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## THE POETS OF THE GHETTO

THE STUDENT OF LITERATURE learns about many different kinds of poetry; the primer of classification will teach him to distinguish between the narrative type and the lyric or dramatic. The subdivisions of narrative poetry, he will be told, are the heroic epic, the literary epic, the mock epic, the metrical romance, the popular ballad, the literary ballad, and the metrical tale. There are, moreover, many subdivisions of the two other main classifications.

There is, however, a new type of poetry that has yet to acquire its own pigeon-hole in the literary classification of verse—the poetry of the ghetto that came into existence about two decades ago. The critic of the ghetto poets is forced to brush aside the standard approach because of the circumstances under which the ghetto poetry was born, and its moral significance. For, while the ghetto poets' range is fairly wide in terms of the types of composition, their work does have its own special distinction, and it is governed by its own, seldom purely literary, preoccupations. It is quite easy, of course, to apply the ordinary critical method of classification. Thus, we shall find that some ghetto poems are lyrics, songs, ballads, and so on. We shall discover an astounding variety of types and a similar variety in quality, since among the ghetto poets were both talented "professional" writers, amateurs, and even cultural illiterates.

But what immediately arrests the reader's attention is the incredible background against which the ghetto poet's world is unfolded. As the recent trial of Adolph Eichman has shown, the sheer impact of statistics staggers one's imagination and is apt to make one's sympathy with the victims perfunctory. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for the average person to identify himself with *thousands* (let alone with millions) of slaves in the ghettos and concentration camps. It is little wonder that this person might be moved more by the tragic story of Anne Frank (which contains no scenes of atrocities) than by a long account of Nazi crimes. Sim-

ilarly, much of the writing about the extermination of the Polish ghettos, revealing a story of barbarism and blood-lust unprecedented in man's history, has had a stunning effect upon the reader. The ghetto poetry which has survived, however, is profoundly moving because it is a collection of individual statements made by men who existed in an unbelievably gruesome world.

The ghetto poet, like the rest of his fellow sufferers, was reduced to the animal level of subsistence, and often below that, at less than two hundred calories a day. The scenes from the Warsaw Ghetto in the documentary film *Mein Kampf* (Minerwa, Columbia), recorded by German film newsreels, show men, women, and children shrivelled up to skin and bone. Daily they fell dead by the hundreds in the streets; their bodies were covered with terrible sores. The corpses lay in the crowded streets until cleaning squads located them, loaded them on the carts, and carried them to mass graves. Starvation, epidemics, tortures, murders—these were the normal conditions in the ghettos. Gestapo informers, blackmailers, and thieves infested them. All evil and vicious instincts came to surface in the dwellers of these distorted and nightmarish prisons, as each man fought to survive, and the community attempted to find the means to resist its extinction.

It is small wonder that under those inhuman circumstances corruption was wide-spread. Underworld characters collaborated with the Gestapo and led a merry and dissolute life. In February, 1942, the Warsaw Ghetto witnessed a veritable orgy of entertainment, which included a contest for the most beautiful legs, and which prompted many people on the "Aryan" side of the wall to conclude that life was very pleasant in the ghetto. Needless to say, the Germans made full use of this weird manifestation.

The system of inhuman discrimination and brutality could not be reconciled with the canons of judgment prevalent in civilized society. The mind could not function normally, and it stopped, utterly defenceless. Any creative effort can be successful in so far as it is conducted within the framework of certain orderly social concepts, even when it is directed against them. But when those concepts are suddenly erased or turned awry, a cultural vacuum ensues. When the most criminal elements in a society are given the power of life and death over the rest of the people and, moreover, are invested with the trappings of patriotism and even "morality", the ordinary citizen's idea of law and justice is rendered meaningless.

