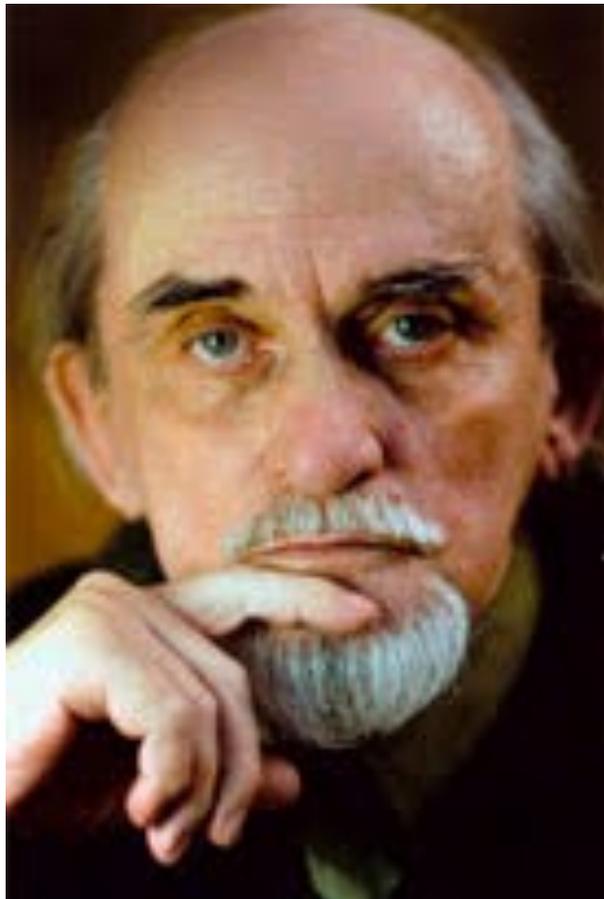


LETTER TO MARC CHAGALL
The Curious Odyssey of a Holocaust Poem

By Michael Nevins



The suffering of Jewish people is my great guilt. The guilt of all those who survived. This is how I feel it, please put this guilt in inverted commas. Please do not take it literally. It is not my sin or my guilt in a literal sense or, even less so, my wrongdoing. But I feel that if I was destined to survive, this means that I am guilty. Jerzy Ficowski, 2006



Jerzy Ficowski

In 1982 I published a memorial book about the destroyed Jewish community of Dabrowa Bialostocka, the village in czarist Russia from where my paternal grandparents emigrated during the 1890s. More than three decades later, Dorota Budzinska, a school teacher in Dabrowa who had read my book on-line, sent an e-mail inviting me to participate in a conference she was planning in order for her students to learn about their town's long forgotten Jewish history. How could I say no? So on May 24, 2016, along with a son and a grandson, we spent a memorable day in "our shtetl."

While preparing for the event, I learned that the program's official title was to be *A Reading of Ashes*. This meant nothing to me but after an internet search, I learned that these words were the title of a collection of twenty-five poems, all on Holocaust-themes, that had been written after the end of World War II by Jerzy Ficowski, a Polish poet whose name is hardly known in this country. Dorota had read this small volume and felt that the title would be an apt designation to rekindle the memory of Dabrowa's Jews.



French edition of Ficowski's poem *Lettre a Marc Chagall*

During the German occupation, Ficowski (pron. Fitsovski) was a teenage member of the underground Home Army. He participated in the Warsaw Uprising, was imprisoned for several months by the Nazis and bore within himself what he later described as “the pain of an incapacitated onlooker.” After the war’s end, he studied at Warsaw University and translated literary works from several languages including Yiddish.

Jerzy Ficowski spent years searching for the language and form that would best express his feelings about the crimes committed on the Jewish people as well as upon the Roma (gypsies.) Because he protested distortions of history and concealment of the Holocaust by the Soviets, much of his work was censored by the regime. Although a volume of his general poetry had appeared in 1948, Ficowski’s book of Holocaust related poems *Odczytanie popiołów* (A Reading of Ashes) wasn’t published until 1979 in London; an English translation followed two years later and the collection including illustrations wasn’t printed in Poland until 1988. Some scholars praised these poems as the most moving depictions of the Holocaust ever written by a non-Jew or, as Ficowski described himself, “I, their unburnt brother.”

