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Voices of Theresienstadt

Mary Mills

Theresienstadt had a special status among the ghettos and extermination camps created by the Nazis. Its community was not established in an area with a significant Jewish population; it was created in what had previously been a small garrison town located in Czechoslovakia, Terezin. The population of Theresienstadt was drawn mainly from Jews deported from Moravia, Bohemia, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. The Nazi plan for Theresienstadt was based on illusion and deception. The Jews sent to Theresienstadt were eventually to be deported to extermination camps while life at Theresienstadt was to be proclaimed to the outside world as a "model Jewish city." In view of the Nazi propaganda purpose, it is hardly surprising that there were many artists, musicians, writers, and other professionals of note, who were deported to Theresienstadt. ("Theresienstadt: General Survey").

While the physical demands of daily life at Theresienstadt may have been less severe than at other ghettos, the psychological stress was every bit as intense. Deportation and the fear of deportation were a constant threat. Within such an environment, the arts provided a means of resistance as is evidenced by Rafi Schechter's decision to conduct Verdi's *Requiem*, a Christian litany, in a performance at Theresienstadt (Bondy 303-13).

Like the performance of Verdi's *Requiem* but on a much more individual level, the following poems,[1] which I discovered in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, are significant in their defiance of the Nazi attempt to deprive the Jews of Theresienstadt of their humanity. Instead of drowning in the sea of pessimism created by the horrendous conditions of a ghetto environment, the authors infuse their poems with an optimism that bears witness to a resilience of the human spirit and a belief that their struggle will be remembered. Each poem is both an act of resistance directed against the Nazi plan to dehumanize the Jews and an act of faith in the strength that will enable the Jewish spirit to survive.

With the exception of "Roses" and "Apocalypse" by K. L. Gross, all the poems I have translated are unsigned. Emma Goldschederovà, who was head of the Housing Section at Theresienstadt, collected them and gave them to her daughter, Nina Zdenka Ebb. Ms. Ebb donated the poems to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1995. Many of the authors were deported to Auschwitz, where they died.[2]

The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names compiled by Yad Vashem provides very basic information about one Karl Gross, who quite possibly is

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the author of "Roses" and "Apocalypse." He was born in 1864 and was deported from Vienna to Theresienstadt on August 21, 1942. On September 23, 1942, he was deported from Theresienstadt to Treblinka and perished in the Holocaust. This information is taken from a list of Theresienstadt camp inmates given in the *Terezinska Pametni Kniha/Theresienstaedter Gedenkbuch*. The same database provides information about Irma Bach, who is mentioned in "Theresienstadt, am 27. August 1943," a congratulatory poem written to Irma on the occasion of her birthday. Irma Bach was probably Irma Bachova, the name that appears in Yad Vashem's Database of Shoah Victims' Names. Her nationality was Czech, and her name was probably shortened to Bach. Since many Czechs knew German, it is not surprising that a poem in honor of her birthday would have been written in German. According to the database, she entered Theresienstadt on December 2, 1942, and her birthday was August 27, the date on the poem. On October 16, 1944, she was deported to Auschwitz, where she perished.

Translating these poems was a difficult task for several reasons. The subject matter, to say the least, is extremely disturbing. Many of the poems resonate with a tension between the brutal reality of daily life in Theresienstadt and the fragile hope of survival. To render this tension most effectively, I have attempted to keep the rhythm and the rhyme of the original poems, which sometimes has rendered a literal translation all but impossible and required the addition of words in some of the poems, most notably in "Chor der Toten", "Der Flüchtling," "Legende," "Apokalypse (August, 1944)," and "Rosen." The last line of the fourth stanza of "Chor der Toten, " "Neue Kämpfer in dem alten Streit" is translated with "New warriors with an old battle in view." While "in view" is an addition, it is in keeping with new warriors having an old battle before them. In the third line of the first stanza of "Der Flüchtling," "Sie hatten ihn bald wieder eingebracht" is translated as "They captured him again and again." "Again and again" conveys the idea of a situation of ongoing escape and capture that is suggested by the use of "bald" together with "wieder." The addition of "he had to stomp" to the penultimate line of the last stanza of "Legende," is done for the purpose of rhyme and does not detract from the image of a bad hound (Hitler) leading human sheep to their destruction. The last line of the second stanza of "Apokalypse (August, 1944)" ends with the addition of "by His hand." This addition allows the rhyme to be maintained and is in harmony with the poem since the angels are acting as the hand of God in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha. The word "fassen" is used both figuratively and literally in the last two lines of the third stanza of "Rosen." "Ich bin nur Mensch und kann als Mensch nur fassen" has been translated as "I'm only human and only as such can I contemplate." "Uns fasste mehr schon, als ich je geglaubt" has been translated a bit loosely with "We've been victims

