

Eulogy for 77, 297 Victims

Jiří Weil

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. And who can find the ashes of those who came from my native country, there were 77, 297 of them? I gather some ashes in my hand, for only a hand can touch them, and pour them into a linen sack, just as those who once left for a foreign country took with them some of their native soil so as never to forget, to return to it always.

Paper boxes sit on a shelf of soft wood that has been painted brown. In the boxes are names arranged in alphabetical order. There are 77,297. These are the names of victims from Bohemia and Moravia. Each name has a transport number, a year of birth, a last place of residence, and a date and place of death. Sometimes a date and place of death are not given. It is not known when and where these people died. All of the names are inscribed on the walls of the Pinkas Synagogue, which lies next to the old cemetery. Thus will their memory be preserved.

MOREOVER ALL THESE CURSES SHALL COME UPON THEE, AND SHALL PURSUE THEE, AND OVERTAKE THEE, TILL THOU BE DESTROYED
(Moses 28:45)

That day, though spring had already come, snow fell, snow that melted immediately and turned into mud, that day people raised their fists in helplessness or cried, that day wheels cut into wet earth, and the rattle of military trucks drowned out shouts of despair.

Josef Friedman, forty-four, an immigrant from Vienna, jumped from the fourth floor of an apartment building. He lay dying slowly in the street. The ambulance couldn't get to him because the military had the street closed off. When the ambulance did reach him, Friedman had already died. That was the fifteenth of March, at two in the afternoon.

SO I RETURNED, AND CONSIDERED ALL THE OPPRESSIONS THAT ARE DONE UNDER THE SUN: AND BEHOLD THE TEARS OF SUCH AS WERE OP-

PRESSED, AND THEY HAD NO COMFORTER; AND ON THE SIDE OF THEIR
OPPRESSORS THERE WAS POWER, BUT THEY HAD NO COMFORTER
(Ecclesiastes [Keholet] 4:1)

Death entered the city that day accompanied by pipers, horsetails, death-heads and the rattle of drums. People tried to flee from her, but Death's legs were faster, and she caught them on the roads, in trains, and at the gates of border-crossings.

People stood in a long line outside the police headquarters on Perštýn. They had been standing there since the early hours, they had come while it was still dark. At 9 o'clock the gate opened. A member of the S.S. in black uniform stepped out. He said: Jews—out of the line. He said this in German, as he stood on the sidewalk with his legs far apart. A Czech guard translated.

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
(Jeremiah 16:13)

They passed laws meant to bind, to pursue, to wear-down, to pulverize, to crush and to destroy the soul. These were malicious and senseless laws. They only thought them up in order to enrich themselves, for they loved things and were willing to steal and to rob. First they passed laws to take control over property.

Rudolf Jakerle of Kobylisy saved money his whole life so he would have something to live on in his old age. He kept it in the bank. On the 28 March, he wanted to withdraw a certain amount, but they told him at the bank that they could not release any money without proof of Aryan status. Rudolf Jakerle went home upset. An hour later he suffered a stroke and died.

IN WHOSE HANDS IS MISCHIEF, AND THEIR RIGHT HAND IS FULL OF BRIBES.
(Psalms 26:10)

Then they passed countless other devious laws, of which no one could keep track: they forbade the use of streets, some only during business hours, and others on Sundays and holidays, some streets with ditches, some that were paved, and some that were actually highways. One forbidden street was Ermine, and no one knew where that could possibly be. They also forbade certain foods—fruit, onions, garlic and spinach. They forbade parks, woods, waterfronts, libraries and galleries. Some of these laws were passed in secret, including one order that Jews not leave their homes after 8 pm.

On December 15, 1939 an S.S. battalion stormed the Aschermann café on Dlouhá třída, the Ascherman was a café Jews were allowed to patronize, mostly emigrants and people who had no place to live and nothing to live on went there. It was exactly 20:05. The S.S. pulled on their leather gloves hands and began beating Jews. Chairs fell and tables were overturned, thickening blood dripped onto the broken cups as they lay strewn on the floor. The patrons were dragged out of the café, packed into wagons and were taken to a villa in Střešovice that housed the anti-Jewish battalion. There in a courtyard next to the garage they were again beaten long and hard, then interrogated. Some were let go, others were stripped. Those who were stripped disappeared forever.

