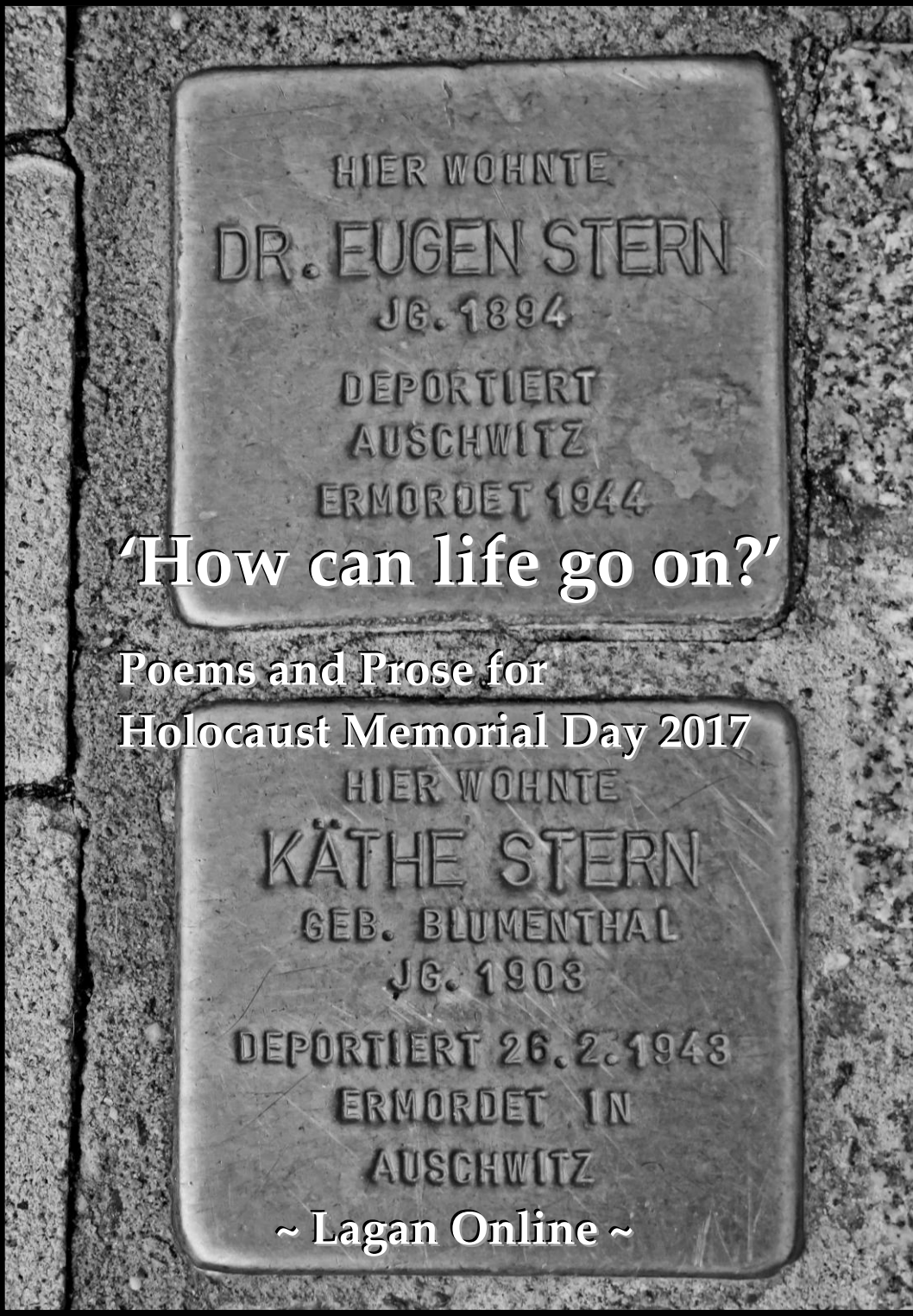

‘How can life go on?’

Poems and Prose for Holocaust Memorial Day 2017

~ Lagan Online ~

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'For the survivor death is not the problem. Death was an everyday occurrence. We learned to live with Death. The problem is to adjust to life, to living. You must teach us about living.