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of more, beyond belief run wild." Here "fasste" conveys a seizing, which is intensified by "mehr schon, als ich je geglaubt" ("even more than I could have ever believed"). Because of the implication of physical violence, the translation seems appropriate.

The greatest challenge was conveying the immediacy of the situations described in the poems while finding the voices of the authors. Hence the name I have given to the group of poems I have translated: "Voices of Theresienstadt." Listen carefully and you will hear them.

DER BACH

Der Bach, in seinem Lauf eingedämmt,
Gewinnt an Kraft und kann die Räder treiben.
Die weiche Luft, gepresst und eingezwängt,
Gewinnt an Kraft und kann den Fels zerstäuben:

So kann es auch mit uns einmal geschehen,
Wenn wir nach langer Frist vom Grunde steigen,
Dass in der Tiefe Tiefe wir erwarben,

Und dass die Kräfte, die uns scheinbar starben
Sich der erstaunten Welt nur reiner zeigen.

In aller Qual, in allem Stilleliegen,

In aller Sehnsucht unerfüllter Nächte,
Atmet das Leben doch in vollen Zügen.
Aus Blut und Tränen wachsen neu die Mächte.

THE BROOK

The brook, whose flow is dammed up,
Gains power and can drive the wheels.

The gentle breeze, pressed and squeezed,
Gains power and can pulverize the rock:

Thus it can also happen to us—
When we rise from the ground after a long time,

It will be seen that in the deep we acquired depth,
And our powers that appeared to suffer death,

Will show greater strength to an astonished world.
In all the agony, in all the keeping quiet,

In all the longing of many an unfulfilled night,
Life continues to draw deep breaths.
Renewed from blood and tears is our might.

CHOR DER TOTEN

Vor dem nächtlichen Himmel
Stehet ein Feuerschein,
Greift mit tastenden Armen
Tief in das Dunkel hinein.
Das ist die Fackel des Todes,
Das ist das Sterbefanal!
Schuldloses Feuer, wie loht es!
Glühendes Totenmal!

Hier in tosender Esse
Bringt man die Opfer zur Ruh'.
Hier bei nächtlicher Messe
Lacht man das Amen dazu.
Und sie glauben auf immer

CHORUS OF THE DEAD

Against the night's sky
Stands a fiery glow,
Grasping with searching arms
Deep into darkness below.
It is the torch of death,
It is the beacon of the dead!
How intensely the innocent fire
Smolders, a monument to the dead!

Here in the raging flue,
The victims are laid to rest.
Here at the evening mass,
An Amen is said in jest.
They believe that every deed

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Taten und Spuren verwischt.
Aber es tönt aus dem Schimmer,
Aber es klingt aus dem Eicht!

Hörst du die singende Flamme,
Hörst du des Funkens Gesang,
Der aus dem glühenden Stammen
Gleich einem Samenkorn sprang?
Feuer reisst sprühend die Funken
Wie eine Garbe empor,
Und ich lausche versunken
Einem dämonischen Chor:

Nimmer gehn der Erde wir verloren,
Die uns Mutter bleibt in allem Leid.
Nur die blinden, ahnungslosen Toren
Wähnen uns nun außer Raum und Zeit.
Neuerstanden sind wir neugeboren
Neue Kämpfer in dem alten Streit.

