Harry Klein

Shoes

At the Auschwitz death camp, I worked with shoes;  
The SS murderers forced me to sort shoes.  
Frighteningly tall mountains of shoes,  
Countless thousands and thousands of pairs of shoes.

Day after day, fresh thousands and thousands of pairs of shoes;  
Day after day, tall mountains of shoes, mountains of shoes.  
To whom do they belong, these thousands of pairs of shoes,  
These tall, blood-curdling, frightening mountains of shoes?

These are the shoes of my brethren, my people, the Jews;  
They were worn just yesterday, by children, sisters and brothers;  
By mothers and fathers, by grandmothers and grandfathers –  
And I can affirm all this in detail, as testimony.

I recognise whose shoes these are –  
They speak to me in my wakefulness, dreams and tears.  
Each mountain of shoes is a Jewish community;  
I murmur a Kaddish, along with a silent prayer.

Tiny, little shoes from windows were hurled;  
The infants were killed, their little heads [bashed] against walls  
By Nazi hands [so] heartless and murderous –  
The blood-spattered walls are the proof thereof.

Here lie the shoes of the hunted and persecuted,  
Of those chased into the lime\(^2\) carriages of death,  
In terrifying gas chambers gassed  
And in blazing crematoria burned.

Here lie mountains of shoes in blood drenched.  
Courageous, heroic Jewish fighters  
Lost their lives in an embittered war.  
To defeat Nazism was their endeavour.

Here lie mountains of shoes of mothers and grandmothers –  
There lie mountains of shoes of fathers and grandfathers.  
Generations have been cut down, without leaving a trace –  
Neither marker nor tomb have remained.

At the Auschwitz death camp, I worked with shoes;  
The SS murderers forced me to sort shoes –  
Frighteningly tall mountains of shoes,  
Countless thousands and thousands of pairs of shoes.

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\(^1\) [TN: This poem was originally published in “Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal”, p. 274.]

\(^2\) [TN: The railway carriages utilised to transport prisoners to the death camps were habitually whitewashed with lime and doused with chlorine, which caused many of the deportees to perish from suffocation.]