FOR DOGS HAVE COMPASSED ME: THE ASSEMBLY OF THE WICKED HAVE
INCLOSED ME: THEY PIERCED MY HANDS AND MY FEET
(Psalms 22:17)

However insidious, however senseless the laws were, they were spread out like a net in order to ensnare anyone whom they still allowed to live. There were no forests, no trees, no flowers. Only music and the words of poets brought comfort to those days.

Max Opperman of Brno loved classical music. He was a lawyer, but that was only a job for him. At home he played a piano he was supposed to have turned over, and he never missed a concert. He could not resist when they played Beethoven's Fourth. There he was recognized by a neighbor, a local German lawyer, a man whom he had seen often in court and with whom he used to chat amiably about music. This former colleague turned him in at intermission. He was thrown out and given to the Gestapo. He died in a concentration camp. But he did get to hear Beethoven's Fourth.

BUT MINE ENEMIES ARE LIVELY, AND THEY ARE STRONG: AND THEY
THAT HATE ME WRONGFULLY ARE MULTIPLIED.
(Psalms 38:20)

These were rapacious people who loved jewelry and gold and always wanted more and more property, and they didn't like to do dirty work, they ordered that this be executed by those they had subjugated and doomed to death. And those people tried to save their lives and the lives of their children by becoming their masters' indispensable helpers: eagerness conquered the helpers' fear, it steered them like reins, so that they served until their own bitter ends. Thus the helpers established a large office with many departments, and even heralds, whom they sent around to the houses where Jews lived proclaiming sad tidings.

On 2 April, a messenger from the Jewish community delivered an order regarding the handover and forced sale of jewelry. Heřman Kraus had a pearl tiepin and his wife had a broach from her mother as well as some costume jewelry. The order did not pertain to these things. They also had their wedding rings, which they did not have to turn over. After the messenger left, Heřman Kraus lay down on the couch and sighed. His wife Emilie (née Austerlitzová) cried over the sink. On 3 April a messenger came from the Jewish community with a circular announcing a prohibition against Jews riding on steamboats. Heřman Kraus sighed: he didn't need to ride on a steamboat. On 4 April a messenger from the Jewish community announced a prohibition against Jews working in the film industry. Heřman Kraus took this calmly, since he had already been fired from his job as an accountant for a timber company, and had nothing whatsoever to do with film. On the 5 and 6 April nothing came, but on the 7 April, three prohibitions and one questionnaire arrived. One order informed him of the loss of patent rights to Jews; another prohibited Jews from purchasing almonds, raisins and nuts. Heřman Kraus took these orders indifferently, but his wife cried over the sink because there wouldn't be much to put in the Christmas cake. The questionnaire that the messenger delivered outraged Kraus, it was a tax questionnaire that was many pages long. Heřman Kraus lay on the couch and sighed. Then he broke into a rage and began pounding the walls with his fists. His wife begged him with her hands pressed together to stop, since the neighbor could well be with the Gestapo. On the 8 April a messenger arrived with an order that Heřman Kraus was prohibited to raise pigeons. That wasn't so bad. It got worse on the 15 April when the messenger brought an order that stores were to limit shopping hours for Jews to 11:00–1:00, and 3:00–4:30. Heřman Kraus's wife cried uncontrollably and lay down on the couch. Heřman lit an expensive black-market cigarette that he had been saving for quite some time. The news from the mail of 18 April was not tragic either. It was an order prohibiting Jews from using dining cars and sleepers on the railways. Since Heřman Kraus knew from another order that it was forbidden for Jews to use the railways without permission from the very highest offices, he threw it in the wastepaper basket. He took the order delivered on the next day with the same indifference; it prohibited him from entering the municipal forest. Another order had prohibited him from leaving the city limits, so he couldn't get to the forests anyway. And then an order arrived that was truly was tragic—and now both of the Krauses cried. It was a ban on use of streetcars without special workers' permits. Both the Krauses were elderly.

FOR I AM READY TO HALT,
AND MY PAIN IS CONTINUALLY BEFORE ME.
(Psalms 38:18)

The weight of wheels cut the pass ever deeper so that steep walls rose on either side. Here only the bloody rowanberry grew. Ever-heavier wheels kept running over bodies. They stamped bolts of yellow fabric—good, durable fabric—with six-pointed stars. Inside of these stars they printed signs with jagged letters in a foreign language. They ordered all Jews to wear these humiliating tags—tags like for livestock—on the left, just over the heart. Perhaps these marks were put there to quicken the pulse even more, so the heart would grow angular and constrict, or perhaps these were put there only as targets to aim at. And these stars shone even in the light of day.

