
Poetry from the Theresienstadt Transit Camp, 1941-1945

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“Doch will’s das Schicksal anders haben,
Erlebe ich die Freiheit nicht,
Und werde ich auch hier begraben,
Wird weiter leben mein Gedicht.”

-- Walter Lindenbaum¹

When artists represent horrifying and traumatic events, discussions inevitably ensue over the appropriateness and necessity of such representations. It comes as no surprise that the debate about the function of art after the Holocaust has been particularly contentious in Germany and has been conducted with increased visibility and urgency since the country's unification.² As early as the 1950s, however, German philosopher and social critic Theodor W. Adorno shaped West German debates about art's role in addressing genocide. Questioning the capacity of traditional aesthetic forms to convey such horror in a culture characterized by mass consumption, he specifically directed his critique toward lyric poetry written after the event. “Cultural criticism,” Adorno stated in his essay “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” written in 1949, “finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And it corrodes even the knowledge why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (34). Adorno’s argument that the rupture in the continuum of German history must not be forgotten and that the limits of representation have been reached within the traditional parameters of art has been both applauded and critiqued. Despite his subsequent explications and modifications, scholars and writers repeatedly seized upon the phrase “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” often isolating it from its immediate and wider content and reading it, for example, as a prescriptive ban on poetry.³ As late as 2006, Lawrence Langer observed in *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* that the “after Auschwitz” citation remains an “authoritative force” and has not lost “its continuing appeal” (123). Many German language studies on the poetry of the Holocaust, for instance, continue to frame and position their work in light of these debates.⁴

Scholarship on the literature of the Holocaust continues to address a myriad of topics in a diverse body of German language texts written after 1945. Different generations of Jewish and non-Jewish writers have explored recurring questions such as the handling of collective/individual guilt and the transference of collective/individual memory. They have reflected on the precariousness of language in general and of German in particular as well as on the intricacies of identity constructions after the Holocaust. Aside from poetry, prevalent representational modes have included autobiography, fiction, and documentary theater. Yet, what by and large has been absent from scholarship are investigations of German language poetry written *in* the various Nazi camps, ghettos, and prisons. Scant knowledge of this writing on the one hand and a prevailing poetic discourse privileging traditional aesthetic analysis on the other, has prompted the far too general conjecture that poetry written in spaces of confinement mostly consists of clumsy meter as well as dull rhymes and displays inadequate figurative language.⁵ While being recognized as human documents (Dieter Lamping) or political manifestations (Wolfgang Emmerich), these texts have “failed” as poetry.⁶ Scholar Hermann Korte even questioned—albeit indirectly—the existence of such poetry altogether, when he remarked in 1999:

Dagegen entziehen sich die Orte des Holocaust dem Gedicht in einem prinzipiellen Sinne. Das lyrische Subjekt rekonstruiert Erfahrungsräume und produziert Bilder und Vorstellungen von der Topographie des Grauens und des Todes. Von den Erfahrungen selbst ist es ausgeschlossen.

[In principal, the places of the Holocaust elude poetry. The lyrical subject reconstructs spaces of experience and produces images, as well as conceptions of the topography of horror and death. But it is excluded from actual experience.] (25)⁷

This negative assessment not only devalues poetic texts written during the Holocaust but also denies them a representative capability of *l'univers concentrationnaire*.⁸

In the last twenty years, only a small number of literary scholars have explored poetry written in the camps, ghettos, and prisons while the Holocaust unfolded. Even fewer researchers have responded to initial attempts by Michael Moll and Katja Klein, Constanze Jaiser and Andrés J. Nader to collect and gather poems from the archives, to make them accessible to a larger audience, and to create a framework for literary analysis.⁹ Jaiser’s German-language study on poetry from the Ravensbrück concentration camp (2000) and Nader’s analysis of German-language poems from a number of different sites (2007), for example, are informed by research on the construction of testimonial writing and its intersection with trauma. Apart from these more recent publications much of *Germanistik*,

however, has failed to formulate essential questions for the study of poetry from the Holocaust within the context of Holocaust literature. This disproportion not only elucidates the lack of a clear definition of the terms, but it also demonstrates that the canonization of Holocaust literature is well under way.¹⁰ Thus a diverse body of poetic texts and writers remains at the periphery of German academic memory, excluding important individual voices in the representation of atrocity. Walter Lindenbaum's poems and those written by others might have indeed "lived on" and survived in anthologies and archives, but unfortunately they have largely been forgotten in the study of literature.

A close reading of Peter Kien's poem "Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen," written between 1941 and 1945 in the Theresienstadt (Terezín) transit camp, provides a useful complement to current Holocaust research.¹¹ Kien's poem demonstrates the importance of poetry in a camp setting in general and in Theresienstadt in particular. In light of scholarship by James E. Young, the poem also lends itself to consideration as testimonial writing that has a far-reaching relevance to the study of poetry from the camps. Interpretation of "Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen" illustrates how multifarious readings of poetry written in Theresienstadt offer vital insights into the collective poetry of the Holocaust.

As in other concentration camps and ghettos throughout Europe, many prisoners in Theresienstadt found artistic outlets to express the traumatic experience of deportation and imprisonment. Some created art to bear witness and to document daily life, yet for others, as Sibyl H. Milton and Marjorie Lamberti have shown in their work, the creation of art served as a temporary flight from reality and as a strategy for survival. Testimonial and imaginative writing, in form of chronicles and diaries as well as cabaret performances, libretti, plays, and poetry, constituted an important part of the spiritual resistance against dehumanization. As Sara Horowitz points out in her book *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*, the act of writing provided the writer in the ghettos with

a means to persevere through difficult times without giving way to despair. Against an onslaught deliberately designed to dehumanize the ghetto inhabitants, writing preserved their identity, reminding them that they were thinking, autonomous human beings. For private diarists as for archivists, writing allowed the "little bit you" to prevail over the "90 percent ... stomach," if only provisionally. Ringelblum proclaimed in his notes, "Let is be said that though we have been sentenced to death and know it, we have not lost our human features; our minds are as active as they were before the war (299)." (59)

