

Preface to *Looking Back, Going Forward: New & Selected Poems*, by Merrill Leffler

FOR NEARLY SIXTY YEARS, Herman Taube has been writing like a man possessed – “an exposed soul in constant grapple to rid myself / from the terror of dreadful memories, nightmares, / always in a struggle to control my equilibrium.” His immense body of work – in poetry, fiction, essays and journalism – has been a relentless lament over the terrible brutalization and murder of European Jewry. Herman’s work has been dedicated to keeping memory alive. “My writing has become the quintessence / of my life, the essence for my existence / As much as I would like to stay away from it, / I am hunted by voices calling: Remember Us.” Not “haunted,” but “hunted.”

There are writers who will not let us turn from the world that they have experienced, no matter how terrible. They cannot help themselves – they have seen too much. “I feel like a caged animal,” Herman writes, “trying to get away from daily flashbacks that fluctuate in my mind, / from panic to anger, fighting to overcome anxiety/ and free myself from the tremors of fright.”

And yet, with the darkness that rives its way through so much of Herman’s work – the early death of his parents, the gulags of Siberia, the destruction of European Jewry, the pain of aging and wanting to give up – there is also a powerful current of celebration that gives homage to the human spirit, to the countless acts of kindness and generosity of those he has known, all those anonymous souls who no one remembers except the poems themselves. “It is not of my personal experiences I write, / but of the thousands of innocent victims / from countless countries, gifted men and / women in the prime of their lives who died.” Herman’s poetry celebrates as well the simple but deep pleasures of life – it may be the voice of a bird landing on the balcony, the scent of a flower, and the macabre comedy – after all that life has wrought – over the worry of cholesterol, of all things. Yes, there is comedy here, too, even if dark and mordant.

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Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1919, Herman’s English is drenched in Yiddish and in the thousand-year Yiddish culture that in less than a decade the Nazis eliminated. We speak of the “six million dead,” an incomprehensible number, let alone the 50-60 million dead during WWII; but there were also the hundreds of villages, the great cities and centers of learning, the cultures that are now merely displays in museums and words in books. As Elie Wiesel has written of Herman Taube’s poems, “they evoke the melancholy memories from a world that vanished during Europe’s darkest years.”

Ranging over a lifetime, the poems that make up *Looking Back, Going Forward* begin in the gulags of Siberia, where soldiers of the Polish army that Herman was part of were sent as prisoners. “Horse wagons carried us from our homes/ to the uttermost parts of the Soviet Union,/ transformed us from normal human beings,” he writes, “into herds of living skeletons, exposed to the/ perils of cold, hunger and abusive treatment.” Poem after poem gives us “details of what/ happened both to Jews and non-Jews” in Siberia, where “life is worthless in the gulags,” then in a remote Uzbekistan village, a Kyzyl Kishlak, where for two years he was a medic in a clinic.

Typhus and malaria were rampant there. “Patients with dysentery and malaria / were turned back to the Kolkhozes or/ left laying on the floors of the clinic,/ in dust and

dirt. To relieve their thirst,/ some dragged themselves to the/ ariks, drinking the contaminated water./ Because of the lack of food and medicines,/ patients were dying day and night.”

If there were terrible acts of meanness and betrayal each day – “They behaved brutally to their own/ kin, beating, humiliating the women/ and the weak, forcing them to stay in/ line at the latrine in biting cold weather./ To see the sadistic behavior of my own/ people, the changes in their personalities,/ obsessed me with rage and a feeling of/ shame and guilt. Why do I keep silent?” – there was also the opposite, Father Jagla, for example, ordinary Jews and gentiles, and then, too, the generosity of the Uzbek people. They took him in and despite the “hardships and periodic insults,/ They made our lives bearable,” he writes. “They came at night, brought food and left.”

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In 1943, Herman was drafted into the Second Polish Army and sent to Russia, where he served as a medic in the Kursk offensive; there his ambulance was blown up and he nearly died. After a difficult recovery, in January 1945, he was sent to Majdanek, where he first learned of the terror that had occurred there and then to Plathe, Pomerania. In Plathe, he organized the first Polish Red Cross station for civilians and managed to liberate from Koeslin (Koszalin, in Polish) the young woman, Susan Strauss, who was to become his wife. In 1947, the family – there were already two children – emigrated to the U.S. from Alsfeld, Germany, settling first in Baltimore and then near Washington, D.C.

From the beginning Herman wrote for Yiddish newspapers and other periodicals, published stories with Susan, and raised a growing family; he continues to write for the Yiddish *Forward* and is its White House correspondent.

These few biographical details are the mere outlines of a life – it is the poems that give us a sense of the man through the voice that his language creates. This is an extraordinary achievement for someone who didn’t come to English until he was 35. A number of the Siberian and Uzbek poems in this book were written in Polish and Yiddish, though they are not noted as translations. The poems have been culled from hundreds more, written then and over these years. Poetry is the way that Herman responds to living in the world – each day brings one or two or more. In “Longevity,” a poem not in this collection, he writes of old age, “it is a bargain that you get for nothing” but then replies to himself, “it is amazing to be living so long/ Especially when you apply your longevity to perform noble tasks.” And for Herman those tasks are living meaningfully in the world – unable and unwilling to turn from the experiences that have shaped who he is, they form the foundation of the man he is continually going forward to become.