Da wir brachen durch die enge Schranke,
Die das Leben hart in Fesseln hält.
Wurden ganz wir Geist und ganz Gedanke,
Und das fiel von uns das Morsche, Kranke
Wie der Schorf, der von der Wunde fällt.

Leben wird durch Tod nur neugeboren,
Durch den verjüngert sich die Welt.
Erstlinge sind wir und auserkoren
Für ein Sein, das neuen Sinn erhält.
Nimmer gehn der Erde wir verloren,
Denn aus uns baut sich auf's Neu' die Welt,
Aus der Flamme sind wir neugeboren,
Glut und Feuer, das die Nacht erhellt.

And its trace will vanish.
But from the glimmer and the light
There resounds strongly "Take heed!"

Do you hear the singing flame,
Do you hear the song of the embers
That sprang from the glowing root
As from a seed without members?
Fire reduces embers to sparks
Like a cluster upward bound,
And I listen totally absorbed
By a demonic chorus' sound:

The earth will never forget us,
She remains our mother in all our pain.
Only blind, clueless fools imagine us
Beyond time and space with no domain.
We've arisen and are born anew,
New warriors with an old battle in view.

For we broke through the tight chain,
That held our life firmly fettered.
We became whole in mind and spirit,
From disease and decay untethered,
As a scab falls from a wound without pain.

Only through death is life reborn,
Through death the world is renewed.
We are the chosen first-born,
For whom existence has new meaning.
The earth will never forget us,
From us the world will be recast,
From the flame we are reborn,
Embers and fire brighten the night past.

DER FLÜCHTLING

Er hatte den Herren viel Ärger gemacht,
Denn er wollte den Ketten entfliehen,
Sie hatten ihn bald wieder eingebracht,
Um ihn vor Gericht zu ziehen.

Wie ein Vogel war er dem Käfig entschlüpft
Wenn die Frühlingslüfte ihn grüßen
Man sagte, er werde nun aufgeknüpft
Und sollte am Galgen büssen.

Und man fand der entrüsteten Worte viel,
Denn er hatte dazu noch gestohlen,
Er besaß so wenig an Ehrgefühl,
Sich Essen und Kleider zu holen.

THE FUGITIVE

To his masters, he was a constant pain.
Slavery's bonds he wanted to thwart.
They captured him again and again,
And brought him for sentencing to court.

Like a bird from his cage, out he'd slipped.
When spring's winds bid him Good Day,
He'll be strung up soon enough they quipped.
On the gallows, he shall have to pay.

They uttered many an angry word.
By stealing, he'd shown his greed.
His sense of honor had become blurred;
He took food and clothes to fill his need.

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Man riss ihm die Lumpen vom Leib herab
Und band seine Hände mit Riemen,
So kühlte man an ihm die Wut erst ab,
Und peitschte ihm blutige Striemen.

Denn er hatte den Herren viel Ärger, gemacht
Er hatte sie bitter beleidigt,
Er hatte ihr Herrenrecht missacht,
Und seine Freiheit verteidigt.

Sie schlugen ihn ohne Bedenken wund
Und taten bedenkenlos richten,
Er war ja viel weniger wie ein Hund,
Ein Geschöpf kaum wert zu vernichten.

Und als die Nacht, die friedvolle, kam,
Vernahm sie ein hilfloses Stöhnen,
Da rang sie die Hände in schweigendem Gram
Und die Sterne glänzten.

Stripped of his rags, he was laid bare;
Straps were used to bind his hands.
His tormentors' rage cooled hardly a hair
As the whipped welts bloodied the bands.

To his masters, he was a constant pain,

By his insults, they were offended
Their masters' right felt his distain,
While his freedom he defended.

Unconscionably he was hurt and hit;
They punished him without a second thought.
The worth of a dog he had not the least bit,
A creature hardly worth killing they thought.

