry. *The Lifelong House* in 1983. Lotte herself would have been about sixty years old. If this poem is about Lotte’s own grandmother, she would probably have passed away decades before. But in any case, the linen towels the grandmother in this poem had woven still cooled her grandchild’s face. The sensuality evoked by the linen towel here is one of touch. As is the case with her “black skirt dusting hot sand”.

Another example is “the barbed-wire gaze” ...gazing is of course a visual action. Yet, in this case it can be interpreted as having a tactile sense: “That barbed-wire gaze that had governed her five sons.” It *had* governed them, but does no more because either she has passed away or her five sons have or both. Hers was a *barbed-wire gaze*.

And how about the “filigree frame”? Though women are often described as weak, mothers are more often portrayed as strong. Hence the “filigree frame”. The frame of this mother of five sons was delicate, yet strong. It was made of beautiful finely-worked metal...perhaps precious metal. Filigree is something we, the readers, can visualize, but would probably also would want to touch.

Hence because of the cool linen, the hot sand, the barbed wire gaze, and the filigree frame, it can be said that tactile cues abound in this poem and the sensuality of touch is called upon. Tactile sense is used as a way to develop the main theme of the poem. And as the title might indicate, the theme here is remembering an important loved one.

Time of youth is contrasted with time of age. The poet, perhaps the the readers as well, are remembering their own younger days and pondering their future old age. The grandchild in this poem remembers the grandmother’s “time of briskness” when she would “stride to the water pump”, but sees that now in old age “she could walk no further than the garden gate.”

And yet, the grandmother's "slowing bones belied her agile eyes. In their brightness quickened life". If the grandchild can still remember those "agile eyes", the "look that hunted hardship", "that barbed-wire gaze", then indeed, the grandmother "still rule(s) without words", if not over all the five sons, at least over the grandchild. Because, as is the belief in many cultures around the world, grandparents have not really died until they are forgotten by their grandchildren, by their descendents.

Aunt Elsie

My Aunt Elsie,
Daughter and sister of rabbis,
Was roundness incarnate.

Dripping with long-fringed shawl
And smelling of soap,
Of wax and wood,

She stood with the heat
In a low-beamed room
Of the black and white house:

The mothball wife
Pregnant with prayer
She curled her hands

And widened her eyes
Like frightened pennies:
Questioning her childlessness.⁸⁾

In this poem we are presented with a cameo portrait of an aunt, the “daughter and sister of rabbis.” Here, as in the afore mentioned *Lettuce With Herbs*, the sense of smell is used to bring to life the description of the main character. Aunt Elsie smells “of soap and wax and wood...”and she is described as “The mothball wife.” This latter description denoting not only one of Aunt Elsie’s smells but also perhaps her secluded and protected life.

If “the low beamed room in the black and white house” where “she stood with the heat” is in fact the kitchen, this would call to mind delicious aromas and home and hearth images as well as serving as an indication the Aunt Elsie was a devoted cook for her family.

The visual image in this poem is one of roundness in shape... “roundness incarnate.” Aunt Elsie, if unable to be pregnant with children, is, nevertheless, “pregnant with prayer.” In prayer she “curled” her hands. Her round “eyes widened like frightened pennies.”

It is in the last line of the poem that we first understand Aunt Elsie’s not uncommon, but nevertheless disappointing, circumstance. It is in the last line that we appreciate the use of the round images and home-and-hearth fragrances in the poem. Aunt Elsie is childless.

“Her eyes widened like frightened pennies: questioning her childlessness.”

The Shoemaker’s Wife

She came to us walking, at night.
Our bundle of mended shoes
Hot secrets in her shopping bag.

By the door in the hall she stood
And cried. Her autumn hair
Wild from the wind.

Her red-blue eyes like
Sores in her face,
Sad pockmarks

From the cobbler’s shop
In the narrow old town
Where her husband hammered

And stitched his days;
Where the sign ‘No Jews’
Newly pinned to the door

Pleased her sons’
Keen suspicion

That mastered all our lives.⁹⁾

The resistance of a blue-eyed shoemaker's wife against the "keen suspicions" of her sons is portrayed in this poem. In the summer of 1935, anti-Semitic signs appeared in shops and restaurants. "The sign 'No Jews' newly pinned to the door" of the cobbler's shop in "the narrow town" indicates to the reader why the simple delivery of "a bundle of mended shoes" to a customer, perhaps one of long standing, has become an act of defiance of family and fatherland.