Poetry proved to be an especially popular genre in this setting. In her autobiography *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (1992), Ruth Klüger elaborates on its

versatile “usefulness.” In September 1942, she and her mother were forced to relocate to Theresienstadt from Vienna, the city where she was born. Not only did creating and reciting poetry provide comfort and support in the new surroundings but it also offered a balanced, coherent, and well-structured language in times of utter chaos. Writing poetry—as she explains it—constituted “ein poetischer und therapeutischer Versuch diesem sinnlosen und destruktiven Zirkus, in dem wir untergingen, ein sprachlich Ganzes, Gereimtes entgegenzuhalten; also eigentlich das älteste ästhetische Anliegen” [“a poetic and therapeutic attempt to stem the tide of this senseless and destructive circus in which we were drowning with a linguistic wholeness. Basically, the oldest aesthetic goal”] (127).¹² Klüger also explains how reciting poetry helped to pass time, during roll call in Auschwitz, for instance, when she recited Friedrich Schiller’s ballads, and how it helped exercise her mind, preserving her sanity.

Viele KZ-Insassen haben Trost in den Versen gefunden, die sie auswendig wußten. Man fragt sich, worin denn das Tröstliche an so einem Aufsagen eigentlich besteht.... Mir scheint es indessen, daß der Inhalt der Verse erst in zweiter Linie von Bedeutung war und daß uns in erster Linie die Form selbst, die gebundene Sprache eine Stütze gab. Oder vielleicht ist auch diese schlichte Deutung schon zu hoch gegriffen, und man sollte zuallererst feststellen, daß Verse, indem sie die Zeit einteilen, im wörtlichen Sinne ein Zeitvertreib sind. Ist die Zeit schlimm, dann kann man nichts Besseres mit ihr tun, als sie zu vertreiben, und jedes Gedicht wird zum Zauberspruch.

[Many inmates found comfort in the poems they had memorized earlier in life. Naturally, one can ask why it is so comforting to recite poetry in this particular setting.... It seems to me that the content of these lines was only of secondary importance and that it was the verse form itself, the stable language, that helped us. Or perhaps even this is too much of an interpretation, and one should state first and foremost that poems and poetic lines structure time and are literally a pastime activity. When times are bad one can do nothing better than to chase them away, and each poem becomes a magic charm.] (123-124)¹³

Ruth Klüger’s autobiography is an important source for understanding the significance of poetry in the camps, but other reports are also available. In *Drei Jahre Theresienstadt* (1984), Gerty Spies relates how she often created and completed poems in her mind, since pen and paper were scarce. She describes how the mind served as a “storage space” with the finished and unfinished poetic product immediately accessible to the writer.

Meine Versgebilde waren oft lang und darum schwer im Gedächtnis zu bewahren. Damals gewöhnte ich mich—heute ist es mir rätselhaft, wie ich bei dieser

körperlichen Schwäche die Zähigkeit aufbrachte --, mit unerbitterlicher Energie schon unterm Formen und Gestalten Wort für Wort und Zeile für Zeile meinem Gedächtnis einzumeißeln und immer von neuem in Gedanken zu wiederholen, dann ein Stück weiterzuarbeiten, nochmals zu wiederholen—and so fort. Und das alles, ohne die dem Schaffen notwendig zugrunde liegende Stimmung entgleiten zu lassen. Ich hielt sie fest, sie hielten mich fest—wir hielten einander, meine Geschöpfe und ich. (47)

[Yet despite all that, it was not free or easy sleep. I could not and was not allowed to turn on the light during the night. My poetic creations often were long and therefore difficult to retain in my memory. Then I started the habit (today I cannot fathom how in my physical weakness I summoned the tenacity) with unrelenting energy, while forming and shaping word for word and line for line, to chisel them into my memory, always repeating them again anew in my mind, going on a little, and then repeating all of it over again, and so forth. And all that without letting slip away my underlying mood necessary for creating. I held on to them, they held on to me—together we held each other, my creatures and I.] (72)¹⁴

As in the case of Klüger, the poetic texts provided stability, allowing Spies to occupy her mind as she went about daily life in the camp. The process of writing poetry, the active preoccupation of finding and arranging one's voice—be it in the mind or on paper—constituted intuitive purpose for her and became a vehicle for catharsis.¹⁵

Whereas Klüger and Spies emphasize the therapeutic value of creating verse, scholars such as Frieda W. Aaron, Alan Mintz, and David Roskies among others situate the choice for poetry within a particular tradition of Jewish writing: namely, as a reaction to persecution and destruction. As Torah and Talmud teach, once evil is witnessed it needs to be described and reported so that it can be remembered (Young, *Writing and Rewriting* 18). In the words of Chaim Kaplan: "It is difficult to write, but I consider it an obligation and am determined to fulfill it with my last ounce of energy. I will write a scroll of agony in order to remember the past in the future" (Katsh 30). Just as the camp and ghetto diarists wanted to bear witness to the events unfolding around them and to create durable documents of the terror they experienced, so did many poets. Stephen Spender also stresses the importance of didactics in the Jewish tradition of writing poetry. If suffering is expressed through the medium of poetry, it will not be "aesthetic," as he exemplifies, rather it will be "didactic" (8-9).