And as the night came peacefully and fell,
To a helpless moaning she listened.
In silent sorrow she wrung her hands as well

And the stars glistened.

LEGENDE

Ein schlauer Hirte blinder Menschenschafe

Vernahm einstmals des Herren Stimme: "Sprich,
Was tust Du, Mensch?" - "Ich hüte Deine Schafe!"
Da sprach der Herr: "Vor allem hüte dich!"

Erschrocken rief der Hirt: "Du meine Güte!
Ich soll mich hüten! Dass mich Gott behüte!"
Sprach's, ging und liess die Schäflein schnöd' im Stich.
Die Herde, die sich gottverlassen fühlte,
Irrt ängstlich blökend in dem weiten Rund

Und war schon froh um jeden bösen Hund,

Dass er ein wenig sie zusammenhielte.
Sie suchten tappend einen Halt zu fassen,

Um auf den rechten Weg sich führ'n zu lassen.
Plötzlich rief einer: "Freunde! Sieg und Heil!

Ich bin erleuchtet! Mir war Glück zuteil!

LEGEND

Tending a group of blind human sheep, a sly shepherd
Once heard God's voice: "Speak, fellow,

What are you up to?" "I'm guarding your herd!"
Thereupon God said: "Protect *yourself* from every foe!"
Startled, the shepherd called: "Goodness me!
Protect myself! Under God's watch may I be!"
This said, from the little sheep scornfully did he go.
The herd felt abandoned by God and wandered,
Lost and afraid, bleating to the far reaches of the grounds

And was happy to meet any one of the bad hounds,

Hoping that he might hold them a bit together.
Groping about, they sought to secure a foothold,

So that on the right path would be led the entire fold.
Suddenly, one of them called out: "Friends! Hail, Victory!

I am enlightened! Good fortune was granted to me!

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Die Vorsehung, sie ist mir wohl gewogen:
Ich fasste, zog und fühlte mich gezogen!"
Da folgten jubelnd sie dem Gottgeweihten.
Durch fette Weiden hin auf rauher Straße,
Liessen sie gläubig in den Sumpf sich leiten.
Voran ging er in prachtvoller Ekstase:
Beseelt vom Genius der großen Zeiten
Zog er sich selber vorwärts an der Nase.

Toward me Providence is apparently well disposed:
I caught hold, pulled and felt myself transposed!"
Then they followed God's anointed with great joy and pomp.
On a desolate street away from the lush meadows,
Firm in their faith, they let themselves be led into the swamp.
Arrayed in splendid ecstasy, to lead the way he arose:
Inspired by the genius of great ages, he had to stomp
And pulled himself forward by his very own nose.

APOKALYPSE (August, 1944)
K. L. Gross

Es braust der Himmel, es dröhnt die Luft,
Die Erde wird zur Leichengruft
In Sodom und Gomorrha.

Die Engel des Herrn ziehn über das Land
Und säen Schrecken, Verderben und Brand
Über Sodom und Gomorrha.

Denn sie haben Leiber und Seelen verderbt,
Und das Gut missbraucht, das die Väter vererbt,
Sie machten das Leben zum Narrenspiel
Und achteten der Gesetze nicht viel
In Sodom und Gomorrha.

Sie haben den Geist in Ketten gelegt
Und einen Bastard gehegt und gepflegt.
Sie haben auf ihre Maschinen vertraut
Und den Geist missachtet, der sie gebaut,
In Sodom und Gomorrha.

Sie haben die Weisen und Seher verhöhnt
Und haben gelacht, wenn ein Opfer gestöhnt.
Sie haben geschändet Boten des Lichts
Sie haben gelacht tags des Gerichts
In Sodom und Gomorrha.

Nun fließt die Schale des Zorns übers Land,

APOCALYPSE (August, 1944)
K. L. Gross

The heavens howl, the winds pound,
The earth becomes a huge burial ground
In Sodom and Gomorrha.