This shoemaker's wife was "by the door in the hall" of her customer's house as "she stood and cried." Perhaps she understood that the reality of what she had not wanted to believe would happen had in fact come to pass. Perhaps she understood "the keen suspicion that mastered all (their) lives." And presumably, what she understood did not please her as it did please others, including perhaps some of her family members.

So, I wonder, are her blue eyes red from crying only about the fate awaiting her customers or is it perhaps also, or more so, for the change that is taking hold in the hearts of her own family and her countrymen? And moreover, are there not today women in countries around the world who feel that their nations are over militarized or racist? Are there not women today who see or fear having their men following paths that promote these tendencies and who feel powerless to stop it? But isn't there also always resistance in some form or other? Can it not be said that even the "bundle of mended shoes" in

this poem are “hot secrets” of resistance?

Friends¹⁰⁾

To call you faithful would not be enough.
You came at night because the laws were wild
With hate. It could have meant a broken, rough
Diminished life for you and for your child;

It could have been your end. But when they burnt
The temples, when they rent the doors apart
That held our confined world, when they interned
And chained the silent men and many hearts

Translated fear to death, you found the way
To us. Even before the cattle-trucks, that day,
Your comfort marked a constancy. It brushed

All bitterness away I might have clucked
As a distorting mask. With love you judged.¹¹⁾

How does anyone ever know who their friends really are? Note that the title of this poem is “Friends.” In times of adversity, “When they burnt the temples, when they rent the doors apart,” Lotte must have been wretched, “all bitterness,” her face as a “distorting mask.” However, a family of friends, the Trempers, did stand by them. Specifically, it was the daughter Greta Tremper (Berdolt) who was

Lotte's dearest friend. Because of their "constancy" these family friends, at great personal risk, had "with love... judged" the situation and had "found the way" to bring "comfort" to Lotte's family, the family of Ernst Israel Wertheimer in Mainz, Germany. In the poem *Lament and Celebration i.m. Greta Berdolt* the last four lines are:

Through streets of terror
You came as night's shadow
Giving new names
To courage and love.¹²⁾

This period in time would come to be known as Kristallnacht. It was 48 hours of destruction on November 10th and 11th, 1938. When the final count was taken, it was found that there were 1,300 synagogues set on fire, 7,500 Jewish businesses destroyed, 30,000 Jews arrested, and at least 96 Jews killed. The destruction had come down quick and hard and was all over Germany. Kristallnacht was said to have been in retaliation for the assassination of one German diplomat in Paris, which itself was said to have been in retaliation for a deportation in process of 12,000 Jews of Polish origin. In fact, view the swiftness and the disproportional degree of retaliation, the assassination has come to be considered merely the pretext the Nazis had been waiting for to the launch what would come to be known as the Kristallnacht pogrom.¹³⁾ During Kristallnacht altogether six synagogues had been destroyed in Mainz where Lotte lived.

It was at these times, “when the laws were wild with hate” that Greta came to the Wertheimers of Mainz, Germany. She was a friend...in the most real sense of the word. And on “that day” the “comfort” brought by her “marked a constancy. It brushed all bitterness away” that Lotte “might have clutched as a distorting mask.” So Lotte was able to believe that not all Germans hated Jews and that some friendships could be stronger than hate run rampant.

Fugue

[for Sophie Cahn]

There was no irony in it,
After their nightfall arrival.
She always came shadowless now.

This time she brought one in his black
Swastika uniform. They ate
As usual at the oak table.

Then, in the yellow light's comfort
The older woman's accurate
Fingers unpinned a stepping fugue.

