SUSAN WIDER: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN IMAGES

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Susan Wider. Susan Wider is the author of "It's My Whole Life: Charlotte Salomon: An Artist in Hiding During World War II", which was winner of the 2022 National Jewish Book Award for young adult literature, and the first biography for teen and young adult readers about the art and life of German Jewish artist and modernist painter, Charlotte Salomon. Also author and musician, Susan Wider worked at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and the Santa Fe Institute, and she joins us from Santa Fe. Thank you, Susan, for joining us and I look forward to our conversation.

Susan Wider: Thank you very much. I'm so happy to be here.

JH: Lead us off, if you would, with a brief introduction to the life of Charlotte Salomon.

SW: Charlotte was born in Berlin, had a very difficult struggle in Berlin right before World War II, was sent by her parents to the South of France and struggled again. And the book describes her life story, the way she painted it and the way she wanted it to be left behind for others to understand.

JH: Your biography integrates the creativity of Charlotte Salomon with her life and her family and school, and ultimately, of course, until she was murdered in Auschwitz at 26 years of age. You also take pains to interweave creativity with history and mental health. Did today's heightened awareness about suicide and mental health shape your storytelling, especially in light of the presumed young adult audience?

SW: I think particularly in light of the young adult audience, and this was actually a conversation I had with the publisher at the time because so many of the issues, mental health, suicide, refugee status, discrimination, these are all issues that young adults and even younger teens are dealing with in some way. So yes, I was conscious of that and I was conscious of the publisher's desire and interest in being certain that we did talk about those issues from Charlotte's perspective in an accessible way so that the reader is feeling that same distress that she may be feeling.

JH: You also interweave Salomon's art into your biography of her in a very effecting give and take between visuals of her art and photographs throughout the story that you tell, especially, by the way, I think it's interesting because she used words and captions really so much in her art. What are the qualities in addition to the captions and the use of written language in her art that evoke a graphic novel to you?

SW: I think particularly at the beginning of her work that she called "Life? Or Theater?" which was this big work that she was producing while she was in hiding in the south of France. If we look really closely at the paintings toward the beginning, I would say maybe in the first third of that work, and we think she painted somewhat in chronological order, she painted 1,300 pictures, so at the very beginning, she uses every sheet of paper and she actually creates lines of scenes of paintings and it's because of that that her work is often described as a graphic novel precursor because you have these little tiny scenes, almost like a comic book style where she'll run across the page in maybe seven or eight rows, scene by scene by scene, describing Christmas, describing school, describing playing with friends.

SW: And then she did this incredibly clever thing where she took these transparencies, she would tape those to the left-hand side of the painting. She, and presumably the reader down the road, could fold these transparencies over the art. And then for each one of those little pictures that I just described running across the page, she could put her text exactly where she wanted it on top of that picture. And I think that's where a lot of this graphic novel precursor idea comes from. I certainly saw it when I started working on Charlotte and really exploring her art. And then as we see later in the book, the thought is that she ran out of these transparencies, and so later in the book, and even more and more as we move forward, she's adding the text directly to the paintings because she doesn't have a choice. She's running out of paper. Presumably, she's running out of paint. And she's trying to paint her whole life in a year and a half. [laughter] It's a tall order.

JH: In relation to her art, I can't help but feel that one piece feels very, very different from the rest. It's... I think it's a charcoal, although I'm not sure, and it's called Death and Maiden. It's hard to read that piece without thinking of her own death and the Holocaust in mind. But perhaps you would like to bring something else to it. Describe it for us and tell us what you make of that.

SW: You're absolutely right. Death and the Maiden stands out in her "Life? Or Theater?" artwork because it is quite different. And we believe that the reason that it's quite different is because it was most likely painted back in Berlin when she was at art school. And there's a scene within

"Life? Or Theater?" where she actually paints that painting into one of her paintings because she tries to use it as a gift for her lover in Berlin before she leaves for the south of France. And he wants a couple of her pictures and I think they argue a little bit over whether she'll let him have two pictures, including Death and the Maiden, or not. And one or the other of them in the conversation that she portrays says, "Oh, Death and the Maiden, that's us. And people are going to be talking about us later." And the reason she chose that subject and painted it in art school back in Berlin was because her lover had been, well, "buried alive" in the trenches of World War I.

SW: That is potentially an exaggeration, but that's how he and she both described his experience. So she always saw him and he saw himself as coming back from the dead and that was a powerful image to her. And we see it often in "Life? Or Theater?" where she talks about, "In order to live, you have to first have died or have experienced death." And these were powerful emotional themes for Charlotte. She reiterates them, she paints them, she describes them in some of her words. It may be the only picture that survives from her art school days in Berlin.