A closer look at the specific camp and ghetto settings in which writing took place reveals much about the circumstances that allowed artistic production. For a number of reasons Theresienstadt has been considered an "anomaly" among

the camps and ghettos, one of them being the relative tolerance and tactical encouragement of cultural activities by the authorities (De Silva ix). Such assumptions, however, need to be met with caution, as Sibyl H. Milton observes:

The Theresienstadt ghetto was thus, as we now know, a camp designed as a link in the chain that inevitably led to the gas chambers and also an elaborate hoax to deceive international opinion. As part of this depiction, the SS tolerated some cultural activities, including theater, music, lectures, and concerts. Other cultural activities, such as art and teaching the children were not specifically prohibited, but carried risks if discovered. But while we know that Terezín was nothing but a way-station to the killing centers, the posthumous fame of Theresienstadt is based primarily on the myth created by this hoax. (18)

In total, more than 140,000 European Jews were imprisoned in Theresienstadt. Roughly 35,000 deportees died in the camp, and about 88,000 were deported from Theresienstadt to the East, where most of them were eventually murdered (Milton 15-16). Hans-Günther Adler and historians such as Vojtěch Blodig, Miroslav Kárný, Jaroslava Milotová, and Zdeněk Lederer have published comprehensively about the history of Theresienstadt between 1941 and 1945. In his study *Theresienstadt. Das Anlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft 1941-45*, for example, Hans-Günther Adler includes a section about music, theater, and literature, in which he refers to the “Theresienstädter Reimkrankheit” that had inflicted many people. Being guided by aesthetic principles himself, he reacts rather negatively to the abundance of material produced in Theresienstadt (584-585). The response by Philipp Manes, who in his capacity as supervisor of the “Orientierungsdienst” organized more than 500 cultural events in the camp, is more positive.¹⁶ In his first-hand reports, which were only recently published in their German original by Ben Barkow and Klaus Leist, he writes:

Man brachte mir von einigen Personen hier entstandene Verse—darunter fand ich so Beachtliches, daß ich mir sagte, es müsse etwas geschehen, um die guten Dichtungen für später zu behalten, sie der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen, jungen Talenten die Bahn zu ebnen, die Schaffenden anzuregen. Ich erließ ein Preissausschreiben—Termin 20. Dezember [1942]—und veröffentlichte es durch Rundschreiben und Anschlag am schwarzen Brett. (94)

[I received a number of poems that were written here in Theresienstadt, and I found such good examples among the texts that I thought that something had to be done to preserve them: to keep the good poems for later, to make them accessible to the public, to pave the way for young talent, to provide stimulation for the creators. I decided to hold a competition, date December 20, and advertised it with circulars and posted bulletins.]¹⁷

According to Manes, two such competitions took place: one in 1942 and the other in 1944, each eliciting more than 200 entries.¹⁸ A jury consisting of Emil Utitz and Fritz Janowitz, who only served as judge in the first competition, selected what they perceived to be the “best” poems, and the winners were invited to recite their compositions before an audience.¹⁹ Gerty Spies, who was among the winners of the second competition, describes one of these readings in her autobiography:

Im Sommer 1944 veranstaltete Manes einen Dichterwettbewerb, wobei er ohne mein Wissen meine ihm überlassenen Gedichte einreichte. Ich erfuhr, dass ich zu den Prämierten gehörte. Es wurde ein Abend angesetzt, an dem alle Ausgezeichneten eigene Gedichte zum Vortrag bringen sollten. Schon lange vor Beginn war der Dachboden mit Zuhörern überfüllt.... Endlich bestieg unser Freund Manes den Bretterthron. Er begrüßte mit wenigen Worten die Gebenden wie auch die Nehmenden und verbreitete sich kurz über seinen Plan, “meine Dichter,” wie er sich so lieb und herzlich ausdrückte, der Reihenfolge nach vortragen zu lassen und zuletzt im Publikum kleine Zettel zu verteilen, worauf jeder vermerken sollte, was und wer ihm am besten gefallen hatte. Das sollte eine Volksabstimmung darüber sein, wessen Stimme am wärmsten zu den Herzen der Zuhörer gedrungen war. (79-80)

[During the summer of 1944, Manes organized a contest for poets, and without my knowing it, he entered the poems I had left with him. I found out that I was one of the winners. An evening was chosen when all the winners would read their own poems. Long before the set time the attic was filled with listeners.... At last our friend Manes climbed onto the wooden throne. He welcomed with a few words those who had come to give and those who had come to take. He went on briefly about his plan to let ‘my poets,’ as he so kindly and sincerely called us, recite one after the other, and then finally he distributed slips of paper to the audience on which they were to note what and whom they had liked best. It was to be a referendum as to whose voice could warm the listeners’ hearts best. (104-105)]²⁰

The opportunity to participate in such a competition and to recite before an audience validated creative work. Moreover, the performance created a communal space in which individual experience (as expressed in the poem) could manifest itself collectively (as shared experience of the audience). Not all poetry, however, was openly recited. Cultural performances were controlled and censored by camp authorities, and the policies regarding permitted artistic expression underwent frequent change. Of course the Nazis considered the art subversive if it was especially realistic or critical in its depiction. If discovered, the responsible artists and at times the community as well were punished, tortured, or even killed.²¹

Once again it is Gerty Spies who informs the reader in *Drei Jahre Theresienstadt* about this aspect of camp life. She describes how she constantly looked for new places to hide her poetry.

Damals begann es gefährlich zu werden mit der Schreiberei. Die Kontrollen, die Haussuchungen nahmen zu.... Was tun? Meine Zimmergenossinnen rieten mir, meine Freundin Herta beschwore mich, die schriftlichen Zeugen meiner Lagererlebnisse zu vergraben oder zu verbrennen. Ich konnte mich dazu nicht entschließen.... Die Blätter während der Arbeitsstunden unbewacht in der Wohnstätte zurückzulassen, hieß die Gemeinschaft zu gefährden. Kein Versteck war sicher. So kam's, daß ich jeden Tag mit einer schweren Wandertasche über der Schulter in die Arbeit ging und für die Nacht ein wechselndes Versteck ausfindig machte—zwischen Wand und Wandbrett, am Boden des Rucksacks, im Strohsack --, und in der Frühe packte ich wieder aus und nahm mit. So trieb ich's, bis der Tag der Erlösung kam. Und das Glück stand mir bei. (70-71)

[In those days it began to be dangerous to write. The inspections, the searching of our houses increased. Several painters whose pictures of Theresienstadt were found during a search by the SS—due to the carelessness of a prisoner—had to pay for their courage either with the transport or with their lives. What to do? My roommates advised me, my friend Hertha implored me, to bury or even to burn the written evidence of my camp experience. I could not bring myself to do so. To bury—that would mean to let it decay, and to burn it—that I really could not do. To leave the pages unwatched in the room during the hours of work meant to put the others in danger. No hiding place was safe. And so it happened that I went to work every day with a heavy travel bag over my shoulders, and at night I switched between the different hiding places—between wall and plank, at the bottom of a knapsack, in a sack of straw—and in the morning I recovered them and took them with me. This I did every day, until the day of liberation. And luck was with me. (96)]²²