His words cut the afterglow calm:
'I did not believe that a Jew
Could play Bach like that, I thank you.¹⁴⁾

Sophie Cahn(1880-1964), to whom this poem is dedicated, was to play an important role in the life of Lotte Kramer. Until she was 11 in 1934 Lotte was enrolled in the *Volkschule* where 20% of her classmates were Jewish. Then laws were passed forcing all Jewish children to attend schools for Jews only and forbidding all Jewish teachers from teaching non-Jewish children in the *Gymnasium* of Mainz. Though these laws were undeniably anti-Semitic, these seeds of destiny were the impetus by which Sophie Cahn would become Lotte Wertheimer's English teacher and also her rescuer. Sofie Cahn was also a gifted musician.¹⁵⁾

The above poem is presumably an episode in the life of Sophie Cahn that obviously stood out in her mind strongly enough for her to remember it and perhaps to recount it personally to Lotte who could have been her pupil at the time. It was from:

“September 15, 1935 that the swastika flag became the only official flag of the Third Reich and swastika pins and badges came into use across the nation,”¹⁶⁾

The swastika, however, had been used as the emblem of the Nazi party since 1920.

As in many of her poems, Lotte chooses to recount an incident in simple fashion by posing every-day images to stand in contrast with a startling happening or remark.

“They ate as usual at the oak table.” After dinner “in the yellow light's comfort the older woman...unpinned a stepping fugue.” The man she brought with her “this time” was “one in his black swastika

uniform.” There were many uniforms in Germany during the 30s, but the all black SS uniform is the most well known.

The man in the black uniform has just listened to her play the piano. Then there is an “after glow calm.” He expresses his disbelief, his surprise. The very first line of the poem has already informed the reader that: “There is no irony in it.” Until then this man had never heard Sophie Cahn play Bach. He says: “I did not believe that a Jew could play Bach like that,” and he adds, without irony: “I thank you.”

There are many things that we do not know about this situation, but it can be said that, in as far as Lotte has portrayed it, the admiration and the gratitude both seem as real as the meal they have partaken and the oak table at which they have eaten. This moment in time was real. It is described for us in this poem, our window to the past. The music of Bach played by Sophie Cahn had the power to capture the respect and gratitude of the man in the black swastika uniform.

Memoire

On certain days
There would appear a photograph:
A young and handsome officer,
Austro-Hungarian, on her desk.
‘The one I should have married’

She explained 'he fell in the Great War.'
And next to him herself,
A soul-struck girl with eyes of coal.

At other times
A former pupil took his place:
A Leonardo face, lost to her now
In war-anaemic Hertfordshire
Here, she worked hard at living
On the land, at keeping rabbits,
Pigs, at unforgetting.
Her hands were sick at unborn music.¹⁷⁾

After Kristalnacht in November of 1938, the situation for Jews and other minorities in Germany was dire and pressing. At that time Lotte's teacher of English was a person by the name of Sophie Cahn. In addition to being a teacher of English she was also a talented musician. She is the person who made contact with Quakers in Germany and in England and arranged to take five of her pupils to England. They were finally able to leave Mainz in July of 1939 on one of the last Kindertransport trains.¹⁸⁾ Sophie Cahn had been born in 1880 and so she was almost 60 at the time when she travelled across the English Channel and went to live in the English country side with Lotte and four other girls. Lotte at the time was almost 15.

One of the tragedies experienced in the wake of war is the difficulty that must be faced by tens or hundreds of thousands of

widows and never-to-be-wed young women that are left behind. The man Sophie Cahn (1880–1964) “should have married ...fell in the Great War.” “Lost to her” as well was her “former pupil” with the “Leonardo face.”

With her five pupils living in “war-anaemic” Tring, Hertfordshire, England, Sophie Cahn “worked hard at living on the land, at keeping rabbits and pigs.” Sophie Cahn was also a gifted musician. Busy with farm work, “her hands were sick at unborn music.”

Sophie Cahn had indeed lost many things: men in her life, home, profession, opportunities to play her music. But what she was able to retain was valuable. She had her five pupils. She was still a teacher for them and not only of English language, but of life and survival.

“All her pupils in Germany, Jewish or not, were enriched by her and the city of Mainz now has a *Sophie Cahnstrasse* in her honor.”¹⁹⁾

Ode to Margaret Fyleman

[who met our *Kindertransport*]

She met us in a grim-grey station
And warmth spilled from her eyes,
A light on that smoke-filled morning:
Surrounded and spread from her side.

Her Irish voice was melodious,
Her exuberance infected us all,
She could love and hate profoundly
And her temperament held us in thrall.

