

Children's Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp (1942-1944):

An Evening In Terezin

The sun goes down
and everything is silent,
only at the guard's post
are heavy footfalls heard.

That's the guard who watches his Jews
to make sure they don't run away from the ghetto,
or that an Aryan aunt or uncle
doesn't try to get in.

Ten o'clock strikes suddenly,
and the windows of Dresden's barracks darken.
The women have a lot to talk about;
they remember their homes,
and dinners they made.

Then some of them argue.
Others try to quiet them down.
Finally, one by one, they grow silent;
they toss and turn, and in the end,
they fall asleep.

How many more evenings
will we have to live like this?
We do not know,
only God knows.

-Eva Schulzová

Night In The Ghetto

Another day has gone for keeps
Into the bottomless pit of time.
Again it has wounded a man, held captive
by his brethren.
After dusk, he longs for bandages,
For soft hands to shield his eyes
From all the horrors that stare by day.
But in the ghetto, darkness, too, is kind
To weary eyes that all day long have had to watch.

Dawn crawls again along the ghetto streets
Embracing all who walk this way.
Only a car like a greeting from a long-gone world
Gobbles up the dark with fiery eyes—
That sweet darkness that falls upon the soul
And heals those wounds illumined by the day...
Along the streets come light and ranks of people
Like a long black ribbon, loomed with gold.

-1943 *Anonymous*

Campfire (to Eva Landová)

Here I sit on a rock
in the front of the campfire.
One branch after another
is snatched by the fire.
Into the darkness
the forest recedes.

Fire makes one reflect...
Terezin is all I think about.
But now memories gather 'round me
Like falling leaves.

Fall is here.
The leaves turn yellow on the trees,
the campfire dies out.
My thoughts are far from here,
somewhere far,
where integrity lives.

It lives in my friends.
Now I think of her.
Memories gather 'round me
like the falling leaves.

-A. Lindtová

Terezín

The heaviest wheel rolls across our foreheads
To bury itself deep somewhere
inside our memories.

We've suffered here more than enough,
Here in this clot of grief and shame,
Wanting a badge of blindness
To be a proof for their own children.

A fourth year of waiting, like standing above a swamp
From which any moment might gush forth a spring.

Meanwhile, the rivers flow another way,
Another way,
Not letting you die, not letting you live.

And the cannons don't scream and the guns don't bark
And you don't see blood here.
Nothing, only silent hunger.
Children steal the bread here and ask and ask and ask
And all would wish to sleep, keep silent, and
just go to sleep again...

The heaviest wheel rolls across our foreheads
To bury itself deep somewhere inside our memories.

The Old House

Deserted here, the old house

stands in silence, asleep.

the old house used to be so nice,

before, standing there,

it was so nice.

Now it is deserted,

rotting in silence—

What a waste of houses,

a waste of hours.

Franta Bass

Yes, That's The Way Things Are

I.

In Terezin in the so-called park

A queer old granddad sits

Somewhere there in the so-called park.

He wears a beard down to his lap

And on his head, a little cap.

II

Hard crusts he crumbles in his gums,

He's only got one single tooth.

My poor old man with working gums,

Instead of soft rolls, lentil soup.

My poor old graybeard!

Koleba (M. Kosek, H. Lowy, Bachner)

<http://www.slideshare.net/aahelpdesk/holocaust-butterfly>

Alena Synkova

I'd like to go away alone
Where there are other, nicer people,
Somewhere into the far unknown,
There, where no one kills another.

Maybe more of us,
a thousand strong,
will reach this goal
before too long.

Birdsong

He doesn't know the world at all
Who stays in his nest and doesn't go out
He doesn't know what birds know best
Nor what I want to sing about,
That the world is full of loveliness.

When dewdrops sparkle in the grass
And earth's aflood with morning light,
A blackbird sings upon a bush
To greet the dawning after night.
Then I know how fine it is to live.

Hey, try to open up your heart
To beauty; go to the woods someday
And weave a wreath of memory there.
Then if the tears obscure your way
You'll know how wonderful it is
 To be alive.

-1941 Anonymous

Selection of poems from *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence L. Langer. New York: Oxford, 1995

How?

How and with what will you fill
Your goblet on the day of Liberation?
In your joy, are you ready to feel
The dark screams of your past
Where skulls of days congeal
In a bottomless pit?

You will look for a key to fit
Your jammed locks.
Like bread you will bite the streets
And think: better the past.
And time will drill you quietly
Like a cricket caught in a fist,

And your memory will be like
An old buried city.
Your eternal gaze will crawl
Like a mole, like a mole—

-Abraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto, Feb. 14, 1943

Grains of Wheat

Caves, gape open,
Split open under my ax!
Before the bullet hits me—
I bring you gifts in sacks.

Old, blue pages,
Purple traces on silver hair,
Words on parchment, created
Through thousands of years in despair.

As if protecting a baby
I run, bearing Jewish words,
I grope in every courtyard:
The spirit won't be murdered by the hordes.

I reach my arm into the bonfire
And am happy: I got it, bravo!
Mine are Amsterdam, Worms,
Livorno, Madrid, and YIVO.*

How tormented am I by a page
Carried off by the smoke and winds!
Hidden poems come and choke me:
—Hide us in your labyrinth!

And I dig and plant manuscripts,
And if I by despair am beat,
My mind recalls: Egypt,
A tale about grains of wheat.

