THE POOR POLES LOOK AT THE GHETTO

JAN BLONSKI

On more than one occasion Czeslaw Milosz has spoken in a perplexing way of the duty of Polish poetry to purge the burden of guilt from our native soil which is - in his words - 'sullied, blood-stained, desecrated'.(1) His words are perplexing, because one can only be held accountable for the shedding of blood which is not one's own. The blood of one's own kind, when shed by victims of violence, stirs memories, arouses regret and sorrow, demands respect. It also calls for remembrance, prayer, justice. It can also allow for forgiveness, however difficult this may be. The blood of the other, however, even if spilt in a legitimate conflict, is quite another matter but it also does not involve desecration. Killing when in self-defence is legally condoned, though it is already a departure from Christian moral law: Christ ordered Peter to put away his sword. Whenever blood is spilt it calls for reflection and penance. Not always, however, can it be said to desecrate the soil.

What Milosz means here is neither the blood of his compatriots nor that of the Germans. He clearly means Jewish blood, the genocide which--although not perpetrated by the Polish nation--took place on Polish soil and which has tainted that soil for all time. That collective memory which finds its purest voice in poetry and literature cannot forget this bloody and hideous defilement. It cannot pretend that it never occurred. Occasionally one hears voices, especially among the young, who were not emotionally involved in the tragedy, saying: 'We reject the notion of collective responsibility. We do not have to return to the irrevocable past. It is enough if we condemn this crime in toto as we do with any injustice, any act of violence'. What I say to them is this: 'Our country is not a hotel in which one launders the linen after the guests have departed. It is a home which is built above all of memory; memory is at the core of our identity. We cannot dispose of it at will, even though as individuals we are
not directly responsible for the actions of the past. We must carry it within us even though it is unpleasant or painful. We must also strive to expiate it.'

How should this be done? To purify after Cain means, above all, to remember Abel. This particular Abel was not alone: he shared our home, lived on our soil. His blood has remained in the walls, seeped into the soil. It has also entered into ourselves, into our memory. So we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth. Without such an insight, our home, our soil, we ourselves, will remain tainted. This is, if I understand correctly, the message of our poet. Or, at any rate, this is how Milosz sees his duty, while calling upon us at the same time to assume this obligation also.

How difficult this task is can be seen from Milosz's celebrated poem ' Campo di Fiori'. At the heart of it there is the image of the merry-go-round which was--by chance, but what a coincidence!---built in Krasiriski Square in Warsaw just before the outbreak of the ghetto rising. When the fighting broke out, the merry-go-round did not stop; children, youngsters and passers-by crowded around it as before:

Sometimes the wind from burning houses
would bring the kites along
and people on the merry-go-round
caught the flying charred bits.
This wind from the burning houses
blew open the girls' skirts
and the happy throngs laughed
on a beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

(translation by A. Gillon)

Milosz compares 'the happy throng' to the crowd of Roman vendors who -- only a moment after the burning at the stake of Giordano Bruno--went merrily about their business as before, enjoying their 'pink fruits of the sea' and 'baskets with olives and

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lemons' as if nothing had happened. He ends the poem with reflections of 'the loneliness of dying men', who have 'the poet's word' for their only consolation. It is only the word, the poet seems to be saying, which can preserve what can still be saved. It purges the memory by voicing a protest against the passing away and 'the oblivion growing before the flame expired'.

