

from *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*

VI The First Ones

1
And it continued. Ten a day, ten thousand Jews a day.
That did not last very long. Soon they took fifteen thousand.
Warsaw! The city of Jews—the fenced-in, walled-in city,
Dwindled, expired, melted like snow before my eyes.

2
Warsaw, packed with Jews like a *shul* on Yom Kippur,¹ like a bustling
marketplace—
Jews trading and worshipping, both happy and sad—
Seeking their bread, praying to their God.
They crowded the walled-in, locked-in city.

3
You are deserted now. Warsaw, like a gloomy wasteland.
You are a cemetery now, more desolate than a graveyard.
Your streets are empty—not even a corpse can be found there.
Your houses are open, yet no one enters, no one leaves.

4
The first to perish were the children, abandoned orphans,
The world's best, the bleak earth's brightest.²
These children from the orphanages might have been our comfort.
From these sad, mute, bleak faces our new dawn might have risen.

1. A synagogue on the Day of Atonement
2. The stanza alludes to Hayyim Nahman Bialik's "Upon the Slaughter," written in May 1903 in response to the pogrom in Kishinev, Russia, in which forty-nine Jews were murdered.

5
At the end of the winter of forty-two I was in such a place.
I saw children just brought in from the street. I hid in a corner—
And saw a two-year-old girl in the lap of a teacher—
Thin, deathly pale and with such grave eyes.

6
I watched the two-year-old grandmother,
The tiny Jewish girl, a hundred years old in her seriousness and grief.
What her grandmother could not dream she had seen in reality.
Wept and said to myself: Don't cry, grief disappears, seriousness
remains.

7
Seriousness remains, seeps into the world, into life and affects it deeply.
Jewish seriousness sobers, awakens and opens blind eyes.
It is like a Torah, a prophecy, a holy writ for the world.
Don't cry, don't . . . Eighty-million criminals for one Jewish child's
seriousness.

8
Don't cry . . . I saw a five-year-old girl in that "home."
She fed her younger, crying brother . . .
She dipped hard bread crumbs in watery marmalade
And got them cleverly into his mouth . . . I was lucky

9
To see it, to see the five-year-old mother feeding him,
And to hear her words. My mother, though exceptional, was not that
inventive.
She wiped his tear with her laughter and talked him into joy.

O little Jewish girl. Sholem Aleichem³ could not have done any better.
I saw it.

10

I saw the misery in that children's home.
I entered another room—there, too, it was fearfully cold.
From afar a tin stove cast a glow on a group of children,
Half-naked children gathered around the glowing coal.

11

The coal glowed. One stretched out a little foot, another a frozen hand,
A naked back. A pale young boy with dark eyes
Told a story. No, not a story! He was stirred and excited—
Isaiah! you were not as fervent, not as eloquent a Jew.

12

He spoke a mix of Yiddish and holy tongue. No, it was all the holy
tongue.
Listen! Listen! See his Jewish eyes, his forehead,
How he raises his head . . . Isaiah! you were not as small, not as great.
Not as good, not as true, not as faithful as he.

13

And not only the little boy who spoke in that children's home,
But his little sisters and brothers who listened to him with open mouths.
O no, you countries, you old and rebuilt European cities,
The world never saw such children before; they never existed on earth.

14

They, the Jewish children, were the first to perish, all of them,
Almost all without father or mother, eaten by cold, hunger and vermin.

3. Pen name of the noted Yiddish writer Sholem Rabinowitz (1859–1916).

Saintly messiahs, sanctified by pain . . . O why such punishment?
Why were they first to pay so high a price to evil in the days of
slaughter?

15

They were the first taken to die, the first in the wagon.
They were flung into the big wagons like heaps of dung—
And were carried off, killed, exterminated,
Not a trace remained of my previous ones! Woe unto me, woe.

November 2–4, 1943
Translated from the Yiddish by Noah H. Rosenbloom

IX To the Heavens

1

And thus it came to pass, and this was the beginning . . . Heavens tell
me, why?⁴
Tell me, why this, O why? What have we done to merit such disgrace?
The earth is dumb and deaf, she closed here eyes. But you, heavens on
high,
You saw it happen and looked on, from high, and did not turn your
face.

2

You did not cloud your cheap-blue colors, glittering in their false light.
The sun, a brutal red-faced hangman, rolled across the skies;
The moon, the old and sinful harlot, walked along her beat at night;
And stars sent down their dirty twinkle, with the eyes of mice.