- Elie Wiesel

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Matthew Rice : *Why*

in memory of Primo Levi -
(1919-1987)

Driven by the sound of water
gurgling through cold radiators,
his mouth a vortex,
his head a dream of death,
his heart a busy-point under scaffold,
he reaches his naked arm out
and out of the window, inch by miled inch
to clasp the icicle in his hand,
to break it from its frozen root,
to put it to his lips to sooth the immediate horror
of water gurgling through cold radiators,
to have it snatched from his travelling grasp,
with no reason offered,
no explanation voiced,
only an empty glance,
a hollow muttering.

And no answer given
when he asks 'why'.
That finger of ice belonged to no one,
it had no human claim;
it was born out of the cold
and hardness of this world.
Its ice-stump will grow in size and strength again

as the winter lengthens,
it will recoup its former self
that lies now discarded in the snow.
And the why does not figure in any of it.
There is no why here.
Here, there is no why.

(First published in 'Connections', CAP, 2016)

Jim Ross : *Silent Memorials*

Our eyes trip over a four-by-four inch bronze memorial embedded in a sidewalk in Cologne, Germany:

Hier wohnte
Jona 'Johnny' Herz
J.G. 1942
Deportiert 1942
Theresienstadt
Ermordet 11.7.1944
Auschwitz

In English: "Here lived Jonah 'Johnny' Herz, born in 1942, deported to Theresienstadt, murdered on July 11, 1944." It strikes us, first, they sent a newborn to Theresienstadt; second, little Johnny survived a long time, considering. Alongside Johnny's memorial lies another, "Here lived Samuel Kaufmann, born in 1868, deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, murdered on September 1, 1942. Unlike the infant, the old man—already 74 when exiled—didn't last long, partly because Theresienstadt provided essentially no health care. Yes, murder is the right word.

In Koblenz, we see memorials outside the former home of Dr. Eugene Stern, born in 1894, and Kaethe Stern (nee Blumenthal), born in 1903, deported, murdered in

Auschwitz 1944. Stern was my Jewish grandmother's family name, so this strikes home.

Easily mistaken for cobblestones, each Stolperstein, or "stumbling stone," remembers one persecuted or murdered victim of National Socialism, 1933-1945, including survivors.

Most Stolpersteine (plural of Stolperstein) begin "Hier wohnte," meaning "Here lived." Others begin: "Here worked," "Here practiced," "Here taught," "Here studied." Most are placed at an individual's last *chosen* place of residence. By returning victims to their neighbourhoods, Stolpersteine remind passers-by that victims were torn away, and most likely murdered. It says to passers-by, "You are standing in what was once their space." Distributed over 18 countries, the overwhelming majority of the 50,000 Stolpersteine are located in Germany.

In Bamberg—a city in Bavaria that largely escaped the devastation of World War II bombings, and a UNESCO world heritage site—we come across a memorial to a different type of war victim: "Here was shot Bernard Delachaux, born in 1914, a French soldier and prisoner of war who died March 24, 1942."

Later, on a busy street in Bamberg's shopping district, we come upon a cluster of five newly installed, brightly polished Stolpersteine. What catches our attention is a

six-year-old boy, out with his mom and three-year-old sister. The boy goes down on one knee and reads clearly, slowly, solemnly: "Here lived Rosa Brueckmann, born 1868, deported Theresienstadt 1942, murdered Treblinka." Then another for Fanny, born seven years earlier, likewise deported and murdered. He then reads Stolpersteine for the Hahn family: Heinrich and Martha, deported Riga 1941, and there murdered, April 1, 1943; and their son Martin, fled to Holland in 1938, interred in Westerbork en route to Mauthausen, and there murdered December 12, 1942. Heinrich outlived his son by several months. The boy's mom doesn't say, "Hurry, you're stealing my valuable time, let's move along." She lets him take his time. No laughter, no playing. The boy seems to understand too, at least as well as anyone could. No need for commentary. Done, the boy reaches out, takes mom's hand, stands, and the three walk on.

These memorial stones ask us to stumble in silence to remember "one stone for one name."

