"LEBEN? ODER THEATER?"

Anca Badulescu
Lecturer, PhD., „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract:This article focuses on the French novelist's work "Charlotte", a biographical novel/ poem in prose which follows step by step the very short life of the Jewish-German expressionist painter, Charlotte Salomon. Beyond the tragic destiny of the artist this novel condemns once more the most disastrous derailing in human history: the Holocaust. Consequently, this article is meant as a warning against the rising nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic voices in our world.

Keywords: Charlotte Salomon, Jew, Nazism, atrocities, concentration camp

"Life? or Theatre? A Song-Play" is the title of a collection of 769 gouaches by a graphic artist, Charlotte Salomon, one of Germany's greatest expressionist painters, unknown during her lifetime. In his novel, "Charlotte", the French writer, David Foenkinos retraces the short and heart-breaking life of Charlotte Salomon, one of the more than nine million Jews murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War.

The title of the series of autobiographical paintings brings to my mind the famous Shakespearean quotation "All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players/ They have their exits and entrances"…The stage which David Foenkinos brings into the foreground is one where the greatest tragedy in the history of humankind was enacted: the Holocaust. It is unconceivable that many people around the globe have not heard about the Holocaust or don't care about the horrific crimes, the unbelievable acts of cruelty committed by the National Socialists in the 1930s and 40s. Teenagers and young people don't read Anne Franck's journal any longer and "Schindler's List" is not a favorite movie either. Time and history seem to have stifled the voices of all those who died in the concentration camps, their skeletal naked bodies going up as smoke into the indifferent sky. One of these was Charlotte Salomon's and her unborn child's: "Naked under the cold light, the bodies appear gaunt. Charlotte and her belly stand out. Amid others, she does not move. She seems to remove herself from the moment. To be here." (Foenkinos, 2018, p. 208) She is here with twenty first century citizens to warn us about the rising anti-Semitism in the world. She is here to caution us that any of us can become a Joseph K. in the near future if we forget about the absurd crimes of the past. Nothing can ever redeem the atrocities of monsters like Goering, Mengele, Hoss, Brunner (who is responsible for Charlotte's deportation) or their outrageous leader (whose name I don't even want to reproduce). Goering's great-granddaughter and great-grandson have decided to let themselves be sterilized in order not to bring into the world ogres like their infamous ancestor. But nothing should let us forgive and forget. Foenkinos tells the reader in the "Epilogue" of his novel that Alois Brunner, under whose command Charlotte and her husband and thousands of other innocent Jews were deported to Auschwitz, emigrated to Syria and was never extradited. He lived a comfortable life until the 1990s without paying for his deeds and not repenting anything. Quite on the contrary, when asked, he stated that his victims had to die: "All of them deserved to die. Because they were the Devil's agents and human garbage….I have no regrets and would do it again." (Foenkinos, 2018, p.1940) It is of paramount importance that we don't let the Holocaust happen again, that anti-Semitism gains ground and that some of our fellow citizens become innocent victims of maniac dictators.

While "Anne Franck's Diary" represents a deeply moving story of a teenager's awakening consciousness when in hiding from the Nazi raids, Charlotte's "Life? or Theater?", feverishly

BDD-A29494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:19 UTC)

created in a span of two years between 1940 and 1942 as a way to escape madness (as Charlotte confessed), illustrates the tragic life and legacy of the artist in powerful images and words. The author even gave instructions as to the music which should accompany the contemplation of the gouaches. The whole is divided into three main parts. The first one depicts the period between 1913 to 1937, thus starting before Charlotte's birth and going on with her childhood and early youth. The year 1913 was marked by her aunt Charlotte's suicide, one in a long series of suicides in the family and followed by Charlotte's mother's in 1926, when the artist was just eight years old, and by her grandmother's in 1940. The predominant colour of these paintings is blue. The second and most impressive part tells the story of Charlotte's great love for Alfred Wolfsohn and the leading colour is red. The "Epilogue", mainly painted in yellow, re-enacts the last years of her short life, 1939-1942, while she was an exile in Villefranche-sur-Mer, in the South of France. In only two years she created a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' or a 'total work of art' comprising drawings, transparencies, captions thus combining poetry, visual arts and a 'soundtrack' which included Schubert Lieder, music by Mahler, Mozart and Bach but also Nazi marching songs. Just before she was deported, she entrusted her life's work to doctor Moridis to hand over to Ottilie Moore, in whose villa, l'Ermitage, she had found refuge, and told him: "Keep this safe. It is my whole life". Happily, "Life? or Theater?" survived the war, unlike its creator. In a letter, after finishing her artistic statement, Lotte wrote: "I was all the characters in my play./ I learned to walk all the paths./And in that way I became myself." (Foenkinos, 2018, p.179) Charlotte's father, who had escaped together with his wife the Nazi mass murders, first exhibited his daughter's collection of gouaches in 1961. It is only then that she became known to the world. Since then several other exhibitions, and a number of films, plays, operas, and ballets, based on her complete autobiographical work, have recreated the artist's life. Although she is celebrated around the world, not enough people know about her tragedy and about the nightmare of the Holocaust, about the violent and unjust death of millions of Jews and gipsies.