JH: Technically, it's also much more classically figurative and realistic.

SW: Correct. It almost has an art school feeling to it.

JH: Yeah.

SW: There's also some speculation that it was a painting that she won a prize for in a contest in Berlin during art school. I'm not convinced because there's a classmate of hers who says otherwise and describes the competition in a different way. But those are just some of the fun things that biographers get to uncover when we start exploring what people have previously written and what we would like to add to the conversation.

JH: You describe the efforts, not only of Charlotte's grandparents, but also of her father and stepmother to leave Germany. You explain many German Jews were in denial and thought the trouble with the Nazis would not last much longer. But after the terror of Kristallnacht and the Sachsenhausen camp and fearing what lay ahead, Albert and Paula, that is Charlotte's father and stepmother, decided the family had to leave Germany. Why was it important to you to make the distinction between those who stayed and those who fled?

SW: I'm really trying to help readers see the world, experience the world, everything that's going on in it at that time through her eyes and from her perspective. And so the idea that, of course, the parents are going to come along and say, "Yep, gotta leave, time to go, you're first," it helps, I think readers understand the situation she was in. She had absolutely no control. She had no say in where she might go, how she might get there, none of it. It was all set upon her. And I think that makes the poignancy of how miserable she then is when she gets to France and has to try and deal with these grandparents. It makes it that much more poignant really that she was really uprooted and miserably so.

JH: Let's talk a little bit about one of their friends in France named Emil Straus. He said of Charlotte, wherever she happened to be, she pulled out her sketchbook. She had to unburden herself and her language was pencil or brush. And indeed, as you've said, Charlotte was remarkably productive, which seems to validate Emil Straus' characterization of her. But I wonder, from a zooming out perspective, do you think that artists experience a true compulsion as described by Straus to create in their metier? Or do you think maybe that this notion comes from non-artists who romanticize the creative spirit and who don't see the long hours of practice and tedium that refine the skill and develop the artistic idiom as much as maybe any [0:11:14.2] ____?

SW: While you were asking me that question, I was liberating a piece of paper next to me so that I could read to you, in Charlotte's words, something that I may not have used in the book, but I kept a running list as I was writing of all these wonderful things that Charlotte, I'm gonna say said, of course, wrote because we don't get to hear them in her own voice. But she at one point says, "I knew I had a task that no force in the world could keep me from." And she's referring to her painting. She's referring to getting down on the page her whole life while she still can. And at one point she also says, "I set myself to becoming a greater person and artist." She didn't have the opportunities in Berlin to ever have her own art show. She didn't have those opportunities as a young person at all, apart from art school, maybe group shows for the classroom. But I think that Charlotte Salomon, World War II or not, was a driven artist. So I think in her head and in her heart, it was all about painting. And man, if you got in her way, it was not a good idea. [laughter] Who knows what kind of artist she might have become had she had the opportunity, but it was in her.

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JH: As a somewhat secondary theme, you raised the issue of identity. I'm calling it secondary, maybe you'll disagree. I'm thinking of two examples in particular. First, the really attenuated quality of their Jewish identity, their identity being that of Charlotte herself and her family. And second, Charlotte's ability to pass as gentile. Her friend in France goes so far as to ask Charlotte why she should even acknowledge her Jewishness and effectively turn herself in. I wonder from your perspective as an author, how this theme might have affected your relationship with Charlotte as a person.

SW: It's interesting because even if you go back to these little graphic novel scenes at the beginning where I mentioned Christmas, they were an assimilated family celebrating Christmas, doing most of the same things that their non-Jewish neighbors were doing. I think I remember finding on the grandparents' death certificates, or maybe it was even some other vital record... And of course, this is all in German in this horrible old script, but they asked for a religious

affiliation and I believe the grandparents say "None". So it's interesting, and this would have been well before any war time issues at all, and yet it appears that when Charlotte's father remarried, and he married Paula Salomon Lindberg, her father had been a rabbi. And Charlotte at first, she loved her stepmother. She just adored her, idolized her almost.

SW: So I think she may have felt closer to some of her Jewish roots then. We won't ever really know. We don't know that much about the family's religious practices. But it's interesting for me personally because you asked how it affected me and my approach. The whole time that I was writing this book, and I continue to do it, and I hope to continue to do it in upcoming projects, I was exploring my own Jewish roots on my father's side which I knew very, very little about.

