

Who Are They To Me?

Who are “they” to me
I a child of Jewish Polish parents
whose memories are filled with ancestral
episodes of contempt for my people.

Recollections of their European origins
and of that black blot
that casts so heavy a shadow over their lives.

Stories of ten decapitated Jewish heads placed upon the S. S. desk
shrunken heads upon which skull caps are derisively displayed
“This is your minyan, Jew.”
Witnesses who saw green and yellow smoke
out of chimneys fueled by human bodies.

“They” are the silent spectators
who dared to deny what “they” saw or heard.

“They” are the collaborators
the betrayers of the rhetoric of grave theology.

Then I concluded
that “they”— all of them—
meant me and mine no good.

“They” are my enemies
if not overt then hidden foes
No allies, no friends among “them.”





And then as in a nightmare
out of the evil heart rose
the cry of a sobbing infant
How could innocence reside in that hellish heart?

And then I heard of others, read of others, met others
Gentiles, Christians, believers, atheists
in every country Nazi tyranny controlled.

Non-Jews, not kith or kin, not fellow religionists
but those who danced to a different ritual
Non-Jews from every walk of life
turned themselves into hiding places
their sewers, stables, attics, basements
into sanctuaries.

Not saints or supermen and superwomen
but persons of flesh and bone like yours or mine
who risked their security, safety, lives to hide the hunted.

Others joined the enemy or narrowed their heart
to their parochial group
But these transcended the boundaries of their faith
their church
to enter the leprous circle of the condemned?

They are the heroes from the other side
whose decency and courage broke through the walls
that denied a common humanity.

They are the healers of our disillusionment
the brakes upon our generalizations
They give the lie to cynicism convinced that
beneath the skin of all others is only
my implacable, eternal foe.

They are the ordinary men and women
who did what they did
because human decency and conscience demanded it
Because, because, because
“and what else would you do?”

They hold up a mirror to my soul
Would I let them in
this hunted man
this pregnant woman
this trembling family
Would I unlock the door?

Would I let them in
for days or weeks or months or years
would I scrounge for food to feed these strangers
when the offer of a loaf of bread
means imprisonment and death.

Would I get hold of sleeping pills
to silence the cries of the infant
whose sobs might give away the hiding place.

Would I dispose of their excrement, bury their dead
turn my home into whispers
lest the informants lurking about
sell hiders and hidden
for a carton of cigarettes or a bottle of vodka.

Would I falsify identity papers
forge baptismal certificates, visas
lie to the interrogators
seek out allies in a conspiracy of goodness?

They did and theirs are lessons
that must not be lost to our children
Know that there is always an alternative to passive complicity
Know that knowing is no cognitive sport
to hear and see and then feign deafness, blindness, muteness
Know such knowledge is evil
a subterfuge for shedding the blood of innocence.

Know that there is goodness
even in hell
Goodness precious, rare
but that must be cultivated to resist evil
Know that goodness must be recognized, searched out
raised from the dust of amnesia
Know that the good who protected the persecuted
must themselves be protected by us
the family of the survivors.

We owe the world a double witness
Of those who slaughtered and of those who saved
Know the darkness and know the light
Know the evil and know too the good
Remember the moral heroes for
a generation beyond the holocaust
enabling our children to hope again, to trust again
to mend again the tattered fabric of our lives.

Breathe spirit into the smoldering ashes of the cremated past
that the sparks of decency may be fanned
to light the candle of many wicks
to enlighten the future
Bear witness to goodness that our hearts not fail.