From among those who were fascinated by Charlotte Salomon's life and work, the French writer David Foenkinos and his novel "Charlotte" stand out. The whole adventure started with the novelist's research about the art historian, Aby Warburg, the owner of an unprecedented collection of books. Foenkinos' obsession with this strange personality and his 'mythic library' brought him to Germany, on a literary journey. In Berlin he was invited to a Charlotte Salomon exhibition. This moment was one of illumination, of "complete overwhelming" (Foenkinos, 2018, p.67): he suddenly knew what he was looking for. Ironically enough, while reading about the painter, he discovered the link between Aby Warburg and Charlotte Salomon: as a student at the Berlin Art Academy she acquired and greatly appreciated books by the now famous art historian. After Warburg's death in 1929, his disciples, mainly Ernst Cassirer, rescued his precious books from the Nazi hate for culture by 'exiling' them to London (where they still are). Charlotte created her life's work in exile. It was concealed and saved from destruction by Nazi invaders by her French admirer, doctor Moridis. After the war, Moridis handed Charlotte's paintings to Ottilie Moore and she gave them to her father. Albert Salomon first exhibited the shocking series of gouaches in Amsterdam. Books and paintings, like Jews, could only survive the Nazi persecution in exile. The connection between Warburg and Charlotte is obvious.

The author confessed that he had been greatly impressed by the artist's genius and innovative spirit. It was a love at first sight for a huge artistic achievement. In the novel itself Foenkinos states that he has been taking notes long before the novel was born. He even started writing it several times but gave up as he repeatedly felt that it was impossible to go on. These are his own words: "Cétait une obsession physique, une oppression." The author even mentioned or quoted Charlotte in several of his novels. Charlotte's life and work had gradually become a fascination. Work on this novel lasted for ten years and, when he finished it, the novelist could not write for a whole year. He had given his best and found himself drained of energy and artistic fervor. His passion for Charlotte's work and spirit determined him to literally trace back her life by visiting the places where she lived,

BDD-A29494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:19 UTC)

studied, loved, where she hid, and where she created the fabulous story of her life. In Berlin he walked on Ludwigstrasse and stopped at number 15, where Lotte had spent her childhood and adolescence, he visited the Art Academy, travelled back to Nice and Villefranche-sur-Mer completing his artistic pilgrimage. By doing this, he recreated step by step the calamity of Charlotte's life in the dismal times before and during the Second World War. Thus, Foenkinos needed to assemble information and strength to be able to write his book. When asked if his novel was fiction or reality, the author underlined the fact that everything he wrote was genuine.

