



Olga Kirsch
photographic portrait by Shai Zakai
from her book - 'Portrait of a woman', 1994 Israel

Olga Kirsch het alles...

Voorwoord

Op 'n dag google ek Olga Kirsch en daar verskyn die Poolse webwerf met die teks wat begin: „Olga Kirsch het alles: briljante intelligensie, talent, skoonheid, passie, hardnekkigheid en posisie...” Alles is van toepassing op die Afrikaanse digteres waaroor ek die volgende tematiese nommer van *Werkwinkel* saamgestel het. Maar ek ontdek gou dit gaan oor 'n gelyknamige persoon uit die boek van 'n Poolse skrywer, nie oor die Suid-Afrikaanse digteres nie. Om iets in Pools oor haar te vind, grens aan onmoontlikheid, ook al het haar voorsate uit die gebied gekom wat vanaf die sestiende eeu die groot Pools-Litouwse rijk was, bekend as Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów dws. res publika van twee nasies, waar daar vanselfsprekend meer nasies was as net die twee regerende nasies. Daarvan getuig diverse ekwivalente name van die stadje waar Olga Kirsch se voorouers stam: Plungė in Litaus, Plungiany in Pools, Plongė in Samogities, Plungyan in Jiddisj en ten slotte Плу́нтяны in Russies, want die hele gebied wat die naam gedra het van Neder-Litoue of Samogitië is aan die einde van die agtiende eeu deur tsaristiese Rusland geannekseer. Ongeveer honderd jaar later, in 1910, het die vader van Olga Kirsch die stadje verlaat en na Suid-Afrika geëmigreer. In Plungiany was toe meer as die helfte van die inwoners Jode, trouens die meeste Joodse immigrante na Suid-Afrika het uit die gebied gekom wat nou Litoue is.

Olga Kirsch is in Afrika gebore en getoë, maar baie vroeg in haar leeftyd van 24 jaar trek sy ook. Hierdie keer lei die pad na die jonge staat Israel. Dit wil voorkom dat reeds in haar Oos-Europese genotipe 'n hibriditeit ingeprent was wat verder reik en meer omvat as die wandelende Jood se stereotipiese patroon. Olga Kirsch self het in drie tale geleef: Afrikaans, Hebreeus en Engels. Maar haar digterskap wortel veral in Afrikaans, en slegs gedeeltelik in Engels – twee tale wat sy as digteres gebruik het. Kirsch se bestaan was aanvanklik aan Suid-

Afrika verbonde, daarna aan Israel, maar haar tuiste was vir 'n groot deel ook die eksterritoriale republiek der lettere.

Met hierdie tematiese nommer probeer *Werkwinkel* om Olga Kirsch weer in die kollig te plaas. As outeur en as vrou, as dogter en as moeder, as Jood en as mens, die skrywende, die digtende mens. Nooit was sy 'n onerkende of vergete outeur nie, dis waar. Daarvan getuig aan die een kant die name van die medewerkers aan hierdie nommer: hulle het reeds vroeër oor haar geskryf en gepubliseer of haar ontmoet en onderhoude gevoer. Aan die ander kant bewys die publikasies waarna in hul artikels verwys word dat hierdie digteres nooit werklik in die vergetelheid geraak is nie.

Daar is in die loop van tientalle jare verskillende artikels oor Olga Kirsch gepubliseer, daar is dissertasies wat verdedig is, en selfs gedigte wat as eerbetoon en uit haar inspirasie geskryf is. Maar tegelyk was sy as outeur nooit in die sentrum, in die vaste kern van die Afrikaanse literatuur nie. Die grafiek op die omslag van hierdie nommer wat resultaat is van 'n navorsing oor die plek wat haar toekom in die literêre sisteem, illustreer dit baie duidelik. Olga Kirsch se posisie as vroulike outeur, as digteres lê êrens tussen die sentrum en die kantlyn. Die kwessie van verbondenheid en ontheemdheid wat daarmee saamhang, gaan soos 'n rooi draad vanaf die omslag en deur die bydraes wat hier versamel is. Dis die onderliggende toon in die lewe en in die werk van haar. En tog pas Kirsch nie in binêre opposisies nie, selfs nie heeltemal in die teenstelling vertrouwd / verbonde en oneie / vreemd wees aan 'n bepaalde ligging nie. Haar herkoms, die omgewing waarin sy groot geword het, haar verhuising na 'n ander land en haar digwerk wat nog steeds boei – niks kan voldoende toegelig word deur polêre alternatiewe nie. Die foto wat hierdie nommer op 'n baie spesiale wyse inlui, stel glad nie 'n persoon wat eers aan die vorming van haar identiteit moet begin nie of wat aan haar posisie twyfel nie. Sy het toe op 'n ouer leeftyd vir die professionele fotograaf geposeer nadat sy die uitnodiging aanvaar het om aan die boek *Portrait of a woman* (1994), 'n versameling van die reeks vroulike portrette, saam te werk. Danksy hierdie projek kyk ons vandag nog na 'n selfbewuste vrou, 'n wakker mens. Die houding wat sy hier aanneem en die gestileerdheid van die versamelde artefakte is veelseggend, oop vir interpretasies. Soos haar gedigte.

