

READING ASHES

In May 2016 I participated in a symposium held in the small Polish town Dąbrowa Białostocka from where my paternal grandparents emigrated during the 1890s. The organizers had read a memorial book that I'd written in 1982 about the shtetl's lost Jewish community and invited me to speak. I learned that the program's title *Reading Ashes* referred to a collection of twenty-five poems with Holocaust themes that were written after the end of World War II by the Polish patriot Jerzy Ficowski.

Jerzy Ficowski (1924-2006) was a multi-dimensional intellectual who during the Nazi occupation displayed noteworthy empathy for the plight of Poland's most persecuted people - especially Jews and gypsies. During the war as a member of the underground Home Army he participated in the Warsaw Uprising and spent nearly a year in a German prison camp. He found his poetic voice after the war but under Soviet governance his literary works were suppressed so that his best known work *Odczytanie popiołów* ("Reading Ashes" or "A Reading of Ashes") didn't appear until 1979. It had taken many years for Ficowski to complete this project for as he said, "I wrote for a long time in order to avoid offending anyone with what I wrote." Critics have praised Ficowski's poems as the most authentic and moving depictions of the Holocaust ever written by a non-Jew - or, as he once described himself, "I, their unburnt brother."

One of the poems in the collection *Reading Ashes* was titled *LETTER TO MARC CHAGALL*. The famous painter had reluctantly sat out the war in self-imposed exile in the United States, but returned to France in 1946 and lived for most of the remainder of his life in Provence. In 1950 Chagall had published a homage in Yiddish *For the Slaughtered Artists* as anguished tribute to dozens of East European artists who perished in Paris during the war: "May we find comfort...in the spirit of our fallen, of those who left us... For we Jews live not only for the living but also for the dead." In the first stanza Chagall appeared to be in a confessional mood, perhaps reflecting a measure of guilt for having left:

*Did I know them all? Did I visit
their atelier? Did I see their art
Close up or from afar?
Now I walk out of myself, out of my years.
I go to their unknown grave.
They call me. They pull me into their grave -
me - the innocent - the guilty
They ask for me: Where were you?
- I fled...*

*I see: now they drag along in rags,
Barefoot on mute roads.
The brothers of Israels, Pissarro and
Modigliani, our brothers - they are led
With ropes by the sons of Durer, Cranach
And Holbein - to death in the crematoria.
How can I, how should I, shed tears?
They have been soaked in brine -
The salt of my tears.
They were dried out with mockery. Thus I
Lose my last hope*

Ficowski's motive for specifically addressing Chagall, whom he didn't know, in this fashion is unclear. The poem, which probably was begun in 1956, could be understood as a mild rebuke for the artist who, in his own words, had fled. It contrasted the nostalgic fairy-tale beauty of Chagall's images of his home town Vitebsk with the suffering of children in the Warsaw ghetto. In 1960 Ficowski sent French and Yiddish translations of the poem to Chagall who then was living in Vence and received a thank you note written in Russian. The next year a prominent Polish composer, Stanislaw Wiechowicz wrote a dramatic orchestral accompaniment to the poem which was played on Polish radio and several times performed live. In 1964 a recording by the Israel Philharmonic was broadcast on French radio on a program

celebrating Warsaw's Ghetto Uprising and upon hearing this broadcast, Mrs. Chagall (Vava) called her husband to listen. Apparently, he was sufficiently moved that he began to compose his own visual accompaniment. - five etchings which eventually appeared in a limited folio edition printed in Paris in 1969. It would be another decade before *Letter to Marc Chagall* appeared in the collection *A Reading of Ashes* that was printed in Paris - then in English translation in 1981 and not published in Poland until 1988.

Chagall's art often was described as being poetic while Ficowski's poem incorporated many of Chagall's familiar metaphors; in effect, their approaches were complementary. But in Chagall's five etchings written to accompany this poem, in addition to fiddlers and lovers, goats and roosters, there were burning buildings, tombstones, corpses on the ground or floating in air and a crucified Jesus launched like a rocket into the sky amidst billowing smoke.

In 1943 Chagall had insisted, "There are no stories in my pictures, no fairy tales, no popular legends...For me a picture is a surface covered with representations of things (objects, animals, human beings) in a certain order in which logic and illustration have no importance. The visual effect of the composition is what is paramount." Perhaps he was being disingenuous, but there can be no doubt that these etchings depicted grim reality. In effect, both Ficowski's "Letter" and Chagall's response were requiems for victims of the Holocaust; each man in his own way venting rage, expressing frustration at their impotence and compassion for the fallen.

An English language translation of *Letter to Marc Chagall* that appeared in the collection *A Reading of Ashes* (1981) began:

*What a pity, Sir, you do not know Rose Gold,
the saddest golden rose. She was only seven when this war ended.
I never saw her*

but she does not take her eyes off me.

Rose (Raisl) may have been the same little girl whom as a young man Jerzy Ficowski saw begging on a Warsaw street. Her image haunted him and she was described again in a poem titled *A girl of six from the ghetto begging in Smolna Street in 1942*: “so she cried...so she fell silent...so she died.” That same moppet was depicted in other poems as well, e.g. “Those who have only seen a child crying over a lost doll cannot know how she was crying. The despair exceeded the capacity of the little child’s body...” Ficowski had been influenced by a book published in 1947 (*Dziecci oskarzaja*) that included transcripts of children who had survived the war. Because no poetry, prose or painting could so authentically express tragedy as the children’s own words at the beginning of certain stanzas Ficowski inserted italicized excerpts from this source that he referred to as “flourishes in prose.”