The book's first words expressed Ficowski's despair: "I did not manage to save a single life. I did not know how to stop a single bullet." One stark poem in the collection that especially interested me was titled *Letter to Marc Chagall* (**See Appendix One**) and I wondered why the poet chose to address the famous artist whom he'd never met in such a way. Evidently, Ficowski had begun working on this poem in 1947, starting by writing short phrases in his scrapbook but, as he later recalled, "the poem just would not grow.... The words withdrew as if they were afraid that they would not be able to express the content they were to carry." He wished to hear and understand the voices of those who lay in the silence of the earth, but no ordinary words could do justice to the magnitude of Nazi crimes.

Ficowski mused that if he couldn't find the proper tone, the poem might sound dishonest and considered whether it would be best for him to remain silent out of respect as when standing at a grave: "I would rather keep silent but by keeping silent I am lying. I would rather move on, but by moving on I am trampling... I began to take aim at that which seemed inexpressible. I'd write the first verses, and [then] toss them in the trash." In frustration, Ficowski put the project aside.

However, in 1947 transcripts of first-hand accounts made by children who had survived the Holocaust was published in Poland (*The Last Eyewitnesses: Children of the Holocaust Speak* by Maria Hochberg-Marianska and Noe Gruss.) Ficowski wrote, "No word of poetry can equal the shocking power of their disclosures in the language of children." Indeed their simple words seemed so authentic that Ficowski decided to insert italicized excerpts into the substance of certain of his poems — a device that he called "flourishes in prose."

Jerzy Ficowski admired reproductions he'd seen of what he described as Chagall's "fairy tale" depictions of rural life, but in the context of Holocaust history, those pictures seemed transformed: "In a way, they descended into an inhuman time, associating themselves with the ashes of the crematoria." In addition to employing some of the children's words, he used familiar images from Chagall's paintings but including them here within a cruel setting. Polish scholar Katerina Szewczyk-Haake suggested that Ficowski's *Letter* contrasts two different worlds: the familiar shtetl motifs of Chagall's art and the grim reality of the Holocaust: "...the poem expresses gratitude for the fact that Chagall's art might stay intact despite the horrors of the times, preserving a world which no longer exists.

Translating Polish verse to English can be challenging. Consider the following example that appears in the final stanza of the *Letter* when the poet describes how two young children escaped detection by hiding behind a wardrobe. Keith Bosley's English translation in 1981:

*I think they will find shelter
and that I shall meet them again
tucked away in the safety
of your oracular colors,
Mr. Chagall.*

Because there are alternate synonyms for “oracular”, e.g. prophetic, prescient, ambiguous, cryptic, obscure, confusing, fairytale-like, enigmatic, it matters which adjective a translator selects. Ficowski was no help. He chose not to explain his meaning, simply explaining, “The rest I have told in *Letter to Marc Chagall*.” The *Letter* had appeared in several minor collections of Polish poetry until in 1960 Ficowski sent a French translation to Chagall who then was living in the south of France — he received this handwritten reply:

*Dear Mr. Ficowski,
Please excuse me for writing in Russian. I was deeply moved by your letter and poem “A Letter to Marc Chagall.” I fully understand what you went through. I am moved that you thought of me. I would very much like to deserve your confidence in me as a painter. This is a great encouragement for me. But above all I wish you happiness...and that you may find a way back to your personnalité. You are on the right road.*

As Jerzy Ficowski recalled, “It [the note] was an award for me and a valuable souvenir. I put it under glass as the only ‘original Chagall’ in my possession.” But that wasn’t the end of the story. In 1961 a Polish musician, Stanislaw Wiechowicz, was commissioned by the National Radio to compose a musical accompaniment to the *Letter*. It was written for orchestra, chorus and soloists and the premier was performed at the Warsaw Autumn Music Festival in 1961; a studio recording followed the next year and live performances in Polish cities, and also in Israel. After a radio broadcast on Holocaust Remembrance Day in 1965, the cultural attaché of the Polish Ambassador in Paris announced that Chagall had just informed the Embassy of his decision to illustrate the *Letter*. Ficowski recalled “This was quite unexpected news, especially since Chagall very rarely illustrated literary works.”