3

Away! I do not want to look at you, to see you any more.
False and cheating heavens, low heavens up on high, O how you hurt!

4. Karzenelson echoes the opening lines of Bialik's "Upon the Slaughter."

Once I believed in you, sharing my joy with you, my smile, my tear—
Who are not different from the ugly earth, that heap of dirt!

4

I did believe in you and sang your praises in each song of mine.
I loved you as one loves a woman, though she left and went.
The flaming sun at dusk, its glowing shine,
I likened to my hopes: "And thus my hope goes down, my dream is
spent."⁵

5

Away! Away! You have deceived us both, my people and my race.
You cheated us—eternally. My ancestors, my prophets, too, you have
deceived.

To you, foremost, they lifted up their eyes, and you inspired their faith.
And full of faith they turned to you, when jubilant or grieved.

6

To you they first addressed themselves: *Hearken, O Heavens, you*—⁶
and only afterwards they called the earth, praising your name.
So, Moses. So Isaiah—mine, my own. *Hear, O hear*, cried Jeremiah, too
O heavens open wide, O heavens full of light, you are as Earth, you are
the same.

7

Have we so changed that you don't recognize us, as of old?
But why, we are the same—the same Jews that we were, not different.
Not I . . . Not I will to the prophets be compared, lo and behold!

5. An allusion to Karzenelson's own song "*Di zunn fargoyt in flammen*" (The sun sets
in flames).

6. Deuteronomy 32:1.

7. Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 2:12.

But they, the millions of my murdered ones, those murdered out of
hand—

8

It's they . . . They suffered more and greater pains, each one.
The little, simple, ordinary Jew from Poland of today—
Compared with him, what are the great men of a past bygone?
A wailing Jeremiah, Job afflicted, Kings despairing, all in one—it's they!

9

You do not recognize us any more as if we hid behind a mask?
But why, we are the same, the same Jews that we were, and to ourselves
we're true.

We're still resigned to others' happiness. Saving the world we still see as
our task.

O why are you so beautiful, you skies, while we are being murdered,
why are you so blue?

10

Like Saul, my king⁸ I will go to the goddess Or, bearing my pain.
In dark despair I'll find the way, the dark road to Ein Dor; I shall
From underground awaken all the prophets there—*Look ye again,
Look up to your bright heavens, spit at them and tell them: Go to Hell!*

11

You heavens, high above, looked on when, day and night,
My people's little children were sent off to death, on foot, by train.
Millions of them raised high their hands to you before they died.
Their noble mothers could not shake your blue-skinned crust—they cried
in vain.

8. 1 Samuel 28.

God of Mercy

12

You saw the little Yomas, the eleven-year-olds, joyous, pure and good;
The little Bennys, young inquiring minds, life's remedy and prize.
You saw the Hannas who had born them and had taught them to serve
God.
And you looked on . . . You have no God above you. Nought and
void—you skies!

13

You have no God in you! Open the doors, you heavens, fling them open
wide,
And let the children of my murdered people enter in a stream.
Open the doors up for the great procession of the crucified,
The children of my people, all of them, each one a God—make room!

14

O heavens, empty and deserted, vast and empty desert, you—
My only God I lost in you, and they have not enough with three:
The Jewish God, the holy ghost, the Jew from Galilee—they killed him
too.
And then, not satisfied, sent all of us to heaven, these worshippers of
cruelty.

15

Rejoice, you heavens, at your riches, at your fortune great!
Such blessed harvest at one stroke—a people gathered in entire.
Rejoice on high, as here below the Germans do, rejoice and jubilate!
And may a fire rise up to you from earth, and from you strike,
earthwards, devouring fire!

November 23-26, 1943

Translated from the Yiddish by Jacob Sonnag

O God of Mercy
For the time being
Choose another people.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,
We have no more prayers.
For the time being
Choose another people.
We have run out of blood
For victims,
Our houses have been turned into desert,
The earth lacks space for tombstones,
There are no more lamentations
Nor songs of woe
In the ancient texts.

God of Mercy
Sanctify another land,
Another Sinai.
We have covered every field and stone
With ashes and holiness.
With our crones
With our young
With our infants
We have paid for each letter in your Commandments.

God of Mercy
Lift up your fiery brow,
Look on the peoples of the world,
Let them have the prophecies and Holy Days
Who mumble your words in every tongue.
Teach them the Deeds
And the ways of temptation.