This peril did not keep people from writing. A catalogue published by the Theresienstadt archive in Israel, *Beit Terezín*, lists the names of at least sixty people who wrote poetry in German and whose poems are still available. Further research in the Czech Republic has indicated that many more such poems exist. Up to this point, I have collected over 400 German texts. They can best be characterized by their heterogeneity. As individual poetic representations they touch on a variety of topics, from descriptions of “everyday life” (including housing, work, fear of transport, sickness, hunger, death, leisure-time activities) to philosophical contemplations about the past, present, and future. There are shorter as well as longer poems, written as sonnets, ballads, prayers, psalms, songs, and elegies. Some

display strict rhyme schemes, whereas others are written in free verse. A few of the texts are handwritten, either on loose paper, included in diaries or in collections of poetry; while others are typed, making it often difficult to assess whether they are originals or copies. German anthologies such as *An den Wind geschrieben* or *Lyrik gegen das Vergessen* contain samples of poetry from Theresienstadt, but no comprehensive collection exists as of now.²³

The study of testimonial writings such as concentration camp and ghetto diaries provides important impulses for a discussion of poetry, even if, at first glance, their relationship might not be apparent. Hermann Korte, for example, argues that lyric poetry is not equipped to function as testimonial writing because the genre itself fails to attest to the factuality of the past, especially when contrasted to official documents (Korte 25). At the center of this perceived displacement lies poetry's formal make-up, the use of figurative language and artistic form, both, according to Korte, dominating and diminishing the content:

Als Zeugnisse wären Gedichte schon wegen der Hegemonie der poetischen Form über die tatsächliche inhaltliche Mitteilung am wenigsten brauchbar. Die Form, nicht die Tatsachen, die Sprache, nicht deren außersprachliche Referenten, Bilder und Metaphern, nicht der Präzisionsgrad der Realitätsbeschreibung stehen im Mittelpunkt. (26)

[As testimony poetry would be the least usable because of the hegemony of poetic form over content. The focus is on form, not on facts; on language, not on extra-linguistic referents; on imagery and metaphors, and not on the precision of describing reality.]²⁴

While it is indeed difficult for a literature of testimony to represent historical events factually, or, expressed differently, to attest to their literal existence, it seems to be a misleading task to ask of this kind of writing in the first place, as James E. Young convincingly illustrates in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (1988):

When we turn to literary testimony of the Holocaust, we do so for knowledge—not evidence—of the events. Instead of looking for evidence of experiences, the reader might concede that narrative testimony documents not the experiences it relates but rather the conceptual presuppositions through which the narrator has apprehended experience.... That is, even if narrative cannot document events, or perfect factuality, it can document the actuality of writer and text. (37)

Given the inherently constructed nature of literature, even of a literature of testimony, neither the writer nor the reader can claim or expect an un-interpreted rendering of the events that gives full access to the actual truth. Rather than privileging "factuality," Young accentuates the notion of "actuality" of writer and

text. The call for a factual depiction and for textual “proof” in any kind of literary testimony, therefore, becomes untenable as it does not constitute the primary focus of critical analysis.

With regard to Holocaust diaries, Young further clarifies that the writer of such diaries must confront the fundamental question of how to represent these events in writing. How can one testify to the horrors of the camps, if one uses a narrative device that necessarily opens the door to what Hayden White has termed “the fictions of factual representation” (121)? For once the events are arranged into structured narrative, no matter how inchoate they seem at the time, they suddenly appear coherent and tend to belie the writer’s feeling of discontinuity. The interaction between reader and text once the authority of the writer is withdrawn from the text also becomes an important issue. The link which existed between the event and the writer may be lost to the reader, at which point, according to Young, the text is “only a detached and free-floating sign, at the mercy of all who would read and misread it. Evidence of the witness’s experiences seems to have been supplanted—not delivered—by his text” (24).

The process of writing is already an interpretative act in itself, and this underlies Young’s assumptions with regard to Holocaust writers. The conscious choice of poetry—rather than a diary, for example—can be seen as a first reaction to, as well as a first interpretation of, the events occurring to and around the writer. As Klüger’s and Spies’ remarks exemplify, poetry fulfilled different functions at different times, and in trying to understand and translate the new conditions and their imminent consequences, they as well as other writers resorted not only to a “condensed” form but also to a language known and familiar to them. Even if a first reaction was often an assertion of language’s insufficiency, the poets cloaked the unfamiliar new in a familiar way, using available metaphors.²⁵ Rather than seeing these metaphors as incapable of communicating the facts of the Holocaust, as some critics have suggested, Young has argued, that “the language and metaphors by which we come to the events tell us as much about how events have been grasped and organized as they do about the events themselves … we must recognize that they are our only access to the facts, which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering them to us” (91). An analysis of poetry from the camps therefore demonstrates not only the importance of form but also the use of figurative language to convey experience.

Contributing to the writing of the Holocaust in general and to the writing of Theresienstadt in particular, the poems produced in this particular setting are distinct textual representations of its time and place. They are linguistic and artistic renderings of experience. Just as there exists a number of competing memories of an event, so will there be a variety of forms trying to represent

memory of that event, each form passing down its own distinct kind of memory. The poems written in Theresienstadt constitute valuable repositories of individual memory and play an integral part in the collective writing and remembrance of the Holocaust. Acknowledging poetry's central role in this process, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi remarked early on in her study *By Words Alone. The Holocaust in Literature*:

If we consider the social dimensions of elegiac literature, even in a secularizing community, the poem which is invested with mythical or ritualistic functions can also constitute a living historical memory that historiography, in its remoteness, cannot. (103)

