



Congregation Beth Israel

חבורת בית ישראל

**Twelve poems
for Yom HaShoah /
Holocaust Remembrance Day**

**plus El Maleh Rachamim /
God, Full of Mercy
(a memorial prayer for victims of the Shoah)**

A SMALL STATION OF TREBLINKA

Here is the small station of Treblinka
Here is the small station of Treblinka
On the line between Tluszcz and Warszawa
From the railway station Warsaw - East
You get out of the station and travel straight

The journey lasts
five hours and 45 minutes more
And sometimes the same journey lasts
A whole life until your death

And the station is very small
Three firtrees grow there
And a regular signboard saying
Here is the small station of Treblinka...
Here is the small station of Treblinka...

And no cashier even
Gone is the cargo man
And for a million zloty
You will not get a return ticket

And nobody waits for you in the station
And nobody waves a handkerchief towards you
Only silence hung there in the air
To welcome you in the blind wilderness

And silent is the pillar of the station
And silent are the three firtrees
And silent is the black board
Because here is the small station of Treblinka...

Here is the small station of Treblinka...
And only a commercial board stands still:
"Cook only by gas"
Here is the small station of Treblinka...
Here is the small station of Treblinka...

—*Władysław Szlengel*

*Translated from Polish to Hebrew by Halina Birenbaum
and from Hebrew to English by Ada Holtzman*

THE WALL

Little Chaim builds the Wailing Wall
from the wooden blocks,
stronger and higher than
the wall of the ghetto on Bonifraterska Street.

No one can hear the police dogs barking
or the lament of the ghetto street,
behind the wall built by Chaim
even the best shots can not destroy it,
because behind this wall God hears
little Chaim weeping for
the destroyed temple of his childhood,
barbarians did not spare
a rag clown with the red nose,
a plushy teddy bear,
or a wooden swing in the backyard
now crowded with other kids.

Children's room with the colorful curtains
remained on the Bonifraterska Street,
little Chaim has only few wooden blocks
to build the Wailing Wall.

— *Yvonna Opoczynska-Goldberg*

flight

on the train
you had left me
a message scrawled
across brown paper
wrapping hung like
an empty garment
bag hooked in the
baggage net
overhead it all
seemed upside down
no safety from
that direction
i could not reach
anyway
having inch by inch
shrunk into
myself pacing
the moving compartment
swaying
upside down
no safety in
any direction

— *Gertrude Halstead*

A Funeral

The coffin – a crematorium furnace,
Lid – transparent, made of air,
Human body turned into smoke,
Blown through the smokestack of history.

How shall I honor your passing,
Walk in your funeral procession?
You, homeless handful of ashes
Between the earth and heaven.

How to cast a green garland
On the grave dug high in the air –
An ark of the world's four corners
Under the invader's fire.

Your coffin, which is not,
Will not slide from roaring cannons,
And only the column of air
Illumines your death with sunrays.

And here is such a great silence
On earth, like a trampled banner,
In the mourning smoke of corpses,
In the crucified outcry.

— *M.J., a Warsaw ghetto poet*

*Translated from the Polish
by Yala Korwin.*

...Passing Chelmno on the Main Road Driving Past It...

In May,
along the road to Warsaw,

little ghost
of Lidice.

A row of peasants
cutting up the earth

on bended
knees.

A man spiffs up
a roadside shrine,

leaving a bunch of
tacky flowers.

Little figures
bathing in the Warta.

Little thought
to what was there.

— *Jerome Rothenberg*

Shema

You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house,
when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

—*Primo Levi*

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freightcar

Here in this carload
I am Eve
With my son Abel
If you see my older boy
Cain son of Adam
Tell him that I...

—*Dan Pagis*

CLOTHING: AUSCHWITZ CHANGING ROOM

Strength and honor are her clothing.
—Proverbs 31

she slipped off the cradle of her shoe
and her foot evaporated rose
like candle smoke into her leg

and the memory

the felt memory of this foot flowed
like river clay into the mold of air
her foot left
behind she

I balance

on this new pedestal
that looks as if it were
my foot

and this shoe
its patient love
how it absorbs
my foot

taking me as
ever with
itself

I unroll this stocking

and my bared leg fades like mist

into the glove of my other leg
to murmur gratitudes

for a lifetime of symmetries

with this other stocking
my legs vanish

both into my belly
my skirt my blouse
pool warm in a circle
on the floor

no body is where
a body

seems to be
thighs
triangle of hair

pale breasts
are only mirrors

only magic

no arms need hide what
needs no hiding

from the black boots
rising
into creased

uniforms
into stark

masks
staring out
from

their emptiness

—Susanna Rich

Smoke

From the crematory flue
A Jew aspires to the Holy One.
And when the smoke of him is gone,
His wife and children filter through.