JOZEF ZEIKOWICZ

25 Live Hens And One Dead Document

Such an unimportant, trivial document:

25 live hens were requisitioned this Saturday on Podrzeczna Street and taken to the headquarters of the HIOD [*Hilfs-Ordnungsdienst*, the Auxiliary Order Service]. As agreed to by Jewish Police Chief Rozenblat, the hens were distributed as follows:

13 hens were returned.
6 were sent to Drewnowska Street
1 hen—Rozenblat
5 hens, i.e., 20 meals—*Hilfs-Ordnungsdienst*.

Don't throw this paper away, even if it is unsigned, undated and written in pencil.

This dry, insignificant document you've accidentally found among old papers could reveal one of the ghetto's most horrible and tragic stories—if only you knew how to read it.¹

It's the story of 24 Jews who perished for no reason, none at all.

It's the story of 24 people who lost their lives in the street, like rabid dogs. This piece of paper you've found by chance in the ghetto archives says nothing about 24 dead Jews. In fact, it speaks only of 25 live hens. But listen to the people, and they'll tell you the story that begins with a Polish ruffian from the city.

A *shoyget* [Yid: Gentle youth] who was born on Zielony Rynek [Green Market], who grew up among Jews and was known by the name Rudy Janek [Red-headed Johnny], decided one day to turn his coat inside out and become a *Volksdeutsch*.

As a *Volksdeutsch* he could grab Jews for forced labor. Some paid him off without a word. Some did not; their pockets were cleaned out by him.

As a *Volksdeutsch* he could enter any Jewish house he wished, and rob Jewish property.

1. The Lodz Ghetto in western Poland was created by the Nazis in April 1940. During 1942 and June–July 1944, there were massive deportations from Lodz to the Chelmo extermination camp. In August–September 1944, the ghetto was liquidated, and the remaining sixty thousand Jews were sent to Auschwitz.

A lowly porter from Zielony Rynek, a sack pusher for the Jews, Rudy Janek was transformed into a lord.

Instead of hanging around the market with a rope on his back, the *Volksdeutsch* could walk around in his Sunday suit even on a weekday and, just as he used to on Sundays, get dead drunk.

Before, Janek had to carry a 100-kilogram sack on his back for 20 *graschen*, hiding in his pockets the beans he stole for his pigeons from Jewish stores. And now these pockets were filled with 20-Reichsmark notes.

Before, Janek had to beg for those beans, but more often he stole them. From time to time he was caught and got a slap in the face. Now he is given the 20-mark notes with a friendly smile, and those who don't wish to be friendly have their money taken from them and also get a bashing in the face from Janek.

When they slapped him for theft, they did so with justice and pity. The few beans didn't make a difference, but this redheaded lad should learn not to touch them. So he got off with a few well-meaning slaps. He was happy that it was just that, and they were happy, having taught a thief a lesson. But when Janek hits, he knows no justice or pity. Janek likes blood. Lots of blood.

Bravo, Janek! You possess all the attributes of a real German. You've become a true-to-life German. But woe to you, Janek, for just when you trained yourself to be a stray dog, who rakes and grabs and lusts for blood, just then they put you on a leash!

Janek, who was no good for anything any more, not even for lifting a sack, who was no more than a stray dog, a mangy dog, was good enough to be a watchman for the German police, a warden of Jewish lives in the ghetto.

Janek, now the German policeman Johann, was posted at the ghetto border to see that Jews didn't slip into the city looking for food.

Janek did not feel comfortable in the uniform they put on him. A dog does not like his muzzle.

The 20-mark banknotes were all gone. Since all the Jews had been driven into the ghetto, there was no way to get new ones. Janek had to live on the modest wages of a police guard. And he had to stand there and watch—like a chained dog.

Janek was not used to it. He was a stray dog. Stray dogs hate having chains around their necks. He was in a state of rebellion but could not rebel openly, for he could get shot. The gall in him rose to his mouth. His life was bitter, his world oppressively small.

Ever since he was put in uniform, Janek had been thirsty for a drink. His

tongue felt glued to his palate like a piece of dried liver. And the only taste he had in his mouth was the taste of gall. Gall and liver.

Janek longed for freedom, longed for the 20-mark banknotes. With his stupid mind, with his piggyish-blue eyes he began to look for banknotes right there, at the ghetto border.

Standing there one day, his mouth dry and his tongue out like a thirsty dog, Janek spotted Redhead Leyzer.

