

“Shema”

Primo Levi

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.
Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Primo Levi: a Jewish-Italian poet and writer, was born in Turin in 1919. Before the Second World War he was an industrial chemist. In 1943 he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where he survived due to his “usefulness” to the Nazis as a chemist. His most famous prose work is “If This is a Man” in which he wrote about his experiences in Auschwitz. Haunted by his Holocaust experiences, he committed suicide in 1987.

“First They Came For The Jews”

Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

Martin Niemöller was a German pastor and theologian, born in Germany in 1892. Originally a supporter of Hitler's policies, he eventually opposed them. He was arrested and eventually confined in the concentration Sachsenhausen and Dachau camps. He was liberated by the allies in 1945 and continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a noted pacifist.

“The Butterfly”

Pavel Friedman

The last, the very last,
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing
against a white stone. . . .

Such, such a yellow
Is carried lightly 'way up high.
It went away I'm sure because it wished to
kiss the world good-bye.

For seven weeks I've lived in here,
Pinned up inside this ghetto.
But I have found what I love here.
The dandelions call to me
And the white chestnut branches in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here,
in the ghetto.

Pavel Friedman: Friedman was a young poet, who lived in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Little is known of the author, but he is presumed to have been 17 years old when he wrote “The Butterfly”. It was found amongst a hidden cache of children’s work recovered at the end of the Second World War. He was eventually deported to Auschwitz where he died on September 29, 1944.

"Could Have"

Wisława Szymborska

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.
You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck -- there was a forest.
You were in luck -- there were no trees.
You were in luck -- a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
A jamb, a turn, a quarter-inch, an instant . . .

So you're here? Still dizzy from
another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or
speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.

Wisława Szymborska: Szymborska was born in Poland in 1923, and lives in Krakow. Between the years 1945-1948 she studied Polish Literature and Sociology at the Jagiellonian University. Szymborska made her début in March 1945 with a poem "Szukam słowa" (I am Looking for a Word) in the daily "Dziennik Polski". She has worked as a poetry editor, a columnist and a translator. In 1996 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.