Boris Lurie
Pennings Poemings

Translated by Andrew Shields

frommann-holzboog

Pennings Poemings

NIGHT, STUTTHOF

At six o'clock, the day is over. Everything's quiet, soft snoring fills the barrack and now and then a soft sigh or someone talking to himself. And even the rubber club that got the crowd to settle down, even it lies idly in the corner of the better room where the masters sleep, where the kapos and the oldest eat in the evening and tell each other the latest news while their servants already go to rest.

The little nightlamp over the entrance door sheds a sparse light that I see people in who hastily run somewhere in their socks and then come back again … the usual scene of a quiet night in which the prisoner wishes it would last forever … provided he can get any sleep in the company of two or three comrades in the bunk, provided he doesn't have to scratch until the skin under his jacket is bloody, provided.

Another day has reached its end and it serves no purpose at all to think about what happened in its course: the same hasty, hurried rising as the day before, the same slice of bread — if it isn't smaller — that's then smeared with marmalade by another prisoner, then, at the barrack exit, a bowl with "coffee" for three, and later the often vain search for the man with the bowl … the search for a quiet place … then the escape from another whip that one inevitably has to cross paths with somewhere. It seems to rain here forever, the mud penetrates your boots … and after the roll call for hours on end, you try as usual to get out of being surrounded, to blend in among the cripples

who live in the block opposite, to get to quieter parts of the camp, to escape work. If you manage it, you then walk to the great yard in front of the main gate, which is bustling with life. Columns stand there, columns of older and "better" prisoners, and you run quickly between them, run into a toilet, act as if you are very busy, until the day dawns, until the columns have left the camp. Meanwhile, the cleaners come into the toilets to do their job, and if you're lucky, they don't drive you outside … Then, it's noon, when you always risk not getting your bowl of soup if you didn't work. After you calmly have the bowl of soup in your stomach, you notice the barrack is surrounded, and no other way out is left but work. And what work means …, you know that from experience.

And now, after it has gotten quieter and everything seems to be sleeping, I leave the boards, spread the blanket on the floor by the window, see the well-lit fences and behind them a few lights from badly blacked-out windows in the luxurious SS building, and slowly fall asleep. It's a wonderful feeling to know you'll have peace and quiet until four a.m.

Whistling and shouting wake me up: some still put off getting dressed; others put on their clothes quickly. I'm one of the latter. "Everybody out", shouts a voice in Polish. I'm reasonable enough to not be one of the first and also not one of the last. Outside, it's cold and dry — a veritable miracle here — and columns stream out of all the barracks. First, we're put into rows of five to march to loud commands. Then the voice goes quiet, the first people in the column are almost running, while those further back are only walk-

ing slowly. Other columns join ours, and as we arrive at our destination, we form a single crowd of spectators standing around a half-lit space in the center of the camp … and we barely understand what's going on. All the paths that lead here are overflowing, and some people are hanging from the barrack windows to get a view. Others, probably the majority, don't care what's happening and don't even look over at the brightly lit spot. Almost at the same time, we all make out a scaffold, a gallows. We remember that it was already there the day before; everyone knew somebody would be hung … but we'd all long since forgotten about it … A comforted murmur now starts — meaning: so … that's it! — but it's interrupted by a loud, "Silence!" We can't hear what the man's saying; we only hear that he first speaks German and then Polish. And then a figure appears, the figure of a young man. Most turn away and look in the opposite direction. Others, who've already gone halfway back, turn around, stand still, and wait. And I look where he sits on the chair, and to me, he seems quiet and collected. Nobody says anything and nobody calls out to him. The routine must run its course, and the punishment is really not serious. The camp elder, who leads the ceremony, pushes the stool away, and the boy falls and hangs. And then the caps get taken off, first in front by the gallows, and then further back, like a wave. As the people in back take off their caps, the people in front have already put theirs on again. It's said he shouted: "Long live the Red Army and the Soviet Union!" But I didn't hear it.

There are no longer any separate columns on the way back to the barracks. People are talking again, though perhaps more quietly than before. And it seems

to me — of course this is nonsense — as if I were the only one who even had any thought at all for that young man, the locksmith from Russia who struck an SS man on the head with a wrench. Perhaps I had these thoughts because I believed I was still alive. Perhaps. And this heroic comrade, unknown, hanging: what did he believe?

And then it's night again, and later morning. And even in Stutthof near Danzig, it's light by day and dark by night. But it's always gray, bleak, and rainy there — as it surely is now.

Here, in New York, Friedl,
it's not like in that little Buchenwald

You go to the doctor and he looks you
over
what are you worth to him: a hundred *or* a thousand
KaZet-Reich dollars.

THREE SNAKES

swim in the water across the concrete ceiling, one without a head. No, one without a body—with just a head. We've already eaten up the body. Now is it really true the head will grow a new body so we can eat it again? Or will the new body be too slimy, too sickly, no good to eat? Maybe what got eaten up wasn't even a fish? Just a fish head now swimming round by itself? The two snakes swimmying round in the concrete water are my two sisters—the one, tall and tougher, and the very beautiful sister long since with the dead. The snake head or fish head, though—that's me.

Three separate lines——

what's lovely's ugly, but what's ugly's lovely!
oh give me just a little time for pain!
I love the Paris prostitutes.