SW: Because Dad's family, like so many families, never talked about these things. It just wasn't part of the conversation. We don't know, or we don't talk, or we don't say, or all the other kind of cliches, "Oh, everyone was killed in the war," these things that we hear over and over again. So I was sort of on this parallel track trying to understand Charlotte and where she's coming from and realizing that my father's in Europe fighting for the US Army, trying to help people like Charlotte, at the same time that Charlotte and a number of my dad's relatives are experiencing what they're going through. So I know it helped me write the book because there was a personal emotional connection for me with this whole period that I was discovering as I was learning about Charlotte. I was discovering a lot about my own family.

JH: I don't wanna drop any spoilers, but there is sort of a mystery that unfolds, but I do wanna dive a little bit into some of the problems of memory. And your story and some of your historiography at the end of the book in particular, raises really deep and abiding problems of memory. On the one hand, for example, you describe a brief encounter with Otto Frank and his decision to publish Anne's Diary, which we know now was very heavily edited and curated. And on the other hand, you discuss how heavily post-war handlers edited Charlotte's, what I'll call text and visual autobiography, "Life? Or Theater". I wonder if you think that there is a special need and emotional demand to sanitize the lives of the victims of the Holocaust, or alternatively, perhaps, do you think that any biography is, by the very nature of evidence and the limitations of communication, a curated piece of arts?

SW: Well, there's all in that point where we have to stop writing because the public sure says, "Susan, you just need to stop with all these new things you're finding." Curated is a great word for it. Of course, each biographer brings their own history to the project, but it's also each biographer's responsibility to remain as true as possible to the facts that are there and the facts that aren't there. So it's sort of a juggling act of being very careful to present what we know, to work really, really hard to try and find some new things that we might not know or to correct. As an example, the last really complete, at the time, biography for Charlotte goes back to the mid-1990s. And so you start from there. And don't get me wrong, there've been a number of wonderful monographs and other books about her since, but nothing that was as deep a biography as the wonderful biography by Mary Felstiner back in the mid-1990s. And so you go back and you look at that and you think, "Wait, we must have better information by now. We must know more by now. I must be able to look at some of the same documents that Mary was looking at and see what else I can find."

SW: So I think curated, but also very much directed by this, at least in my case, drive to really try to get to the core of what facts we can work from, what we really do know. And in Charlotte's case, we're lucky because we get to see it in her pictures. So she painted a lot of it for us. And we have quite a few of her words. I wish we had more. I wish we had letters and diaries and all of those wonderful things that biographers love, but we don't really. So yes, Otto Frank was working very hard to try and figure out what to do with Anne's work. And there's actually a whole another new revision of Anne Frank's diary in the works because apparently, Anne revised some of it of herself and we haven't seen some of that yet. But the Salomons certainly were trying to follow Otto Frank's model. The first book about Charlotte was called "Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures".

SW: Well, that was definitely influenced by what Otto had done for Anne. And in the case of parents writing about their children, you don't talk about certain things perhaps, or you suppress certain things perhaps, or you airbrush the words off the page perhaps [laughter] to try and control the narrative. Well, it's my job to talk about that and to try and shed some light on why that happened and what was done. Because I'm all about Charlotte's story being more widely known and heard and read and viewed. And she would be incredibly upset to know that the paintings are not in the order she intended them to be. She tried, [laughter] but it all got scrambled. So I think my job is to really try and present her as truthfully as I can and to pull myself back if Susan gets in the way.

JH: The book has been marketed, and I assume you wrote it as young adult nonfiction, but the themes that run through it really criss-cross many, many aspects of life from many perspectives. So I wonder if you have had audience responses from different corners beyond the realm of what we might normally think of as young adult literature.

SW: Even though this book was written for a younger audience, it's being read very broadly by adults and by artists as well. It's been interesting to watch that. I'm hearing from so many adults that are just enchanted with her story and found her story to be enlightening.

JH: You refer to the fact that you have this incredible body of evidence and these 1,300-plus pieces of art. So I'd like to ask you to close out the interview by describing for us a single piece of Charlotte's art that perhaps has most stuck with you and why.

SW: From "Life? Or theater?", I absolutely love her painting of her friend Barbara from art school back in Berlin. And I think the reason I love it so much is I see influences of Modigliani on the page. And Modigliani is one of my husband's favorite painters, so I'm able to emotionally connect Charlotte to her friend, to Modigliani, back to my own husband. I like that there's sort of a circle that goes on there. I will say that there are also very few, but they're beautiful paintings of Charlotte's and they have been donated to the art collection at Yad Vashem. And they are gorgeous paintings of the south of France that look nothing like what we see in "Life? Or Theater?" And they're accessible and available to view online. Some of those paintings, to my mind, might indicate where else she might have gone with her painting in terms of landscapes and gorgeous colors and nuanced colors had she had the opportunity.

JH: Susan Weider, thank you so much for this interview and for sharing the life of this remarkable artist. It was really a pleasure.

SW: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

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