

Seven Poems, Seven Paintings

A Teacher's Guide to Selected Holocaust Poetry



Primo Levi

Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian poet and writer, was born in Turin in 1919. Before the Second World War he was an industrial chemist. In 1943 he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where he survived due to his “usefulness” to the Nazis as a chemist. His most famous prose work is “If This is a Man” in which he wrote about his experiences in Auschwitz. Haunted by his Holocaust experiences, he committed suicide in 1987.

Hayim Gouri

Hayim Gouri, a Hebrew poet, was born in Israel in 1923. He served in the Palmach, Haganah and Israeli Defense Forces, and after the Second World War was sent to Europe where he visited Displaced Persons’ Camps. His poetry covers a broad range of subjects, some intensely personal, reflecting his experiences during the Second World War and the Israeli War of Independence.

Paul Celan

Paul Celan was born in Czernowitz, Bukovina in 1920. In 1942 Celan saw his parents deported to Auschwitz. He survived the Shoah in other camps but never recovered from his ordeal and in 1970 committed suicide. Celan’s highly acclaimed work is powerful, highly original, often ambiguous and deeply tragic.

Pavel Friedman

Pavel Friedman was a young poet, who lived in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Little is known of the author, but he is presumed to have been 17 years old when he wrote “The Butterfly”. It was found amongst a hidden cache of children’s work recovered at the end of the Second World War. He was eventually deported to Auschwitz where he died on September 29, 1944.

Wisława Szymborska

Wisława Szymborska was born in Poland in 1923, and lives in Krakow. Between the years 1945-1948 she studied Polish Literature and Sociology at the Jagiellonian University. Szymborska made her debut in March 1945 with a poem "Szukam słowa" (I am Looking for a Word) in the daily "Dziennik Polski". She has worked as a poetry editor, a columnist and a translator. In 1996 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Dan Pagis

Dan Pagis, a Hebrew writer, was born in Bukovina in 1930. His early years were spent in a concentration camp in the Ukraine from where he escaped. He settled in Israel in 1946 and taught medieval Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He became one of the most vibrant voices in modern Israeli poetry. His references to the Holocaust are sometimes oblique and filtered through his use of biblical or mystical images. He died in 1986.

Martin Niemöller

Martin Niemöller, a German pastor and theologian, born in Germany in 1892. Originally a supporter of Hitler’s policies, he eventually opposed them. He was arrested and eventually confined in the concentration Sachsenhausen and Dachau camps. He was liberated by the allies in 1945 and continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a noted pacifist.