There was space for us in her house,
Quite bohemian in every way,
And she cooked huge meals on her kitchen range
In a slap-dash manner each day.

We all flocked to her for protection,
Refugees from life and war,
And her Schubert songs and her Dickens
Filled our evenings by the fire.

So this ode to her and her memory
For the life of art she shared
With a generous heart and gesture
That lives on and defies the world.²⁰⁾

Upon arrival in England, Sophie Cahn and her five charges: Lotte Wertimer (Kramer), Hildegard Lebrecht, Lore Loebmann, Eva-Marie Metzger and Irma Margarethe Moser, were welcomed by Mrs. Margaret Fyleman and these “refugees from life and war” went to live with her at Fendly House in Tring, Hampshire.

In this *Ode to Margaret Fyleman* the reader is introduced to a

woman with a melodious Irish voice who “could love and hate profoundly.” The reader learns that the lady of Fendly House “was quite bohemian in every way,” and generous “she cooked huge meals on her kitchen range.” Mrs. Fyleman in this poem is praised and thanked not only for the food and shelter give she gave them, but for much more. The “warmth that spilled from her eyes,” “her exuberance,” “her Schubert songs and her Dickens” fed the spirits and the souls of her refugee children. She was a benefactress of “generous heart and gesture” that Lotte and the kindertransport girls would never forget.

Though the world does seem callous and cruel at times, full of “grim-grey station(s)” and smoke-filled morning(s), it is because of people like Mrs. Fyleman that a generosity “of heart and gesture... lives on and defies the world.” As in the poem *Friends* seen above, we have here a portrait of a woman whose love for Lotte brought her strength, courage and the will to persevere. Don’t we all, at times, need this kind of encouragement? Don’t we all need such “mothers”?

The House

That house had taken us
Into its dusty arms,
And after some years
Of apprenticeship
In all its obscurities
We left it, much wiser.

There were others in our place,
Some Lolita-like girls
With acrobats' eyes,
Fallen into the law's ditch:
One had 'married' her father,
Another, with a parsnip smile,
A slave to the sex of a woman.
Both still smarting
As disciples of love.
A third, thin girl
With a refugee face,
A wire-cage head of hair,
Dark as burnt grass,
Could not refrain from stealing.
She wanted to cram herself
Full of precious objects,
Be pregnant with possessions.

The house tried its best
With corridors and corners
Declaring protection,
A barricade to fence off
'thou shalt not'
To point them towards
A new existence-
For a short while only.²¹⁾

This poem is about Fendly House.²²⁾ During the war years, Lotte grew to maturity learning many things about English culture and the lives of young women in it. She was welcomed into Fendly House by the lady of the house, Mrs. Margaret Fyleman, (see Ode to Mrs. Maragaret Fyleman). This is where Lotte, her teacher Sophie Cahn and the four other kindertransport girls lived and “after some years of apprenticeship...left it much wiser.” Later on Sophie Cahn and Mrs. Fyleman were to try their hand at “the boarding and rehabilitation of juvenile delinquent girls-not an easy undertaking.”²³⁾

Where Lotte and the four girls had lived, now “there were others in (their) place.” These had “fallen into Law’s ditch.” Each had her own separate story. “Refugees from life” if not from war as well. “The house (run by Sophie Cahn and Mrs. Fyleman) tried its best.. to point them in a new direction” but succeeded “for a short time only.”

Lotte, as evidenced here in this poem, has mature understanding of the troubles of others as she became exposed to their lives and predicaments. The refugee girl who thieved because she wanted to be “pregnant with possessions” is not judged or condemned by Lotte. Her situation is described and her motives are viewed.

Lotte is describing young women of those times and the seeming futility of the efforts being made to help them after they had gotten into trouble with the Law. War can erode social services and economic opportunities. The social fabric of a society can be stret-

ched to the point rending. And women in such situations will have to struggle to survive. The 'thou shall not' commandments of normal times, seem to have less weight. But still, Fendly House, Lotte's former home and place of "apprenticeship," "tried its best." That is to say the matrons of Fendly House, Margaret Fyleman and Sophie Cahn, "tried (their) best." Their generosity was not limited to Lotte and the Kindertransport girls, but was extended to young women of various circumstances in need of help.