The act of remembering and mourning fixes in the memory the image of the stake in the middle of the market place or that of a merry-go-round on the grave. The success of the poem itself--which is often quoted and has been translated into many languages--is a clear proof of that. In its Hebrew version, the poem may appear as evidence of the hostile indifference of the Poles in the face of the Holocaust. Years later Milosz wonders 'whether there really was such a street in Warsaw. It existed, and in another sense it did not. It did exist, because there were indeed merry-go-rounds in the vicinity of the ghetto. It did not, because in other parts of town, at other moments, Warsaw was quite different. It was not my intention to make accusations.'(2) The poem, he concedes, is too 'journalistic', allowing one too easily to draw conclusions. It simplifies truth and, by so doing, soothes the conscience. Worse, the poet discovers that he has written 'a very dishonest poem'. Why? Because--I quote--'it is written about the act of dying from the standpoint of an observer.' So it is; the piece is so composed that the narrator whom we presume to be the poet himself, comes off unscathed. Some are dying, others are enjoying themselves, all that he does is to 'register a protest' and walk away, satisfied by thus having composed a beautiful poem. And so, years later, he feels he got off too lightly. Matched against the horrors of what was occurring at the time, he says, the act of writing is 'immoral.' 'Campo di Fiori' does not succeed in resolving the conflict between life and art. Milosz adds in his defence that the poem was composed as 'an ordinary human gesture in the spring of 1943' and, of course, we must immediately concede that it was a magnanimous human gesture. During that tragic Easter, it saved--as someone put it somewhat grandiloquently--'the honour of Polish poetry.' We agree with the poet, though, that the last word on the subject has yet to be spoken.

This agonizing over a poem may perhaps help us to understand why we are still unable to come to terms with the whole of the
Polish-Jewish past. Here then I shall abandon literature and draw directly on my personal experience. Perhaps, on reflection, not even very personal, as almost everybody who has travelled abroad, especially in the West, must have had this question put to him at one time or other: 'Are Poles anti-semites?' Or, more bluntly: 'Why are Poles anti-semites?' I myself have heard it so many times, and so many times I have tried to explain, that I could attempt a thumbnail sketch of some twenty or so of such conversations:

'Are Poles anti-semites?'

'Why do you put your question in this way? There are Poles who are anti-semites, some others who are philo-semites, and a growing number who do not care either way.'

'Well, yes, of course, but I am asking about the majority. Poles have always had a reputation for being anti-semites. Could this be an accident?'

'What do you mean by "always"? Wasn't it true that at a time when Jews were expelled from England, France and Spain, it was in Poland, and not elsewhere, that they found refuge?'

'Yes, maybe, but that was a long time ago, in the Middle Ages. At that time Jews were the objects of universal contempt. But at least since the mid-eighteenth century in Europe, there has always been a problem of Polish intolerance.'

'But it is exactly at that time that Poland disappeared from the map of Europe!'
'Polish society, however, continued to exist and the Jews could not find their place within it. Why?' 'We were under foreign rule; we had to think of ourselves first.' 'This is precisely what I mean. Why could you not think of yourselves together with the Jews?' 'They were too numerous. We did not have sufficient resources. We could not provide for their education, judiciary, administration. Jews didn't even speak Polish: they preferred to learn Russian or German. But there were enlightened people among us who advocated the course of assimilation and strove to bring the two communities together.' 'But why? Why couldn't Jews simply remain Jews? You were also responsible for pogroms, why?'

'It is not true, the first pogroms took place in the Ukraine and they were provoked by the Tsarist police. . . And so such discussions continue: 'When you regained independence, the fate of Jews did not improve. On the contrary, anti-semitism became even more vicious.' 'You can't change society in only twenty years, and besides
that, was it not much the same elsewhere in Europe at the time? In the aftermath of the First World War we received many Jews from Russia, and after 1934 from Germany. 'That may be true, but you still treated them as second-class citizens. During the war you saved too few.' 'There is in Israel a place commemorating people who saved Jews during the war. Thirty per cent of the names on that list are Polish names.' 'But the percentage of Jews who survived the war in Poland is low, the lowest in Europe in relation to the total number of the population.' 'In 1942 there were four Jews for every eight Poles in Warsaw. Now, how is it possible for the eight to hide the four?' 'It was indeed the Poles who used to identify Jews and passed them on to the Germans and to the police which was, let us not forget, Polish.' 'In every society there is a handful of people without conscience. You have no idea what the German occupation in Poland was like. To hide one Jew meant risking the life of one's whole family, children included.' 'Yes, that's true, but there were equally brutal punishments for the underground activities, yet a great number of people were
involved in them. Following the war Jews did not wish to remain in Poland.'
'Indeed, it was difficult for them to live surrounded by memories.'
'It was difficult for them to live among Poles who did not wish to give them back their houses and shops and threatened and even killed some of them. Have you not heard of the pogroms in Krakow and Kielce?'
'The pogrom in Kielce was a political provocation.'