Robert Kaufman was returning home from the Braník quarries to his apartment in Karlin. He was dead tired from unaccustomed labor and barely able to keep on his feet, as he was not allowed to sit down on the tram. In Podolí a German with a badge on his lapel boarded the tram. When he saw the star he grabbed Kaufman by the shoulder, kicked him, and threw him from the moving tram. Kaufman fell on the hard stone of the rail-line, lacerating his face till it bled and breaking a leg. He lay there for a long time until he was taken to the Jewish hospital. He was taken there in a wheelbarrow. On the way Kaufman roused from unconsciousness and moaned in pain.

REMOVE THY STROKE AWAY FROM ME: I AM CONSUMED BY THE BLOW
OF THINE HAND.
(Psalms 39:11)

Blood was spilled and people were dying by murder or suicide, but these were only streams that had yet to coalesce into that great river of death. And now a hangman appeared who sat in place of the judge; looking with cruel eyes through the slits of his lids, he began to give orders to hasten the kingdom of death.

On 27 September, 1941, Reinhard Heydrich was named Reichsprotector. When Himmler recommended him to Hitler he advised: 'Heydrich knows no mercy, no pity. Even the murder of children will be a joyful duty.' Hitler smiled and nodded in agreement. Ordinarily Hitler never smiled. Immediately upon his arrival Heydrich declared martial law, and each day he presided over the deaths of dozens of people. On 16 October the first transport of Jews left for Lodz. On 19 October, Terezín was established as a stop on the way to death. On 11 November, Hitler gave Himmler an order to exterminate the Jews. On 24 November, the first transport of Jews was dispatched to Terezín.

MY TEARS HAVE BEEN MY BREAD DAY AND NIGHT.
(Psalms 42:4)

People lay on the cement floor of the trade center, which consisted of clap-board shacks, the outsides of which had been covered in whitewash that was now smudged with soot that was itself blurred by rain. Among them were families with children crying, who wanted to go home. A day's worth of bathwater had to last a week or longer in the filth and dirt of the wooden shacks. In summer they suffocated in the stench and closeness, and in winter they shivered with cold. They stuffed their ears with cotton wool to drown out moaning and shrieks. They were also kicked and beaten as their last possessions were taken from them, these things being the most necessary. Many people died on the cement floor amid the groaning and squalor. At night they were driven under the weight of their luggage onto a train, forced with kicks and scolded in that language of theirs, and packed into cars in order to take them to a place from which there was no return.

Rudolf Kohn was paralyzed and had used a wheelchair for years. They took him to the Radiomart in a cart. There he was set on an ordinary chair. People were called up to a barber to be shorn close. An SS man was furious when Kohn did not come when called. They told the SS that Rudolf Kohn was paralyzed and couldn't walk. The SS man screamed that he would cure him. He took out a service revolver and shot it point-blank into Kohn's ear. Rudolf Kohn jumped up and took a few steps. Then he collapsed and died.

THE VOICE OF HIM THAT
TAUNTETH AND BLASPHEMETH;
BY REASON OF THE ENEMY
AND THE REVENGEFUL
(Psalms 44:17)

They went slowly, packed into train cars—men, women and children. They went in early spring when the earth smells fresh, they went past streams and rivers, fields and meadows, past well-dressed people running off to have fun or to meet a sweetheart, past people leaning against ploughs, past factories where people stood at lathes watching each turn with care, past puppets shows and past pubs with clinking glasses and the smell of roasting meat, past stores displaying hats, and past moving vans carrying furniture to new apartments, past trains laden with missiles, and past soldiers on motorcycles with pistols in their belts. However they saw nothing, as the windows had been boarded up. And this is how they were cast out on the long journey to a small country station.

Růžena Hekšová had a lot of luggage as well as a heavy bag filled with provisions. She had been told that there was not much food at Terezín. She also had suitcases with underwear and clothing. Her transport number was written in white on her

suitcases. A young man with an armband came by and offered to assist her. Růžena Hekšová was pleased by his willingness to help. She never saw her suitcases or bags again. But sometime later she did see her thermos in a junk shop. She recognized it immediately because it was painted three different colors, a gift from abroad. The thermos was for sale, but Hekšová could not buy it because she had no Terezín money.