Cissie

Her name was Cissie
And she mangled sheets,
Her hair was peroxide yellow;
She crooned about love
With a smoker's cough
While the sweat slipped down her belly.
She could tell a tale
Full of sex and ale
As the mangle wheeled her story,
And her laughter roared
As her bosom soared
When she slapped the sheets to glory.
In a war-time pub
Some G.I. pick-up
Cheered the Monday morning queues,
But below her pride

Of the good-time night
Were a lonely woman's blues.
For once in a while
A black eye would smile
From her puffy face of sweat;
And we knew it meant
Her old man had spent
The infrequent night in her bed.
So she rolled and roared
As she laughed and whored
Till one day she clocked—in no more:
No G.I. or mate
Kept her out so late—
But a Buzz-bomb had struck her door.²⁴⁾

This poem is in repeating three line stanzas of 5-5-8 syllables. It is ballad, a short story in verse. In order to understand our heroine's situation, it will be necessary to have a little background information about laundries, buzz bombs and prostitutes in war time England.

So first of all, let's consider the long standing, though not usually legal, female profession. As a teenager living at Fendly House or as a young bride revisiting Sophie Cahn and Margaret Fyleman there, Lotte might have know or heard rumors of "good-time" girls of the WWII days in England. If Lotte had had no personal or second hand knowledge of the profession, she might have read about it in the

newspapers.

For example:

Colonel WM Clark, a US federal judge serving as legal advisor to the US Army in London during WWII pointed out that “there are too many prostitutes, that their behavior is far to blatant, and that the impression created on the American troops and their mommas at home is bad.”²⁵⁾

As indicated in the above article, Cissie’s line of work was not so unusual at the time. So now we have seen two possible sources of Lotte’s knowledge of her subject. Now let us consider the period of time in which this ballad was set?

In June of 1944 the German Army began using a very deadly weapon called the V1. The “v” stood for *vergeltungswaffe* which meant vengeance weapon. These were better known to Londoners as “buzz bombs.” By the time the buzz bombs came into use, Lotte would have been living in London as the young bride of Frederique (Fritz) Kramer and was 21 years old. Lotte had been assigned war-time work in a huge laundry. The job was long hours of hard physical work.

While reading the poem *Cissie* we will notice some laundry/factory vocabulary. This may be totally coincidental. Examples: “she mangled sheets,” “peroxide,” “as the mangle wheeled her story,” “she clocked-in no more.” Taken out of context these words are

indicative of a laundry / factory environment. In regards to “the mangle”...was Cissie literally working at “a machine with two rollers used in the past to remove water from washed clothes”?²⁶⁾ As to her clocking-in no more...did good-time girls have time cards with which they punched in on a factory clock? Could it just be that as Lotte herself was working in a laundry that these expressions just reflect the environment of the author not the heroine of the ballad.

Or then again the reader might wonder whether Cissie had been moon lighting...that she might have had one job by day and one by night perhaps? Following this train of thought, we might even try jumping to the conclusion that Lotte was working in the same laundry as Cissie.

But this poem is not about the history of prostitution or buzz bombs nor is it about laundries in war-time England. It is the tale of “a lonely woman’s blues” whose “old man” would “once in a while” inflict upon her “a black eye (that) would smile from her puffy face.” There is a depth and breadth of details in this poem. This evokes emotional response.

“She crooned about love with a smoker’s cough while the sweat dripped down her belly.” There is realism in the detail here. It enables the reader to better visualize the story.

“She rolled and roared as she laughed and whored.” There is action in this “tale of sex and ale.” And there is tragedy. During

the WWII in Great Britain 60,000 civilian victims died. Cissie, whether fact or fiction, was one of them. “Till one day she clocked-in no more...a Buzz bomb had struck her door.”

If read aloud several times, one will hear that there is music as well as drama in this poem. It has rhyme and rhythm as well as tragedy. This is indeed a ballad. It is a ballad of a woman on hard times.

On Shutting the Door²⁷⁾

Often when I leave home,
I think of you,
How you'd have shut the door
That last time
They fetched you out at dawn.

What fears would prophesy,
What intimations
Could foretell the terrors
Of those plains,
The herding into ash?