The recent shift in scholarship towards a reflection on particular forms of representation, taking into account the constructed nature of the literature produced in the camps, has prompted increasingly complex textual approaches. In a German context, one such example is Constanze Jaiser's aforementioned work on poetry from the Ravensbrück concentration camp titled *Poetische Zeugnisse. Gedichte aus dem Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück 1939-1945*, published in 2000. Her research is guided by Young's findings on the literature of testimony. Whereas he focuses on the particulars of metaphor, Jaiser prioritizes symbols, which she views as a linguistically more stable and hence more adequate category for analysis. By referring to the poetry produced by female inmates in Ravensbrück as "poetic testimonies," she not only takes into account the complex process of writing poetry and the difficulty of establishing a poetic subject but also acknowledges the troubling relationship between the text and its reader once the authority of the writer is removed. Another recent and vital work is *Traumatic Verses. On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps 1933-1945* by Andrés Jose Nader, which appeared in 2007. Whereas Jaiser focuses on poetry written in one particular camp, Nader offers readings from a number of different sites, among them Buchenwald and Theresienstadt. His work is largely influenced by Trauma Studies. Concentrating less on the complexity of figurative language and on the specific space of production, he stresses instead the importance of form in what he calls "emergency poetry," which in his understanding "seems to provide a structure for bringing traumatic experience to articulation. Possibly it allows the author to create in or through the poem a 'resonating other' ... an interlocutor who plays an essential role in the mechanisms that safeguard psychic identity and health" (10). Surprisingly, Nader neither cites nor refers to Jaiser's recent critical study (2000) but instead uses Michael Moll's *Lyrik in einer entmenschlichten Welt* (1988) as a point of reference. Moll's book in turn was important to Jaiser, since she disagrees strongly with his premise that poetry does not constitute an adequate

representation of the Holocaust. By neglecting to include Jaiser's research in his study, Nader misses the opportunity to elaborate on and/or take issue with her discussion of important concepts, for example, the construction of the poetic subject, which he generally calls the "inmate speaker."

In Nader's study, writing from Theresienstadt is represented by a singular poet, Ilse Weber, who might be the most widely known German-language poet from Theresienstadt.²⁶ But there are many more lesser known poets, whose works have neither been analyzed nor translated into English. Among them, for example, is Peter Kien, who was born in the Czech town of Varnsdorf in 1919.²⁷ In December 1941, he was deported to the camp on one of the first transports and became the deputy director of the drawing office.²⁸ In numerous sketches, some of which survived the war and are now on display at the Theresienstadt permanent exhibition and at the Jewish Museum in Prague, Kien illustrated everyday life in the camp. Apart from drawing and painting, Kien wrote and produced the play *The Dolls* and created the libretto for Viktor Ullmann's opera *The Emperor of Atlantis or Death Abides*. In addition, he wrote poetry. It is uncertain if he ever submitted samples to the competitions hosted by Manes in 1942 and 1944. Kien grew up speaking German and Czech, and before the war he studied at both the Prague Art Academy and a private graphic art school (Braun 155). On October 14, 1944, Peter Kien, his wife Ilse Kien Stranská and his parents Leonhard and Olga were transported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered (Langer, *Art from the Ashes* 685). During his imprisonment, he wrote at least twenty-seven poems which have been preserved. Preceded by a table of contents, the poems have been typed on several pages of loose paper. It is unclear whether Kien himself typed them or someone else copied them from a handwritten manuscript.

Peter Kien expresses Theresienstadt in a variety of images and poetic forms, touching on topics such as the transience of life (for example in his poem "Wer heut nicht küsst") and the omnipresence of death (for example in "Kaum wagt der Blick sich in die öde Weite," which Adler also refers to as "Die Peststadt"). In "Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen" he explores the notion of home and one's desperate longing for it. By deliberately choosing the psalm as his form, here a song of lamentation, he contextualizes the present within a religious and historic frame of reference, allowing the reader to draw a comparison between the experience of the Babylonian Exile and imprisonment in Theresienstadt.²⁹ As the psalm continues, however, Kien dissolves its formal conception, ultimately creating a space for a critique, not praise of God.³⁰

Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen

Unter den Mauern Babylons
sassen wir und weinten,
wenn wir der Heimat gedachten.

Heimat!
Das ist das Rauschen der Bäume in den Gärten
Ach, sie sind gefällt

Heimat!
Das ist der Atem, der aus der breiten Brust des Stroms quillt,
Ach, er ist verdorrt

Heimat!
Das sind * schweigenden Fenster in alten Prunkfassaden
Ach, sie sind geschleift.

Wenn ich dein vergesse, süßes Gestern,
so werde * meiner Hoffnung vergessen.

Unter den Mauern Babylons
sassen wir und weinten,
wenn wir um uns blickten.

Schutthalden und verpestete Hügel

Leid und Verbrechen wandeln Arm in Arm durch zerklüftete Strassen
denn ein ziellos suchender Wahnwitz
schlitzte der Erde den Leib auf
und wühlt in ihren Gedärmen
nach einem Orakel

Unter den Mauern Babylons
sassen wir und weinten
wenn wir der Zukunft gedachten

Nicht zur Rückkehr löst sich die Fessel von unseren Füßen
aber wie Sand vor dem Herbststurm
werden wir nach den vier Winden wirbeln,
jeder einsam in feindliche Wüsten.

[Under the walls of Babylon
we sat and cried
whenever we remembered home.

Home!
That is the rustling of the trees in the gardens
Ach, they are no more

Home!

That is the breath streaming from the wide breast of the river
Ach, it is withered!

Home!

That is the silent windows in old grandiose edifices
Ach, they have been sanded.

When I forget you, sweet yesterday,
[I] will forget my hope

Under the walls of Babylon
we sat and cried
whenever we looked around us.

Piles of rubble and contaminated hills

Pain and suffering walk arm in arm through ragged streets
because an aimlessly wandering lunacy
slit open the body of the earth
and rummages through its bowels
for an oracle

Under the walls of Babylon
we sat and cried
whenever we thought of the future

Not for our return will the shackle be removed from our feet
but like sand before the fall storm
we will be swirled into the direction of the four winds
each one alone into hostile deserts.]

