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### Light in Darkness

Elisabeth Orsten

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## Elisabeth Orsten

### LIGHT IN DARKNESS

NO WORDS can describe the pain of those who passed through Hitler's concentration camps and gas chambers. Yet even that black night of suffering was pierced by rays of light. True, what was done cannot be undone; still, whatever was done, no matter how evil, can at every moment be given a new meaning, a new direction. Terror need not perpetuate itself; it can be broken and give way to goodness.

The record of Nazi crimes is ugly, but there is also a record of courage and repentance: the courage of those who helped in time of bitter need, and the repentance of those who did not. Burdened by what happened under Hitler, some Germans have pondered the dire events, have examined their conscience, and have tried to awaken others. The spirit that has animated them should be known, I think, beyond the frontiers of Germany.

There is, for instance, Eleonore Sterling's *Er ist wie du*, "He Is Like You," an attempt to trace Nazi anti-Semitism back to past stereotyped images of the Jew, or Albrecht Goes's *Das Brandopfer*, "The Burnt Offering."<sup>1</sup> This beautiful book is the story of a butcher's wife whose shop is the only one in town where every Friday, for two short hours, Jews are allowed to buy meat; it is the story of her little kindnesses to them, her sudden discovery of the abyss that seeks to swallow them, and her desire to atone for all this evil. There is the Protestant religious community *Oekumenische Marienschwesternschaft*, "Ecumenical Marian Sisterhood," which prays for the healing of the rift among Christians and for the healing of the rift between Christians and Jews. Its foundress, Mother Basilea, writes:

1. See Eleonore Sterling, *Er ist wie du* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1956), and Albrecht Goes, *The Burnt Offering*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Pantheon, 1956). It is unfortunate that the English translation of this extraordinary story has largely remained unnoticed.



Who did not oppose the evil, shares in the guilt. We all knew more or less how the Jews were carried off; we knew that they were sent to dreadful camps, though we may not have known the extent of their torments. . . . If now, after all the atrocities committed against the Jews, we are not moved to show them, in some way or other, love and kindness, then we are not sorry for what we, as Germans, did to them. But where there is no sorrow, God cannot forgive our guilt. . . .<sup>2</sup>

There are others who have spoken, written, or acted in a like spirit. I shall limit myself to the recording of two attempts to allow Catholics to see Jewish suffering through the eyes of Jews.

## I

A FEW weeks after the brutal crushing of the Hungarian revolt by Soviet troops, the Jesuit monthly *Stimmen der Zeit*, "Voices of the Times," published the last thoughts of a modern Job under the title "From the Burning Ghetto." The editors must have deemed his words and the time of publication most appropriate to arouse the conscience of their readers to the realities of Jewish suffering. No one can grasp the full meaning of the murder of six million people. The figure is too vast, too staggering, to speak immediately to the heart. But the story of one man, one Jew's cry to heaven, cannot leave hearts unmoved. The editors were under the impression that the document before them was actually written by one of the last inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto, though it was really the work of a Jewish writer, Zvi Kolitz.<sup>3</sup> Its fictional character, however, in no way lessens its impact; Yossel Rackover, Mr. Kolitz's hero, speaks as many a fighter in the ghetto may have spoken. What he has to say is deeply disturbing. But do we not need to be jolted into realizing what distress and turmoil the doings of the evil and the lethargy of the good can bring upon a man?

2. M. Basilea Schlink, *Israel—Gottes Frage an uns* (Darmstadt: Oekumenische Marienschwesternschaft, 1956), pp. 16–17.

3. Zvi Kolitz's story was first published in a Yiddish weekly in Buenos Aires in 1946. Years later a typewritten copy of it, without the author's name, found its way from Argentina to Israel, where it was thought to be an authentic document and printed in the spring 1954 issue of the literary journal *The Golden Chain*. The following year it was read in German by Anna Maria Jokl over the radio station of Free Berlin, a reading that brought a tremendous response and led to the discovery of the author. (For a fuller account of the story's strange fate see *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 7, 1955.)