Or maybe, you looked round
As if before
A holiday, leaving
No trace of dust,
No crumbs for pests, no moths

In cupboards, carpets;
Covered the chairs,
The settee from the glare
Of light and sun,
Turned off the water, gas...²⁸⁾

Once again, just as in *A Lettuce With Herbs*, a simple action, this time not the cutting of fresh herbs, but the shutting of a door, reminds the author of another time and place. The author is probably remembering her former home in Mainz where she had lived with her parents decades ago. However, she is not only remembering a location but also imagining a past situation she herself was not there to witness. That is to say her mother's last morning in the place Lotte remembers as her childhood home in Germany. Questions seem to haunt Lotte. "That last time (they) fetched her out at dawn," how did her mother shut the door? What were her fears and terrors? Was she able to imagine the final "herding into ash?" The reader too is swept up in this questioning.

But almost as soon as the fearful terrible backdrop is hung, the scene, as if on a Kabuki revolving stage, shifts to Lotte's quiet peaceful childhood home. Images of cupboards, carpets, chairs and a settee are called to mind. The ordinary actions that the woman did prior to shutting the door are recalled. The images of home and hearth predominate. The woman does the little chores she usually did before leaving on a holiday: checking that there is "No trace of dust...", that the chairs and settee are covered and that the utilities

are tuned off: “the water, gas..”

And so with that one last word in the last line of the poem, the revolving stage rotates again and swings around full circle. With the single word “gas”, we the readers are back to thinking of “fears and prophesy,” and historical atrocity.

Saved

My aunt survived the war in Southern France.
A camp inmate to be dispatched to death,
A case of interest for the medics there.

She suffered from a tumor on the brain.
So they decided on experiments
To operate her conscious and aware.

They tapped and poked the inside of her head
Until they found what they were looking for
And made her answer questions with each touch.

The nuns looked after her for many years
While husband, sister, disappeared for good
And she survived in bed, hole in the head.

After the war her brother found her there,
A wreck, and yet she gained in strength and lived

Determined to old age to tell her tale.²⁹⁾

This poem, *Saved* by Lotte Kramer is not about beauty. It is about horror. In this poem the facts are stated bluntly and specifically. Only one person's story is told here. There is no mention of the more that 75,000 Jews deported from France to Nazi death camps in Eastern Europe. Nor is there mention of the fact that only two to three thousand survived those camps. There is no mention either that in a similar time frame the Imperial Army of Japan's Unit 731 was pursuing similarly horrific medical experiments in occupied China. No broad picture is painted here. But it is important to understand that although a single person's story can often seem insignificant, there are some that can symbolize the experiences of many. For Lotte this poem describing the tragedy of her Aunt Sarah is surely such a poem. And it is certainly also important that people of other times and places, learn of these events. This is especially true for young people who have no knowledge of or responsibility for those war torn years.³⁰⁾

The aunt in this poem is probably the Aunt Sarah mentioned in another poem called *Two Great Aunts*.³¹⁾ In the poem *Saved* we learn that she "suffered from a tumor on the brain" and the medical personnel there "decided on experiments." The grim facts are plainly told. The "medics there" were "to operate her conscious and aware." For the reader, this stark and blunt description hits hard, especially in such a short poem where details are kept to a minimum. Contrarily, somehow it is both hard to believe and yet believable.

Perhaps this is because in this poem not much attention is paid to the medics who experiment. This is a poem of Lotte Kramer's aunt who was doomed to survive. And having done so, she was "determined to old age tell her tale" She was "a wreck, and yet she gained in strength and lived." She lived to tell so that the horror would not be forgotten, because once atrocities are forgotten, they can more easily reoccur. And to this end, it can be said that it is precisely because this poem is so blunt and specific, that it succeeds as a poem and moreover as a message to posterity.

A Fable

That time
When the 'Final Solution'
Became known as the unacceptable fact

You sat
In front of me on an English bus:
The back of your head, your hair, your skin,

The way
The nape of your neck with its small
Dark point moved from side to side

In cautious
Rhythm, the slightly helpless
Expression of your thin shoulders...