This poem, consisting of ten differently organized stanzas without a regular rhyme scheme, takes the shape of a psalm, in which the communal voice—expressed through the first person plural—laments not only the lost past, but also the unsettling present and the unknown future. Kien quotes directly from the biblical Book of Psalms and, as indicated in the title of the poem, refers to the 137th Psalm, in which the destruction of Jerusalem is lamented. In his rendition, he alters the first line of the original text from “An den Wassern zu Babel saßen wir und weinten, wenn wir an Zion gedachten” to “Unter den Mauern Babylons sassan wir und weinten, wenn wir der Heimat gedachten” (*Die Bibel* 619). Substituting “waters” with “walls,” Kien specifically alludes to the physical constitution of Theresienstadt, a garrison city encircled by walls. In addition, he sets up a framework for the discussion of “home” in the opening lines of the

poem, in which “Zion,” as we will see, is figured as a nostalgic land- and cityscape, seemingly free of religious vocabulary and nuances. Kien repeats these two lines three times in the poem, each time following it with a slight modification of Psalm 137. His variations read: “Unter den Mauern Babylons sassen wir und weinten, wenn wir der Heimat gedachten,” “wenn wir um uns blickten,” and “wenn wir der Zukunft gedachten.” These altered endings each introduce a different time frame—past, present, and future—which is then in turn further explored in the poem. In verses 18 and 19, the reader is presented with impressions from life in present-day Babylon (Theresienstadt), a place where suffering and violence are personified and walk “arm in arm.” But before the communal voice describes the present location, it remembers the lost and destroyed home, rebuilding and reclaiming it in memory. The poetic voice recalls aspects of nature, in particular the rustling of the trees in the gardens (verse 5), the enlivening river (verse 8), as well as the old magnificent city landscape (verse 11). These nostalgic memories are poignantly summarized in the metaphor “sweet yesterday”—“Wenn ich dein vergesse, süßes Gestern, so werde meiner Hoffnung vergessen” (verse 13)—which contrasts with the verse of the original psalm, where the object of remembrance appears as “Jerusalem” --“Vergesse ich dich, Jerusalem, so verdorre meine Rechte” (619). As in the opening lines of the poem, where he substituted “home” for “Zion,” Kien keeps the structural reference to the original, omitting, however, verbatim quotations and therefore allowing a less religious vocabulary to enter the psalm. This effectively secularizes the memory of home and simultaneously dislodges it from Zionist connotations. His rendition, then, could be understood as an attempt to counteract the racially perverse National Socialist view of “Heimat” and to repossess it through the German language.³¹ However, these memories are in danger of fading into oblivion. The emphatic and repeated exclamation “Heimat” (verses 4, 7, 10) preceding the description of home is followed by an expression of resignation: “Ach” one verse later (verses 6, 9, 12), introducing the turn toward the negative. The positive associations with “home” are after all only a wishful construction of the past that does not correspond to the reality of the present. The poetic voice is painfully aware of this discrepancy and reminds itself that sustaining hope is an essential tool in surviving the present moment (verses 13-14). The communal “we,” which incorporated the reader into this experience, dissolves into a personal “I” at this point, mirroring and stressing individual concerns.

The positively charged imagery representing the lost, “sweet” past stands in stark contrast to the depiction of the present location, a contaminated landscape consisting of “Schutthalden und verpestete Hügel” (verse 18). Kien adds to the

biblical and historic context yet another component, namely the association of the ravaging Black Death through the metaphoric construction “verpestete Hügel.” In this way, he encourages the readers to call to mind not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the first Temple in 586 BCE, as well as the Babylonian Exile that followed, but also the persecution and destruction of numerous European Jewish communities in the 14th century caused by anti-Semitic violence during the outbreak of the plague.³² He thus expands and alters the frame of reference, showing that the present encompasses past experiences of persecution and suffering. Life, as it is rendered here, is *entfremdet*: insanity, which is personified as a brutal actor, is unleashing its destructive and aimless powers, violating and butchering the earth in search for an oracle which will not provide answers (verses 19-23). Death and destruction are omnipresent, and the future will most likely not bring about positive changes in terms of reclaiming the “Heimat.”

Whereas the original psalm does not touch upon what the future may hold for the captives, Kien does so in his rendition and thereby distances the poem further from its original.³³ Recognizing that the return home is no longer attainable, the poetic subject predicts a renewed homelessness by evoking and modifying yet another biblical reference, this time a passage from Genesis (28:14):

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and messengers of God were going up and down on it. And standing beside him was JHWH, who said, I am JHWH, the God of your father Abraham's [house] and the God of Isaac's [house]: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and the east, to the north and the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you. (*The Contemporary Torah* 43-44)

In Kien's version, the prisoners, including the poetic subject, will be swirled like sand into the different directions of the four winds, each into hostile deserts—“aber wie Sand vor dem Herbststurm / werden wir nach den vier Winden wirbeln / jeder in einsame Wüsten” (verses 27-30)—anticipating their continued search for a homeland like generations before them. Past and present will be followed by an uncertain, hostile, and lonely future. Whereas the passage in Genesis references God's words of protection and guidance for Jacob, Kien's poem ends here.³⁴ It seems as if God is silent, perhaps not even present, and most certainly not offering

consolation or help: “einsam” (verse 30). By ending the poem with the allusion to Jacob’s story in Genesis, but excluding the essential part of God’s continued guidance, the psalm appears almost blasphemous, not praising but criticizing God’s negligence and inaction. Amidst the confusion and destruction, the poetic subject transforms the psalm of lamentation into a space for criticism of an absent and ultimately silent God, painting a bleak picture for the future.