TRUST NOT IN OPPRESSION, AND PUT NOT VAIN HOPE IN ROBBERY;
IF RICHES INCREASE, SET NOT YOUR HEART THEREON
(Psalms 62:11)

They drove them into barracks and forced them to sleep on hard three-tiered bunks. They gave each person three unpeeled, frost-frozen potatoes or some slops that at one time they had called coffee, and another time, soup. Even this garbage had to be earned with hard labor. Behind the ramparts trees blossomed, the highway spread off into the distance, and beyond the fortress rose green hills. But the city was full of filth and dust, and the clamor of footsteps resounded all day until all were ordered back to their communal quarters.

Adolf Horovic was seventy. He stood in line at the cafeteria, waiting patiently. The cook poured a ladle of brown liquid into his bowl. Weakened from the wait, he stumbled and fell. The soup slopped out of the bowl and spilled on the dirt floor. Horovic didn't get a second helping of soup. He wasn't entitled to one. He sat on the ground and tears streamed from his eyes. That was all he had for dinner.

THEY PUT POISON IN MY FOOD,
AND IN MY THIRST THEY GAVE ME VINEGAR TO DRINK
(Psalms 69:22)

Corpses were carried away in carts that had once been used to deliver bread. There were a lot of corpses, and people paid no attention to the boxes in which they were laid. And dust settled over the city and into people's noses as they plodded along, sneezing. They lay in their quarters and talked about their former lives, lives that were beautiful and full of plenty of food. Back then they had traveled by train and automobile on trips to tourist inns where music played. And when they had come home, they had drawn hot steaming baths and soaked long and blissfully until it was time to dry off with a towel, put on a dressing gown and pajamas before lying down on white, clean-smelling sheets. Then they would settle down for a while with a good book, turn the knob on the radio to hear what was happening in the world. And then sleep would come.

All the blind people were billeted together as they waited for death. For them—and only them—it would be a kind of redemption. They didn't see what was going on, but they knew. The lunatics that had already left this world were kept in the same barracks. They had already left this world for one where they were not given orders. But even they knew. Then came the crippled, those missing arms or legs. They were the worst off, because they saw everything and they knew what was happening.

CONSIDER, YE THE BRUTISH AMONG THE PEOPLE
AND YE FOOLS,
WHEN WILL YE UNDERSTAND?
(Psalms 94:8)

But life is life, and the end hadn't arrived yet. Even in this fenced-in fortress town with the mark of the star and barbed wire, people still tried to lighten their lives with bits of sugar or a play. Yet, they were controlled by criminal powers that ruled over and judged them. Sometimes they were beaten and punished to entertain or to relieve the boredom of those in power.

On 10 January 1942, nine executions were carried out as directed by camp Commandant Seidl. People had been sentenced to death for petty offences. They sat locked in the guardhouse. It took a long time to find a hangman, until a former assistant to the Prague executioner volunteered. A committee of elders and Czech police was forced to attend along with members of the SS. The rope to which one of the condemned had been tied, broke; thus one of the condemned was left alive, the hangman announced, as was the custom during the First Republic, that the execution had been carried out. However the leader of the camp ordered that the condemned men be hanged again. The condemned died bravely. When the SS men left the site of the execution, only members of the council of elders and police remained; the chief of police decreed, "Salute the executed."

LET THE GROANING OF THE PRISONER COME BEFORE THEE;
ACCORDING TO THE GREATNESS OF THY POWER, SET FREE THOSE THAT
ARE APPOINTED TO DEATH.
(Psalms 79:11)

The end came quietly. The end meant another transport like the one that had brought them the fortress city, this time to an unknown country referred to as the East. And the East was an evil word, a word people feared. They did not know that flames from fiery ovens burned bright, even in the light of day. They did not know that a gas called Zyklon would hiss its way into tiled rooms. They knew it was bad there, that they were closer to death. So they tried to stay in the fortress

city, they thought up the most unlikely schemes to stay, to evade the transports. However, few were able to do so.