The shock
Shivered through me like fire.
Seconds of fabled seeing until

The other
Woman with the stranger's face
Turned round to get off at the next stop.³²⁾

Here, in this poem of hopes raised and dashed, is one moment in time: "seconds of fabled seeing." After the defeat of Germany in World War II the people of the world were informed of the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust. It would take years, however, before the width, breadth and depth of it all were really understood...before "the unacceptable fact" could be fathomed. The hope that maybe somehow somewhere loved ones were still alive would persist.

For Lotte Kramer, who had escaped to England as part of the kindertransport effort in 1939, this poem unveils to the reader a deep rooted hope that surfaced as she was sitting behind a woman on a bus in post-war England. The physique of this woman, the back of her head, her hair, the nape of her neck, her thin shoulders, all these brought to mind someone Lotte knew and had been hoping to be reunited with. Her mother perhaps? Lotte imagined "seconds of fabled seeing." "The shock shivered through (her) like fire." Shivered...like fire. And then..."the stranger's face."

One fleeting experience in Lotte's life, but undoubtedly represen-

tative of many others. In fact perhaps, as is described in *Stone-Setting*, this fleeting experience represents decades of others. Please note that it is also in the poem *Stone-Setting* that Lotte relates one of her basic motivations for writing: “I share my scars with each young orphan’s wound, and blind man’s guilt.”³³⁾

Post-War V

Your letter searching for me crossed with mine
Searching for you. My ‘*Wahlverwandtschaft*’ older
Sister in enemy country. Not one sign
Of bitterness. Knowing of bombs and fire

Where we used to play and fearing for your
Life so many times, to see your writing
On the envelope crossed grief with joy. For
Now you told me how you fled still carting

Those mementos that my mother brought at dawn,
Her curfew visits, how you saved your child,
Your mother too. But war had meant destruction
Of our town, and worst: had felled your husband.

In those first letters we nailed down our tales
Of you as widow, I as orphan, balanced scales.³⁴⁾

Greta Trempers Berdolt was Lotte Kramer’s best childhood

friend, her kindred spirit from Mainz Germany. Greta was an older sister in what was “enemy country.” In “Post War V” we understand that not only did Lotte and Greta continue to be friends, but that “knowing of bombs and fire where (they) used to play,” Lotte had feared for Greta’s safety. May the reader please note, that Lotte says there was “not one sign of bitterness” in Greta’s letter about the losses *she*, Greta, had suffered. In other words, Lotte recognizes that Greta and her family had also been victims of the war.

Note especially the phrase: “to see your writing on the envelope crossed grief with joy.” Lotte was experiencing two opposite emotions of similar intensity. Needless to say that it is only a person with whom one is very close and who has had similar experiences that the deepest grief and the most soaring joy can be truly shared. For Lotte, Greta would have been such a person. They had both lost so much. Greta had managed to flee “still carting those mementoes that (Lotte’s) mother brought at dawn.” Although Lotte would receive these, her childhood family, home and former way of life were gone forever, as were Greta’s...disappeared by the winds of war.

If told that Lotte Kramer was holocaust survivor, one might expect her poems to be dark and filled with bitterness toward and denunciations of the people of the Rhineland. However if even after a thorough reading of her poetry, there were nodenunciations to be found, the reader might wonder why there were not. I think, for one

thing, Lotte realizes the viciousness of the circle called revenge and that the way to peace is to break that cycle. Moreover, Lotte seems to have come to the conclusion that what happened in Nazi Germany is not the fault of all the Germans. It is not the fault of the many Rhineland folk like her friend Greta. It can be said that Lotte Kramer, a person who lost 12 of her family members in the holocaust³⁴⁾, has many reasons to be dark and pessimistic. However, in this poem she presents a world in which not all is lost and in which there is a glimmer of hope for the future. Not all is death. There is also life. There is “grief crossed with joy.”

conclusion

In closing, let us now remember the heroines Lotte has presented to us...the portraits of women she has she has rendered “with a generous heart and gesture that lives on and defies the world.”³⁵⁾ The lives of women as she describes them are often “as electric then as now.”³⁶⁾ These are the stories of women who have suffered world wars and the accompanying hardships and have managed to find ways to cope. Perhaps it was by remembering the happier days of childhood or the lives of relatives she admired, respected and longed for (A Lettuce With Herbs, Grandmother, Aunt Essie, On Shutting the Door, Saved), that Lotte herself was better able to cope with her displacement, her diaspora of mind and body, heart and soul. In a way it might be said that she makes the people she loved come to life on paper.