It took more than eight years for Chagall to complete the etchings, perhaps because during this period he was working on the ceiling of the Paris Opera and the stained glass windows for the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Adrien Maeght, Chagall's Parisian publisher and distributor, agreed to take on the project which finally emerged in 1969 as a deluxe folio edition, 175 copies signed by both men.

In November, 1970 Ficowski asked Chagall for more information about the creation of the prints and received this reply: "As far as I can recall, I began to do illustrations even as I was [first] reading your poem...After about two years, I completed for the second time the frontispiece which had seemed to me inept. I hope that the possibility arises of seeing you some day. You know how moved I was by the poem that you wrote for me which I love very much." On the same day in 1971 that Ficowski received his own copy of the newly finished "Lettre" from Chagall's French publisher, he composed an essay that described the creation of his poem — an evolution of greater than two decades. (See Appendix Two.) Although this essay described the sequence of events, Ficowski failed to explain just why he'd addressed Chagall in the first place; about this, he wrote only, "The rest I have told in *Letter to Marc Chagall*." It was left for the reader to guess.

Chagall also never explained why he chose to illustrate Ficowski's poem. He'd sat out most of the war in self-imposed exile in the United States and, after returning to France, he published a poetic homage *For the Slaughtered Artists*. This was a tribute to Jewish painters who had perished during the war and in the first stanza, Chagall appeared to be in a confessional mood that, to me, suggested 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...*

Whether or not Chagall suffered from "survivor's guilt," there's no doubt that this poem was deeply personal for him and recalled pogroms from during his Russian youth. These five etchings contained some of the same motions that Ficowski employed in the poem — fiddlers, cows, roosters, fish — but, also, burning buildings, tombstones, corpses on the ground or floating in air amidst billowing smoke. The poet's words were enhanced by the artist's images, each man venting rage while, at the same time, expressing compassion for the fallen.

Ficowski's *Letter to Marc Chagall* begins,

*What a pity, Sir [Chagall], 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.
Twice the snows have melted on them,
two thousand times death has come
to the six-year-old eyes of Rose Gold.*

It's likely that Rose reminded Ficowski of a moppet he'd once seen begging on a Warsaw street. Haunted by her image, he described her in a poem titled *Six-Year-Old from the Ghetto, Begging on Smolna Street*: "She had nothing save the oversize eyes yet to grow up to in them quite unwittingly two Stars of David." In that poem he went on to describe how the little girl was ignored by passersby "so she cried...so she fell silent...so she died." Rose Gold reappears in the second verse of *Letter to Marc Chagall*:

*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.
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.*

Ficowski's obsession with the tragedy of helpless children also was evident in other poems. The last in the collection, which was titled "Both Your Mothers," was dedicated to Ficowski's second wife Elzbieta who was born in 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto. When it was clear that no one would survive, a rescue operation was initiated by Irena Sendler(ova), a young social worker. Assisted by the *Zegota* movement (Polish Council to Aid Jews), Sendler directed a network that saved the lives of an estimated 2,500 Jewish children from the ghetto.

Among them was six month old Elzbieta Bussold who was sedated with Luminal so she wouldn't cry and placed into a wooden carpenter's box with air holes. It was put on a flat bed truck, buried under a pile of rubble from bombed buildings and driven to safety on the "Aryan side", but 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 — many years later she described it as "my dowry and my birth certificate."



The infant was adopted and baptized by the same midwife who had delivered her in the ghetto. The birth mother phoned several times just to hear her baby daughter's babbling, but she was killed in November 1943; the father was shot on the boarding platform in Warsaw when he refused to enter a cattle car to Treblinka. Elzbieta was brought up Catholic and didn't learn of her origin until she was seventeen years old, but as an adult she was able to piece together some of her family's story: "Although too small to remember her clearly, I will never forget my Jewish mother. I cannot even recognize her face in a photograph, but I see her in my dreams."

In later years Elzbieta helped supervise care for the aging Irena Sendler whose wartime heroism had earned her nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize and a medal from Yad Vashem. In Ficowski's biography of the Jewish writer-artist Bruno Schulz, he described Elzbieta Bussold, the much younger woman whom he married in 1968:

My wife was saved in 1942 as a child, the sole member of her family to survive. Her rescuer [Sendler] is now long dead, but [her] Yad Vashem medal is preserved in our house as an inextinguishable memorial to her and out of gratitude for the institution that has honored her sacrifice and heroism with its distinction. (Regions of the Great Heresy, pp. 169-170.)