## YOSSEL RACKOVER SPEAKS TO GOD

Warsaw, April 28, 1943

I, Yossel, son of Yossel Rackover of Tarnopol, a disciple of the Rabbi of Ger and descendant of the great zaddikim from the families Rackover and Meissel, write these lines while the ghetto of Warsaw burns. The house I am in is one of the few not yet on fire. For several hours we have been exposed to heavy artillery bombardment; walls are collapsing all around us. It will not be long before this house, too, will have become the tomb of its inhabitants, its defenders. The red sunbeams shining through the small half-barricaded window of my room—that room from which, day in and day out, I have fired at the enemy—show me that evening is coming. The setting sun cannot know how little I regret that I shall not see it rise again.

Something strange has happened to us: All our ideas and feelings have changed. Death, suddenly leaping at us, comes as a redeemer, a liberator, a breaker of chains.

I love the beasts of the forest; it, therefore, hurts me deeply when someone compares to them the criminals who today roam through Europe. It is not true that the tyrant is beastlike. He is, I am convinced, a typical child of our modern humanity. That humanity has given birth to him and formed him; he is the clear expression of its secret desires. When I was in hiding in the forest, I came upon a dog one night, a sick, starving dog, his tail pressed between his legs. Right away we felt our common lot, for the dogs did not fare much better than we. He nestled against me, buried his head in my lap, and licked my hands. I do not think that I have ever cried before as I did that night. I fell on his neck and cried like a child. No one will be surprised when I say that at that moment I envied the beasts. It was not only envy I felt, it was shame, too. I was ashamed of being a man, and not a dog. Suddenly, however, I realized that not the beast, but I the man could do something in the world to come; that not the beast, but I the man could bring down my clenched fists on the table of the Almighty and demand an explanation—and this is what I am going to do as soon as I stand before my angry Creator. The hosts of my people whom those evil men turned into ashes were passionately attached to life. With horror they saw the great works of creation, sun, day, light, become their deadliest enemies. This is the full measure of our degradation: Life has become for us disaster, death release, man a torment, the beast a model, the sun a terror, and the night a comfort.

Millions of men in the great wide world, loving the day, loving sun and light, have no idea how much darkness and misery the sun has brought to us. It has become a tool in the hands of criminals, serving them as a beacon



to illuminate the trail of those who sought to flee from them. When I hid in the woods with my wife and children—there were six of them—night, night alone, hid us in her bosom; the day delivered us over to those who sought our souls. Never shall I forget the rain of fire which beat down on the thousands of refugees who were on the road from Grodno to Warsaw; with sunrise, the airplanes came, and they murdered and murdered among us. My wife died in this butchery, the babe of seven months in her arms. That day two others of my beloved children disappeared: David and Yehudi, one four, the other six. At sunset, the few refugees who were left alive continued on their way to Warsaw. I, however, with my three remaining children, wandered about the woods and fields that surrounded the battlefield, seeking my lost children. The whole night through, our voices cut the deadly silence like sharp knife-blades: "David!" "Yehudi!" But only a helpless, heartbreaking echo, like a prayer for the dead, answered our cries. I never saw my two children again. In a dream they commanded me not to seek them any further, because they were safe in the arms of God.

My other children died in the Warsaw ghetto. Rachel, my little ten-year-old daughter, had heard that occasionally scraps of bread were to be found in the municipal garbage containers outside the walls of the ghetto. Even then starvation reigned in the ghetto; those who had died of it lay like refuse about the streets. The people in the ghetto were ready for any kind of death, except starvation; probably, when every other craving has ceased in a man, even though he longs for death, his natural hunger remains. I have been told about a half-starved Jew who said to his fellow: "If only one could eat once more like a man—what a beautiful death it would be!"

Rachel had told me of her plan to steal out of the ghetto—a crime punishable by death. Together with a friend, a girl of eleven, she undertook the dangerous trip. In the darkness of night she left home, and at sunrise she and her friend were discovered outside the ghetto walls. Immediately, the German sentinels, together with their Polish helpers, began to chase the Jewish children who had dared search for bread in the garbage cans so that they would not perish of hunger. People who watched this chase did not believe their eyes. Even for the ghetto this was something new: dozens of those criminals pursuing two starving children who could not run fast. One of them, my daughter, fell exhausted to the ground, and the Nazis pierced her head with bayonets. Her friend was able to save herself, but two weeks later, insane, she died.