"Charlotte" strikes the readers the very moment they open the book. The first reaction is that they go back to the title page to find out if it really is a novel. The form is at first glance a dramatic poem. Thus, every single sentence is written in a separate line. Moreover, the sentences are short and simple without any stylistic or metaphorical adornment, while the verbs are in the present tense simple. The effect of this scantiness of style on the readers is that they watch a succession of images while reading the screenplay. Foenkinos explained that he chose this structure as he was overwhelmed by the tragedy of the artist's life and needed the intermission to be able to breathe and go on writing. This is how the novel begins: "Charlotte learned to read her name on a gravestone./ So she wasn't the first Charlotte./ Before her, there had been her aunt, her mother's sister." (Foenkinos, 2018, p.11) The novelist-narrator, that is David Foenkinos himself, succeeds in creating a narrative text in which he encapsulates Charlotte Salomon's life but also her artistic work. While being an unusual biography, homage, novel or story, "Charlotte" is undoubtedly a powerful document about the Nazi massacres, about the greatest tragedy humankind endured, only because nothing was done while this ugly dream could have been throttled. The first signs of the growing hatred of the National Socialists for 'inferior races' surfaced in the early 1930s. Gradually, the monster acquired huge dimensions until: "In January 1933, the hatred comes to power." (Foenkinos, 2018, p.51) Paula, Charlotte's stepmother and a celebrated singer, was no longer allowed to sing on the stage, Charlotte's father, an eminent doctor and researcher was no longer reimbursed for his work, attacks on Jews became more frequent, books were burnt. Life for Jewish people was increasingly becoming unbearable. Many started thinking of leaving Germany, and the Salomon family was advised to take refuge abroad. Albert, Charlotte's father didn't want to leave his homeland and dismissed this alternative. Charlotte, who had lost her mother in 1926, turned into a taciturn adolescent. She looked more and more into herself while spending her time reading Goethe, Hesse, Rilke and Nietzsche or completing her solid knowledge of music. During the coming years "the noose is tightening". (Foenkinos, 2018, p.53) Then, in November 1938 'Kristallnacht' happened. Jewish houses and businesses were pillaged, dozens of Jews were murdered for no reason at all. Charlotte had already lost her hope that this immense hatred would pass, and was terrified. She had understood that her country was led "by a pack of bloodthirsty hounds". (Foenkinos, 2018, p.54) Soon enough, one year before the 'baccalaureat' exam, a law forbade Jewish children to attend classes and Charlotte and Paula were forced to live like hermits in their Berlin apartment. During this period she discovered her passion for painting. The young woman was fascinated by Van Gogh and Chagall, and soon learned about the expressionists: Munch, Kokoschka, Beckmann. Her talent worked miracles and Charlotte was admitted at the Art Academy in Berlin. Even though her origins condemned her to isolation, her gift could not be ignored or denied. She won the prize which was given once a year to the best student but she had to suffer yet another humiliation. A Jew couldn't have been awarded the prize, so that it went to her blonde Aryan friend, Barbara. In a speech in Munchen, the Fuhrer had firmly pointed out that art should not dependent on time, era, style but only on people. And people should be Aryans. Modern art was condemned and labeled as disgusting: "The eye must be educated, an army of taste molded./ And above all: those guilty of decadence must be named and shamed." (Foenkinos, 2018, p. 62)

Charlotte's falling in love represented a turning point in her life. Alfred Wolfsohn, an eminent musician, obsessed with the myth of Orpheus was, like Charlotte herself, a troubled soul. At only eighteen he fought on the front and lived the horror of the war, a trauma which would follow him all

BDD-A29494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:19 UTC)

through his life. Charlotte's love for Alfred Wolfsohn was violent and cosuming. This huge experience would later on become an important part of "Leben? oder Theater?", and Alfred's portrait a leitmotif. In 1961 Paula Salomon sent Alfred Charlotte's exhibition catalog and the musician, who had fled to London in 1940 and had not left the city since, finally understood the immensity of Charlotte's feelings: "Charlotte seems obsessed by him, by their affair./Alfred feels a shiver all over his body./As if something had grabbed him by the back of the neck."(Foenkinos, 2018, p. 216). Charlotte's and Alfred's love story was abruptly interrupted and strangled when Charlotte was sent by her father to the South of France to join her grandparents who had already found shelter in Villefranche-sur-Mer, in Ottile Moore's house. Jews could leave Nazi Germany only if they had not yet reached the age of twenty-two, and Charlotte was not yet twenty-two. For a while she tried to resist. She preferred to die in her native Berlin, with her family and lover. Broken-hearted, she gave in and left everything behind. On the station platform Alfred whispered in her ear a sentence which was to accompany her ever after and which would become an obsession: "May you never forget that I believe in you."(Foenkinos, 2018, p. 125) Charlotte Salomon did not see her family and Alfred again. The Nazis had cut all the strings which connected her to a normal, logical world.

Before her fleeing to France, Charlotte witnessed her father's deportation. At that initial stage, the Nazis' arrests were aimed at intellectuals. Professors, doctors, artists were simply taken away from their homes and most of them never came back. Without any explanation Albert Salomon, the doctor who had made medical breakthroughs, had operated on soldiers at the front during WWI, and had been a war hero, was thrown into Sachsenhausen, where "he doesn't know where he is, who he is./ As when you wake from a nightmare. (Foenkinos, 2018, p.117) Paula Salomon, still a famous opera singer, achieved the impossible: her husband's release from the concentration camp. After four months in Sachsenhausen, Albert was a completely different man, broken, defeated, lost. This brilliant surgeon and innovator in the medical field had escaped the Nazi hell but had to continue living with the memory of the atrocities he had witnessed. Just before the outbreak of the war, Paula and Albert succeeded in fleeing to Holland, leaving their former life behind. In Amsterdam they arrived empty-handed and terrified of being arrested, imprisoned, killed. Friends from Berlin helped them eschew deportation and survive the war.