Before my visit to Poland in 2016, I learned that Elzbieta was living in Warsaw and arranged to meet her in a small cafe in the city's former Yiddish theater on the evening before I flew home. I hoped that she could tell me more about the origin of the *Letter*.



But by then, the “baby in the box” was in her seventies and because she’d been much younger than her husband, she had no personal knowledge of events leading to the composition of the poem *Letter to Marc Chagall*. However, she told me that she’d corresponded with Chagall’s second wife Vava who explained that when Wiechowicz’s rhapsody was broadcast on French radio, she had called her husband over to listen. It’s unclear whether or not that was when Chagall was inspired to resume work on his unfinished project, but when the five etchings finally were completed, the result was one genre inspiring another and then another, a requiem of mutual creation — a synergy of poetry, art and music.



One of five etchings Chagall made to illustrate Ficowski's poem

Vava Chagall told Elzbieta that in 1968, after some 20,000 Polish Jews had been expelled by Soviet authorities, perhaps in an effort to show the world that they were not anti-Semitic the Polish Embassy in Paris planned a publicity event at which the Jewish artist would meet the Polish poet. Their idea was for Ficowski to receive a temporary passport to permit him to travel as Poland's official representative, but he refused to serve as a propaganda tool for the oppressive Soviet regime and declined the invitation. So it was that Jerzy Ficowski and Marc Chagall never met.

Polish scholar Elzbieta Kossewska has written about Chagall's friendship with David Lazer, a Polish-Israeli journalist who sometimes visited the artist in Provence. During one such visit in 1958, Lazer mentioned Ficowski's poem and Chagall replied that he already was familiar with it and wished to know more about the author: "[Chagall] was even contemplating the possibility of pitching a French translation with his own illustrations to a local publisher — an idea that would come to fruition over ten years later." After Wiechowicz's rhapsody was played in Israel, Lazer informed Chagall who replied:

My dear friend Lazer, thank you for the letter containing the clipping of your article about the Polish poet. It is moving; had I been in Israel at the time when his Jewish poem was performed, I would certainly have been sad...It is good to know that there are friends...among the Christians.

When Jerzy Ficowski died in Warsaw May 9, 2006, an obituary written by his friend Krzysztof Czyzewski noted, "these verses could not have been written from afar, but only by someone living in Warsaw after the Holocaust. And above all by someone who could not remain passive, who witnessed the end, but who built on the ashes because life goes on....Later generations must wrestle with [the dividing wall between Poles and Jews] anew, striving to hear and understand the voice 'of those who lie executed in the deep silence of the earth' — the generations of those Poles who 'would like just to go on, and in going, trample.'" The poet felt a sense of responsibility to allow the silent to speak and bore witness not only to the tragedy of the Jews but also remembered that the Roma (gypsies) and others were victims of the Shoah.

Ficowski certainly would have agreed with Primo Levi who once wrote, "We cannot understand [Nazi hatred], but we can and must understand where it springs from, and we must be on our guard. If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened can happen again." Jerzy Ficowski contributed his whole life to promoting tolerance and building bridges between people of different nationalities and religions. It's a pity that today few people in the United States are familiar with his poetry.

LEARNING, THEN DOING

In the hope of rectifying this state of affairs, in 2022 I decided to produce a video that combined a translation of Ficowski's *Letter to Marc Chagall* with the artist's little-known illustrations. I recruited a production team, actors and a composer and also obtained

permissions from the families of the poet and the painter — the result was a sixteen minute documentary film (see, <https://vimeo.com/756136424>. Password: Chagall.) My video's last words were, "These two gifted men couldn't erase the Holocaust from their memories — and neither should we!" To my mind, it's not sufficient for a viewer to passively watch the film — better yet would be if it inspired them to do something constructive in response. Ficowski wrote poems, Chagall made etchings, but for mere mortals, the challenge is what can we do given our more limited talents? To explain what I mean, I'll describe how several people I know reacted after they'd learned something new and personal about the Holocaust.

