

Marked

Poems of the Holocaust

Stephen Herz

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S.S. St. Louis Sailing Off Florida Coast with Cargo of Unwanted

America, we can see the lights of Miami.
America, we're nine hundred and seven Jews fleeing
Hitler.
America, we're nine hundred and seven human beings
looking for a haven.
America, they won't let us land in Cuba.
America, you won't let us land in America.
America, we're cabling you:
How can you be silent? Help!
America, have you forgotten
Emma Lazarus's words of hope on your
Statue of Liberty?
America, why have your Jews forgotten us?
America, where is FDR?
America, is it true Henry Ford has a sign on his plant:
Jews Destroy Christianity
Jews Control The Press
Jews Produce Filthy Movies.
America, are you anti-Semitic?
America, some of us are committing suicide.
America, your quota numbers will never reach us in time.
America, the lights of Miami are fading
into yellow stars.

At sea for over a month, the St. Louis docked in Antwerp June, 1939. France, Great Britain, Holland and Belgium granted the Jews temporary haven. England was the only safe refuge. Many of the others were murdered in Auschwitz and Sobibor. Some went into hiding, some survived, a few succeeded in emigrating to the U.S. before 1945.

Death March

We eat everything
that's green or alive.
We eat grass.
We eat leaves.
We peel bark off trees.
We swallow live little frogs.
Nettles we eat.

Some boiled potatoes
a lady tosses—
put one in your mouth
and you'll taste a bullet.

We suck the earth,
lick dew off rocks,
scoop a little snow for a drink.

We march for hours,
march for weeks,
in a zigzag pattern we march.
In rain, snow,
half barefoot in frost we march.

We stumble.
We lag behind.
We seek the ditch.
We fall.
We get up.
We can't get up.
We keep going.

Every few minutes a shot.

Approximately a hundred thousand Jews died on the death marches in 1944–45, when the Germans, knowing they would be defeated, evacuated the concentration camps.

Don't Touch

I shift my shoes and soup bowl under my head,
dream I eat a turnip, the camp bell rings,

rings every dark morning at four, sometimes three:
a voice shouts *Aufstehen*, get up! *Appell! Appell!*

stand in the cold, freezing at the morning roll call:
I am washing my face in morning coffee:

I am tying my trousers at the bottom with a piece
of string so the shit won't run out:

my wooden shoes slip in the mud, the stench of the
cremo strong today: *links, links, links und links:*

marching out under the arch with my *Kommando*,
out under the sign: *Arbeit Macht Frei*

I am running my hands over the rough wooden planks
of my dark three-tiered bunk in my barracks

in the Holocaust Museum in DC
I'm reading the sign: *Don't Touch*.