The fifth child, Jacob, a boy of thirteen, died of tuberculosis on the day of his *bar mitzvah*. His death was a release. The last child, my fifteen-year-old daughter Eve, perished in a "children's raid," which was begun at sun-

rise and ended at sunset of *Rosh ha-Shanah*. On that day, hundreds of Jewish families lost their children.

Now my hour has come. With Job I can say of myself—and I am not the only one who can do so—naked was I born and naked do I return to the earth. I am now forty-three years old. When I look back, I can say, in so far as any man can say anything with assurance, that I have had a wonderful life. Though I was blessed with happiness, never did I become overbearing. I kept my door open for everyone in need, and I was happy when I could help a man. I served God with fervent devotion and my only request to Him was that I might be allowed to serve Him "with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my might." After all I have lived through, I cannot say that this attitude has remained completely unchanged. But with certainty I can say that my belief in Him has not altered by a hair's breadth. Formerly, when all was well with me, my feeling toward Him was as toward One who had always shown me His grace and in whose debt I stood. Now, however, I feel that He owes me something, too. Now, I think I have the right to admonish Him, but I do not demand, as Job did, that God put His finger on my sin so that I may know what brought this punishment on me. Greater and better men than I are of the opinion that what is now happening is no longer punishment for sin. Something extraordinary is taking place in the world—ours is the time when the Almighty turns His face away from those who pray to Him.

God has hidden His face from the world, and men have been abandoned to their savage instincts. Hence I think it is quite natural that those whose lives are marked by what is divine and pure should be the first to fall victim to the instincts now ruling the earth. This may be no consolation, but as the destiny of our people has been governed by laws not of this earth, by laws spiritual and divine, so must the man of faith see in these events part of that great divine reckoning, in relation to which human tragedies lose their importance. This does not mean, however, that a devout Jew should simply accept the verdict as it stands, and say: "Righteous is the Lord and righteous in His judgment." For to say that we deserve the blows dealt to us would mean that we despised ourselves and held the name of God in contempt.

Because this is so, I do not expect a miracle, nor do I pray to my God that He may have pity on me. Let Him show me the same indifference that He has shown to millions of His people. I am no exception to the rule, and I do not expect Him to have a special relationship to me. I shall not attempt to save myself, nor will I flee from here. Indeed, I shall make it easier for the fire to do its work, for I shall pour gasoline over my clothes. There are still three bottles left of the many I poured down on the mur-



derers' heads. What a great moment in my life! I shouted with joy within my heart. In former days I could not have imagined that I would be able to rejoice in the death of men, even though they should be enemies like these. Stupid humanists may say what they want; revenge was, and forever will be, my last impression of this battle and my deepest satisfaction. Up to now I have not understood that passage of the Talmud which declares revenge to be holy since the word is placed between two divine names: "A Lord of vengeance is our God." Now I can understand this thought. Now I can understand why there was joy in my heart, for I remembered that thousands of years ago the first of the prophets called God a God of vengeance.

The first prophet in Israel called God a God of vengeance because he foresaw that at the end of days such things would happen in the world, that there would be for them neither explanation nor consolation, only the hope for God's avenging justice.

During these past years I have thought a great deal about vengeance. I cannot push aside the thought that the "God of vengeance" created men ultimately for love and that He, who is called "God of love," ultimately created men of vengeance. Our Torah is filled with threats of death for the smallest transgression. Yet, when the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of our people, pronounced a single death sentence over a period of seventy years, the people branded the judges "murderers." On the other hand, though the God of the nations commanded His faithful to love all who are created in His image, our blood has been shed in His name day after day for the last two thousand years.