Earlier I mentioned the teacher in my former grandparent's shtetl who had invited me to speak there. When Dorota Budzinska first began teaching in Dabrowa, she realized that although living Jews had disappeared long ago, their dead remained as silent witnesses of the past — the neglected cemetery seemed to her like a personal reproach, and she felt a moral obligation to clean it up. In 2015 Dorota enlisted her students in the task for as she explained, "education through work and creative projects brings the past closer, shapes attitudes and teaches tolerance and understanding of the world." She believes that active engagement in educational activities will change perception of "Jewish matters," not only for her students but also for the local community. When Dorota Budzinska was nominated by the POLIN museum for their prestigious prize in 2019, here's how she described herself:

I am a teacher and a pedagogue, so I am aware that my attitude, opinions and behavior have an impact on the youth I work with.....In an environment where a variety of nations and religions exist, it is vital to teach tolerance through joint activities and shared knowledge. Stereotypes, intolerance and indifference all stem from lack of knowledge.

Now in her 37th year teaching language in Dabrowa Bialostocka, on November 9, 2022 Dorota gathered her students, including my granddaughter Ava's new pen-pal Paulina, at the cemetery for a memorial event recalling the day 80 years earlier when the first shipment of Dabrowa's Jews were shipped off to Treblinka. At a similar event two weeks later that involved five neighboring towns, a Polish translation of my video was shown.

On each of my three visits to Poland, I met Dr. Tomasz (Tomek) Wisniewski, who for nearly three decades has been collecting information about Jewish history in the Bialystok region. He is a writer, journalist and film-maker who has created an archive of more than 17,000 photographs, some of which were included in my video.



Dr. Tomek Wiśniewski

Tomek was born in 1958 and moved with his family to Bialystok when he was ten years old. As a university student he became active in the Solidarity Movement and was arrested for anti-Communist activities and sentenced to nine months in jail. During that period government censorship limited what books could be read in public libraries, but that wasn't the case in prison libraries. So, while in jail, Tomek was able to read about the Bialystok ghetto and the almost total annihilation of Poland's Jewish population. This changed his outlook about his city, his country and even his own identity: "I wanted to know what there was before when Jews lived in Bialystok."

Like most of his postwar generation, Tomek had no inkling that his native city once was an important center of Jewish life, learning and political and economic activity. He was unaware that Jews made up the majority of Bialystok's pre-war population, that tens of thousands of Jews had been confined in a wartime ghetto or that in 1941 the Nazis herded some 1,000 Jews into the Bialystok's main synagogue and then torched the building.

When released from prison, Tomek asked scholars whether the things he'd read were true and was told that they were, but they were forbidden to talk about or teach them since it was against communist doctrine. He dug up pre-war guides and newspapers and felt that he was discovering a lost world that had vanished from view as if it had been drowned like the mythical continent of Atlantis. In 2018 when the POLIN Museum gave him their coveted annual award for "contributions to building mutual understanding and respect between Poles and Jews," Tomek explained:

The history of the Jews of Bialystok is not just Jewish history for me. The history of the Jews in Bialystok and of Polish Jews in general, is a major part of Polish history. Poles who deny themselves knowledge of this history remain ignorant of themselves and their past. They never get to know who they really are. It is they who are the losers, nobody else.

For many years Tomek Wisniewski has been fighting for the establishment of a Jewish museum in Bialystok. He began by founding Museum of the Jews of Bialystok and the Region” an association whose website, www.jewishbialystok.pl, is visited by about fifty thousand people every month. Tomek plans to rent permanent space in 2023 that will open daily for exhibitions, special events and to provide a place where family documents can be stored.

I'll close by describing three Americans who during visits to Poland learned some of their own family's stories and, as a result, were inspired to use their talents to honor the memory of Eastern Europe's former Jewish community.

Dalit Hadass Warshaw is a multi-talented musician who composed and played the musical background for my video. In 2016 she was invited to perform in Warsaw and took advantage of the visit to learn about her family's roots. When she returned home, she composed a new work titled *For Saba and Forgotten Souls* (Saba means grandfather in Hebrew) and in my video, as Ficowski's poem is read and Chagall's etchings are projected, she plays this haunting piece on violin and theremin (an electronic musical instrument). In addition, when Dalit learned of her great, grandfather's heroism, she composed a new piece about his story, *Swimming to Fire*, that will premier at Bargemusic in New York City in January, 2023.