'Even if it was, so what? It did find a response. Ten thousand people besieged the Jewish apartment house in Kielce. Ten thousand people can't be provocateurs.'
'Jews were sometimes a target not for being Jews but for sympathizing with communists.'
'In 1968, is it because they were communists that they had to leave Poland?'

And so on, indeed, endlessly. The debates of historians resemble this discussion. The same arguments and events--only more carefully documented --appear time and again. There is a vast body of literature, of both a personal and a documentary nature, of which we have very little idea in Poland. We should, however, know it better, because it also refers to us. It contains a wide range of viewpoints and opinions. There are books whose authors do not hide that they are motivated by hate. We cannot afford to ignore them; they are born of personal experiences whose authenticity
cannot be doubted. And, besides, haven't we ourselves produced a literature abounding in pronouncements full of hatred, sometimes hysterical hatred, towards Jews?

There are also many books which are cautious and, as far as is possible, devoid of partisanship. These books carefully remind us of the intellectual as well as the material conditions of Polish-Jewish co-existence. They take into account the terror, unimaginable today, of life under the German occupation and a certain moral degradation of the society which was a direct result of life under this enormous pressure. This, in fact, was not a uniquely Polish experience; it happened also elsewhere. They make a tacit assumption that tragedies of Eastern Europe cannot be measured by the yardstick of, say, the English experience. When the skies are literally falling in, even a kick can be an expression of sympathy and compassion. The truth, however, remains difficult to determine and difficult to accept. Two years ago I attended a discussion in Oxford between some foreign and some Polish specialists and I must confess that it was a distressing experience. For us as well as for the Jewish participants, I suppose. We were a long way from agreeing with each other, but that is not the aim of such conferences. I was continuously aware of what was not being said there and what is the main reason why these discussions--friendly, for the most part--were painful for all concerned. It was later that I came to the conclusion that this was due to the sense of a kind of contamination, a feeling of being somehow soiled and defiled, which is what Milosz had in mind in the passage noted above.

And that is why I would like to go back once more to the poet. In 1943 Milosz wrote another poem about the destruction of the ghetto, a poem entitled 'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto'. It is more ambiguous, perhaps more difficult to understand. It opens with the image of destruction:

It has begun: the tearing, the trampling on silks,
It has begun: the breaking of glass, wood, copper, nickel,
silver, foam
Of gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves,
balls, crystals,

And later:

The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat
seizes
the foundations.
Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,
With one leafless tree.

The city was destroyed, what remained is the earth,
full of
broken shells and debris. It is also full of human
bodies. In this
earth, or rather under it:

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his
way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.
He touches buried bodies, counts them, pushes on.
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous
vapour,
The ashes of each man by a different part of the
spectrum.

Who this mole is, it is difficult to say. Is he a
guardian, perhaps a
guardian of the buried? He has got a torch, so he
can see; better,
at any rate, than the dead can see. And the poet
himself, he is as
if among the buried. He lies there with them. He
fears
something. He fears the mole. It is a striking,
startling image:

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole,
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who has sat much in the light of candles
Reading the great book of the species.
And so this mole has the features of a Jew, poring over the Talmud or the Bible. It seems more likely that it is the Bible, as this alone deserves the name of 'the great book of the species', meaning, of course, the human species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.
(translation Cz. Milosz)