There are still three bottles of gasoline left. They are as precious to me as wine to the drunkard. After I have poured the last bottle over my clothes, I shall put these lines into the empty bottle and hide it between the bricks of the half-barricaded window. Should anyone find these lines and read them, perhaps he will understand the state of mind of a Jew, one of the millions who died abandoned by God in whom he so firmly believed. The other two bottles I will let go up in flames over the heads of the criminals when my last moment has come.

We were twelve in this room when our revolt began; for nine days we fought against the enemy. My eleven comrades were killed. They died without making a sound. Even the little boy died quietly, like his elder comrades. It happened this morning. The boy had climbed on the heap of dead men, so that he could look out of the half-barricaded window. For a few minutes he stood beside me like that. Then suddenly he fell backwards, rolled down from the pile of corpses, and lay still like a stone. On his small pale forehead, between the two black curls, a drop of blood ap-

peared—a bullet through the head. Yesterday morning, when the enemy opened fire against our fortress—one of the last left in the ghetto—all were still alive. Five men were wounded, but continued fighting. In the course of these last two days, all of them were killed. One after the other stood guard, each man in turn mounting guard on top of his fallen comrades, until he too was hit by a bullet. These are the nameless martyrs of Israel. No, Lord, I do not envy you when you will have to answer these men.

Three bottles of gasoline I have left, but no more ammunition. A great many shots are still being fired from the three floors above mine. They cannot send help to me, however, since the staircase has apparently been destroyed by gunfire, and I think the house is about to collapse. I am lying on the ground while writing these lines. All about me lie my fallen comrades. I look into their dead faces and it seems to me they are smiling ironically, as if to say: "Have a little patience, you fool. Only a few more minutes, and you too will understand everything." The face of the little boy, who lies by my right hand as if he were asleep, seems especially mocking and ironical. It is as if his small mouth were smiling. And to me who am still breathing and feeling and thinking it seems that he is laughing at me. He is laughing at me with that quiet and telling smile of one who knows much and speaks to another who knows nothing but imagines that he understands everything. Yes, he knows everything now, this young boy; all things are plain to him. He knows why he was born and why he had to die so young; why he had to die when he was only five years old. In case he does not know, at least he knows that knowing or not knowing are absolutely unimportant and meaningless in the face of the eternal glory of that better world in which he now lives—perhaps in the arms of his murdered parents to whom he has returned. In one or two hours, I too shall know. Unless the flames destroy my features, my face too may have a similar smile after my death. Meanwhile I am still a living human being, and it is as such that I want to speak to my God before I die, as a simple man who enjoyed the great but unhappy privilege of being a Jew.

I am proud to be a Jew, not despite the world's relationship to us, but rather because of it. I should be ashamed to belong to one of those nations that gave birth to and reared those criminals who are responsible for the acts committed against us.

I am proud to be a Jew, because it is difficult to be a Jew, very difficult. It is easy to be an Englishman, an American, or a Frenchman. It is easier and more convenient, but by no means more honorable. Yes, it is an honor to be a Jew.



I think to be a Jew means to be a fighter, a perennial swimmer against the dirty criminal human stream. You, our enemies, say that we are evil. I would like to see how you would have behaved in our place.

I am happy that I belong to the most unhappy people in the world, a people whose Torah incorporates the highest morality and the most beautiful of all laws. The Torah was made even holier and more lasting through its desecration by the enemies of God. I think one is born a Jew as one is born an artist. It is impossible to free oneself from this fact. This is the divine advantage in us that makes us the chosen people. Who does not understand this will never understand the higher significance of our martyrdom. "There is no thing more whole than a broken heart," said a great rabbi. There is no people more chosen than the one that is always persecuted. Had I not believed before that God designated us to be His people, our sufferings would have convinced me of it.

I believe in the God of Israel, even though He has done everything to destroy my belief in Him. I believe in His laws, even though I cannot justify His ways. My relationship to Him has ceased to be that of a servant to his master, and has become that of a pupil to his teacher. I bow before His majesty, but I will not kiss the rod with which He chastises me. I love Him, but I love His Torah still more. And even if I had been mistaken about Him, I would continue to keep His Torah. For God means religion, but His Torah means a way of life. And the more of us die for this way of life, the more immortal it becomes. Earlier in my life I often wished to draw a dividing line between what He says and what He does. Now I see that our greatest test as the chosen people is to do what we know He says, in spite of everything that He seems to do.