At the beginning of the German occupation the imprisoned Jewish community, still in a state of shock, was culturally paralyzed; but as months passed, the ghetto desperately fought for its life despite the pressure of refined German bestiality. It organized escapades in the smuggling of foodstuffs; it established

contacts with the Poles outside the ghetto; it resisted passively by ignoring all atrocities. Thus, when the Germans "legally" shot the first eight Jews for going outside the wall to search for food (six of them were women who tried to obtain food for their children), a much larger number stole outside the ghetto on the following day, undaunted by the executions.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the ghetto prisoners began to engage in many cultural enterprises which, like their indifference to death and cruelty, were an expression of their will to survive. The Warsaw Ghetto had an underground organization, IKOR (The Jewish Cultural Organization), which provided the community with a series of literary and scientific lectures, and which set up central archives to collect documents and data on the martyrdom of Polish Jews. Most ghettos had their own newspapers in the Polish and Yiddish languages, and some organized theatrical companies.

Destitute musicians and artists continued their work until they were snatched off the streets or dragged from their hide-outs to the waiting deportation trucks. Later, district literary groups were formed; and their compositions were read at clandestine meetings or published in hand-written editions. The dividing line between the sublime and the absurd was often indistinct. The Lodz Ghetto had a complex network of educational institutions at public, high-school, and university levels; it also boasted a theatre called "Avantgarde". The well-attended public lectures and the teaching and entertainment went on during the worst days of mass arrests and deportations to extermination camps. Tiny lots, mostly situated around garbage dumps, were cultivated by agricultural researchers conducting experiments for the improvement of this "soil".

The publication of poems in the ghetto underground was not a matter of caprice, or merely an expression of aesthetic ends. A volume of poetry served to bring a measure of normality to the condemned community. It provided people with an opportunity to regain moral sanity, to face death with tranquillity, with a determination that conveyed anguish and contempt for the executioners. The ghetto poets offered grimly lucid pictures of shattered lives and hopes. Their stanzas were the magic potion which occasionally restored a moment of clarity and peace to the tortured mind, veering on the verge of insanity. They revealed personal hopes and the bitterness of true understanding. Poetry became a tool—nay, even a weapon—in the struggle for survival.

Resistance to enslavement and death is perhaps the main motivation of the ghetto poet, even when he writes in despair—an oft-recurring mood of his work.

Sometimes the poet assumes almost a contemptuous attitude to life and mankind; sometimes, however, he cherishes hope for a successful revolt. He believes that

in Cracow, Paris, everywhere  
the streets will explode with freedom.\*

These lines by Michal Borwicz appeared in a slender anthology of eleven poems, called *From the Depths*, published by the underground Jewish National Committee in Warsaw in 1944, without the authors' real names. Borwicz survived the war, and in 1947 edited a much larger anthology of ghetto poetry, *The Song Shall Not Be Lost* (published by the Central Jewish Historical Committee in Poland). Both anthologies show genuine poetic talent side by side with amateur attempts at versification. But none of the poems lacks profundity of emotion, which makes up for the lack of technique.

If the poems do not make easy reading, it is not because of unusual metaphors or personal idiosyncracies of writers escaping into their private universe, although there would have been a good reason for that. They are difficult to read because they are so moving. In his preface to the New York edition of *From the Depths* (published in New York in 1954 by the Association of Friends of Our Tribune), Joseph Wittlin, a Polish poet and novelist, wrote, "Shame burns the eyes that skip along the black, lugubrious lines of these beautiful stanzas. The eyes are ashamed to read these melodious relics of extermination, to read without going blind."

*The Song Shall Not Be Lost* revealed the names of the ghetto authors for the first time, and we find Gentiles and Jews writing on similar themes. Surprisingly enough, the Jewish poets often manifested less indignation—if one can use that term at all in regard to Nazi crimes—than their Gentile fellow-writers. They believed in freedom, although they must have realized that freedom would come when they were no longer alive.

