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Death List, Poem

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Heimrad Bäcker; photograph by Franz Linschinger

A strange little book came in the mail the other day. It's called *transcript* and is published by the admirable Dalkey Archive Press. Translated from the German by Patrick Greaney and Vincent Kling, its author, Heimrad Bäcker (1925-2003), was unknown to me. He was an Austrian book editor, photographer and concrete poet who as a teenager joined the Nazi party and became an active member in the regional leadership of the Hitler Youth. At a first glance, his book looks like a collection of verbal scraps of uncertain origin, some of which have the appearance of avant-garde poetry, but on examination it turns out to be something entirely different. Bäcker's "poems" consist of excerpts from documents by Holocaust planners, perpetrators, and victims.

There are quotes from concentration camp files, arrest reports, instructions for operating gas chambers and hanging prisoners, comments by executioners and witnesses, notes on medical experiments and other such material found in the vast files of a regime that was not only busy exterminating millions of people, but striving to micromanage its degrading acts down to the smallest detail:

you are requested to leave the keys in the locks of all furniture, chests etc. as well as the keys in the locks of all interior doors. if the keys are on a separate key ring, they are to be taken off and placed in the lock of the receptacle to which they belong. to the building and hallway keys should be attached a ribbon and a piece of cardboard on which you are to write your names and

apartment number and identification number. these keys are to be given to the authorized official. before leaving your residence, the list of assets that was issued to you is to be

Bäcker doesn't invent anything. There is a full bibliography at the end of the volume. He edits a bit to isolate some bit of information and lets it stand alone, so that like a poem it may invite the reader to ponder a word or an image until its full meaning unfolds in all its horror:

men in white lab coats were sitting in the next room, near the windows, at tables reinforced by cold blue light shining up from inside them. they were weighing loose diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, rubies, and similar stones. they would wash them in liquids that had a caustic odor and then eye them through jewelers' loupes to determine their weight in carats and thus their value. every color of the rainbow gleamed and sparkled in the dishes.

cadence 1 to the stool

cadence 2 onto the stool

cadence 3 reading of the sentence

cadence 4 stool removed

not suspecting their impending scheduled death, the people clapped and some broke out in jubilant cheering

The cumulative effect of these fragments is harrowing. A letter says: "i probably won't ever see you again, won't hear your voice, won't kiss you. but how i want to see you, if only once!" In the long lists of names, one or two stick out. What did the tailor Zoltan Fleishmann look like? What sort of life did the shopkeeper Bernhard Herskovits have? We read about a camp inmate who was punished with death for not executing with total accuracy the motion of taking off his cap and putting it back on, of another who was shot because he was no longer capable of performing certain kinds of heavy labor owing to his physical condition, and of a little four-year-old Jewish boy who distributed short pieces of string to men and women on the way to the gas chamber—presumably by way of reassurance. Poetry is in the details, we usually say, but so is cruelty.

I first thought the book could have been longer to drive the point home, but then remembered the old saying about poetry that less is more. Patrick Greaney is right when he writes in the afterword that “The Shoah is transformed from something that readers thought they already understood into something that they have yet to grasp and that *transcript* allows them to examine.” Even someone who has a solid knowledge of the literature of Nazi Germany may encounter things here they didn’t know about or simply overlooked. I, for one, was astonished to discover that the Nazis were already using the phrase “enhanced interrogation” to refer to what they did to people in their prisons so they wouldn’t have to call it torture. c

Heimrad Bäcker, *transcript*, translated by Patrick Greaney and Vincent Kling (Dalkey Archive Press, 2010)

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