On 9 January 1942, the first transport left Terezín headed eastward to Riga. Out of 1,000 people transported, only 102 returned. On 11 March, 1,001 left for Izbic, only 6 returned. On 17 March, another transport left of Izbic with 1,000 people, 3 returned. On 1 April 1,000 people left for Piask, 4 returned. On 18 April 1,000 people left for Rejnovice, only 2 returned. On 23 April 1,000 left for Lublin, only 1 returned. On 26 April 1,000 people were transported to Warsaw, only 8 were left alive. On the twenty-seventh of April another transport of 1,000 people was dispatched to Izbic, only 1 returned. On 28 April 1,000 people left for Zamość, only 5 were left alive. On 13 April another transport of 1,000 people left for Zamość, 19 people returned. On 9 May 1,000 people left for Ossov, none of them returned. On the 17 April a transport of 1,000 people was sent to Lublin, not one was left alive. On 25 April another 1,000 people were sent to Lublin, and 1 returned. On 12 June 1,000 people were sent to Travniki, none returned. On 13 June another 1,000 people were sent off to a place unknown, no one knows their fate. On 14 July another 1,000 people were sent to Trostinec, only 2 returned. On 28 July another transport of 1,000 people was sent to an unknown destination, not one returned. On 1 September, a transport of a thousand people was sent to Rassika, 49 returned. On 8 September 1,000 people were sent to Trostinec, only 4 returned. On 10 September, another transport left for Trostinec, in it were 2,000 people, none returned. On 22 September, 2,020 were sent to Trostinec, none returned. On the 22nd of September, 1,000 people left for Minsk, only 1 remained alive. On 23 September, a further transport of 1,980 left for Trostinec, none returned. On 26 September yet another transport of 2,004 people left for Trostinec yet again, none remained alive. On 5 October 1,000 people were sent to Treblinka, 2 returned. On 18 October another 1,000 were sent to Treblinka, 2 returned. On 28 October 2,018 people left for Treblinka, none returned. On 6 October the first transport of 1,866 people left for Auschwitz, 28 remained alive. That was the year 1942. In the following years the transports continued, with greater or lesser frequency. The last transport was dispatched from Terezín on 23 October 1944.

WHAT PROFIT IS THERE IN MY BLOOD, WHEN I SHALL GO DOWN TO THE
PIT?

SHALL THE DUST PRAISE THEE?

SHALL IT DECLARE THY TRUTH?

(Psalms 30:10)

As more and more people disappeared into nothingness, the numbers of people in the fortress town dwindled. They brought in a commission from the Red Cross who didn't see anything, nor did they want to. They were shown paths filled

in with sand, scrubbed sidewalks, a building labeled “school,” a musical pavilion in the park, a café and a hospital. Everything had been thought out beforehand, everything was practiced and rehearsed. That day there was plenty of meat, though nobody had any. The meat was only for display. It was borrowed from the kennel, where the dogs had a right to real meat.

In honor of the Red Cross the children learned and performed a children's opera, Hans Krása's Brundibár. The Red Cross commission and the SS were very pleased by the children's performance as well as with the director and composer. After the commission had left, all those who had performed were dispatched to Auschwitz where they died in the gas chambers.

AND I WILL CUT OFF THE CITIES OF THY LAND,
AND I WILL THROW DOWN ALL THY STRONG-HOLDS
(Psalms 5:10)

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, 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.

At roll call Dr. Mengele stood in his white smock making the selections. If he pointed his hand to the left, it meant life; if he pointed his hand to the right, it meant death. Women with children always went to the right, meaning death, while women without children went to the left, to live. A woman could spare her own life by giving up her own children. But none of the mothers did. They followed their children to the gas.

MINE EYES DO FAIL WITH TEARS, MINE INNARDS BURN,
MY LIVER IS POURED UPON THE EARTH, FOR THE BREACH OF THE
DAUGHTER OF MY PEOPLE,
BECAUSE THE YOUNG CHILDREN AND THE SUCKLINGS
SWOON IN THE BROAD PLACES OF THIS CITY.
(The Lament of Jeremiah, Lamentations 2:11)

And ashes cover the countryside and rise to the heavens, and millions perished in the ovens, and those 77,927 from my native land are only a drop in the ocean of dead from burnt-out villages, razed cities and overturned graves. And 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. However, 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.

On 17 March 1943 the so-called family camp at Auschwitz was liquidated. Eight thousand men, women and children were sent to the gas chambers. They knew what fate awaited them, they knew they were going to their deaths. They went singing the anthem of their native land, "Where My Homeland Lies."

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)

Translated by David Lightfoot

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