

## Charles Reznikoff

### Poet Description:

Born in the Brooklyn Jewish community of the 1890s, Charles Reznikoff earned a law degree but did not practice for long. He did work at a legal publishing firm in the 1930s, which proved a major inspiration in his writing. He began his career as a poet, however, as an imagist. Many of these early poems appeared in hand-set books that Reznikoff published himself. Meanwhile, his focus began to shift. At the publishing firm he was summarizing court records of legal cases for publication in reference books. They provided a unique, often violent, history of American social life. While these court cases had all the persuasive if sometimes surreal idiosyncrasy of individual lived experience, their cumulative effect created a broad panorama of American life. He also found the spare prose of the court narratives powerful. Reznikoff refined and compressed some of the stories from court records for a 1934 prose collection, *Testimony*, and he began reworking the material into poems. The eventual result was a two-volume poem sequence, *Testimony: The United States 1885-1890: Recitative* (1965) and *Testimony: The United States (1891-1900): Recitative* (1968). Two further volumes covering the years up to 1915 were found among Reznikoff's papers after his death, and a new two-volume edition comprising all four sections was issued in 1978 and 1979. Portraits of African Americans and accounts of race relations are among his recurrent themes. His 1975 book, *Holocaust*, used similar compositional techniques to create harrowing poems out of court testimony during the trials of Nazi war criminals. His sources, as he notes, are Trials of the Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunal from 1945-46 and the records of the 1961 Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In a way, *Testimony* and *Holocaust* are unified by Reznikoff's sense that the Jewish poet should be a moral witness. Reznikoff supported himself doing freelance research, writing, and translation.

### Race/Ethnicity:

Eastern European <sup>[1]</sup>

### Picture:

**Gender:**

Male [2]

**Sexuality:**

Straight [3]

**First Name:**

Charles

**Last Name:**

Reznikoff

**Birth & Death Dates:**

Friday, August 31, 1894 to Thursday, January 22, 1976

**School of Poetry:**

Objectivist [4]

**Birth Place:**

Brooklyn , New York

United States

See map: Google Maps [5]

New York US

**Group visibility:**

Private - accessible only to group members

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[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/race-ethnicity/eastern-european>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/gender/male>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/sexuality/straight>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/school-poetry/objectivist>

[5] <http://maps.google.com?q=46.880607+-87.363281+%28%2C+Brooklyn%2C+NY%2C+%2C+us%29>