Werkwinkel hoop om met hierdie versameling artikels by te dra tot die verdere diskoers oor Olga Kirsch en die Ander in die Afrikaanse en Suid-Afrikaanse lettere.

Jerzy Koch
Hoofredakteur

Olga Kirsch has it all...

Preface

When I googled Olga Kirsch, a Polish website appeared with a text that started with the words: "Olga Kirsch has it all: brilliant intelligence, talent, beauty, passion, obstinacy and position..." Everything applicable to the Afrikaans poet about whom I compiled the following thematic issue of *Werkwinkel*. But I quickly discovered that the text dealt with a homonymous persona out of a book by a Polish writer, and did not refer to the South African poet. To find something in Polish about the poet is almost impossible, even if her ancestors came from the area which, from the sixteenth century on, was the great Polish-Lithuanian empire, known as Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, i.e. the res publica of two nations, where there were obviously more nations included than just the two ruling ones. This becomes clear from the diverse equivalent names of the town where Olga Kirsch's ancestors came from: Plungė in Lithuanian, Płungiany in Polish, Plongė in Samogitian, Plungyan in Yiddish and lastly Плу́нгяны in Russian, because the whole area denoted as the Lower Lithuania or Samogitia was annexed by Tsarist Russia at the end of the eighteenth century. Approximately hundred years later, in 1910, Olga Kirsch's father left this town and immigrated to South Africa. More than half of the residents in Płungiany were Jews, in fact the majority Jewish immigrants in South Africa came from the area of the present day Lithuania.

Olga Kirsch was born and bred in Africa, but early in her lifetime, at the age of 24, she also moved. This time her path led to Israel. It seems as if there already was a hybridity imprinted in her East-European genotype, which stretched further and comprised more than the wandering Jew's stereotypical pattern. Olga Kirsch lived in three languages: Afrikaans, Hebrew and English, but her poetry was mainly rooted in Afrikaans and only partially English – two languages which she as a poet used. Kirsch's existence was initially connected with South Africa, later with Israel, but her home was for a major part also the exterritorial republic of literature.

With this thematic issue *Werkwinkel* aspires to place Olga Kirsch again in the spotlight: as an author and a woman, and as a daughter and a mother, as a Jew and a human, as a writer and a poet. Never has she been an unrecognized or forgotten author, there is no doubt about it. This is evident if one looks at the names of contributors to this issue: they have already written and published texts about her, or met and interviewed her. Furthermore, publications which their articles refer to also testify that this poet has never fallen into oblivion.

In the course of several years various articles about Olga Kirsch have been published, dissertations have been defended, and even poems in honour of her or inspired by her have been written. But at the same time, she as an author has never been in the centre, nor in the core of the Afrikaans literature. The graph on the cover of this issue, which presents the research regarding the place that she deserves in the literary system, illustrates this very clearly. Olga Kirsch's position as a female author, and as a poet lies somewhere between the centre and the margin. A related question of connectedness and homelessness runs like a red thread from the cover through all the contributions collected here. It is the underlying tone of her life and work. And yet, Kirsch does not fit into the binary oppositions scheme, not even in the paradox: known / connected and strange / disconnected from a certain location. Her descent, the environment in which she grew up, her moving to other country and her poetry that still captivates – nothing can adequately be explained by any polar alternatives. The picture which introduces this issue in a very special way, does not present a woman who has yet to form her identity, neither does she doubt about her position. She posed in a later stage of her life for a professional photographer, after she had accepted the invitation to participate in the book *Portrait of a Woman* (1994), a collection of series of female portraits. Thanks to this project we can still today look at a self-conscious woman, an aware person. The attitude that she adopts here and the stylised artefacts are significant, open to interpretation. Like her poetry.

With this collection of articles *Werkwinkel* aspires to contribute to the ongoing discourse of Olga Kirsch and the Other in the Afrikaans and South African literature.

Jerzy Koch
Editor