

I KEEP RECALLING: THE HOLOCAUST POEMS OF JACOB GLATSTEIN

Poems by Jacob Glatstein, 1993

In 1934 Jacob Glatstein traveled to Lublin, Poland, to visit his ailing mother. His reminiscence about his voyage is contained in two volumes of elegant prose, *Ven Yash iz Geforen* (1938; "When Yash Went Forth"; an earlier version was serialized in the Yiddish magazine *In Zikh*) and *Ven Yash iz Gekumen* (1940; "When Yash Arrived"), in which he narrates his personal dilemma of being a universal Jew in an anti-Semitic world. Through a series of interior monologues and dialogues in which strangers tell their stories to a seemingly silent protagonist, Glatstein bares a shocking discovery, namely the Jew, who in his historical wanderings embodies the ideal of international siblinghood, is in **the end** what he was in the beginning, a *yidele*, "a little Jew." The paradox becomes more compelling when in-your-face Jew hatred causes the narrator to hide his ethnicity from Nazi youths on a train ride to Poland, though his inner self wants to assert *Ich bin a Yid*. The writer's confessional struggle—that is, his Jewish selfhood was parsed and defined by an outside world—alludes to the fate of East European Jewry on the eve of World War II. And on the twisted journey to Auschwitz, the world was silent and, worse, indifferent.

Glatstein's Holocaust poems are meant to confront, shock, understand, give solace, and mend a shattered Jewish world. His poetry is informed by an authenticity that is anguished by memory and reflection. His striking imagery, ear for folk idiom, and ability to divest and invest words, sounds, and structure enhance his verse. His "Good Night World" is a shattering rejection of European culture, state and church included, in whose bosom the Shoah was thought, prepared, and executed. He exclaims,

Good night, wide world

Big stinking world!

Not you but I slam shut the door.
 With my long gabardine,
 My fiery, yellow patch,
 With head erect,
 And at my sole command,
 I go back into the ghetto

 Swinish German, hostile Polack,
 Thievish Amalekite—land of swill and guzzle,
 Slobbering democracy,
 With your cold compress of sympathy,
 Good night, brash world with your electric glare.

 Good night, I give you in good measure
 All my redeemers;
 Take your Jesus Marxes; choke on their daring.
 Burst with each drop of our baptized blood.

What he laments is the Jews' enticement and entrapment in a Gentile world, and he exhorts,

I need no comforting.
 I walk again my straight and narrow way:
 From Wagner's heathen blare to Hebrew chant
 And the hummed melody.
 I kiss you, cankered Jewish life,
 The joy of homecoming weeps in me.

Glatstein's bellwether poem (written in 1938), which speaks to the downtrodden Jew not to exchange *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) for all the emancipation in the world, echoes the lessons of Ahad Ha'am and Chaim Nahman Bialik on enlightenment and pogroms.

Glatstein anticipated the horror of the *Khurbn*. His reflection on the dawn of the Shoah are expressed with a tear-laced quill on burning parchment. His portrayal of the **life** and anguish of the Jew in the ghetto and in the camps is a vivid reminder that the shtetl, the thousands of small-town Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, is no longer. Some of

his poems are anguished testimony to the difficult privilege of Jewishness and the moral crisis of faith. In "Wagons" (1938) he relates that the *wegener* —sign of a once robust shtetl life—return at night with no one there to greet them. A fearful plea is offered to heaven: "Let me not remain the only one,/Do not pass over me with my thin bones." Yet the Voice of Compassion and Justice does not reply and the heavens do not cry.

In "Smoke" the poet explains and wonders,

Through the chimney of the crematorium,
A Jew wafts upward to eternity.
And as soon as his smoke disappears,
His wife and child curl upward too.
And up above, in the heavenly pale,
Holy ghosts keen and wail.
O God, up where Your glories resound
Not even there can we be found.

What emerges is that the everyday becomes unbearable and the Eternal is uncovered as mystifying and baffling. Reacting to the destruction of the Six Million, Glatstein's elegiac challenge to God, seeded in the rabbinic genre of *klapei shemayya'* (against heaven), is not without merit.

Who will dream You?
Remember You?
Deny You?
Yearn after You?
Who will flee You?,
only to return
over a bridge of longing?
No end to night
for an extinguished people.
Heaven and earth wiped out.
Your tent void of light.
Flicker of the Jews' last hour.
Soon, Jewish God,

Your eclipse.

The suggestion that the Shoah twins Jewish history and the Jewish conception of God is decisive and stark.

For Glatstein, to honor the memory of the brutally murdered is to never forget nor forgive ("I Keep Recalling"). True, his elegies cannot restore the autonomy of the victims, but they reconstruct flesh to bones, personality to numbers, and novelty to *novum* —a written memorial to honor those who suffered and hoped in the eye of the storm.

—Zev Garber

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