Mark Podwal is an acclaimed artist of Jewish themes and because I knew that his mother had emigrated from Dabrowa Bialostocka as a young child, I invited him to join me when I visited in 2016. He did and shortly after returning home, Dr. Podwal painted 18 color prints that were displayed widely and also reproduced in a book (cover below). The next year, 2018, Mark invited me to join him when he returned to Poland in order to donate 1000 copies of this picture book.

KADDISH

FOR DĄBROWA BIALOSTOCKA



MARK PODWAL

Polish translation by Katarzyna Lisjak



Later, Dr. Podwal painted an oak tree with the twenty-two letters of the Yiddish alphabet scattered among the leaves (above). Dabrowa means oak forest, hence the oak tree. These letters represent the town's former Jewish population and tiny red houses in the background symbolize how the Germans had burned the village to the ground. Mark Podwal's solitary oak tree also was reproduced as a mural that was placed on an outer wall of Dabrowa's high school and I decided to conclude my documentary with this vivid image because, to my mind, the tree symbolizes life and growth, strength and peace.

Although Dr. Dan Oren had nothing to do with my project, he's another example of someone who became activated after visiting his family's ancestral shtetl in 1993. After that trip he began a long search to solve a mystery about an old family photograph. (The story is well told in his book, *The Wedding Photo*.) And as a result of what he learned, Oren founded an NPO called The Friends of Jewish Heritage which is dedicated to protecting and restoring physical sites, including more than 1,200 cemeteries and some 200 still-standing synagogues in Poland; members of the organization volunteer their services to perform the hard work.

During my three visits to my grandparents' shtetl, I came to appreciate that similarities of Christians and Jews, Poles and Americans far exceed our differences. That being said, my closing words at Dabrowa's first Jewish Culture Day in 2016 still seem apt today — perhaps even more so.

Once again we live in troubling times — not as awful as during the darkest days of the 20th century, but troubling enough. And again, harsh words are being spoken by influential leaders both in your country and mine. Now is a time for all people of good-will to be vigilant in guarding against injustice and hate and it's in times like these, that it's necessary to hold fast to our best values — including tolerance, kindness, humility and humanity. That was a fundamental lesson in the life and poetry of Jerzy Ficowski — it's a lesson that can be learned from the poems in his "Reading the Ashes" and today it's my message to you.

THE LETTER ARRIVES

It took several years for Jerzy Ficowski to finish *Letter to Marc Chagall* and then send a copy to the famous artist. In turn it took nearly a decade for Chagall to complete his five etchings so that the limited folio edition of their joint venture didn't appear in Paris until 1970; the only English translation of the poem, but without illustrations, wasn't published in London until 1981. I had first learned about the poem just before my visit to Dabrowa in 2016 and my documentary was completed in late 2022, but the lengthy odyssey of Ficowski's *Letter* still had more places to visit.

The first public showing of my video was held (virtually) on November 9, 2022 at Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel in Riverdale, N.Y. on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Coincidentally, on that same day Dorata's students gathered at Dabrowa's Jewish cemetery in order to clear the overgrown space and to light candles in memory of the first deportation of the town's Jews to Treblinka which occurred on that same date 80 years earlier. About two weeks later, when another memorial event for five neighboring towns was held in nearby Suchowala, my video was played with Polish translations. Symbolically, Ficowski's *Letter* was delivered, the ashes were read and the poem's lengthy odyssey concluded.



Dorata Budzinska's students volunteer to clear Dabrowa's Jewish cemetery of debris and to honor the memory of their former neighbors

SPECIAL THANKS

I'm grateful to Elzbieta Ficowska, the poet's wife, and to their daughter Anna Ficowska -Teodorowicz for approving this essay, and also to Danielle Freedman and Elzbieta Smolenska for their translations from Polish. My video *Letter to Marc Chagall* was co-directed and edited by Vera Aronow of Turnstone Productions, the narrator was Elzbieta Smolenska, readers were Wally Glickman and Arlene Moskowitz and background music was composed and played by Dalit Warsaw.

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APPENDIX ONE

Letter to Marc Chagall

T

I

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.
Twice the snows have melted on them,
two thousand times death has come
to the six-year-old eyes of Rose Gold.