Julia Dasbach :
Upon Reading the List of Babi Yar Victims

Kiev was unburied city then,
nooses swung suspended
from trees and telephone poles,
handmade ropes strangled out
the breath from necks in uniform,
left men dangling for days
while survivors watched December's frost
flake away and take the hanged men's skin.
Men who wouldn't be laid to rest
in breadbasket soil alongside the thousands
they heaved into it.
Dust still looms
above this frozen ground, a nameless gravestone
stamped September 29. Our ancestors lie below,
the living entombed beneath the dead.
If only their breath could melt
the deepening snow, show us where to dig
for all the missing, and let my grandmother
stop waiting for her father
to come home.

(taken from a longer sequence, "Learning Yiddish," originally published in Narrative Magazine)

R. Bremner : *Bodies*

The sky still darkens at evening.
The sun still wakes up in early morn
They tell me the waves still break on the shoreline
The frost comes overnight in November.
How can all these things keep on?
Don't they know it's all changed?
That the earth has turned backwards on its axis
And now down is up, up is down.

I try to joke but the joke is on us
And I can't laugh, can't even cry anymore
I used to count days, and mark them
With a twig in the dirt behind a shed
Now I'm not allowed near that shed
And I don't count the days anymore anyway
Instead I count bodies, bodies not people
Bodies that go into that building one way
Bodies that come out another
Bodies I used to see and know
But now I don't see anymore
Bodies that fall to the ground before me
And bodies that wish that they could

But these are not bodies, they're people
Friends I have known for some years or a day
Or family, scattered here, there, and afar
Some I never knew till just now

But they're better off being just bodies
For then I don't mourn them as much
When the sun still wakes up in the early morn
And the sky still darkens at evening.

(Originally published under the title 'The sky still darkens at evening' in the Poetry Super Highway 2016 Yom HaShoah Anthology.)

Callum Beal : *Stickmen*

I looked online for pictures of the Holocaust for the class
project. I almost couldn't look.
There were piles of stickmen burning in pits.
Except these weren't stickmen drawings.
These were real stickmen: starved, gassed and burnt.
There were stick men, stick women, stick children, lying
down and dying.
No one cared, no one paid any attention.
There were stickmen death walks and stick men
shootings, but these stickmen were still people!
I hope we never forget them.

(Year 9, Bangor Grammar School)

Erika Dreifus : *Diaspora: A Prose Poem*

Rain delays my flight an hour. Another. Other flights are cancelled. Diverted. I wait for my plane to Columbus, Ohio, where the elder daughter of a second cousin will be called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah in the morning. I wait, despite the storms and the announcements and the overcrowded Delta terminal in New York and the additional holdup after boarding as thunder rattles the commuter jet on the tarmac, and in the end, I will arrive safely at the Columbus Airport Marriott at two-thirty in the morning.

Seven hours later, in the sanctuary of Congregation Tifereth Israel on East Broad Street, young Talia stands behind the Torah. Her maternal grandmother—my father's first cousin—recites a Hebrew prayer in the cadence of the *sabra* she is. The paternal grandparents chant together, with the Lusophone inflections of their adopted home in São Paulo, and the entire Brazilian contingent laughs when the rabbi attempts a few words in Portuguese.

And the rest of us—the aunts and uncles and cousins of varying degrees—have converged from Canada and California, from Memphis and Boston, from Raleigh and tiny Williamson, West Virginia, and in our blood and our bones we've reconstructed here the remnants of our common home, the birthplace of my father's parents,

and the *sabra's, Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*. The mid-October sun streams through stained glass into the sanctuary, joyful ancestral tears.

(originally published in 2008 in New Vilna Review)

Katy Radford : *Vienna to Millisle*

After the children's home, fostering.
Viennese assimilation into another's way of surviving.
Then a small girl with an Easter dress and flowers in
your hair.
In due course, at seven,
armed only with a brown suitcase, ball and smoked
cheese sandwich,
a train journey through Europe.
You grow, you service, you serve.
Transformed by the kindness of strangers, the hope
of love
and the love of hope.