The Lord's angels move swiftly over the land
Sowing terror, destruction and fire by His hand
Over Sodom and Gomorrha.

For the mass ruin of body and spirit did they countenance,
And misused the goods from their fathers inheritance,
They have made life a fool's game
And left the laws of morality lame
In Sodom and Gomorrha.

Upon the mind they have laid chains
Attending to the needs a bastard feigns.
To machines they have shown their trust,
To the mind that built them only disgust,
In Sodom and Gomorrha.

They have scorned the prophetic and wise
And have laughed about a victim's cries.

They have defiled messengers of the Light
Even laughed at Judgment Day's might
In Sodom and Gomorrha

Now the scales of wrath flow over the land,

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Und die Engel säen Verderben und Brand
Über Sodom und Gomorrha.

ROSEN

K.L. Gross - (Herbst 1943)
Der Rosen Duft ist ewig mir verleidet,
Seitdem das Wort mir nichts als Jammer birgt.
Was ward aus ihnen, die mich einst begleitet?
Verhungert, totgeschlagen und erwürgt.

Was ward aus Dir, der mir die Welt gewesen?
Der einem müden Herzen Hoffnung gab,
Der mir vom Schicksal schien wie auserlesen?
Ich steh vor allem wie vor einem Grab.

Es mag ein großer Sinn in allem walten,

Die schweren Wehen einer neuen Zeit,
Ein grosses prächtig Einzug hält.
Ich bin nur Mensch und fühle nichts als Leid.
Ich möchte lieben, und ich muß doch hassen.
So hasst die Mutter, der das Kind geraubt.

Ich bin nur Mensch und kann als Mensch nur fassen,
Uns fasste mehr schon, als ich je geglaubt.

Ich klage jeden an, der es geduldet,

Der ruhig zusieht, wie man Menschen tritt.

Ich klage jeden an: "Du hast es verschuldet,
Da Du gelitten, dass Dein Bruder litt!"

Und sag' es den Gerechten und den Frommen:
"Ihr werdet alle büssen, Mann für Mann!"
Es muß die Hölle über alle kommen,
Bis man dieses Volk einst lieben kann.

Angels sow destruction and fire by God's hand
Over Sodom and Gomorrha.

ROSES

K.L. Gross - (Fall, 1943)
The fragrance of roses is forever spoiled for me,
Since for me only misery does the word hold.

Where might my erstwhile companions be?

Starved, beaten and strangled: among death's cold.

What happened to you, the one who was my world?
Who gave hope to make a tired heart brave,
Who seemed chosen as if by fate my way hurled?
I stand before all as though before a grave.

A grand purpose might be at work in everything,
A new time's hard labor pain,
A great, splendid arrival will bring.
I'm only human and feel nothing but pain.

I would like to love but I must, nonetheless, hate.
The hate of the mother, who is robbed of her child.
I'm only human and only as such can I contemplate,
We've been victims of more, beyond belief run wild.
I accuse everyone who lets it happen just the same,
Whoever watches calmly while trampled people cry.
I accuse everyone: "You are, all of you, to blame,
For having allowed your brother to suffer and die!"
And tell this to the righteous and the pious:

"You will all pay, one after the other!"
Hell will have to extirpate the malicious,
Before this people can be greeted as brother.

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WIE WERDE ICH DIES VOLK EINST WIEDERFINDEN

Wie werde ich dies Volk einst wiederfinden,
Das wie verhext schien, als ich es verliess.
Das sich gefiel in tausend blinden Sünden

Und lachend seine Warner von sich stiess.
Ein müdes Volk von Bettlern in Ruinen!
Das wird das Erbe sein der Heldenzeit.
Und doch, ich weiss, ich werde unter ihnen,
Dann leben, sie von einem Alp befreit.

Ich weiss genau, ich werde wieder lieben
Ein Volk, das unterm Kreuze geht und stöhnt.
Der Übermut nur hatte mich vertrieben,
Der tolle Wahn, der noch das Opfer höhnt.