And I tell the tale to the stars:
Once, a king at the Nile
Built a pyramid—to rule
After his death, in style.

Let them pour into my golden,
Thus an order he hurled,
Grains of wheat—a memory
For this, the earthly world.

For nine thousand years have suns
Changed in the desert their gait,
Until the grains in the pyramid
Were found after endless wait.

Nine thousand years have passed!
But when the grains were sown—
They blossomed in sunny stalks
Row after row, full grown.

Perhaps these words will endure,
And live to see the light loom—
And in the destined hour
Will unexpectedly bloom?

And like the primeval grain
That turned into a stalk—
The words will nourish,
The words will belong
To the people, in its eternal walk.

-Abraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto, March 1943

**Jewish cultural centers—YIVO is the Jewish Scientific institute in
Vilna, where Sutzkever worked before his internment.*

For My Child

Was it from some hunger
or from greater love—
but your mother is a witness to this:
I wanted to swallow you, my child,
when I felt your tiny body losing its heat
in my fingers
as though I were pressing
a warm glass of tea,
feeling its passage to cold.

You're no stranger, no guest,
For on this earth one does not give birth to aliens.
You reproduce yourself like a ring
And the rings fit into chains.

My child,
what else might I call you but: love.
Even without that word that is who you are,
you—seed of my every dream,
hidden third one,
who came from the world's corner
with the wonder of an unseen storm,
you who brought, rushed two together
to create you and rejoice:—

Why have you darkened creation
with the shutting of your tiny eyes
and left me begging outside
in the snow swept world
to which you have returned?

No cradle gave you pleasure
whose rocking
conceals in itself the pulse of the stars.
Let the sun crumble like glass
since you never beheld its light.

That drop of poison extinguished your faith—
you thought
it was warm sweet milk.
I wanted to swallow you, my child,
To feel the taste
Of my anticipated future.
Perhaps in my blood
You will blossom as before.

But I am not worthy to be your grave.
So I bequeath you
To the summoning snow,
The snow—my first respite,
And you will sink
Like a splinter of dusk
Into its quiet depths
And bear greetings from me
To the frozen grasslands ahead—

-Abraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto, January 18, 1943

Burnt Pearls

It is not just because my words quiver
Like broken hands grasping for aid,
Or that they sharpen themselves
Like teeth on the prow in darkness,
That you, my written word, substitute for my world,
Flare up the coals of my anger.

It is because your sounds
glint like burnt pearls
discovered in an extinguished pyre
and no one—not even I—shredded by time
can recognize the woman drenched in flame
for all that remains of her now
are those grey pearls
smouldering in the ash.

-Abraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto, July 28, 1943

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car

here in this carload
I am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that I

-Dan Pagis

The Roll Call

He stands, stamps a little in his boots,
rubs his hands. He's cold in the morning breeze:
A diligent angel, who worked hard for his promotions.
Suddenly he thinks he's made a mistake: all eyes,
he counts again in the open notebook
all the bodies waiting for him in the square,
camp within camp: only I
am not there, am not there, am a mistake,
turn off my eyes, quickly, erase my shadow.
I shall not want. The sum will be all right
without me: here forever.

-Dan Pagis

Instructions for Crossing the Border

Imaginary man, go. Here is your passport.

You are not allowed to remember.

You have to match the description:

Your eyes are already blue.

Don't escape with the sparks

Inside the smokestack:

You are a man, you sit in the train.

Sit comfortably.

You've got a decent coat now,

A repaired body, a new name

Ready in your throat.

Go. You are not allowed to forget.

-Dan Pagis

Ready for Parting

Ready for parting, as if my back were turned,
I see my dead come toward me, transparent and breathing.
I do not consent:
one walk around the square, one rain,
and I am another, with imperfect rims, like clouds.
Gray in the passing town, passing and glad,
among transitory streetlamps,
wearing my strangeness like a coat, I am free to stand
with the people who stand at the opening of a moment
in a chance doorway, anonymous as raindrops
and, being strangers, near and flowing one into another.

Ready for parting, waiting a while
for the signs of my life which appear in the chipped plaster
and look out from the grimy windowpane. A surprise of roses.
Bursting out and already future, twisted into its veins—
a blossoming to every wind. Perhaps
not in my own time into myself and from myself and onward
from gate within gate I will go out into the jungle of rain,
free to pass on like one who has tried his strength
I will go out
from the space in between as if from the walls of denial.

-Dan Pagis

In the Corner of Time

In the corner of time
the alder revealed
swears to itself in stillness,

on the back of the earth, breadth of a handspan,
squats the lung
shot through,

at the edge of fields the winged hour
plucks the grain of snow
from its eye of stone.

Streamers of light infect me.
Flaws in the crown flicker.

-Paul Celan

If I Only Knew

If I only knew
On what your last look rested.
Was it a stone that had drunk
So many last looks that they fell
Blindly upon its blindness?

Or was it earth
Enough to fill a shoe,
And black already
With so much parting
And with so much killing?

Or was it your last road
That brought you a farewell from all the roads
You had walked?

A puddle, a bit of shining metal,
Perhaps the buckle of your enemy's belt,
Or some other small augury
Of heaven?

Or did this earth,
Which lets no one depart unloved,
Send you a bird-sign through the air,
Reminding your soul that it quivered
In the torment of its burnt body?

-Nelly Sachs