Eulogy for 77,297 Victims
Jiří Weil

Translated by David Lightfoot

Where is my home, where is my home?
Waters roar across the meadows,
Pinewoods rustle among crags,
The garden is glorious with spring blossom,
An earthly paradise to behold.
And this is that beautiful land,
The Czech land is my home,
The Czech land, is my home!
(Czech National Anthem)

Translator's Introduction

The poem before you, Jiří Weil's 1958 *Eulogy for 77,297 Victims* (*Žalozpěv pro 77,297 obětí*) is many things: it is a brief history of the subjugation, deportation, and murder of Czech Jews between 1942 and 1945; an artifact of the creation of the famed memorial in the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague, and a window into the experience of those who returned home from exile following the liberation of concentration camps. Lastly, as this translation hopes to capture, it is a powerful and innovative text, sadly still unfamiliar to many readers of Czech literature.

At the time it was first published, there was little public sympathy for the treatment of Jews under the Nazi occupation. Official histories portrayed victims as defeatist and weak, often citing a lack of participation in the underground resistance. The Jewish Community (*The Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration),* which figures prominently in the text, was cast as a tool of collaboration. *Eulogy for 77,297 Victims* recounts a different story entirely, beginning with illustrations and examples of how the Nuremberg Laws trapped Jews and coerced them into cooperating with the Nazi authorities. It identifies public spectacles contemporary eyewitnesses would have found difficult to miss: lines of Jews registering with the municipal police, internment of citizens at the former Radio Mart at the Czech Trade Fair Grounds (Veletržní výstaviště), and the trainloads of prisoners departing every major urban centre for Terezín, a walled fortress town near Litoměřice, from which Jews were dispatched to concentration camps abroad.

The poem was read aloud in the Pinkas Synagogue in 1959, against the backdrop of 77,297 names hand painted on its walls by painters Jiří John and Ivan Boštík.

Many of the accounts in *Eulogy for 77,297 Victims* are explored elsewhere in Weil's oeuvre, most notably in *Life with a Star*; in his posthumous novel, *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*; as well as in an early story, "Píseň na rozloučenou (A Farewell Song)." But the language of this poem is unique beyond its genre. Three different kinds of text—journalistic accounts, eyewitness accounts, or anecdotes, and biblical pericopes—alternate in a regular order eighteen times, forming a single, cohesive narrative. Each of the fifty-four stanzas is delineated by graphics as well as by style.

What is most remarkable about this blending of styles is how they play off one another. The poem begins with a journalistic description in the historical present. But the journalistic style wends into rhythmic and lyrical prose that is periodically interrupted with short staccato lines:

> Smoke from nearby factories shrouds countryside as flat as a table, a countryside stretching off to infinity. Covering it are the ashes of millions of dead. Scattered throughout are fine pieces of bone ovens were not able to burn. When the wind comes, ashes rise to the heavens and the pieces of bone remain on the earth. Rain falls on the ashes, and rain turns them into good fertile loam befitting the ashes of martyrs.

Following each journalistic passage is a personal account. These recede as the other narratives build. In parts of the poem they consist of nothing more than lists. As Jews are dehumanized they are rendered only in synecdoche:

> A mother's hands smoothing a child's hair, lovers' hands intertwined, hands blessing a chalice of wine, hands clasping a hoe, a hammer or a plane, the firm hands of a doctor tending the sick, the fine hands of an embroiderer, the hard and calloused hands of old men, the small fists of a child. And hands rising from graves, hands bloodied by wounds, nails torn and crushed by steel-toed shoes.

The quotations from the Jewish Bible (quoted here from the King James translation) can at times be mistaken as the words of those described in the text, be they the oppressed, the oppressors, or the narrator. A description of a group of Jews being horribly beaten is followed by "For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. In another passage, this one describing police brutality, the biblical quotation could be either the voice of God, or the oppressor himself. "Therefore will I cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not, neither ye nor your fathers; and there shall ye serve other gods day and night."

Aside from responding to the official narrative of Jewish history, *Eulogy for 77,297 Victims* bears witness to the sufferings of Jews. It also describes for con-

temporary readers the sense of isolation and survivor guilt that characterized those years:

> The handful of those who survived see shadows, shadows of unburied loved ones whose ashes have been mixed into the earth. The shadows are silent, as if reproachful or on guard.

The last three stanzas of *Eulogy for 77,297* begin with an affirmation of belonging nation, and frame the remains of those cremated abroad as some that will return home and regenerate the Czech nation. It merges the first images of the text—ashes rising and falling to the earth with the idyllic description of the Czech lands from the national anthem, "Kde domov můj" ("Where is My Homeland").

> Their ashes mix into loam, the good earth from which crops grow and trees blossom. Cross through these lands *where waters rush through rapids and pines whisper through the rocks*, and beauty shines in the brightness of dawn as the shadows walk with you hand in hand. For in peace and serenity, it is their land, too.

The second passage recounts patriotism that comforted a group of Jews on their way to their deaths, as they sang "Kde domov můj."

In closure, the biblical passage addresses not the mourns at the synagogue, but a very distinct audience, those who did nothing as their neighbors and fellow Czechs were driven out.

> Yet they are Thy people and Thine inheritance, that Thou didst bring out by Thy great power and by Thy outstretched arm.
> (Moses 9:29)

The translator would like to acknowledge the impossibility of rendering all of the subtleties and inter-textual references of text like *Žalozpěv pro 77, 297 obětí* into a foreign language and to thank Drs. Veronika Ambros and Mirna Solic for their corrections, suggestions, and patience.

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