Above us, in the height of sky,
Saintly billows weep and wait.
God, wherever you may be,
There all of us are also not.

—*Jacob Glatstein, trans. from Yiddish by Chana Faerstein*

After Auschwitz

After Auschwitz, no theology:
From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises—
a sign the cardinals have chosen themselves a pope.
From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises—
a sign the conclave of Gods has not yet chosen
the chosen people.

After Auschwitz, no theology:
the numbers on the forearms
of the inmates of extermination
are the telephone numbers of God,
numbers that do not answer
and now are disconnected, one by one.

After Auschwitz, a new theology:
the Jews who died in the Shoah
have now come to be like their God,
who has no likeness of a body and has no body.
They have no likeness of a body and they have no body.

—*Yehuda Amichai, trans. from Hebrew by Chana Bloch & Chana Kronfeld*

How My Family Survived the Camps (excerpt)

Was nicht nicht umbringt, macht mich starker:
What does not kill me makes me stronger.
Nietzsche said this about other things
Not this.

How did my family survive the camps?
Were they smarter, stronger than the rest?
Were they lucky?
Did luck exist in Dora-Nordhausen,
Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen?

How did they survive *Erfurt*, the selection?
My mother spoke good German
I see her now at the staging camp
Her keen wit dancing around the SS
Like her young Slavic feet
She was young and good-looking
Thin but good-looking
And the SS liked the Ukrainian Frauen.
On the cattle car to Dora
To the chimneys of that camp
My mother rode with her family intact
Thinner but intact
And ready for work.

The boxcar stopped
At the Nordhausen factory
The way out through the crematorium chimney in Dora
Here, my grandmother learned languages
Wstavach, Stoi, Ren, schwein, Halt.
In Dora, where not to understand an order meant death
My grandmother learned six languages; after six months
My family could work, hide and ask for bread
In all the languages of Europe.
They learned English the same way.
How did my family survive?
Survive is not the right word.
I'm alive, my father would say, alive
Alive because I did not die; others died.

Keep breathing, he encouraged me in difficult times
Keep breathing.

—Larissa Shmailo

1980

And when I go up as a pilgrim in winter, to recover
the place I was born, and the twin to self I am in my mind,
then I'll go in black snow as a pilgrim to find
the grave of my savior, Yanova.
She'll hear what I whisper, under my breath:
Thank you. You saved my tears from the flame.
Thank you. Children and grandchildren you rescued from death.
I planted a sapling (it doesn't suffice) in your name.
Time in its gyre spins back down the flue
faster than nightmares of nooses can ride,
quicker than nails. And you, my savior, in your cellar you'll hide
me, ascending in dreams as a pilgrim to you.
You'll come from the yard in your slippers, crunching the snow
so I'll know. Again I'm there in the cellar, degraded and low,
you're bringing me milk and bread sliced thick at the edge.
You're making the sign of the cross, I'm making my pencil its pledge.

—*Avrom Sutzkever*

Translated from Yiddish by Cynthia Ozick

אל מלא רחמים
דיין אלמנות ואבי יתומים
אל נא תחשה ותתאפק לדם שנשפך כמים
המצא מנוחה נכונה
על כנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים וטהורים, כזהר הרקיע
מאירים ומזהירים
לנשמותיהם של רבבות אלפים
אנשים ונשים, ילדים וילדות
שנהרגו ונשחטו ונשרפו ונחנקו ונקברו חיים
בארצות אשר נגעה בהן יד הצורר הגרמני וגרוריו
כלם קדושים וטהורים
בגן עדן תהא מנוחתם
לכן בעל הרחמים יסתירם בסתר כנפיו לעולמים, ויצרור בצרור החיים את
נשמותיהם
יי הוא נחלתם
ינוחו בשלום על משכבם
ונאמר אמן

El Maleh Rachamim / God, Full of Mercy

God full of mercy
defender of widows and father of orphans
be not be silent or restrained regarding the blood which was spilt like water
grant proper rest beneath the wings of Your Presence
in the great heights of the holy and pure
who like the brilliance of the heavens give light and shine
for the souls of multitudes of thousands, men, women, boys and girls
who were killed, and slaughtered, and burnt, and suffocated, and buried alive
in the lands touched by the hand of the German oppressor and its followers
all of them holy and pure
may the Garden of Eden be their resting place
therefore may the Master of mercy shelter them in the shelter of His wings for eternity
and bind their souls with the bond of life
God is their inheritance
and may they find peaceful repose in their resting place
and let us say: Amen