They hardly recognized each other. The Janek in uniform looked altogether different. Leyzer, who had had a flour store on Zielony Rynek, remembered Janek as a ragged, shabby *shygetz* who wore torn trousers, walked barefoot, and had a face covered with reddish, pig-stiff bristles. On Sundays Janek used to put on his one and only black suit, which he had bought in the Old Town, and his high-heeled red shoes, shave his face, and make the reddish hair cling to his head. But on Sundays Leyzer's business was closed, so Leyzer never saw Janek in his Sunday incarnation. It never crossed Leyzer's mind, therefore, that that scoundrel, that red-headed Polish ragamuffin might be changed into a German soldier with a gun—and that he would be standing right there, guarding him, Leyzer.

On the other hand, in the old days when he owned a store on Zielony Rynek, Redhead Leyzer was a man with a big belly. In the summer he used to wear a shiny alpaca coat, which glittered like a well-cleaned mirror, and light chamois shoes with soft toes. In the winter, a beaver coat with a wide fur collar, boots lined with felt and galoshes. And in every season he had a shiny, reddish, well-trimmed beard. So Janek could not know that this ragged, shabby Jew, with the worn pants around his sunken belly, with a torn, little excuse for a beard, that this pitiful little Jew was Redhead Leyzer from Zielony Rynek.

So they met but did not recognize each other. Yet they'd been looking for each other so long that they finally understood.

"They'd been looking for each other" does not necessarily mean that Redhead Leyzer was looking specifically for Rudy Janek, or that Rudy Janek was eager to see no one but Redhead Leyzer. In fact, Redhead Leyzer was looking for a German guard corrupt enough to want to live well and let others live too, a guard who, as businessmen used to say, would agree to be "poisoned" and would make deals. At the same time, Rudy Janek was looking for Jews who, like in the good times not so long ago, would fill his pockets with 20-mark banknotes.

Thus, facing each other eye to eye—on either side of the ghetto fence—they looked at one another for a long time without speaking. And when they were finally done with the survey—Leyzer of Janek's grandeur and Janek of

Leyzer's dejection—Janek took another look around to make sure that nobody was watching—and let Leyzer come closer to the fence.

"How are you, Leyzer? Come, don't be afraid."

Just like that. Feeling a sudden exhilaration over Leyzer's downfall, Janek addressed his erstwhile boss informally.

Leyzer did not appear at all shocked. He even liked this intimacy. A *shaygetz*, yes, but our *shaygetz*. A servant. And so Leyzer came nearer without fear.

Janek, having grown up among Jews and having earned his keep from them, knew a few Yiddish words, such as *mamele*, *tatele*, a *kholere*, a *kapornb* [Yid: Mama, Papa, cholera, bad bird (the latter two used as curses)]. Now, to find favor with Leyzer, he embedded these words in the speech he directed at him.

"See, Leyzer. *Di kholere hot geklopht* [Yid: the devil has taken the lot of] you Jews. Your sacks of flour on Zielony Rynek are now ours. Everything is ours. The whole world will be ours. Me now—Johann, a master. And you Leyzer—a lousy Jew, a servant."

Leyzer saw that if Janek went on like that, he would be unable to begin. Answering with an insult was too dangerous. He had to try diplomacy, a little flattery, and a bit of scolding. So he didn't say a word but sighed deeply instead, meaning: "You are right, Janek, we are in trouble." And then he began:

"*Nie boy sie, Janek, tam gzieie woda byla, woda bedzie, a gouniarz gouniarzem zotanie!*" [Pol: Don't worry, Janek; where there was water, there will always be water, and a shithead will always be a shithead]. In other words, Janek, where there was money, there will be money again, and a swine will remain a swine.

After a bit of this small talk, with hints from Leyzer and punches from Janek, they came to the following agreement: Janek would toss over the fence whatever he could get in the city. Leyzer would sell the merchandise, and they'd share the proceeds.

"You know, Janek—live and let live!"

"That's right, Mister Leyzer: where water was, water will always be; money goes to money. You will have and I, too, will have, as in the old days. Remember, Leyzer?"

These were the first days of the ghetto. People did not yet comprehend the evil which had befallen them. The population was, so to speak, in the honeymoon of ghetto life, and behaved therefore like a young, freewheeling bridegroom, eating well and spending one banknote from his dowry after another. Everything in the ghetto, therefore, was for sale. Everything that could be procured.

After the turmoil in the city, after the killings inside the homes during the "planned resettlement," after the grabbing of people on the streets for forced labor, after the scare about what was going to happen tomorrow, or even in a few hours, the Jews in the ghetto, among themselves, rejoiced in *ahle far niente* [Ital: sweet frivolity]. Crowds gathered in the street and exchanged good news. Cards were played outdoors, and food was stashed away.

