To The Warta

I call you from afar, from my sleepless thoughts,
I stand on the shore now, with [my] eyes closed
and seek in the extinguished fire those years
which burned like the bush in the Bible.
Like me, you are strange now and, in your grief, silent
and deep like my grandfather’s sad resplendence,
and beautiful like in Jewish windows – the ashes,
and pure like my mother who came here for Tashlich
and perhaps, by virtue of her sacred plea –
the Divine Presence, blue, lay above you.

I stand on the bridge now, with [my] eyes consumed,
You are still the same, the familiar Warta;
The only witness whom I recognise here
is who dreams amid the houses burnt down
and searches the Gentile fields and meadows,
whether he is still coming, Berisz, with [his] wooden pails,
and maybe the wind’s lyres are still carrying
an echo of the language of Jews and [their] zmires
and seeks [one of] the Lamed-Vov in the heat of the summer,
whether he is still alive, singing and fasting;
And he comes into the crowd laughing to look
and to relish in the speeches of Raphael and Kruk;
The chestnuts, too, have disappeared,
together with the word which ignited the hearts.

I stand by the river on the fields of embers
and seek in the extinguished fire those years.
I know you will wash them away forever,
but what of your sorrow and longing?
Who [now] needs your hoshanos, growing green on your banks,
and what worth is there in your lonesome days,
if you can no longer hear the talking of Jews
and no song from our tears here emerges.
Who will then bathe here, and who will swim?
How can you now in your beauty take pride?

Do you remember how we used to sit here in love,
When Jewish children were still here romping about?
Can you perhaps call to your mind
the white linen fluttering like banners
which my sister hung here on fences?
The sun has gone down here more beautiful and redder.
I stand now, a stranger, bent and bowed,
and search for my little streets with streaming eyes
and, in the blues waves at dusk, I see –
my father rocking himself, wearing kitel and tallis

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*1 [TN: Heb., lit. “to cast”; ritual performed near a body of water on the first day of Rosh Hashana in order to cast away the sins.]
*2 [TN: Traditional Shabbos and holiday songs.]
*3 [TN: According to Jewish tradition, there are “Lamed-Vov”, i.e., thirty-six (numerical value in gematria) righteous individuals in each generation, who are usually “hidden Tsaddikim”, due to their great modesty.]
*4 [TN: Little willow branches used by religious Jews to beat the ground with on the seventh day of Sukkos, Hoshana Rabbah, which are otherwise useless.]
*5 [TN: In prayer.]
*6 [TN: Kittel is a white robe, and tallis a prayer-shawl; both are worn during all the Yom Kippur prayers.]
The Old Synagogue

Humble, in the Selichos\(^1\) days,
It beseeched from the river street,
With tears and prayer,
Over slanted roofs, faded and muddy –
It looked at me, always –
Silent.

Our houses crouched,
Their windows sunk into the ground;
We dreamed [together,] in public [prayer];
And in days of thirst, from its well
We drank.

Aron [the] Shames wiped
The mould off the copper lion;
And tablets slept above
In the grey, cloudy sky.

Pious grandmothers whimpered
The prayers with holy tears;
And my grandfather Jekel wore
His shel rosh\(^2\) like a crown
Above his furrowed brow.

Berisz [the] water-carrier warmed himself,
Hungry, in the antechamber;
And sang together with the reciters of psalms,
Hoarse and like a coachman.

When Gentiles with poles and axes
Hacked out the panes,
Through the open windows
Flew in white doves,
And prayed with [us] together
In the pogrom days.

Faded letters
Looked down from the portal
On the drunken Gentile
This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter\(^3\).

Now I lay on your stones;
I, the estranged child,
And kiss your dust which contains
Our kaddishes of generations;
I’ve remained alone, alone,
And I go away with your Eternal Candle.
I wish kaddish, in my heart,
After you to say,
And your light –
To continue carrying.

I Seek

I seek, I seek,
In the bright eyes of Stewart and Willie,
The tears of Mojsze Szmul.

I seek in the eye-glow of homeless cats,
Which thrive in cellars among old cans:
Is Mojsze Szmul perhaps still lying,
In the bunker there concealed?

I hear him, I hear Mojsze Szmul,
Playing on his fiddle.
Faint tones wander about on Union Street:
Do you perhaps know where to seek
The traces of his footsteps?

How do you mean? This very minute,
And through that dark side-street,
He went to the river,
And hid under the bridge.
Later they chased him in Glowacka’s field,
And when he was breathless already,
He suddenly shouted:
"I have you deep in the ground, with your lives!"

And like a meteor he set off
To the spheres,
And merged with the stars.

I seek, I seek, in the bright eyes
Of Stewart and Willie –
The tears of Mojsze Szmul.

\(^1\) [TN: Days of atonement preceding the High Holidays.]
\(^2\) [TN: The part of the tefillin (phylacteries) worn on the head, above the forehead.]
\(^3\) [TN: Psalm 118:20; this verse would have been inscribed in Hebrew above the entrance.]