*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.*

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.

What a pity, Sir, you do not know Frycek!
His mother gave birth to him only just before the war.
Now, he wanted to be a herring, which has its own salt,
or a fly, which is allowed to buzz.
For he was allowed only a small existence.
He dreamt behind the wardrobe of an onion,
well, how could he not cry from such dreams!

*I sat behind the wardrobe, had no supper. When someone came, I sat
nice and quiet, I was never even out in the sun. I covered myself up
with a counterpane [blanket] which was full of lice. I thought I would always be like this.
They said they would travel to Czestochowa and leave me behind. I was just about to
cry, but I thought what of it, when they go away I shall come out from behind the
wardrobe.*

What a good thing, Sir, you do not know Frycek,
who played behind the wardrobe at being a cobweb!
The little daughter sits in the green window.
The samovar from Vitebsk hums down the years.
The sleepy oil lamps smoke.
From heaven the winged herring blesses the country fairs.
Anyway why believe in Frycek?
After all, Frycek is not the Lord God.

II

And on a certain day Mummy came and took me somewhere else to live, where I had to call mummy 'madam'. Sometimes I would forget to call mummy 'madam', and then mummy would get very annoyed. But it was so hard for me to get used to it, so difficult, that now and then I had to whisper in mummy's ear a few times 'Mummy, mummy, mummy'. And I would ask: 'Mummy, but when the war is over, will I be able to call you mummy out loud?'

These are verses from the Newest Testament.
In it six million cards [pages], charred,
while those that survived have for years reflected
a red candlestick of fire.
And there are also testimonies of things.
In the hairdresser's mirror
a bearded terror
stirred up rings wider and wider still
as in sad green water,
and they shattered that other world.
Not even a reflection was left.

I would send you, Mr. Chagall,
albeit a small shard of the mirror,
but by now they are deep
in the stratum of a dead era,
and near them an abundance of bones
to which it means a lot
that one should be briefly silent for them
lying in all the unknown places
and should recite for them
Aloud the word 'Momma'.

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' -- was how they shot them.

And now deserts arose:
the sands of Majdanek, Sobibór,
the dunes of Treblinka and Belzec,
where the wind arranges for eternal rest
not flint, mica, sandstone
minced in the grinders of ancient seas
but limestone and coal
of the human race leveled with the earth.
I, a man, I, a son of this earth,
I, their unburnt brother,
still see you, Sir, your cockerel, now blind,
guarding the scraps of human affairs
and on the last day of destruction
rising above the ashes.

III

On the sites of the extermination camps robber bands are prowling,
looking for gold in the layers of ash left from the burnt prisoners.
In the darkness the ashes run out through the colanders of hourglasses.
And in the air there seems to be a breathing of last gasps.
Sometimes the night will be lit
by a star resurrected from beneath the earth:
a gold tooth extracted from the ashes.
And then in that flash can be seen
anthropoid hands dripping red.

Today I recognized those palms
though by day they are clean as a wafer:
they applauded the trains in which
Rose Gold and Frycek, from behind the wardrobe,
travelled, parting from us forever,
leaving their dead behind them.
I think they will find shelter
and that I shall meet them again,
tucked away in the safety
of your oracular colors,
Mr. Chagall.

APPENDIX TWO

FROM JERZY FICOWSKI. (Translated by Danielle Freedman)

I'm going to tell in brief how my poem got to be illustrated by Marc Chagall, how it came about that that great painter decided to honor my poem with a set of five prints — a poem dedicated precisely to him — right in its very title. I wrote A Letter to Marc Chagall on and off from 1950-1956, and published it for the first time in the pages of the weekly publication, "The Simple/Straightforward Way", in 1957. Subsequently the poem was contained in my following little collection of poems [Reading Ashes] in that same year — in "Where I come from", and later — in the section entitled "Some Poems" (1971).

In time it received numerous translations into many languages: Swedish, Finnish, Hungarian, Russian, French, English, Yiddish, Hebrew... One of the three translations into French, done by Suzanne Arlet, I sent to Chagall, even before it was published, in typescript form, in 1960. Shortly thereafter, I received a reply, an extensive letter written by hand and in Russian, since he had a more fluent command of this language than of French. The letter was dated by year only — 1960 — and was written in Vence — the artist's residence in the [French] Alps.