The things that look to us as if you, O God, did or tolerated them are so incomprehensible and therefore so inexcusable that I have to ask what I am going to ask when I shall stand before you, and that I will have to insist on an answer.

You say that we have sinned. Of course we have sinned. That one must be punished for it, I can understand. But I demand that you tell me if there is a sin in the world that merits a punishment as great as this.

You say that you will give our enemies their deserts. I believe that you will deal with them mercilessly; this I do not doubt. But I demand that you tell me if there is a punishment in this world which can atone for the crime that has been committed against us.

Perhaps you will say that now there is no question of punishment and expiation, that you have only turned your face away and have abandoned men to their instincts. But I ask of you, O God, and this question consumes

me like fire: What more must happen before you will turn your face to us again?

I say to you clearly and openly that we who have been tortured and violated, suffocated and slain, buried and burned alive, insulted, disgraced, and murdered by the millions, now have more right than in any other epoch of our never-ending passion to know where the limits of your patience lie.

And one further thing I must say to you: Do not strain the cord too much, lest—God forbid!—it break. The temptation that you have placed before us is so great and so bitter that you must forgive those of your people who in misery and despair have turned from you.

Forgive those who turned from you in their misery, but forgive also those of your people who in their happiness turned from you. You added to our life a struggle so endless and bitter that the cowards among us had to evade it, and they ran away as fast as their feet would carry them. Do not strike them for it—one does not strike cowards; toward cowards one shows pity. On them, O God, have more pity than on us.

Forgive also those who blasphemed your Name, who began to serve other gods, or who were indifferent toward you. You have struck them so hard that they can no longer believe that you are their Father, that they have a Father at all.

I am saying all this to you, because I believe in you, because I believe in you more than ever, because now I know that you are my God, for you cannot be the God of those whose deeds are the terrible result of their militant godlessness. If you are not my God, whose God are you? The God of the murderers?

Those who hate and murder are evil and sinister, but what am I who within himself carries a ray of your light and of your goodness?

I cannot praise you for the deeds you tolerate. But I praise and bless you for your terrible majesty, which must be immense if not even the present events impress you.

And precisely because you are so great and I am so little, do I pray: I warn you for your Name's sake, cease to demonstrate your might by suffering the unfortunate to be tortured.

I do not ask that you strike the guilty. It lies in the terrible nature of these events that the guilty will bring about their own end. For through our death the conscience of the world has been murdered, since in the murder of Israel the whole world has been murdered. The world will consume itself in its own evil. It will drown in its own blood.

The murderers have pronounced judgment upon themselves; they will not escape it. Their crime is already the beginning of their punishment.



But there are others, Lord, who do not themselves kill, yet they are silent before this murder. There are still others whose lips censure the murder but whose hearts rejoice at it, who in their dark souls think: "Perhaps it is seemly that we say: The murderer is evil, but he does the work for us, and for this we shall always be grateful to him."

It is written in the Torah that a thief is to be punished more severely than a robber, even though the thief does not attack his victim but commits his crime furtively. The robber attacks his victims in broad daylight and fears neither God nor man. The thief, on the other hand, fears men, but not God, and for that reason he must be punished more severely than the robber. I shall not be grieved if you treat those murderers like robbers, for that is their relationship to you and to us. They make no secret of their killings, of their crimes.

I beseech you, O Lord, God of vengeance, my almighty Father, punish as you would punish thieves all those who keep silent about this murder, those who do not fear you, but rather the talk of men—fools! they do not realize that men will not speak of them at all—those who feel pity for the drowning man, and though they can, will not save him.

Death cannot wait for me, and I must stop writing. The firing in the upper floors is growing weaker every minute. The last defenders of our stronghold are falling now, and with them falls and dies the great, the beautiful, the God-fearing Jewish Warsaw. The sun is about to set and I thank you, O God, that I shall not see it rise again. Red beams come through the window and the corner of the sky that I can see is red and fluid like a cascade of blood.