As these illustrations exemplify, Kien conveys the experience of imprisonment by choosing a specific form, a psalm of lamentation, and by agglomerating different historical, religious, and secular citations in altered form, thus creating a literary construction that results in a complex intertextual representation and writing of Theresienstadt. In a thought-provoking, critical, and creative manner, Kien represents the present setting as a radicalized version of ancient Babylon and medieval Europe, a place that is understood within the context of past Jewish catastrophes. However, it also differs from its antecedents: whereas faith in God was not challenged in the tradition of the psalm and served in Lamentations, for example, as “a prototypical Jewish response to national disaster” and, therefore, placed “that catastrophe in a context that affirms divine justice and universal order” (Horowitz 123), it here serves as a vehicle for criticism and as a rejection of this particular understanding. The poetic subject is part of a communal group that—instead of lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem—mourns the loss of a secular home. The tone is one of sadness, anger, and despair, accumulating in the realization that a return “home” is no longer possible once the “shackles are removed” (verse 27). In the presence of an absent God, all that remains is the nostalgic preservation and reconstruction of the past in memory through the German language, which is tainted by aggression and brutality. As Sara Horowitz and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi have shown in their work, similar topics, tropes, and forms also occur in post-Holocaust literature, for example, in the poetry of Paul Celan or the writings of Jean Améry. But whereas events render these writers speechless after the fact, Kien’s contemporaneous writing attempts to reclaim language and meaning, to translate lived experience, all without a perspective of the future. How his writing would have evolved after the Holocaust, for example, whether it would have followed Celan’s or Améry’s path, cannot be determined since he like many other poets did not survive.

Peter Kien is not alone in expressing his experience of imprisonment through poetry. Many prisoners in the various camps and ghettos throughout Europe turned towards writing poetry as an immediate reaction to the events they witnessed. Kien’s “Ein Psalm aus Babylon, zu klagen” is but one example of the over 400 poems written in Theresienstadt. Not all texts follow his pattern and

refer to religious citations or forms. Overall, they can be best characterized by their hybrid nature: some are very short, displaying regular rhymes while referring to topics that are specific to Theresienstadt, such as a stroll on the bastion or arrival in the “sluice,”³⁵ whereas others are written in free verse, poking fun at the absurd living conditions or contemplating the loss of friends and family. For a number of reasons, German Studies scholars have neglected analysis of these poems, even though the texts “lived on” in anthologies and archives. The poems written in Theresienstadt constitute valuable repositories of individual memory and play an integral part in the collective writing of the Holocaust. Reading and analyzing this diverse body of work is necessary for a full understanding of Holocaust poetry, and the writings from Theresienstadt will undoubtedly stimulate more inclusive consideration of Holocaust literature as a whole.

Notes

¹ As quoted in Exenberger and Früh (97). Translation by Alfers: “But if fate wants to have it differently / and I will not experience freedom / And if I will be buried here / My poem will live on.” Born in Vienna in 1907, Lindenbaum was a writer and journalist. Along with his wife and daughter, he was deported to Theresienstadt on April 1, 1943, where he was held captive until his transport to Auschwitz on September 28, 1944. His wife Rachel and their daughter followed approximately two weeks later and were murdered shortly after their arrival. Walter Lindenbaum survived Auschwitz and was sent to forced labor in Ohrdruf (Thuringia), a satellite camp of Buchenwald, where he died on February 20, 1945. While imprisoned in Theresienstadt he contributed texts to cabaret evenings and to his own cabaret, the “Lindenbaum Gruppe.” He also wrote several poems, among them the verse quoted here.

² See, for example, the debates concerning the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin since the late 1980s and the Walser-Bubis controversy of 1998-99. An informative overview on the memorial can be found in Young, especially chapter 7. Schirrmacher has compiled the public speeches, letters, and interviews on the Walser-Bubis controversy. Eshel and Fuchs offer excellent analyses of the debate.

³ For further information on Adorno’s explications about poetry and art “after Auschwitz” as well as its subsequent interpretations by scholars, see for example Hoffmann, Kiedaisch and Weninger provide good overviews.

⁴ See, for example, Emmerich, “Wer spricht? Lyrik nach Auschwitz als Generationenproblem.”

⁵ One might speculate further about the reasons for this disregard and not only attribute it to questions of aesthetics. Kathrin Bower advances the idea that this avoidance can be attributed to the political climate in the immediate post-war years. “The context had changed, there was a shift from the immediacy of survival to the mediation of guilt and shame and for this the simple, sometimes clumsy rhymes of much of the camp poetry seemed inappropriate or inadequate, while it nevertheless embodied the very voices whose existence had been brutally and prematurely extinguished. Not the voices of martyrs or beings made sublime by their suffering, but the voices of ordinary people—where the banality of suffering collided with the

banality of evil. This was not the kind of message that post-Holocaust Germany sought or wanted, but rather one it strove to escape" (133).

⁶ Lamping notes, "In traditionell ästhetischer Dichtung sind solche Schocks allerdings kaum zu erreichen. Das erklärt vielleicht, warum gerade so viele traditionalistische oder klassizistische Lyrik über die Vernichtungslager, die nicht selten auch in ihnen entstanden ist, als künstlerisch mißlungen gelten muss" (280). My translation: "However, it is almost impossible to achieve such shocks in traditional aesthetic poetry. This might explain why so many traditional and classicist poems about the extermination camps, which were not infrequently created there, must be considered artistic failures." Emmerich, in "Die Literatur des antifaschistischen Widerstands," adds, "Im übrigen dürfte es nicht nur eine Talentfrage sein, daß solche Literatur häufig künstlerisch gescheitert ist" (286). My translation: "It should not only be a question of talent that such literature often failed artistically."

⁷ My translation. For a more detailed analysis of Korte's article, see Alfers.

⁸ See, for example, Lamping (285–286). It is interesting to note that the aesthetic debate is of only minor importance in Israel, as pointed out by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi in her book chapter "'The Grave in the Air': Unbound Metaphors in Post-Holocaust Poetry." "The critical questions over aesthetic boundaries that were inaugurated by Theodor Adorno and have informed most readings of post-Holocaust poetry in America and Europe are rarely invoked in discussions of the Holocaust in Israel" (259).

⁹ See Jaiser, Katja Klein, and Moll. See also Nader's "The Shock of Arrival: Poetry from the Nazi Camps at the End of the Century" and *Traumatic Verses. On Poetry from the Concentration Camps 1933–1945*.