It is a terrifying poem; it is full of fear. It is as if two fears co-exist here. The first is the fear of death; more precisely, the fear of being buried alive, which is what happened to many people who were trapped in the cellars and underground passages of the ghetto. But there is also a second fear: the fear of the guardian mole. This mole burrows underground but also underneath our consciousness. This is the feeling of guilt which we do not want to admit. Buried under the rubble, among the bodies of the Jews, the 'uncircumcised' fears that he may be counted among the murderers. So it is the fear of damnation, the fear of hell. The fear of a non-Jew who looks at the ghetto burning down. He imagines that he might accidentally die then and there, and in the eyes of the mole who can read the ashes, he may appear 'a helper of death'. And so, indeed, the poem is entitled: 'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto'. This Christian feels fearful of the fate of the Jews but also--muffled, hidden even from himself--he feels the fear that he will be condemned. Condemned by whom? By people? No, people have disappeared. It is the mole who condemns him, or rather may condemn him, this mole who sees well and reads 'the book of the species'. It is his own moral conscience which condemns (or may condemn) the poor Christian.
And he would like to hide from his mole-conscience, as he does not know what to say to him.

Milosz, when asked what or who is represented by this mole, declined to answer. He said that he had written the poem spontaneously, not to promote any particular thesis. If this is so, the poem would be a direct expression of the terror which speaks through images, as is often the case in dreams and also in art. It makes tangible something which is not fully comprehended,

something that was, and perhaps still is, in other people's as much as in the poet's own psyche, but in an obscure, blurred, muffled shape. When we read such a poem, we understand ourselves better, since that which had been evading us until now is made palpable. As for myself, I have--as probably every reader does--filled in the gaps in my own reading of 'A Poor Christian'. I hope, however, that I have not strayed too far from the intentions of the poet.

Here I return to the hypothetical conversation. It is a simplified summary of dozens of arguments and discussions. What is immediately striking here? In the replies of my fictitious Pole one detects the very same fear which makes itself felt in 'A Poor Christian'. The fear that one might be counted among the helpers of death. It is so strong that we do everything possible not to let it out or to dismiss it. We read or listen to discussions on the subject of Polish-Jewish past and if some event, some fact which puts us in a less-than-advantageous light, emerges, we try our hardest to minimise it, to explain it away and make it seem insignificant. It is not as if we want to hide what happened or to deny that it took place. We feel, though, that not everything is as it should be. How could it have been otherwise? Relations between communities, like the relations of two people, are never perfect. How much more imperfect are relations as stormy and unhappy as these. We are unable to speak of them calmly. The reason is that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we fear accusations. We fear that the guardian mole might call to us, after having referred to his book: 'Oh, yes, and you too, have you been assisting at the death? And you too, have you helped to kill?' Or, at the very least: 'Have you looked with acquiescence at the death of the Jews?'
Let us think calmly: the question will have to be asked. Everybody who is concerned with the Polish-Jewish past must ask these questions, regardless of what the answer might be. But we--consciously or unconsciously--do not want to confront these questions. We tend to dismiss them as impossible and unacceptable. After all, we did not stand by the side of the murderers. After all, we were next in line for the gas chambers. After all, even if not in the best way possible, we did live together with the Jews; if our relations were less than perfect, they themselves were also not entirely without blame. So do we have to remind

ourselves of this all the time? What will others think of us? What about our self-respect? What about the 'good name' of our society? This concern about the 'good name' is ever-present in private and, even more so, in public discussion. To put it differently, when we consider the past, we want to derive moral advantages from it. Even when we condemn, we ourselves would like to be above--or beyond--condemnation. We want to be absolutely beyond any accusation, we want to be completely clean. We want to be also--and only--victims. This concern is, however, underpinned by fear--just as in Milosz's poem--and this fear warps and disfigures our thoughts about the past. This is immediately communicated to those we speak to. We do not want to have anything to do with the horror. We feel, nevertheless, that it defiles us in some way. This is why we prefer not to speak of it all. Alternatively, we speak of it only in order to deny an accusation. The accusation is seldom articulated but is felt to hang in the air.(4)

Can we rid ourselves of this fear? Can we forestall it? I think not, as it lies, in all truth, in ourselves. It is we ourselves who fear the mole who burrows in our subconscious. I think that we shall not get rid of him. Or at least, we shall not get rid of him by forgetting about the past or taking a defensive attitude towards it. We must face the question of responsibility in a totally sincere and honest way. Let us have no illusions: it is one of the most painful questions which we are likely to be faced with. I am convinced, however, that we cannot shirk it.

