

Shoah *Train*

P O E M S



WILLIAM

Shoah Train

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W I L L I A M H E Y E N



etruscan press

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*Und Zeit geht hin, und Zeit nimmt zu, und Zeit
is wie ein Rückfall einer langen Krankheit.*

(& Time passes, & Time adds to itself, & Time
is like a falling back into abiding sickness.)

RAINER MARIA RILKE
("Requiem for a Friend")

October: grapes hung like the fists of a girl
gassed in her prayer. *Memory,*
I whisper, *stay awake.*

ILYA KAMINSKY
"A Toast"

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Prayer

It is the 1920s. In Paradise,
on its podium in a library,
an unabridged dictionary
turns its vellum leaves,
words like this one

mana

appear in visitors' minds,
& we are the glad dead
who study & write here
in white gold light under

the muses' alabaster eyes.
Lord of Shoah,
may we remain in Eden
where all that transpires later
forgets us, & always will again.

The Annunciation

Munich's *Odeonplatz*, August 2, 1914.
Stone lions stare out across the square.
In the crowd of thousands—
a photograph exists—
one young man appears in a state of ecstasy,
mouth agape, eyes wide
& slashed with light,
as though, in these moments, a divine destiny
were being revealed to him:

in *Mein Kampf* he'd write,
"Those hours appeared like redemption
from the troubling moods of my youth,
and I am not ashamed to say that,
overwhelmed by passionate enthusiasm,
I had fallen on my knees and thanked Heaven
out of my overflowing heart
for granting me the immense fortune
of being allowed to live in those times."...

We close our eyes: disembodied,
chorus of witness, we float down
into that photograph,
surround the one riven:
he falls to his knees: we know
what is next, & next:
we look up to heaven in supplication,
but know, now, we are helpless
in this roar of light.

Zeitpost

1.

From Fort Landsberg the Fuhrer
asked Gottfried Wagner's grandmother
for writing paper.

She sent him, she said, masses
of fine paper.

He wrote words on this paper. These words,
written in passion, became his sentences, paragraphs, his book.
I don't know if the drafts of *Mein Kampf* drafted

on writing paper
sent to the Fuhrer
by Winifred Wagner
still exist, still bear
his hand toward the construction of the crematoria,

or if they have gone to compost,
as he has, except

for a few bones somewhere,
a few molars.

2.

When words are written
in righteous passion
on fine paper made with linen—

when words upwell from injury & hate,
will they nevertheless exist

even if the paper on which they were written
decomposes?—in this case, a moot question
posed by me to myself in a margin in Gottfried's own

Twilight of the Wagners.

Words the Fuhrer
pressed into that paper
still transform them-
selves in the *Götterdämmerung* of gas & flame

unless, unless, . . . but there is no unless
unless

we call back the spirit who delivered that paper,
& then not even then.

Mutilation, 1934

For the first time, a woman is allowed to see
her wounded husband, brought back from the East.
She finds him mutilated, missing an ear,
half his face, an arm. "It's the Jews,"
she screams, "it's all the Jews' fault."

Jewish Doctors, Berlin Story, 1938

A man took his wife to the hospital to give birth.
A picture of Jesus hung over the bed.
The man said, "Nurse, that picture must be removed—

"I don't want Jewboy as my child's first sight."
The nurse replied that she herself had no authority,
but would be glad to process his request. . . .

In the evening, he received a telegram from the doctor:
"You have a son. The picture did not need
to be removed. Your child is blind."

USA

One day teen-ager Gottfried Wagner,
great-grandson of the titanic composer,
explored a shed that housed
his father's motorcycle. In the sidecar,

in two cardboard boxes, he discovered
aluminum cans rusted shut. Later,
he pried them open with a screwdriver. Inside:
reels of film—his grandmother, his uncle,

his aunts with "*unser selige Adolf*," our soulful
Adolf (*USA* in family code), all so happy,
assured already of that Final Victory
to come. We know them, these strollers,

these dancers & strutters
who recede again inside aluminum
that rusts in Time. (The photographer
is Gottfried's & our hidden father.)

Chimney

My father said don't ask from such things.
He didn't want to hear it what's the use,
goddamnit, be quiet, & then we were or else.
His brothers were dead & the Jews never mind
& the war was over & this was America where
anything could happen & we shouldn't forget it.
What thinks you you're so smart, & he laughed.
He'd raise his hand, & threaten, but not hit.
What he did in the war: carpentry foreman
at Bethlehem Steel in Brooklyn against the Axis,
the bottom line. Germans make good Americans,
he said, but lousy Germans. He smoked
three packs a day & hid behind his smoke.

Ocean

In 1935 the *Bremen*, a German liner,
flew its swastika in New York Harbor.
Protestors boarded, tore the *Hackenkreuz* down.
Hitler protested this American desecration....

In 1971, with wife & children, I sailed the *Bremen*
on its last Atlantic crossing.
The ship left New York early on a fall morning,
years of black water reddening eastward in the sun.

Dedication, 1939

The line of WWI veterans,
my mother's father among them,
stood at attention on a Bremerhaven dock.
Gusts of brine wind lapped
at the Fuhrer's black leather coat,
but he took his time,

took each man's hands in his own,
thanked each for his sacrifice.
He of the luminous wounded blue eyes,
seeing my grandfather's
prisoner-of-war medal, asked where,
& how long. "Russia, two years,"

my grandfather answered,
then added, "I escaped."
His beloved Fuhrer embraced him
in moments of blue flame.
Behind them, *Das Reich*,
their new battleship, loomed.

Ribbons

My mother
in her nostalgia
mentioned that
in old Bremerhaven
a Jew—Lebental,
or Lieventhal,
something like that—
came to her father
& implored would
Herr Wörmke please
provide him the addresses
of his daughters
in America—
Hanne, Lena, Erna—
so that when
his own family
left Germany
they could be
in contact
for possible help
in getting settled.

Well, my mother said,
L. was a Jew.
Her father did
not want
to get involved.
He said he
was sorry,
but no...
What became
of that family