SWEARING TO HEINRICH HEINE

Why don't you just write everything (… everything celestial) — in getto-language? Why in the Egyptian of American slavery? I think … haha, for thirty-nine years now, I've been trying, if it can be called thinking: In skyscraper High Egyptian, I've been putting my brain together. Why not in High-Full-Blooded-German? The nice Dadaist grandchildren (forgive me … un-blood-line-binding) of the intellectuals of the SD special forces "might find it very amusing". What I'm also doing here: in Subhuman-German from the deepest mass grave. So why not enclose yourself in your own getto-language? The Yiddish language, once concentrated in bridled spaces, renaissanced by SS and police higher-ups with Ascension-Germanicum … in the first new Jewish state, it already almost started to exist with an official eagle stamp — but the deadline given to it by the European-Western cultural authorities kept it from flourishing. Three-quarters of the getto inmates spoke it with beauty, the true, unreviled Yiddish mother-tongue. But not back then, in the wire-fenced quarter — my Baltic-speaking self flirting with German: the guinea pig of this linguistic self-dissection.

Only later did I slowly learn Yiddish, although father and mother spoke it with gusto — in private, and otherwise when bickering (along with the so tender-and-hysterical language of the Russians). I could only palaver Yiddish very unfreely … as late as Stalingrad happened in Anno Second Year (of the

first German, not the later second American-Egyptian slavery) — and I am eighteen. And not in the proud Red Army but in the getto slave-storm commando. Where Yiddish is the language of all dead mothers (even in today's freedom). And I began to speak it as if I'd always spoken it (except for the many spiritual things I didn't know ...), and look!
The words came out picture-perfect! Now in my rage I write, the Great Poet of Suffrance, of what they call the Holocaust (as if such a Dante, whom I haven't read, could write it) — instead of shooting at Arab villages, to the renaissance of my balls. I push myself to argue, to be rational and cool and positive, as a displaced immigrant just has to be — in Nebulae-New-Yorkicum. Understand the American letters pretty well? Hardly the anglopharaonic syntax. Its hissing finesse remains strange to me. I fed on too much in KaZets. Yet I manage it somehow in the imperialist tongue. Although the natives here feel like I speak Old-Bolshevist. And then ... reading my writings out loud to myself is torture. And those who take me for a sold coffee say nothing but only gulp.
In my High German, I do have a few emotional subtleties. And the Yiddish of my grandparents has long since flown away. To and for whom shall I gibber-gibber in my Hereafter-Riga-Baltic-Yekke German? Those who should hear my sentences explode — they won't hear them anyway.

Lastly, the first language my Leningrad milkbreast-nurses poured into me, Russian, also comes back from everywhere, strong as steel, like the scorned comrade Stalin will. I symphony it pretty well; with a mishmash accent in the long run (much worse even than the Georgian Stalin). Speaking Yiddish only briefly thrives ... it gets hard after three minutes of gravestones. Egyptian-anglosaxon works

This collection of poems and texts dates back to the years 1947 to 2001. The majority was compiled by Boris Lurie on the occasion of his art exhibition at the Buchenwald Memorial in Weimar, which opened in December 1998. However, working on the book project motivated Lurie to write more poems, which were included in the collection as "Addenda". *Geschriebigtes – Gedichtigtes* was published in 2003. At Lurie's request, it was set in the Fraktur hand and contains illustrations of his art exhibited in Buchenwald as well as many contributions by friends from the NO!art movement. This translation — or rather re-composition — into English by Andrew Shields, entitled *Pennings Poemings*, focuses exclusively on Lurie's poems and texts.

Boris Lurie was born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) in 1924 and moved to Riga with his family at the age of one. After the German occupation of the Baltic States in 1941, he survived the ghetto in Riga along with his father. However, his mother, grandmother, younger sister, and his classmate and girlfriend Lyuba Treskunova were shot in 1941 in the Rumbula forest along with nearly 28,000 Jews. Between 1941 and 1945, father and son were deported to different labor and concentration camps: Riga, Lenta, Salaspils (Kurtenhof), Stutthof, Buchenwald (subcamp Polte-Werke). They were both liberated by the American troops in April 1945. Thanks to his knowledge of German and English, which Lurie had acquired in school, he then worked as an interpreter for the American intelligence service Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) during interrogations of Nazi suspects and in an American prisoner of war camp in Babenhausen, Germany. In June 1946 Lurie and his father emigrated to New York, where his older sister had fled at the beginning of the war.

Lurie is best known as a visual artist. However, he was also a prolific writer and exceptionally communicative in different languages: In addition to his very extensive English and German correspondence, he also maintained a lively exchange in Hebrew and Russian. The posthumously published memoirs *In Riga* and the novel *House of Anita* were both written in English. Lurie's knowledge of German had been essential for his survival in the concentration camps. In the

Table of contents

Published with the support of the Boris Lurie Art Foundation.

Opening and closing images: Boris Lurie, *Dance Hall Series*.
Eleven selected lithographs from print runs number 66/110 and 69/290.
Original size: 27,3 × 38,2 cm. D'Arcy Galleries, New York 1961.

A translation by Andrew Shields of Boris Lurie's
Boris Lurie, *Geschriebigtes – Gedichtigtes, NO!art in Buchenwald*, Stuttgart 2003.

Edited by Eckhart Holzboog and Sybille Wittmann
Translation of the afterword: Katrin Kraemer

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at https://dnb.dnb.de.
Paperback ISBN 978-3-7728-2967-3
Ebook ISBN 978-3-7728-3516-2

Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2024
www.frommann-holzboog.de
Book design: Clara Neumann and Christina Schmid
Typeface: Franklin Gothic URW
Paper: Munken Print White 15 100 g/m²
Lithography: Alex Kern
Printing: Offizin Scheufele, Stuttgart
Bookbinding: Buchbinderei Schaumann, Darmstadt

My sympathy's with the mouse,
but I feed the cat.