It is only natural that the poets should paint the pictures of Nazi bestiality. Thus you have the ghetto man in the street, crouching under the wall; you can see him bent under a heavy load in the market, driven by a German soldier. You can hear his moans, his futile prayers, and the sound of whips and of rifle butts crushing human skulls. And then suddenly there is another page in the anthology with a tragically ironic, slightly humorous poem on the incongruity of fate, called "Two Gentlemen in the Snow", by a noted young Jewish poet Wladyslaw Szlengel. The two gentlemen are the poet and his German guard. Szlengel marvels at the

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\*All poems quoted in this article have been translated by the author.

snow that makes no distinction on whom it is falling. He compares his own captivity to that of his guard, who must also stand in the cold weather with his prisoner; but immediately he questions his own statement:

And how can I compare at all?  
Your uniform is fine, it's true,  
But what's the use if the snow can't tell  
A handsome soldier from a Jew?

There seems to be little despair in his final suggestion:

Look now, what are we doing here,  
Why pointlessly so roam?  
Listen, man, it snows so long,  
Let's part, let us go home . . .

It is all understatement with a rich dose of bitterness. But the poem captures the nostalgia of a man in a snow-covered street, which makes the poem two-edged. His hatred of his persecutors has not closed his eyes to the fact that the soldier guarding him is as much of a victim of circumstances as he is himself. The man has come to the end of his tether, and his own tragedy has grown pale and become only part of a larger, cosmic tragedy.

Many of the ghetto poets viewed their calamities as something surpassing the boundaries of individual lives. Something had gone wrong with the whole world. And they sought to find and appeal to the conscience of this larger world whose existence they had every reason to doubt. No, they said time and again, what was happening to them was not personal tragedy. It was monstrous, a gigantic struggle between Evil and Good.

The ghetto children often appear in the poems—the nameless, small heroes who ventured outside the walls in order to get food, only to be shot like stray dogs. Here is a “Song of a Jewish Boy”:

All perished; the young and the old;  
All dead, blood-stained.  
The stars are burning in the sky of cold,  
They alone remained.

The ghetto was liquidated. The houses were burnt, and the bodies were burnt too. Only the stars remained—and perhaps a sheet of paper which the poet had thrust under the wall of the ghetto with his last words. The boy has become a “trembling frame” and, like a hunted beast, he flees in search of refuge. Shadows follow him everywhere; there is no man in this world whom he can trust, and finally he is driven into revolt against a Providence that has suffered all this to happen:

Did He behold the sight  
 Of human bodies' flame?  
 Thy name is plague, Thy name is night,  
 Fire is Thy name.

This Job-like theme of protest against the iniquities that have befallen them appears in the verse of several other poets both Christian and Jewish. Maria Hochberg-Marianska cries out in despair:

O Christ, crucified on the bloody Polish roads,  
 Driven by hate from the threshold of the Church  
 Where is Thy place in these times of crime and creed;  
 Is it not behind the walls of the ghetto and the wire of camps?

Those Polish poets who chose to write about the ghetto were grieved and ashamed that their brothers helped the Jews so little. Czeslaw Milosz\* thinks of Giordano Bruno when he looks at the burning ghetto; he describes the scene of usual Sunday merrymaking, the gay laughter of the crowds, and he cannot help comparing the Polish crowd to that of mediaeval Rome where

Giordano Bruno was burned  
 the hangman enkindled the flame of the pyre  
 in the ring of the curious rabble,  
 and hardly the flame extinguished  
 the taverns were full again  
 and hucksters carried on heads  
 baskets with olives and lemons.

The moral is clear:

the people of Warsaw and Rome  
 must trade and play and love  
 passing by the martyrs' pyres.

And yet the poet is sure that one day, when

all will become a legend  
 . . . . .  
 the poet's word shall enkindle revolt  
 on the great Campo Di Fiori.

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\*The full translation of Czeslaw Milosz' "Campo di Fiori" appeared in *The Fiddlehead* (Fall, 1959). Milosz, the author of the celebrated *The Captive Mind*, is an outstanding Polish poet, critic, and novelist.

Another Pole, Marczak-Oborski, writing of Warsaw in April, 1943, goes through an agony of shame and anguish at his helplessness while the ghetto is being wiped off the earth. He openly admits,

Here a man dies  
To whom I was no brother.

