

PRE-READING INFORMATION

Before reading the two selected poems, you should be aware of the following:

- Money and valuables (e.g. jewelry, watches) were confiscated from Jewish victims to pay the cost of their own murder (e.g. Jewish money covered the cost of transporting Jews by train to the death camps; the S.S. had to pay the German railroad a fee for the use of the cattle cars; children under 5 paid half-fare!).
- Between 1941 and late 1943, over 1.5 million Jews were killed at Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec.
- Everything taken from Jewish prisoners was registered with the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office in Berlin.
- Records were kept with detailed tables listing exactly what was taken from Jews on the way to the gas chambers: nearly 2,000 boxcars of clothing and material (e.g., underwear, featherbeds, shoes, rags, valuable fixtures and household effects), almost 200,000 watches, roughly 3,000 kilograms of gold, much of it extracted from teeth.
- A grotesque example of how very detail oriented and savvy the Nazis were in taking full “financial” advantage of their victims: 103,614 watches in need of repair were separated from 75,003 working watches in twelve precise categories of value.
- The best items were used to help ethnic German settlers (mostly ethnic Germans living in Poland), Hitler Youth, soldiers and even foreign workers from Nazi occupied countries and prisoners in the concentration camps were clothed with stolen goods from the Jewish prisoners)
- Items which were no longer functional: nothing went to waste for the Nazis removed pieces, such as locks or hinges which could be “recycled.”

Now go to the websites indicated: <http://shamash.org/holocasut/photos> and look at the photos under:

Auschw01.jpg

Auschw02.jpg

Belzec01.jpg

Teeth.jpg

Now read the two poems below:

Shipment to Maidanek

Arrived from scattered cities, several lands,
intact from sea land, mountain land, and plain,

Item: six surgeons, slightly mangled hands,

Item: three poets, hopelessly insane,

Item: a Russian mother and her child,
the former with five gold teeth and usable shoes,
the latter with seven dresses, peasant-styled.

Item: another hundred thousand Jews.

Item: a crippled Czech with a handmade crutch.

Item: a Spaniard with a subversive laugh;
seventeen dozen Danes, nine gross of Dutch.

Total: precisely a million and a half.

They are sorted and marked – the method is up to you.

The books must be balanced, the disposition stated.

Take care that all accounts are neat and true.

Make sure that they are thoroughly cremated.

Ephraim Fogel

A Cartload of Shoes

The wheels hurry onward, onward.

What do they carry?

They carry a cartload

Of shivering shoes.

The wagon like a canopy

In the evening light;

The shoes – clustered

Like people in a dance.

A wedding, a holiday?

Has something binded my eyes?

The shoes – I seem

To recognize them.

The heels go tapping

With a clatter and a din.

From our old Vilna streets
They drive us to Berlin.

I should not ask
But something tears at my tongue
Shoes, tell me the truth
Where are they, the feet?

The feet from those boots
With button like dew –
And here, where is the body
And there, where is the bride?

Where is the child
To fill those shoes
Why has the bride
Gone barefoot?

Through the slippers and the boots
I see those my mother used to wear
She kept them for the Sabbath
Her favorite pair.

And the heels go tapping;
With a clatter and a din,
From our old Vilna streets
They drive us to Berlin.

Abraham Sutzkever
Translated by David G. Roskies

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

1. How do the two poets express the grotesqueness of the Holocaust? (Give specific examples from the poems.)
2. How do the poets relate what you learned about the Holocaust from the pre-reading information?