



“NEVER AGAIN: A HOLOCAUST,
A SHOAH, ON THE JEWS,
OR ON ANY PEOPLE”

Chaja Polak's latest book is a powerful plea for the need for empathy on both sides of the ongoing Israel-Palestinian conflict. **Elte Rauch** speaks to the Dutch author and Holocaust survivor about writing the work in the wake of the 7 October attacks

In the days after the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October, Chaja Polak, one of the preeminent voices in Dutch literature, wrote down her thoughts about that tragic moment when: “the world started to come apart at the seams”. This long essay became *A Letter in the Night: Reflections on reconciliation*, which draws on her own experience of loss and violence. Polak was born in 1941, in The Hague, and her early days were overshadowed by the Holocaust. Her mother survived Auschwitz, her father died in Dachau concentration camp. She was hidden at five different addresses.

Later, as a young woman and whilst raising two sons, she studied art at evening classes at Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academy. She exhibited work and taught drawing and painting. It wasn't until her late 40s that she made her literary debut with *Zomaar een vrijdagmiddag* (Some Friday Afternoon). This was followed by numerous short story collections, one volume of poetry and novels – several of which have been nominated for the Libris Literature Prize. Many of her works were translated into English, German, Danish, Italian and Hungarian.

Now translated into English for the first time, *A Letter in the Night* argues that empathy in the face of others suffering can, and must, replace the desire for revenge.

ELTE RAUCH: What do you remember about World War II?

CHAJA POLAK: There is little I remember from the dark days of Nazi-occupied Holland, but it undoubtedly shaped me as an artist and writer, as well as a person. Because of an administrative error, I was not taken on the day my parents were arrested. This gave the family hiding me, who were close friends of my parents, the opportunity to hide me in a safe place. It is impossible for people who have experienced the Shoah not to be greatly affected by it. When I started as a visual artist I depicted a recurring image: a small figure, a child, lying recumbent, with strangers standing around, looking at her.

That figure was me. And the strangers and the estrangement is what I truly experienced. I felt terribly alone. I did not understand why my parents had been taken away from me and why they had left me to strangers.

Despite my experience of the Holocaust, I believe we must never give up hope, never turn cynical or indifferent. If I had lost hope for a better world it would have paralysed me and I would not have been able to write.

All I really want to achieve with my art and writing is an alternative to violence. I hope that my work, including *A Letter in the Night*, contributes to and stimulates a

dialogue about – exactly what the English subtitle of the book says – ‘reflections on reconciliation’.

But I am worried that the moral compass has been broken, and empathy and understanding are out of reach, or dormant to the point that we find it difficult to reawaken these important elements of humanity. Ultimately what brings people together is what we have in common.

ER: What were your immediate thoughts when you heard about the attacks of 7 October?

CP: Perhaps to your surprise, I wasn't all that taken aback. I am perfectly aware of the terrorist objectives Hamas cherishes. There has always been tension [in Gaza and the West Bank] because Palestinians were treated as second class citizens. This tension built up over many years until Hamas struck. When they struck, I was worried what the repercussions would be from this extremist Israeli government. I feared the worst. I am pained, even ashamed to say, I wasn't wrong.

ER: You have called for empathy on both sides. How much is that influenced by your Jewish heritage?

CP: I cannot understand the urge to repress a people, in whatever form. The influence the Holocaust has had on my life and art and the mantra ‘never again’ is something I live by every day. Never again: a Holocaust, a Shoah, on the Jews, or on any people.

ER: How can Israelis and Palestinians connect positively with each other after so much brutality?

CP: I hope and ‘pray’ every day for reconciliation. But we live in a power obsessed world. The fact that Trump, Netanyahu, Putin and their governments are ruling the planet, is a daunting prospect for anyone who invests in a peace built on empathy and understanding. I hope the ongoing pressure on Netanyahu's government will force him to face facts and ‘embrace’ – even with gritted teeth – a two-state solution. The world is fed up and angry with Israel. The total number of Palestinians living inside and outside Israel is about 7 million and there are 7 million Jews in Israel. Palestinians and Israelis are neighbours, whether they

want it or not, and have to live alongside each other, in peace. There is nowhere else to go. We need to face the predicament, without violence and judgement. In my book, I talk about the Palestinian/Israeli project, *Across the Wall*, which was set up by two journalists – one Israeli and one Palestinian. In 2019, they launched an initiative whereby Palestinians from Gaza were invited to write letters about their lives. These digital letters were put on an Israeli website. No sooner had the project been announced than 150 Israelis offered to translate the letters from Arabic to Hebrew. These letters transformed Gazans, in the eyes of Israelis, from hostile neighbours into people they could recognise.

My family in Israel is devastated, depressed and afraid like many people there. My Jewishness is so precious to me. But I feel deceived.

ER: You have received global recognition for *A Letter in the Night*. However, it has also received criticism because you don't use the word ‘genocide’ to describe Israel's war intentions. Why do you avoid that word?

CP: The original book was written in the immediate aftermath of 7 October. The English edition has some slight revisions, but I still cannot use the word ‘genocide’. That does not mean I am denying it – it is beginning to look like it is happening, and I say this while my heart aches. But I can't use that word.

Because that word conjures the image of my aunt Jet undressing her two young daughters, Mirjam and Hetty, and escorting them, naked, into the gas chamber. A genocide is the deliberate elimination of a whole people. I still believe Israel wants the land because it was once ‘promised’ to them. But when? How many thousands of years ago? Even if that was a valid reason, many non-Jewish people were already living there – settled families and communities. I leave it up to the International Court to decide whether Israel's actions are a genocide or not.

But the situation in Gaza and on the West Bank is a catastrophe. A word does not make it worse. ■

“My Jewishness is so precious to me. But I feel deceived”



A Letter in the Night: Reflections on Reconciliation by Chaja Polak, trans. by Astrid Alben, The New Menard Press, 2025. **Elte Rauch** is a writer and the founder of The New Menard Press.