We Poles are not alone in grappling with this question. It may be helpful to realize this. Not because it is easier to beat one's breast in company. Not
because in this way the blame may appear less weighty. Rather because in this way we shall be able to understand it better. To understand both our responsibility and the reason why we try to evade it.

We read not so long ago about John Paul II's visit to the Synagogue in Rome. We are also familiar with the Church documents in which--already at the time of Pope John XXIII--the relationship between Christians and Jews, or rather, between Christianity and Judaism, was redefined, hopefully for all time. In the Pope's speech as well as in these documents one aspect is immediately clear. They do not concern themselves with attributing blame nor with the consideration of reasons (social,

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economic, intellectual or whatever) which made Christians look upon Jews as enemies and intruders. One thing is stated loud and clear: the Christians of the past and the Church itself were wrong. They had no reason to consider Jews as a 'damned' nation, the nation responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, and therefore as a nation which should be excluded from the community of nations.

If this did happen, it was because Christians were not Christian enough. The church documents do not state: we 'had to' defend ourselves, we 'could not' save Jews or treat them as brothers. They do not attempt to look for mitigating circumstances (and these can be found). Jews, being monotheists, were 'beyond the pale' already in antiquity. In the Middle Ages what cemented Europe together was religious unity. Let us bear in mind that the Church was, on the whole, more tolerant than the secular rulers. None the less, all this does not change the basic situation and must be put aside. Instead, what has to be stressed is that the Church sustained hostility towards Jews, thereby driving them into isolation and humiliation. To put it briefly, the new Church documents do not attempt to exonerate the past; they do not argue over extenuating circumstances. They speak clearly about the failure to fulfil the duties of brotherhood and compassion. The rest is left to historians. It is precisely in this that the Christian magnanimity of such pronouncements lies.

I think we must imitate this in our attitude to the Polish-Jewish past. We must stop haggling, trying to defend and justify ourselves. We must stop
arguing about the things which were beyond our power to do, during the
occupation and beforehand. Nor must we place blame on political, social and
economic conditions. We must say first of all--Yes, we are guilty. We did
take Jews into our home, but we made them live in the cellar. When they
wanted to come into the drawing-room, our response was--Yes, but only
after you cease to be Jews, when you become 'civilized'. This was the
thinking of our most enlightened minds, such as Orzeszkowa and Prus.
There were those among Jews who were ready to adhere to this advice. No
sooner did they do this than we started in turn talking of an invasion of Jews,
of the danger of their infiltration of Polish society. Then we started to put
down conditions like that stated expressis verbis by Dmowski, that we shall
accept as Poles only those Jews who are willing to

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cooperate in the attempts to stem Jewish influences in our society. To put it
bluntly, only those Jews who are willing to turn against their own kith and
kin.

Eventually, when we lost our home, and when, within that home, the
invaders set to murdering Jews, did we show solidarity towards them? How
many of us decided that it was none of our business? There were also those
(and I leave out of account common criminals) who were secretly pleased
that Hitler had solved for us 'the Jewish problem'. We could not even
welcome and honour the survivors, even if they were embittered,
disorientated and perhaps sometimes tiresome. I repeat: instead of haggling
and justifying ourselves, we should first consider our own faults and
weaknesses. This is the moral revolution which is imperative when
considering the Polish-Jewish past. It is only this that can gradually cleanse
our desecrated soil.