In Villefranche-sur-Mer Lotte had to face living with the fear of being denounced but also with the ordeal of living with her grandparents. When she reached the age of twenty-two, she witnessed the revelation of the dark secret of the family. In a fit of rage her grandfather told her the tragic story of a long line of suicides in Charlotte's mother's family. Charlotte was awestruck to find out that her mother, Franziska, had committed suicide when she was nine years old. The aunt, whose name Charlotte was bearing, had thrown herself from a bridge, while her own mother committed suicide by throwing herself from the window of their flat in Ludwigstrasse. Her great-grandmother, her great-uncle, her grandmother's nephew, all had taken their lives. Her grandmother's mental disorder pushed her to yet another suicide, while Charlotte had to face her grandfather's sexual assaults, which she mentioned in a letter discovered after her death. The artist's life had become unbearable and she was devastated by the question whether to take her own life or to achieve something out of the ordinary, and leave a trace. Her unborn amazingly impressive work "is already breathing inside her." (Foenkinos, 2018, p. 161)

Before letting out all that fear and sorrow in "Leben? oder Theater?", Lotte had to undergo yet another descent into hell. Together with her grandfather and many other German refugees, who were considered the enemy nation, she was taken to the Gurs camp, in the Pyrenees, at the Spanish border. The following months were marked by utter despair and ugliness. The lunar landscape devoid of any colour, the dreadful living conditions, the rats sharing food and mattresses with the inmates, the nightly rapes by the guards were too much to bear for any human being. When her grandfather fell seriously ill, Charlotte begged for mercy, and miraculously, they were released but had to make their own way back to Villefranche-sur-Mer. Just like her father, when returning from

BDD-A29494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:19 UTC)

Sachsenhausen, Charlotte Salomon was the very picture of an irreversibly ruined life. The two guardian angels, Ottilie Moore and doctor Moridis saved her from going mad or committing suicide. When Moridis warmly encouraged her to paint and in this way spill out the images and horrors of the past, Lotte remembered Alfred's last words when she had left him on the station platform in Berlin. That was the moment when she realized that she had to bring the dead back to life by painting them in her life's work. She had finally understood that for her, art was the only possible way to go on living. This was how for the next two years Charlotte Salomon eagerly painted her tragic life in "Leben? oder Theater?", "A union of arts necessary for healing a wrecked life./ The choice that must be made in order to reconstruct the past."(Foenkinos, 2018, p. 170) While still working on her paintings, the artist together with other Jews, who were standing in line to declare their nationality, were forced to board the buses which were waiting to take them to unknown destinations. By a stroke of luck, she was able to walk away and, in a frenzy, she finished her work.

On November 11, 1942 the whole of France was occupied by the fascists. The hunt for Jews around Nice was led by Alois Brunner, a despicable character, a monster in appearance and a notorious criminal in behavior. In Greece he had ordered the deportation of fifty thousand Jews. On 21st September 1943, a woman from Villefranche-sur-Mer denounced the twenty-six year old Charlotte, who had married Alexander Nagler, an Austrian refugee, and was six months pregnant. They were taken to Drancy first and then to Auschwitz, where they were greeted by barking dogs and the cynical slogan which should eternally ring in people's ears: 'Arbeit macht frei'. Charlotte Salomon, a Jew and the creator of a work of genius was gassed that very day. Her husband died less than three months later of exhaustion. Work made him and millions of other Jews free to die.

David Foenkinos' biographical novel or dramatic poem does not only bring Charlotte Salomon's surprising and innovative work into the limelight again. It tells the extremely sad story of her short life and, most importantly, it cautions the readers that forgetting the atrocities of the past, the mass murders and incredible cruelty of the Nazi regime would mean agreeing with, and consenting to the most shameful experience of humankind. Let's not forget that "the true measure of life is memory". (Walter Benjamin, quoted by Foenkinos, 2018, p. 164)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Foenkinos, David: "Charlotte", Canongate Books Ldt., 2018
https://onlalu.com
https://bookaholic.ro/interviu-cu-david-foenkinos-charlotte

BDD-A29494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:19 UTC)