Letter to Marc Chagall contains such an insertion that again refers to little Rose:

Brother went out in the night, drank water from a puddle and died. We buried him at night in the wood. Once uncle went out of the bunker and never came back. We stayed in hiding like this for 18 months till the Russians came. We could not walk at all and even now we have weak legs. And Rose is always sad, she often cries and will not play with the children.

Following this insertion, but now in his own voice the poet addresses Chagall directly, employs the artist’s familiar images and once again refers to this little girl:

*What a good thing , Sir, you do not know Rose Gold!
The bunch of lilacs the lovers lie in would go up in smoke.
The green musician’s fiddle would cut his throat.
The graveyard gate would turn to dust or be overgrown with brick.
Paint would char the canvases.
For the last, most terrible cry
is always only silence*

And later in *Letter to Marc Chagall* there's another inclusion:

The child was very frightened of death. It was snuggling up to its mother and asking: 'Mummy, does death hurt very much?' The mother was crying and saying: 'No, only for a moment - and that was how they shot them.

When Ficowski described "anthropoid hands dripping red" as "a gold tooth extracted from the ashes," he was referring to post-war newspaper accounts of locals scavenging for gold beneath the grounds of Treblinka and this time the insert reads: *On the sites of the extermination camps robber bands are prowling, looking for gold in the layers of ash left from the burnt prisoners.*

Jerzy Ficowski's obsession with the tragedy of helpless children appeared again, in the poem *The Seven Words* in which he employed the same device, preceding his verse with survivors' own words:

Mommy! But I've been good! It's dark!" - words of a child being shut in a gas chamber at Belzec in 1942, according to the statement of the only surviving prisoner.

The last poem in the collection *A Reading of Ashes* was dedicated to Jerzy Ficowski's wife Elzbieta (Bieta) who was born in 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto. When it was clear that none would survive, a clandestine rescue operation was initiated by Irena Sendler, a young social worker who, assisted by the *Zegota* movement (Polish Council to Aid Jews) with about two dozen volunteers, was responsible for saving the lives of some 2,500 Jewish children! When Bieta was about six months of age she was sedated so that she wouldn't cry, placed into a wooden carpenter's box with air holes which was placed on a flat bed truck buried under a pile of rubble from bombed buildings and driven to the "Aryan" side. Before the box was closed, the baby's mother placed in it a small silver spoon inscribed *Elzbieta, 5 January 1942*. It was the only memento of her early life, what Bieta later described as "my dowry and my birth certificate."

The child was adopted and baptized by the same midwife who delivered her in the ghetto as she had many other babies of Jewish women. When the infant was brought to the midwife, Irena Sendler instructed, "Her name is Bieta. When you love her and hold her, call her that." The birth mother phoned several times just to hear her baby daughter's babbling, but she was killed in November 1943; Bieta's father was shot on the boarding platform in Warsaw when he refused to enter the cattle car to Treblinka. Bieta was not told of her origin until she was seventeen years old but as an adult she was able to piece together some of her family narrative. And many years later she helped care for Irena Sendler, by then in her nineties, whose wartime heroism earned her nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize (she died at age 98 in 2008.)

The day after I participated in the memorial program in Dąbrowa Białostocka I met Bieta Ficowska and several of her friends and family in a small cafe in Warsaw's old Yiddish theater. By now the "baby in the box" was in her seventies and did not speak English but two of her grandsons translated. I was eager to confirm certain facts and to test some of my own theories relative to her husband's relationship with Marc Chagall, specifically about the "Lettre." Bieta had no specific explanation for why her husband had addressed his poem to Chagall other than that he had always admired the older man's art. I had read that hanging on a wall in her apartment was a framed letter from Chagall to Ficowski. Could this unlock the mystery? I asked, what did the letter say? Alas, there would be no revelation - merely, "Hello... Thank You."

However Bieta offered an additional detail. In 1968 when some 20,000 Polish Jews were expelled by Soviet authorities, in an effort to show the world that they were not anti-Semitic, the Polish Embassy in Paris planned a public event where the Jewish artist finally would meet the Polish poet. Ficowski would be given a temporary passport to travel to the event as the government's official representative. However, he declined, refusing to serve as a propaganda tool for the oppressive regime. So Jerzy Ficowski and Marc Chagall never met.



In a lecture titled *Ruins and Poetry* delivered at Harvard in 1982, the poet Czeslaw Milosz, who two years earlier won the Nobel Prize for Literature, described the genre of post-war Polish poetry as an attempt to seek equilibrium out of chaos, a need to find expression for an extraordinary collective experience. European culture had been put on trial and was found wanting: “You spoke of the dignity of man...of good and beauty, and look

what happened to you; you should be ashamed of your lies.” Post-war poets may have borrowed symbols from the past but transformed them from “remnants [ashes] found in ruins.” Although Milosz didn’t mention Jerzy Ficowski by name, his analysis could be used to characterize *Letter to Marc Chagall* which can be understood as an ironic reproach to the painter who fled to America - as if to say, you weren’t there.

Jerzy Ficowski contributed his whole life and his poetry to promoting tolerance and building bridges of closeness between people of different nationalities and religions. What a pity that today this admirable humanitarian is not better known in the West.

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