What is easy in the case of words is, however, more difficult in practice. Its
precondition is a change in the social awareness of the problem. For our part,
we often demand of Jews (or their friends) an impartial and fair assessment
of our common history. We should, however, first acknowledge our own
guilt, and ask for forgiveness. In fact, this is something that they are waiting
for--if, indeed, they are still waiting. I recall one moving speech at the
Oxford conference, in which the speaker started by comparing the Jewish
attitude to Poland to an unrequited love. Despite the suffering and all the problems which beset our mutual relations, he continued, the Jewish community had a genuine attachment to their adopted country. Here they found a home and a sense of security. There was, conscious or unconscious, an expectation that their fate would improve, the burden of humiliation would lighten, that the future would gradually become brighter. What actually happened was exactly the opposite. 'Nothing can ever change now', he concluded. 'Jews do not have and cannot have any future in Poland. Do tell us, though', he finally demanded, 'that what has happened to us was not our fault. We do not ask for anything else. But we do hope for such an acknowledgement.'

This means for the Polish side the acceptance of responsibility. Here the guardian mole enters for the last time and asks: 'Full responsibility? Also a shared responsibility for the genocide?' I can already hear loud protests. 'How can that be? In God's name, we didn't take part in the genocide.' 'Yes, that is true,' I shall reply. Nobody can reasonably claim that Poles as a nation took part in the genocide of the Jews. From time to time one hears voices claiming just that. We must consider them calmly, without getting angry, which might be taken as a mark of panic. To me, as for the overwhelming majority of people, these claims are unfounded. So why talk of genocide? And of shared responsibility? My answer is this: participation and shared responsibility are not the same thing. One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it. Our responsibility is for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist. Which of us could claim that there was sufficient resistance in Poland? It is precisely because resistance was so weak that we now honour those who did have the courage to take this historic risk. It may sound rather strange, but I do believe that this shared responsibility, through failure to act, is the less crucial part of the problem we are considering. More significant is the fact that if only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide would perhaps have been 'less imaginable', would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out, and almost certainly would have met with much greater resistance than
it did. To put it differently, it would not have met with the indifference and moral turpitude of the society in whose full view it took place.

A question arises immediately whether this could be said not only of the Poles, but equally well of the French, the English, the Russians, of the whole of the Christian world. Yes, indeed it can. This responsibility is, indeed, our common responsibility. But it cannot be denied that it was in Poland where the greatest number of Jews lived (more than two-thirds of the world's Jewry are Polish Jews, in the sense that their forefathers lived in the territories belonging to the Polish republic in the period before the Partitions). Consequently, we had the greatest moral obligation towards the Jewish people. Whether what was demanded of us was or was not beyond our ability to render God alone must judge and historians will continue to debate. But, for us, more than for any other nation, Jews were more of a problem, a challenge which we had to face.

To refer once more to the realm of literature: nobody understood this better than Mickiewicz. The thoughts and the vision of our romantic poet were more far-sighted than that of any of his contemporaries. Unlike the majority of those who were well-disposed to the Jews, Mickiewicz held a deep conviction that Israel, 'the older brother', should not only enjoy the same privileges in Poland as everybody else, but also at the same time retain the right to remain distinct in religion and custom. This was also Norwid's attitude; as far as we can judge, Slowacki was of the same opinion. So, at the very least, our literary greats stood on the side of truth and justice. The thinking of Mickiewicz was indeed visionary: he seems to have been aware that only such a path could save the Jews (if only partially) from extinction, and us from moral turpitude. It would have been a truly extraordinary path to take and one which would have merited the epithet 'messianic' in the proper sense of the word. Reality, unfortunately, took exactly the opposite form to that dreamt of by the poets. It was nowhere else but in Poland, and especially in the twentieth century, that anti-semitism became particularly virulent. Did it lead us to participate in genocide? No. Yet, when one reads what was written about Jews before the war, when one discovers how much hatred there was in Polish society,
one can only be surprised that words were not followed by deeds. But they were not (or very rarely). God held back our hand. Yes, I do mean God, because if we did not take part in that crime, it was because we were still Christians, and at the last moment we came to realize what a satanic enterprise it was. This still does not free us from sharing responsibility. The desecration of Polish soil has taken place and we have not yet discharged our duty of seeking expiation. In this graveyard, the only way to achieve this is to face up to our duty of viewing our past truthfully.