The fighting spirit and the quiet contempt of death have also found their way into the ghetto poetry. Michal Borwicz thinks of deportation, that sure har-binger of death. He calls upon his friend to shed no tears:

Blame not even fate,  
It is clear: we were all thrown  
To the vile times and the dull avalanche.

But this is no time for despair, for

The future breaks into that huge  
Pyramid of crimes.  
The account is not done; fire burns our hands,  
Ours is death or life, no tears, nor groans.

The young poet Wladyslaw Szlengel, who perished in the Warsaw ghetto, wrote a poem after the armed resistance which preceded the rising of April, 1943. It is called "Counterattack", and tells the story of yet another deportation. The people went to the waggons as though they were weary of their lives. Their humanity had been turned into a state of despondent apathy. Suddenly something strange happened: "the cattle woke and flashed their fangs". When the first unexpected shot was fired,

the gendarme staggered in the gate  
looked surprised, stood a while—  
unbelievably—  
something was wrong . . . .

Something *was* wrong indeed; the human cattle rose to fight at last for a human death. The shambles were turned into a front, and the slaves of Nazi terror grasped their scanty weapons in strange exaltation. "Weep not, O Brother", cries the poet, "Bury not your face in palms, to die is now the simplest thing." His last words, however, show that he thinks not of death but of "the Dawn of Freedom".

One cannot help being concerned more with the subject-matter and mood of this poetry than with its form. To be true, it is impossible to apply to the poems of the ghetto the conventional criteria of literary criticism. Sometimes one wishes

these poems were less polished, less perfect and more barbarous. For they would be thus more easily accessible to our consciousness as a document of horror beyond our feeble imagination.

Who would wish to preoccupy himself with merely the literary merits of such compositions? Who would stop to upbraid the poet for an awkward phrase or rhyme, with the knowledge that these verses were composed a month, a week, even a day or a few minutes before his death—composed in the stench of the bunk, the cellar, the dug-out of a forest, or in the death van? How can one speak of metrical achievements while he is profoundly aware of the crazed cry of a thousand tortured human beings, when he can perceive that

a terrible silence lies on the earth  
like a trampled tattered flag,  
in the stifling smoke of the dead  
in the crucified cry.

Yet the artistry of the poems compels the reader and the critic, despite their emotional reaction, to examine the form too. Actually, the self-control, the balanced tone of many compositions enhance, after a second reading, our sense of shock. Is it possible, we ask, to maintain such calm in the face of so much cruelty?

If it is, it must be so because the poet has reached a stage in his suffering where despair, bitterness, and the death-wish mingle with an indomitable throb of astonishment at the vicissitudes of life. It is the death-wish that produces the unusually poignant metaphors in the poems. The smoke rising from the burning corpses is a familiar image. To Helen Plata it is "the smoke of my mother and brother" that the poetess tries to clutch in her numb fingers. Mieczyslaw Jastrun elaborates on the metaphor in his "Funeral":

The crematorium served as coffin,  
with transparent lids of air,  
and a wisp of smoke from a living man,  
blown through the chimney of ages.

How should we honour your death?  
How walk in your funeral train,  
O homeless handful of ash,  
scattered between heaven and earth?

How lay a wreath of green  
on a grave dug in the air?

"A grave dug in the air?" Mr. Wittlin exclaims with amazement. "Poetry has



not known such image which is no abstraction at all. Cursed is the world, cursed is the reality", he concludes, "in which such poetry could be born."

But, one could add, it would have been much worse had there been no ghetto poets and writers to capture and immortalize those terrible moments of anguish and despair. The only way to ensure that the cursed reality does not recur is to know the whole grim truth about the ghettos, the concentration camps, the prisons. And it is never too late to learn. This truth, for all its gruesomeness, is not a matter to be taken up as a political or social expediency. It is the very core of our contemporary history. Not to learn it is to be partly blind. The poems of the ghetto are important historical documents, particularly important to the student of Jewish history. They are also a testament written by lost men, an awful indictment cast at humanity; but in at least some of its pages one finds a glimmer of hope, which like a lonely star shines over the sombre wilderness of the Nazi jungle.