Tina Crenshaw : *untitled*

December dusk
she lights the candles
still

James Finnegan : *Edith Stein*

for Edith Stein (1891-1942)

Edith rejects an escape plan
by a Dutch official at Westerbork
come let us go for our people

utter annihilation in her view not to go
don't take away my chance to share
the fate of my brothers and sisters

this archaeologist of *empathy*
reaches the little white cottage
  the sound of the Auschwitz train retreating

Viktor Frankl pictures his love
  Primo Levi trades cesium rods
later one day Ivan Denisovich

Edith Stein side-lined by Husserl
and Heidegger blocked from being
  professor of philosophy

for her no work to set her free
her habit with yellow star on the ground
  naked she enters the little white house

Ben Jenkins, Dries Oliver, Benjamin Martin and Jacob McCrea : *The Death March*

Marcher: We keep on walking, walking to our graves.
Marcher: Walking through the fields, towns and cities.
Marcher: The road doesn't stop until we lie down.
Nazi: I don't want to do this, but I keep on doing it.
Marchers: We are walking, walking to our graves.

Marcher: They take us because we're different.
Marcher: Our fingers, toes and noses blacken as we walk.
Marcher: They treat us as if we are less than animals.
Nazi: I don't want to do this, but I keep on doing it.
Marchers: We are walking, walking to our graves.

Marcher: They took me because I am a communist.
Marcher: They took me because I am a trade unionist.
Marcher: They took me because I am a Jew.
Nazi: I don't want to do this, but I keep on doing it.
Marchers: We walked to our coffins, walked to our graves.

(Year 9, Bangor Grammar School)

Vincent Creelan: *There are spirits all around us*

There are spirits all around us
walking our streets, seated
on park benches: silent.
Rarely do they look up
allowing their eyes to be met,
for they are ghosts in their
own lives, and used to being
unseen, unacknowledged.
Their living was as vital
as any we might have
imagined, with dreams of
joy, love, home; being safe.
Now even here they fear.
Death knocked at their door.
In dislocation there is little
space for familial sentiment.
Lives made cold are
barely bygone and keenly
attendant, and call out all too
presently; but we don't hear them.

Joseph Krakowski : *What is Worse?*

You would think that nothing could be worse than being discriminated against, having rights stripped away and being mocked by the Nazis using my own passport, using my own religious star. I was poor and hurt. But actually I was wrong; the ghetto was worse.

You would think that nothing could be worse than being moved to an isolated ghetto, shut away from the outside world. There were Guards at the exits to this place. I was hungry, thirsty and exhausted. But actually I was wrong, the concentration camps were far worse.

You would think that nothing could be worse than being forced to work, hardly getting any sleep at night because of lying awake. Worrying and asking a question over and over: do us Jews really deserve this? I was weak, in pain and had no sense of hope left. But actually I was wrong, the gas chambers were worse.

You would think that nothing could be worse than travelling on a train to a gas chamber, knowing you would be dead soon. Well, you could be right. But actually, we are both wrong, being a survivor is the worst.

There is nothing worse than knowing that 11 million other people died and you didn't. The Holocaust

stopped, I was rescued, and, somehow, I managed to survive. All the guilt, all the sorrow and sadness. It's so overwhelming. I could never forgive the Nazis, but I could never forgive myself for what I did in order to survive...

(Year 9, Bangor Grammar School)

Glen Wilson : *The grass grows, the birds sing*

and this place hums along with little drama.
Trees line the approach, limbs ever stretching,
earthed to this soil, its unique composition.

People return in significant numbers
though the faces are less familiar,
less folded with skin's experience.

Poems are read, songs are played,
breaking the ordinary with ceremony,
for small talk too was lost in the smoke.

A teacher looks at his class, the one time
every head was facing forward, paying attention
to the punctuated silences.

A father explains to his daughter
what happened here and she remembers
as only a child can, handling it like all truths:

a precious jewel that needs to be in light.

Devon Balwit : *The Breaths After and Between*

Peace for our kind can only be a walking towards,
but never an arrival. Somewhere between here and
there, something will shatter it; we will kneel amidst
shards, forced to restore them to new constellations.
Peace floats frail bubbles that burst in shivers
of leaves, a scattering of children playing in canted
rubble. Peace is the breath taken in the aftermath
because we have no other way but to continue
living. We compose ourselves into small offerings
that we leave along the way for strangers to gather,
reminding both that surprise can also mean blessing.