HOW WILL I EVER FIND THIS PEOPLE AGAIN

How will I ever find this people again,
Upon whom, as I left, a spell seemed cast.
Whom a thousand blind sins served to entertain
As warnings were jokes to be forgotten fast.
A tired people, ruined beggars' woe!
Will be the legacy of this heroic epoch.
Yet, I will live among them, I know
When they're freed from a nightmare's yoke.

I know definitely I will love some day
A people that bears a cross and moans.

Only their wantonness drove me away,
Their mad delusion mocking the victim's groans.

WEIHNACHTEN 1943

Eine stille Nacht, eine Heilige Nacht!
Acht Jahre sind so vergangen,
Der ehernen Zeit zum Opfer gebracht.
Was hab ich dafür empfangen?

Meine alte Welt ist vergangen und tot.
Was ist davon mir geblieben?
Die Mutter starb mir in Kummer und Not,

Wie hatte sie oft noch geschrieben:

Eine stille Nacht, eine heilige Nacht!
Es klingt wie mit Engelszungen.
Was mir die Zeit auch an Gaben gebracht,
Ich habe sie fleissig verschlungen.

Pralinen voll Galle und Bitterkeit,

Konfekt voller Gift und voll Hader,
Die reizenden Gaben der ehernen Zeit.
Ich frass sie, vielleicht litt ich Schaden.

Eine stille Nacht, eine heilige Nacht!
Man gab, und ich habe genommen,
Ich habe genommen und habe gedacht,
Das Christkind sei zu mir gekommen.

Ich hielt mich aller der Gaben für wert,
Ich nahm und tat mich nicht sperren.

CHRISTMAS 1943

A silent night, a holy night!
Eight years have passed this way,
Victim of this brazen time's might.
What have I received for this? I say.

My old world is gone without tomorrow.
What of it has remained for me?
My mother died of worry and sorrow,

How often she'd written like a plea:

A silent night, a holy night!
Like angels'tongues it must sound.
Time's gifts eased my plight,
I've swallowed all the bits down.

Pralines full of bitterness and gall,

Chocolates with poison and discord they'd fill,
Charming gifts of this brazen time, all.
I devoured them, maybe I became ill.

A silent night, a holy night!
They gave, and I've taken some,
I've taken, I thought, all right,
To me the Christ child has come.

I thought all the gifts had value,
I took and couldn't resist anything.

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Man hat mir reichlich und gut beschert.
Ich danke recht schön, meine Herren!

Eine stille Nacht, eine heilige Nacht!
Ihr Herren, meine Verehrung!
Nun warte ich auf eine andere Nacht
Und auf eine andere Bescherung!!

Many and good gifts were my due.
Gentlemen, thanks for everything.

A silent night, a holy night!
Gentlemen, you have my devotion!
Now I wait for another night
And for another gift-giving motion!!

IMMER DER GLEICHE

Sturmwind fährt um die Hütte im Wald,

Drinnen herrscht Hunger und Jammer.
Leer der Schrank und der Ofen kalt,
Mäuse selbst meiden die Kammer.
Und in der bleichen Kinderschar
Sitzet die Mutter und harret,
Und die streicht ihrem Jüngsten durch das Haar,
Lauscht, ob die Tür nicht knarret:

Habt nur Geduld! Bald wird's an nichts fehlen,
Kinderchen, betet, der Vater geht stehlen!

Hoch in den Felsen das Räubernest,
Längst ist die Schar schon entschwunden.
Rüstet man nicht schon zum Beutefest
Träumt man von trunkenen Stunden
Aber die Alte ist sorgenschwer,
Denn auch der Kaufmann hat Waffen.
Scheltend streicht sie im Schlosse umher,
Macht sich voll Unruh' zu schaffen:

Wenn es nur klappt! Dann kann's an nichts fehlen,
Leute, betet, der Hauptmann geht stehlen!

