

Chonon Kiel

## 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*<sup>\*1</sup>  
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*<sup>\*2</sup>  
and seeks [one of] the *Lamed-Vav*<sup>\*3</sup> 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*<sup>\*4</sup>, 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<sup>\*5</sup>, wearing *kittel* and *tallis*<sup>\*6</sup>

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<sup>\*1</sup> [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.]

<sup>\*2</sup> [TN: Traditional Shabbes and holiday songs.]

<sup>\*3</sup> [TN: According to Jewish tradition, there are "Lamed-Vav", i.e., thirty-six (numerical value in gematria) righteous individuals in each generation, who are usually "hidden Tsaddikim", due to their great modesty.]

<sup>\*4</sup> [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.]

<sup>\*5</sup> [TN: In prayer.]

<sup>\*6</sup> [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*<sup>\*1</sup> 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*<sup>\*2</sup> 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<sup>\*3</sup>.

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 Głowacka'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.

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<sup>\*1</sup> [TN: Days of atonement preceding the High Holidays.]

<sup>\*2</sup> [TN: The part of the tefillin (phylacteries) worn on the head, above the forehead.]

<sup>\*3</sup> [TN: Psalm 118:20; this verse would have been inscribed in Hebrew above the entrance.]