It begins with the words: "I apologize that I am writing to you in Russian. I was moved that you thought of me. I want very much to be deserving of your faith in me as a painter.".....In July 1962, the then cultural attache of the Polish Ambassador in Paris, the writer Tadeusz Brzeza, in a short telephone interview reported in "Warsaw Life" said: "In recent days, one of the French literary periodicals has featured translations of contemporary Polish poetry, and among them — Jerzy Ficowski's "A Letter to Marc Chagall." The artist was so moved by this poem that he intends to complete illustration and to publish them in an album."

Shortly thereafter, I received a contract from the Paris publisher and patron of art, Adrien Maeght, for a deluxe edition of my poem containing the original aquafortes [etchings] by Marc Chagall. A further seven year period passed in waiting for the result. In the beginning of 1970, I received a copy of a beautiful folio-book. It had been published — with designation for a limited number of subscribers — in 175 numbered copies provided with the autographs of both its authors in common: Chagall's and mine. The whole thing, printed in beautiful typescript on cream, loosely-bound pages of paper, on which are also to be seen original copies of Chagall's prints, is contained in a canvas bound casing.

A fresh correspondence with Chagall was struck up: on the 8th December 1971 he sent me the title page of this edition with a dedication set down in felt-tip pen, adorned with multicolored bouquets of flowers, sketched in the margins. In the short letter attached, I read: "You know how moved I was by the poem that you wrote for me and which I love very much." I addressed the Master with the request that he permit reproduction of his illustrations in a Polish edition of the Letter. He gave consent, at no charge, of his etchings, and in 1976 his wife wrote to my wife, "I hope that the Polish edition of the book, A Letter to Marc Chagall will come out soon and that your husband will be pleased."

Reasons beyond my control meant that this hope was not to be fulfilled for several years: this was the period in which nothing that sprouted beneath my pen stood a chance of publication [under Soviet governance.] After a few months, Vava wrote again: "You know how Marc Chagall values your husband's poetry. He also has a profound faith that THE LETTER will be published." Thus it was that Marc Chagall, on the day before his ninetieth birthday, sustained me in spirit. At that time, I was busy working to complete the poetry cycle entitled "A Reading of Ashes", in which the central piece is precisely a Letter to Marc Chagall.

This volume was published in London in 1979 without the illustrations, and shortly afterwards — this time with the illustrations — in a second printing. About one year after the London [Polish] edition, there appeared in London an edition of the book in English, and in Paris in French. Not until 1981 did the possibility arise, about which I informed Chagall, of an edition by the Iskry publishing house [in Poland.] Mrs. Chagall wrote to me, on behalf of her husband, on 27 February, 1981: “My husband expresses complete agreement that you might reproduce in your collected poems the prints that he completed for you. He was very pleased to hear that your works will again be published....

Thus it came about that the Letter to Marc Chagall itself, and so precisely this very piece of work here whose addressee completed the illustrations to it, appears today with Chagall’s prints, shortly after the great artist’s death. A strange twist of fate brought it about that permission for the printing of the etchings was issued in Paris on 28 March, 1985 — a few hours before Marc Chagall died. On 20 November, 1970, in reply to my question about the creation of the prints, he wrote: “As far as I myself can recall, I began to do the illustrations even while I was reading your poem in 1962. After about two years, I completed for the second time the frontispiece [compared to the first that seemed to me inept.] I hope that the possibility arises of seeing you in person some day.” Such an opportunity never presented itself. I have yet to see the artist to whom I owe the most unlooked for distinction, the most superlative that has ever befallen me.

Finally, a few remarks about the poem itself. It is composed of two elements tightly connected with one another: my own verse and fragments of the accounts of Jewish children who were saved — that of Roza Gold, seven years old, together with Frycek Sztzjkeller, born in Bielsk in 1939, as well as that of Helena Schutz from Lwow, born in 1928. These accounts are excerpts from the book of Maria Hochberg-Marianska and Noe Gruss, entitled “The Children Complain”, published in 1947 by the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland. Rosa and Frycek are — under their actual names — the heroes of my poem. No word in the language of poetry can equal the shocking power of their disclosures in the language of children. So much for commentary. The rest I have told in my “Letter to Marc Chagall.”