NOTES


2. ibid., 63-4.

3. The victim cannot accept that he was not only wronged, but also humiliated and demeaned by his persecutor; that he was unable to stand up to the inhumanity of it all. In the years 1944-8, Polish opinion was not able to acknowledge the disintegration of all norms and moral debasement among a large part of our society in the aftermath of the war. The drastic treatment of these themes by writers such as Borowski and Rozewicz aroused indignation. The readers of this journal ["Tygodnik Powszechny"] took exception to J. J. Szczepański's short story 'Buty' ('Shoes'). It was hard to accept the truth of the 'infection with death' (the term coined by K. Wyka). A rather similar attitude was, of course, also to be found among Jews.

4. That is the reason why there are so few literary works that treat the theme of Polish society's attitude to the Jewish
Holocaust. It is not only because literature is rendered speechless in the face of genocide. The theme is too hot to handle; writers felt that they came into conflict with their readers' sensibilities.

APPENDIX

A. CAMPO DI FIORI

In Rome, on the Campo di Fiori, baskets with olives and lemons, the pavement splattered with wine and broken fragments of flowers. The hawkers pour on the counters the pink fruits of the sea, and heavy armfuls of grapes fall on the down of peaches.

Here, on this very square Giordano Bruno was burned; the hangman kindled the flame of the pyre in the ring of the gaping crowd, and hardly the flame extinguished, the taverns were full again and hawkers carried on heads baskets with olives and lemons.

I recalled Campo di Fiori in Warsaw, on a merry-go-round, on a fair night in the spring by the sound of vivacious music. The salvoes behind the ghetto walls were drowned in lively tunes, and vapours freely rose into the tranquil sky.
Sometimes the wind from burning houses
would bring the kites along,
and people on the merry-go-round
catch the flying charred bits.
This wind from the burning houses
blew open the girls' skirts,
and the happy throngs laughed
on a beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Perhaps one will guess the moral,
that the people of Warsaw and Rome
trade and play and love
passing by the martyr's pyre.
Another, perhaps, will read
of the passing of human things,
of the oblivion growing
before the flame expired.

But I that day reflected
on the loneliness of dying men,
on the fate of lone Giordano;
that when he climbed the scaffold
he found no word in human tongue
with which to bid farewell
to those of mankind who remain.

Already they were on the run,
to peddle starfish, gulp their wine;
they carried olives and lemons
in the gay hum of the city.
And he was already remote
As though ages have passed,
and they waited a while
for his flight in the fire.

And those dying alone,
forgotten by the world,
their tongue grew strange to us,
like the tongue of an ancient planet.
And all will become a legend -
and then after many years
the poet's word shall stir revolt
on the new Campo di Fiori.

Warsaw 1943 (translation A. Gillon)

B. A POOR CHRISTIAN LOOKS AT THE GHETTO

Bees build around red liver,
Ants build around black bone.
It has begun: the tearing, the trampling on silks,
It has begun: the breaking of glass, wood, copper, nickel,
silver, foam
Of gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves, balls,
crystals.
Poof! Phosphorescent fire from yellow walls
Engulfs animal and human hair.

Bees build around the honeycomb of lungs,
Ants build around white bone.
Torn is paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax,
Fibre, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire.
The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations.
Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,
With one leafless tree.

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.
He touches burned bodies, counts them, pushes on.
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapour,
The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum
Bees build around a red trace.
Ants build around the place left by my body.

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who has sat much in the light of candles
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.
Warsaw, 1943 (translation Cz. Milosz)

C. DEDICATION

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.
Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another.
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.
I speak to you with silence like a cloud or a tree.

What strengthened me, for you was lethal.
You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one,
Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,
Blind force with accomplished shape.
Here is the valley of shallow Polish rivers. And an immense bridge
Going into white fog. Here is a broken city,
And the wind throws screams of gulls on your grave
When I am talking with you.

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

They used to pour on graves millet or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
To that you should visit us no more.

1945 (translation Cz. Milosz)