Prices rose by the hour. But the devil had already taken so much, so much Jewish property had been swallowed, the whole wedding was so terribly costly, that these few marks did not matter any more. Thus, exorbitant sums were paid for food, as long as it could be had—which it could, indeed, from the other side of the fence.

These were prosperous times in the ghetto. But it was prosperity turned upside down. People did not earn what they spent. Only a few individuals, who were willing to take the risk and run smuggling operations through the fence, made a profit. The others spent their last money buying everything: soap, sugar, flour, meat, and the greatest of delicacies, live hens! Live hens were capital that increased every day, and there was also the daily bonus—an egg! An egg in the ghetto, God in heaven, it was treasure; two, two and a half marks a day.

Therefore Leyzer urged Janek:

"Janek, by God, remember hens!—not geese, not turkeys, but hens!"

Janek interpreted this in his own way:

"Ha, ha, no more geese and turkeys for them Jews, just hens!"—but since he was "requisitioning" the loot from the peasant women who brought their merchandise to the city, he was not that strict and sometimes added a rooster to the hens he got for Leyzer.

When the ghetto stores all of a sudden began selling eggs for two and a half marks, and on the streets one could buy a plate of poultry meat for 15 marks a quarter, and live hens were seen in the ghetto, the Jewish police became restless.

How come? Hens in the ghetto? Eggs in the ghetto without their knowledge? Merchandise being smuggled into the ghetto, people becoming rich, and they had no share in it? Jewish *chutzpah* [Yid: nerve]! Such Jews should be taught a lesson!

And who could search better than the Jewish police? So they searched until they found Redhead Leyzer and the twenty-five live hens he had gotten from Rudy Janek.

What happened to the twenty-five hens, we learned from the above document: thirteen hens were returned to Leyzer, and let no one say that the Jewish *Hilfs-Ordnungsdienst* resembles the German police, the Krippe, the Schupo, etc., just because they too made an acronym of their name, the HIOD.

Six hens, according to the document, were sent to Drownowska Street. Since the recipient is not named, we have to assume that it was the hospital on Drownowska Street. It's hard to believe, however, that it was the patients who got the hens. It would be closer to the truth that the loot was devoured by the managing personnel.

One hen was given to the commander of the Order Service, the overseer of public order in the ghetto, so as to have approval for the remaining 5 hens given to the HIOD, in the form of 20 meals.

And thus it happened that the principle of "one for all" was finally realized in the ghetto. One Redhead Leyzer was able to satisfy an entire hospital, a whole unit of the Jewish police, and even the commander of the Order Service.

A second part of the "one-for-all" principle was executed by Rudy Janek. Janek was iiked, not so much by the loss as by the *chutzpah* of those Jews who, without his permission, used his own method of requisitioning merchandise. He was thinking:

Good. The damn Jews took twelve of his hens away. Well, then, he'd take two Jews for each hen. They decided, "Fifty-fifty"; he responded, "Double—24 Jews for 12 hens. And let the damn Jews know who Janek is!"

Let the ghetto know who Janek is, who—two months and two days after the ghetto was closed off—shot 24 Jews to death, for nothing. Like stray dogs. On July 2, 1940, he shot a fifteen-year-old girl in the heart.

Three days later, when he was again sent to his post at the ghetto fence, he killed a 29-year-old man and a young woman of 21.

After a pause, on July 10, he shot a 30-year-old woman in the head.

On July 11 a man of 23.

On July 12 he shot the brains out of a 65-year-old man.

On July 16 he hit a 50-year-old woman and a 16-year-old boy.

On July 18 he put a bullet in the heart of a 62-year-old man.

On July 20 he murdered a 20-year-old girl.

With murderous precision he killed five people on one day, July 21: a 17-year-old girl, three young men in their twenties, and a 30-year-old man.

On July 24 two aged women.

On July 26 a 17-year-old boy.

On July 27 a 24-year-old man.

On July 28 his last two victims, a 17-year-old girl and a 50-year-old woman.

A total of thirty-five people were killed by the guards of German justice in the month of July 1940. Rudy Janek killed twenty-four of them. Not one more. Twenty-four—with truly German precision.

But of those twenty-four Jews shot to death, no mention is made in any document. Nor is it mentioned whether the one hen taken by the commander of the Order Service, the guardian of public order in the ghetto, was to his taste or, God forbid, it was not.

In the Ghetto, January 1942
Translated from the Yiddish by Marek Web