Ray Givans : *Armenian Genocide, 1915*

1.
Heavy artillery fire thunder-clapped above our heads
as we hid among the tall grasses under a bridge,
drank from Megaraget's waters, and I thought
of how last summer we lay languidly reading books
between the wheat fields and our mansion gate.
By evening the cannons coughed and spluttered.
The sky above Sassoun was crimson, flecked with stars.
A slow-moving smoke-cloud masked Telvorik's hills
inflaming our nostrils and clogging our chests,
as we huddled into Mother. She tried to quieten my
moans
as I thought of the sounds of the swishing sword blades,
the thud and trespass of knee-length boots,
the snatch and gagging of Father, hauled from our home
and slung across the back of a horse.

2.
The Return, 1995

I stand, again, beneath the bridge,
recall the taste of the sunflower seeds.
In the sun a crane fly quivers
above the restless Megaraget. The river journeys
past villages, where relatives' two-storey houses
crumble
and where my house is buried beneath a street.

Linda McKenna : *Baking Day*

Today is the day I make bread,
my hands mimicking her grace
and speed, knead, stretch, pat ,
knead, pinch and shape, the same
loaves she loved us with.

Today is the day God and I call
a truce. He nods across the chasm
between us, I dust the bread with
her prayers, trusting he will see
the dough rise, golden and fragrant.

We eat it with Aunt Sofie's plum jam,
her envy-of-the-street, see-if-you-
can-beg-the recipe-of-her jam,
the spicy-sweet spoonfuls of autumn
my sisters and I stole.

God and I having resumed our
normal hostilities, my grace
is one of my brother's trip-me-up
riddles, ‘what weighs more a tonne
of iron or a tonne of feathers?’

Arianna Sanchez : *Neighboring Dachau*

My window overlooks Dachau
and I count the tourists shuffling around the grounds.
Elementary children push, giggle with each other.
An older couple stands in front of the Jewish memorial,
hand over hand, heads bent.
A crowd leaves the museum.

Tourists always ask how I can live so close,
so near the camp that began it all.
I always say its because someone must run
Oma's bakery and frost the cookies.

But they can only see death Dachau represents.
They don't see its horrendous beauty after the gates are
locked
They don't see the smoke rise from the crematorium
against the clear, pure moon.

They don't understand that not all spirits want a release.
I watch the souls line up at three in the morning
for a ghostly roll call. I gaze upon the hands
that try to scrub away the blood stained, discolored wall
they once stood in front of.

I can't sleep without the wails
of those who refuse to be forgotten.

Patricia Devlin-Hill : *Butterflies*

Some 20 years on, Miss Gillespie, in a primary school in the 60s,
spoke of an iron curtain. I imagined it high to the sky thumped
along the line of a map, its folds standing heavy on its
cast iron sunken foot prints, dreary with lashed rain,
rusting onto the thin faces behind it, mud wintering to concrete.

Dad held 'before' stories of families of families, threshed apart,
worked till their clothing failed, cattled forward to the boxed, huddled,
intimacy of their collective death, leaving us butterflies, scratched into
the grime of their gas chamber walls. A message forwarded.
'The world will not let it happen again,' he said. Frightened, I believed him.

Some 70 years on: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' data for 2015;
65.3 million forcibly displaced persons, more than at the end of World War II;
21.3 million refugees, 51% under the age of 18, unaccompanied children 98,400;
86% hosted in the developing regions of the world.

Top host counties; Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran,
Ethiopia, Jordan.

At barbed wired lines on a map, thin faces in failing
clothes push under falling snow;
lines trampled to by people cattled densely in
disbelief between fields of grain.
And on his way to this, a toddler water-face-down on a
beach redefines ‘flotsam’.
Was Aylan Kurdi old enough to have some butterfly of
his own?

This is not how we should go on.

HOW CAN LIFE GO ON?

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 2017

27th January is Holocaust Memorial Day, a day for everyone to remember the millions of people murdered in the Holocaust, under Nazi Persecution and in the subsequent genocides of Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Holocaust Memorial Day honours the survivors of these regimes and challenges ourselves to use the lessons of their experience to inform our lives today.

'How can life go on?' is the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2017. The aftermath of the Holocaust and of subsequent genocides continues to raise challenging questions for individuals, communities and nations. HMD 2017 asks audiences to think about what happens after genocide and of our own responsibilities in the wake of such a crime.

For more information, please visit **http://hmd.org.uk/**