Lotte also tells us the stories of women that she and her family

were indebted to. For example “The Shoemaker’s Wife” whose “autumn hair was wild with wind.”³⁷⁾ And let us not forget Lotte’s two benefactresses: Sophie Cahn, “a soul stuck girl with eyes of coal”³⁸⁾ and Margaret Fyleman, a woman whose “temperament held us all in thrall.”³⁹⁾

Moreover, we have cameos of working women. “Josephine” was a maid who had taken to thieving and who “prarde(d) illegally her cheerful acquisitions.”⁴⁰⁾ And then we were introduced to “Cissie.” Hers was a ballad of a woman who “crooned about love,” and who “roared as her bosom soared.”⁴¹⁾

In the poems “Friends,” “Lament and Celebration,” and “Post War V” the reader is introduced to Greta Trempers Berdolt, Lotte’s post-war-living link to the lost world of her childhood on the banks of the Rhine.

All these portraits of women who were at times strong, weakened, joyous, grieving, ordinary, extraordinary, who could “love and hate profoundly,”⁴²⁾ are remembered and brought to life for us in Lotte’s poems. Crafted in the detail that comes from understanding, respect and love, these poems live today as did their heroines in the earlier half of the 20th century.

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- 30) In the United States during the earlier days of slavery, if slaves escaped from a southern state to a northern one, they were considered to have become free people. But after the US Congress changed the laws it was no longer so easy. Then they had to escape all the way north to Canada in order to reach freedom. When the US Congress requested the right to go slave hunting in Canada as had been granted to Southern slave owners whose “chattel” had escaped to the northern United States, Canada refused.

Parallels can be drawn with this and what went on in war-time France. In 1940 northern France came under occupation by the German *Wehrmacht*. The Vichy government had legal jurisdiction in both occupied northern France and unoccupied southern “free zone.” It began passing anti-Jewish measures restricting the freedom of movement of Jews. This limited their lives, both private and professional. The Statute on Jews legally redefined French Jews as a lower class and deprived them of citizenship. *Commissariat General aux Questions Juives* was established in 1941. Between 1942 and July 1944 it helped the Gestapo to capture and deport 76,000 Jews from France to Nazi concentration camps. Only 2,500 survived.

Now where is the parallel? In the USA under the original Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 only the southern states were responsible for rounding up and capturing the runaway slaves. After the passage of the Compromise of 1850, however, a much stricter Fugitive Slave Law was put in place. Officials in the non-slavery northern states were required to assist the slave catchers from the southern states if there were any suspected runaways in their area. Of course, free Negroes in the North were not “supposed” to be handed over as runaways. And in Vichy France, Jews of French citizenship were not “supposed” to be handed over to the Gestapo. But one must not forget that many Jews had already been stripped of their citizenship by *Statue on Jews* of 1940? So the first parallel is that in both Vichy France and in the northern US after 1850, while governments deem it their duty to protect their citizens or at least pretend to, they are not strong enough or willing enough to protect all of their citizens. They can not take the broader based stand. Neither the northern United States nor the Vichy French regime were defending justice and human rights for their own sake, but rather they were protecting their core population and forsaking their minorities.

It could be said that a second parallel is that it was not to be the job of governments to redress their own shortcomings, but rather it was to be the job of the people. In the US it was, for example, a network of resistance called the Underground Railroad. In France it was the *La Résistance Française*. It is worth noting that although Jews in France were only 1% of the population they were 15~20% of the French Resistance. (See: Suhl Yuri (1967), *They Fought Back*. New York: Schocken, pp.181-3. [ISBN 0805204792](#).)

A third parallel that might be noted is that governments not only sometimes fail to protect, but sometimes betray people, be they slaves

born there or people who have crossed borders seeking asylum or citizens they have deprived of citizenship.

So the history one needs to know to understand Lotte Kramer's poem *Saved* is not of the kind usually taught in school history text books. Some of the younger generation might even think that at least Lotte's aunt should be thankful she was able to survive. Perhaps, in this case, the words "doomed to survive" would be more accurate.

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