Über das Volk hängt die Kriegswolke schwer.
Wer hat ein Recht zu bangen?
Gott führt selbst unser siegreiches Heer,
Wir dürfen alles verlangen!
Was der Einzelne nicht darf, das muß jetzt sein,
Denn es gilt, ja, dem Vaterlande,
Und voll gläub'gem Vertrauen blickt auf zu ihm
Die berechtigte Räuberbande:

ALWAYS THE SAME MAN

About the hut in the woods, the stormy winds scold,
Inside hunger and misery rule supreme.
The cupboard is bare; the oven remains cold,
Even the mice find the room too extreme.
And amid the throng of pale young children
The mother sits anxiously waiting on the floor,
Through the youngest's hair, her fingers hasten,
She listens intently for the creak of the door:

Be patient! Soon we'll have everything,

Little children, pray, father's out stealing!

High in the rocks, the nest where robbers

The flock has all long since departed.
Isn't a booty feast already to be made
In a dream of hours full-hearted?
But heavy with worry the old woman looks,
For weapons the merchant has also.
Scolding, she prowls around the castle's nooks,
Her distress rocks inwardly to and fro.

If only it goes well! Then nothing will be missing,
People, pray, the captain's out stealing!

Over the nation, a heavy war cloud alarms.

To be afraid who has the right?
God himself leads our victorious call to arms,
We can demand everything by might!
What the individual daren't, must now be,

For that is meant, afterall, for the Fatherland,
And full of belief and trust, they look up to him

The morally justified robber band:

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Führer! Wir folgen! Du brauchst nur befehlen!
Betet zum Herrgott! Der Führer geht stehlen!

THERESIENSTADT, AM 27. AUGUST 1943

Wir vier von der löblichen Ublikation
bringen die herrlichsten Gratulation.
Verschont sei von jedem Weh' und Ach
im neuen Jahr die I r m a B a c h.
Leider sind wir - o Leid und Harm —
an gebräuchlichen Gaben furchtbar arm.
Wir haben nur unsere gute Gesinnung
wir Girls von der Uebersiedlungsinnung [sic].

Wir wünschen der Irma treu und ehrlich
Ein Lebensjahr, das wenig beschwerlich,
das in Vielen entwickelt zum Guten den Keim
und uns bald zurückbringt in unser Heim.
Bis dahin sei Irma gegeben die Kraft,
sich zu widmen der Verlassenschaft.
Uns alle umschlinge ein enges Band,
bis jede von uns ihre Heimat fand.

KAIN

Es war an einem jener ersten Tage,
Von denen uns die alten Schriften künden,
Die tief und reif voll schweren Sinnes sind.

Auf wilder Heide stand ein grimm'ger Mann.
Er liess den Blick über die Öde schweifen
Und dachte finster eines stillen Toten,
Den er in seinem Blut gelassen hatte.
Er war vor jener Stimme auf der Flucht,
Vor der es für ihn kein Entrinnen gab,
Lag sie doch wie ein Stachel in der Brust.

Und wieder klang es ihm wie Windeswehen:
"Kain, Kain! Wo ist Dein Bruder Abel? Sprich!"
Da murrte trotzig er in Kinderart:
"Herr, soll ich meines Bruders Hüter sein?"

Es folgte Stille. Und es schien dem Mann

Führer! We follow! Just command what you're feeling!
Pray to the Lord God! The Führer's out stealing!

THERESIENSTADT, AUGUST 27, 1943

It's the laudable duty of us four
our very best wishes forth to pour.
Every ache and pain be spared our dear,
dear Irma Bach in the new year.
Unfortunately we are - o suffering and grief —
In useful gifts poor beyond belief.
We have only our good disposition
We girls relocated to a new position.

Truly and sincerely, we wish Irma dear
In her life a not so troublesome year,
When for many the seed for good will thrive

And home again we will all soon arrive.
May Irma be given strength till then
To endure a loneliness beyond her ken.
May a close bond us all surround,
Till each of us her homeland has found.