Within an hour I shall be reunited with my wife and children and with millions of our people in a better world where there are no more doubts and where God is the sole Ruler. I die calm, but not content, beaten but not in despair, believing but not praying, in love with God but not blindly saying amen.

I have followed Him, even when He thrust me away. I have obeyed His commandments, even when He struck me for it. I have loved Him and continue to be in love with Him, even though He has humbled me to the ground, tormented me unto death, and made me a butt of shame and mockery.

My rabbi often told me the story of a Jew who fled with his wife and child from the Spanish Inquisition and whose small boat was driven across the stormy seas to a desert island. Lightning struck and killed his wife. A storm arose and hurled his child into the sea. Alone, without a crumb of comfort, naked and barefoot, beaten by storm and terrified by thunder and lightning, his hair disheveled and hands uplifted unto God, the Jew con-

tinued his way on the wild desert island and said to Him: "O God of Israel, I fled hither so that I might be able to serve you in peace, to obey your commandments and sanctify your Name. But you have done everything to destroy my faith in you. If you think that you can succeed in turning me from my path, then I say to you, O my God and God of my fathers: You will not succeed. You may smite me, you may take from me all that is dear and precious to me on earth, you may torment me to death—yet I shall always believe in you. I shall always cling to you, in spite of yourself."

These are my last words to you, my angry God: You will not succeed. You have done everything to make me lose my faith, to make me despair. Nevertheless, I die as I have lived, my faith in you firm as a rock.

Blessed be forever and ever the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, the God of truth and of the Law, who soon again will show His face to the world and will make its foundations tremble by the sound of His almighty voice.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!

This is a frightening document, frightening because of the agony a man is made to suffer at the hand of other men, frightening also because of his illusion that he can bang his fist on the table of the Almighty and demand answers to his complaints. The creature's relationship to the Creator is never that of plaintiff to defendant.

There are errors and contradictions in Yossel Rackover's testament, and nothing would be easier than to point them out. Nothing easier than to refute his sarcastic reference to the "God of love" or to cite instances of cruelty in Jewish history he seems to have forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

4. While Yossel Rackover, the fictional hero of the Warsaw ghetto, complacently exclaims: "To be a Jew means to be a fighter, a perennial swimmer against the dirty criminal human stream," one of the ghetto's real heroes shows with the most exacting objectivity that there were not a few among its inhabitants who swam with that stream. In his *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), a book the more frightening because of the calmness with which it records the horrors of those days, Emmanuel Ringelblum tells of rich Jews despising and victimizing their poor fellows, of orgies and long-drawn-out balls in a ghetto that in the spring of 1941 boasted of sixty-one night spots. He tells of Jews who collaborated with the S.A. and S.S., who as Gestapo agents kept their neighbors in a constant state of fear, who blackmailed their own or informed against them. The Quartering Office of the ghetto's Jewish council he calls "a nest of corruption"; only through heavy bribes could one obtain a decent apartment (see pp. 118, 131, 254, *passim*). "Jewish policemen also distinguished themselves with their fearful corruption and immorality. . . . [When at the time of the ghetto's breakup in the fall of 1942 the policemen were ordered by the Nazis to round up five 'heads' a day or face deportation and death], they said not a single word of protest against this revolting assignment to lead their own brothers to the slaugh-



Nothing would be easier than to condemn his desire for vengeance—a desire so violent that his soul, too, is in danger of becoming Hitler's prey—and to quote against him the words of another Jew, Victor Gollancz, one of the first men to come to the aid of the starving children of postwar Germany and to alert the Western world to the moral danger of adopting Nazi standards in the treatment of the defeated. In *Our Threatened Values* Gollancz recalls a passage from Amos, where the prophet asks in the name of the Lord whether the children of Israel are not to Him like the Ethiopians and Philistines (see 9: 7–8), “which is,” Gollancz adds, “as if a modern Jew or Russian, or some refugee from Lidice, were to ask, in spite of all the wrong that had been done to him, ‘Is not my God also the God of the Nazis?’” He also retells a talmudic legend which has God rebuke the angels who wanted to chant their hymns while the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea: “The work of my hands is drowning in the sea, and you wish to utter song before me!”<sup>5</sup>