¹⁰ "Über die großen Texte dieser Literatur (möchte man sie eigentlich *Meisterwerke* nennen?), den Kanon, besteht durchaus keine Einigkeit. George Steiner etwa läßt unter den Autoren neben Paul Celan nur Primo Levi, und indirekt, Jean Améry gelten und insgesamt nicht mehr als ein 'halb Dutzend Texte, wo ich sagen würde, es hat dieses unglaublich mutige Wagnis gerechtfertigt'" (Strümpel 13). My translation: "There is no consensus about the great texts of this literature, the canon (might one actually call them *masterpieces*?). For example, in addition to Paul Celan, George Steiner includes among these authors only Primo Levi and indirectly, Jean Améry, and altogether not more than 'half a dozen texts of which I would say this unbelievably brave risk was justified.'"

¹¹ Historians continue to address the question of whether Theresienstadt can be classified as either a ghetto or a camp. The *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust*, for example, does not list Theresienstadt as a ghetto, but describes it as a ghetto-like camp, a "ghettoähnliches Lager" (1403). In the encyclopedic entry on ghettos, Theresienstadt is not elaborated due to its particular structure and organization: "Das Ghetto in Amsterdam ... und das Lager Theresienstadt bei Prag unterschieden sich in Form und Aufbau von den Ghettos in Osteuropa und werden in dieser Übersicht nicht berücksichtigt" (535). My translation: "The ghetto in Amsterdam ... and the camp Theresienstadt close to Prague differ in form and configuration from the ghettos in Eastern Europe and will, therefore, not be included in this overview." Theresienstadt is viewed in this article as an agglomeration of the two definitions at hand. It is designated here primarily as a "transit camp," which for practical and linguistic reasons is also shortened in the article to "camp." However, this does not dismiss the necessary debate about the function of Theresienstadt within the camp/ghetto structure. For an illuminating discussion of this particular issue, see Peter Klein.

¹² My translation.

¹³ My translation.

¹⁴ Translation by Tragnitz in the 1997 edition.

¹⁵ See also Aaron (71).

¹⁶ Even though he is generally more positive in his judgment than Adler, he also comments on the number of people writing poetry and on the quality of their texts: “Die Dichter männlichen und weiblichen Geschlechts gingen hier üppigst ins Kraut. Was sollten die Leutchen die langen Abende über anfangen wie dichten. Ein Glück, das Papier war und blieb rar. Sonst wären wir in dieser Überflutung von sogennanten Erzeugnissen der Muse ertrunken” (Manes 148). My translation: “The female and male poets wrote a lot. What else was there to do during those long evenings? Fortunately, paper remained rare. Otherwise we would have drowned in the flood of so called works of the muse.”

¹⁷ My translation.

¹⁸ There might have also been other German poetry competitions in Theresienstadt, but in his reports Manes mentions only these two.

¹⁹ Emil Utitz, who held professorial positions in Rostock, Halle, and Prague was deported to Theresienstadt on July 30, 1942. There he was the head of the library, the Zentralbücherei (Manes 536). Fritz Janowitz was transported to Theresienstadt on December 4, 1941, and he served as “Gebäudeältester” [“Supervisor”] of the Magdeburg barracks. Janowitz was killed in Auschwitz in 1944 (Manes 511).

²⁰ Translation by Tragnitz in the 1997 edition.

²¹ See, for example, Green and Troller. Both authors relate the fate of several painters whose realistic depictions of camp life were discovered by the authorities, leading to either immediate death or the re-deportation of some of those involved. Spies refers to this as well.

²² Translation by Tragnitz.

²³ See Schlosser. See also Moll and Weiler.

²⁴ My translation.

²⁵ See, for example, Lang: “Thus, I propose at the outset (and if I could, once and for all) to ‘de’-figure this figure of the Holocaust; to claim instead that the Holocaust is speakable, has been spoken, will be spoken (certainly here), and, most of all, ought to be. Virtually all claims to the contrary—in those variations on the unspeakable which encompass the indescribable, variations on the unspeakable, the unimaginable, the incredible—come embedded in yards of writing which attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language in representing moral enormity at the same time that they assert it; certainly they hope to find for their own assertions of that inadequacy a useful, a telling place in its shadow” (18).

²⁶ In recent years Weber’s poetry has been set to music, for example, by Kahan and by von Otter. In 2008 Migdal published her study on Weber.

²⁷ For more information on Kien’s life, also see Serke (447–450).

²⁸ Warnsdorf in German. The town is located in the Czech Republic, in close proximity to the German border (bordering the state of Saxony).

²⁹ In her discussion of Jewish literary paradigms, Aaron points to a play written by Yitzhak Katzenelson in the Warsaw ghetto with the title “By the Waters of Babylon” (5).

³⁰ This manuscript is from the Beit Terezín archive in Israel. The poems have been typed on several pages of paper. As research for this article I copied the text with its omissions in syntax and punctuation, the way it has been preserved. It was written sometime between December 1941 and October 1944 (no set date can be attributed to the poems at this point). The * indicates a grammatical error and/or possible omissions of word(s). The translation of the poem is mine.

³¹ Within a particular German context, the notion of “Heimat” is of course a highly contested one, especially during the years of the National Socialists, whose racial theories dominated the very concept. For further information, see for example, Bickle.

³² The occurrence of medieval references in ghetto writing is not rare, as Horowitz observes: “Ghetto writers frequently compared their situation with the medieval Jewish city” (64).

³³ Kien omits the end of the psalm, which entertains the notion of revenge, and adds other biblical references at his point, for example, from Genesis. The original psalm reads “Tochter Babel, du Verwüsterin, wohl dem, der dir vergilt, was du uns angetan hast! Wohl dem, der deine jungen Kinder nimmt, und sie am Felsen zerschmettert” (*Die Bibel* 619).

³⁴ In Genesis 28:16, Jacob praises God’s words: “Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely JHWH is present in this place, and I did not know it!’ Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place. This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.’ Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named that sign Bethel but previously the name of the city had been Luz” (*The Contemporary Torah* 43-44).

³⁵ The Schleuse [“sluice”] refers to the arrival building in Theresienstadt, where the newly arrived deportees often spent their first night.

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