

Selected Poetry (Wiersze wybrane)

Author: Wisława Szymborska

First Published: 1945

Translations: English (*Sounds, Feelings, Houghts*, 1981; *Selected Poems*, 1986; *Poems: Poezje*, 1989; *People on a Bridge: Poems*, 1990; *View with a Grain of Sand*, 1995; *Nothing Twice*, 2006; *Poems New and Collected 1957–1997*, 1998; *Miracle Fair*, 2001), and many other translations in various languages.

About the Author: Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012) was a poet, columnist, translator, collage artist, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. She studied Polish philology (from 1945) and sociology (from 1946) at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. In 1948, she married poet Adam Włodek (whom she divorced in 1954), and in 1967 she became involved with prose writer and poet Kornel Filipowicz. After Filipowicz' death in 1990, Szymborska wrote one of her poetic masterpieces, the poem-lamentation *Cat in an Empty Flat* (*Kot w pustym mieszkaniu*). Starting in 1950, Szymborska belonged to the Polish United Workers' Party, quitting again in 1966 as a gesture of solidarity with Leszek Kołakowski, a philosopher and reformer who had been expelled from the party. In 1975 she signed the *Memorial 59*, an open letter by dissenting intellectuals against proposed changes in the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic.

Further Important Publications: (all poems) *Dlatego żyjemy* (1952, *That's Why We Live*); *Pytania zadawane sobie* (1954, *Questioning Myself*); *Wołanie do Yeti* (1957, *Calling Yeti*); *Sól* (1962, *Salt*); *Wszelki wypadek* (1972, *In Case*); *Wielka liczba* (1976, *Huge Amount*); *Ludzie na moście* (1986, *People on the Bridge*); *Koniec i początek* (1993, *End and Beginning*); *Chwila* (2002, *Moment*); *Dwukropek* (2005, *Colon*); *Tutaj* (2009, *Here*); *Wystarczy* (2011, *Enough*); *Czarna piosenka* (2014, *Black Song*).

Content and Interpretation

Szymborska described her work in a Nobel lecture: “any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society”. The poetic works by Szymborska that deal directly with the Holocaust are few but significant, the most important of which are *Transport of Jews '43* (*Transport Żydów '43*) and *Still* (*Jeszcze*). *Transport of Jews '43* was first published in *Dziennik Literacki*, a literary supplement to the Cracow daily newspaper *Dziennik Polski*, and subsequently reprinted with the simplified title *Transport of Jews* in the collection *Black Song* (*Czarna piosenka*, 2014; prepared in 1944–48). Szymborska's decision to remove the date from the title would appear to shift fo-

cus from the historiography of the Holocaust to the dehumanisation of Jews – the transport of things, not of people. (If so, the poem *Still* would fall between these two categories, posing as its central issue the transport rather of names – an example of synecdoche that tends towards both reification and metaphor.) The poem is written in free verse, yet returns at intervals to a kind of refrain in distich form: “By custom of the first [second, third] night, the train / stood long – he did not wait for all of them”. This feature – the only, terrifying, regularity in the poem – might be interpreted as a reference to the three nights after Christ’s death, leading to the resurrection. By contrast, the three nights in Szymborska’s poem lead only to death, and it closes with the line “no one was forgiven” (Kuczyńska-Koschany, 2019, p. 168). The second poem, *Still*, has been aptly described as “the ballad of the Holocaust”, one that can be summarised in terms of the poet’s knowledge: “That’s why the poet says ‘I don’t know’ that she knows too much” (Głowiński, 2007, p. 351). The title suggests a compromise position between the endless recurrence of Shoah (manifest in the postwar pogroms) and a reference to the poet’s assertion “It’s not time yet”, which appears in the second verse of the fifth strophe. Not time for what? Suicide? To save oneself – blindly? Whoever jumped from the death trains was casting their lot with chance; some were shot, others managed to escape (Kuczyńska-Koschany, 2019, p. 167). Cattle wagons in *Still* refer once more to the Bible (the Jewish names serve as afterimages of people transported in the wagons), but also to the masterpiece of children’s poetry *Locomotive* (*Lokomotywa*, 1936) by Julian Tuwim (→ *We, Polish Jews*). According to one scholar, “the poet plays with the form of an optimistic prewar poem for children”, but then shifts in the second part to a tone that is “very emotional, with direct reference to the victims and reflections on antisemitism, which was still widespread after the war, in the very country where the Holocaust took place”. The tone in the third part changes once more: “there is a calming effect” and “a more general reflection on the collective forgetting of war victims” at the same time as a “lasting memory of the murdered Jewish nation despite this general forgetfulness, the memory which gives birth to nightmares (‘Awakened in the night I hear / cor-rect, cor-rect, crash of silence on silence’)” (Cieślak, 2004, pp. 38–40). If *Still* is one of the most important contributions to Polish Holocaust poetry, Szymborska’s *Innocence* (*Niewinność*) from the collection *100 Happinesses* (*Sto pociech*, 1967) is the most overlooked.

Main Topics and Problems

In addition to their references to biblical topics, both *Transport of Jews* and *Still* present the theme of the Holocaust in its most recognizable form, the form of collective memory. Janina Abramowska states: “Yes, A TRAIN transporting Jews would be closest to what I call a topos. [...] This is the TRAIN. The early postwar poems have very clear references to the Holocaust” (Abramowska, 2016, pp. 17–18). Perhaps Szymborska’s most distinctive contribution to the topic of the Shoah is her formula “a cloud made of people” (*chmura z ludzi*), which appears in the poem *Still*. It is an image that will recur, for example, in the collection *The Cloud Returns* (*Ta chmura powraca*, 2005)

by Piotr Matywiecki (→ *Boundary Marker*). Of equal note, the poet presents the image of cut hair in Innocence as a material symbol of memoriam.

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