Nothing would be easier than to argue, but dare we argue with a man tormented, facing a lonely death? Dare we claim weight for any answer to his questions that is not born of suffering equally great? Since here suffering gives authority, no one has a better title to answer than the Man who in His passion affirmed that suffering is conquered only by love. Thus the editors of *Stimmen der Zeit* prefaced the protests of this modern Job with the following comment:

Alarm, revulsion, dread, and horror have gripped the entire world these past weeks; once more Bolshevism has shown its true face: cruelty, baseness, treachery. Oh, what kind of world is this where our hearts must tremble again and again at the tears of women and children, at the grief

ter. . . . People are wracking their brains to understand how Jews, most of them men of culture, former lawyers (most of the police officers were lawyers before the war), could have done away with their brothers with their own hands. How could Jews have dragged women and children, the old and the sick, to the wagons—knowing they were all being driven to the slaughter? . . . Most of the time during the resettlement operation the Jewish police exceeded their daily quotas. That meant they were preparing a reserve for the next day. No sign of sorrow or pain appeared on the faces of the policemen. On the contrary, one saw satisfied and happy individuals, well-fed, loaded with the loot they carried off in company with the Ukrainian guards” (pp. 329–330). All this proves that wickedness is not the exclusive property of one or two nations but the burden of all men.

5. See Victor Gollancz, *Our Threatened Values* (Hinsdale: Henry Regnery, 1947), p. 20. See also Meg. 10b, Sanh. 39b; cf. *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935–38), *Megillah*, p. 59 and *Sanhedrin*, p. 251.

of men, where for nearly half a century force and crime have ruled far and wide! In spite of all this, it is the same world in which the Son of God became man, the world He redeemed—redeemed “in hope”! Not yet manifest is the divine glory, though visible at the birth of Christ for a few short moments, though given through His passion and death to those who believe, who “receive” Him. Hence in the darkness of this world there remain, even for the Christian, questions and mysteries to which he can give but one answer: God's love is incomprehensible. He sent His Son into the lowliness of our flesh, into the misery of human history. He sent Him to a dreadful death on the cross. Who can fathom it? But did He not say: “I am God and not man” (Os 11:9)?

. . . The questions Yossel Rackover asks of God are directed to no other than “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Once again, His mysteriousness has violently shaken history. To this one can only answer: No, the God of the fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus Christ, and thus of all Christians, is not an “angry God,” even though He is just. He is the God of incomprehensible love. That this be not an empty word but a vision for all to see, the Son of God became man, became a Jew of the house of David, of the tribe of Judah. Thus God's last and definitive word to the world and to history is not a word of vengeance but of love, a word which He has spoken to the world through the passion and death of His only-begotten, His beloved Son.<sup>6</sup>

## II

IN 1950 the Catholic thinker Karl Thieme published, under the title *Vater, vergib! Gedichte aus dem Ghetto*, “Father, Forgive! Poems from the Ghetto,” a selection of poems by Hermann Adler, one of the few survivors of Vilna, Warsaw, and Bergen-Belsen. This little book, so similar to, and yet so different from, Yossel Rackover's protests, is dedicated to the poet's dead and living comrades, to the men and women who fought and suffered with him. But it is also dedicated to Anton Schmid, a Viennese sergeant, court-martialed and shot by the Nazis for his rescue of persecuted Jews, and to Andreas Gdovski, the pastor of the monastery of Ostra Brama in Vilna, “who had the courage to love as a Christian even in difficult times and to save from death those in peril.” Professor Thieme sees in these poems documents which portray the era of horror without the least extenuation but

6. “Aus dem brennenden Ghetto,” *Stimmen der Zeit*, LXXXII, 3 (December 1956), p. 161.



which never renounce the faith that hatred and despair can be overcome.<sup>7</sup>

In a poem, called "Guard the tablets of the divine covenant," Adler finds comfort in the prayers of the monks of Ostra Brama and in the undying affection of Mary for her people. From the roof of the church her eyes follow the mothers and children, as they are led to the place of execution. Here I quote only the first stanza:

*Venerable, there stands in the midst of Vilna the holy cloister  
of Ostra Brama; there the monks pray for us.  
Our rabbis have all been killed; the scrolls of the Torah,  
proclaiming the Old Law, lie desecrated in the dust.  
Thousands lie dead in ditches, no one to say Kaddish for them.  
But a solitary monk offers Mass for their repose.  
Mercifully receive, O God, the prayers of the pastor of Ostra Brama,  
for in strict enclosure he shelters the persecuted.  
Not one of the monks makes light of the commandments of the Old Law:  
God spoke to us through Moses; Christ kept faith with these words.  
Like us, Christ went to his death; like us, he was slandered;  
one of us once, he refuses not to die with us today.*

"For they know not what they do!" is the title of another poem. Like the first, it is part of a cycle "Songs from the City of Death," composed in free verse between 1941 and 1944. The poet links Jewish suffering to the passion of the crucified Christ:

*Close to the walls of the ghetto at Vilna there stands, blood-soaked,  
a wooden cross.  
In confidence, the Crucified looks up to heaven.  
Trembling in sorrow, the Mother presses herself against the wall  
of her misery.  
The Poles who pass by do not mock; they are silent.  
The time has come when the sons of the ghetto must walk the way of  
the cross; soon the Poles will follow.  
None will be alive when at last freedom shines forth again!*

*Endlessly suffering, the crucified Christ cries out:  
"Forgive the murderers, O Father; arouse those who are silent!"  
And as the wings of death brush by, he softly whispers in bliss:*

7. See Hermann Adler, *Vater, vergib! Gedichte aus dem Ghetto*, ed. Karl Thieme (Berlin: Christian-Verlag, 1950), pp. 5, 45. The poems quoted in this essay are on pp. 7, 6, 10.

*"Hear, O Israel. . . ." Whitefaced, the Mother sinks to her knees:  
"O Father in heaven, you take our children, you lead us unto death;  
but if you leave some to give witness—speak then, O God, speak out  
of their mouths."*

A translation cannot do justice to the sculptured beauty of Adler's verse, a beauty that moved the distinguished Catholic writer Reinhold Schneider to remark:

It seems hardly possible to give the Jewish suffering of our days literary expression, for here art faces a reality that must destroy form. The more sensitive the instrument, the more tender the artistic conscience, the more inevitable seems their failure. Still, poetic mastery is possible, but only out of the tradition of Israel. The prophets shaped the language of such suffering; they looked at the terrifying face of the living God; they wrestled with God, but they submitted to Him, as we must again today. Only as a follower of the prophets is a poet able to say what was endured and overcome at Vilna and at Warsaw. But he must have received more than the gift of powerful and honest speech, he must also have attained that human worth which enables him to persevere in the furnace and walk out of it unbroken. . . . [In Adler's poems] every word, accusation as well as self-accusation, is spoken in the presence of God. Even the boldest words of apparent rebellion: "And who is as cruel as He?" remain words of faith. . . . Hence his poetic work becomes a work of reconciliation. In a Christian, a Polish woman who sought to rescue a Jewish child and who was shot together with the Jews, he finds a figure that as no other points, and must point, to the future.<sup>8</sup>

*Suddenly the killers yield to their murderous lust,  
bullets pierce the night—anguished the victims cry out:  
"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is One and Everlasting!  
Jesus! Mary!" Thus, as one voice, the cries break forth from the  
lips of the dying.  
Amidst the Jews lies murdered but blessed a new Madonna;  
and with her dies the people to whom she owes her God!*

In the Polish woman who loved an orphaned Jewish child more than her own life the poet sees another Mary. And the victims of cruelty he sees strengthened by Christ. In this vision a ray of light has entered the darkness.

8. *Freiburger Rundbrief: Beiträge zur Förderung der Freundschaft zwischen dem Alten und dem Neuen Gottesvolk im Geiste beider Testamente*, III, 10/11 (January 1951), p. 34.