CAIN

It was on one of the earliest days,
Made known to us by ancient scriptures,
Full of deep and profound meaning.

Upon the wild heath stood a fierce man.

His glance wandered across the wasteland.
Darkly he recalled the lifeless body
He had left lying in its own blood.
He was fleeing the voice,
For him there was no escape,
Like a thorn it pricked deep within his breast.

Again it sounded like the wind whistling:

"Cain, Cain! Where is your brother Abel? Speak!"
Thereupon he grumbled defiantly like a child:
"Lord, should I be my brother's keeper?"

There was silence. To the man it appeared

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Als fielen seine armen kleinen Worte
Wie Kiesel tief in einen dunklen Schlund,
Aus dem kein Aufschlag und kein Echo kommt.

As if his wretched, little words descended
Like pebbles deep into a dark abyss,
With neither thud nor echo.

Und wieder schwoll es an wie Sturmessausen
Und aus der Höhe sprachs [sic]: "Ja, Kain, du sollst!"
Du hast des Menschen Sendung nie begriffen,
Und ewig wird sie Dir verschlossen bleiben.

And again it grew louder like the howling of a storm
And from above there came: "Yes, Cain, you should!"
You have never understood the mission of the human race,
And it will remain closed to your mind for eternity.

Ich schuf das Tier bewehrter als den Menschen-
Und dennoch gab ich es in seine Hand!

I created the animal better armed than man-
And nonetheless, I placed it under his dominion!

Ich schuf es schöner, schneller, flinker, stärker,
Und setzt' ihn doch zum Herren über alle!
Das Tier kennt nur den engen Kreis des Ich,
Und nur als eine dunkle Ahnung liegt
Das Wissen um ein Du in seiner Seele.
Schuf ich den Menschen nicht zu höh'rem Ziele?
Grub ich nicht meine Sehnsucht in sein Herz?
Ich warte auf Ihn, denn ich bin allein!

It was more beautiful, quicker, more agile, stronger,
Yet I made him master over all creatures!
The animal's knowledge is limited to itself,
And only as dark suspicion does the knowledge
Of another's being reside within its soul.
Did I not create man for a higher purpose?
Did I not etch my longing in his heart?
I am waiting for him, for I am alone!

Du hast des Menschen Sendung nicht begriffen,
Und ewig wird sie Dir verschlossen bleiben!
Ein Zeichen sei Dir, dass der Mensch dich kenne:
Du wirst der Erde klügste Bestie sein,
In nichts als der Gestalt vom Tier verschieden,
Und nur in der Gestalt dem Menschen ähnlich!
Unstet und flüchtig sollst du sein, und nie

Wirst du und deinesgleichen jene Ruhe
Erfahren, die den Mensch zum Menschen macht.

You have never understood the mission of man,
And it will remain closed to your mind for eternity!
Let this be a sign by which people will know you:
You will be the most clever beast on earth,
Nothing but your form will distinguish you from the animal,
And only your form will bear a human resemblance!
A restless fugitive is what you shall be, and never

Will you or your kind experience the calm
That defines the essence of being human.

Die Stimme schwieg, und Kain erkannte, dass
Er heute sie zum letztenmal vernommen.

The voice was silent, and Cain recognized that
He had heard it today for the last time.

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Scheu wich er von der Stätte seines Urteils.
Gehetzt entfloh er in ein fernes Land
Und zeugte ein Geschlecht von stolzen Kriegern.

Frightened, he withdrew from the place of his judgment.
Hunted, he fled to a distant land
And produced a race of proud warriors.

Notes

1. These poems are part of the Nina Zdenka Ebb Collection, RG-04.056*08, located in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives and are used with permission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. There are thirty poems in the collection. The poems I have translated first appeared on a website created and maintained by Dr. Margaret Lincoln, <http://mandelproject.us/Mills.htm>.

2. The circumstances surrounding the poems and the probable fate of their authors were communicated to me by Henry Mayer, Chief Archivist, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in an email.

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