

[*MJTM* 21 (2019–2020) 82–86]

MOBILE KILLING UNITS, LOPUCHOWA FOREST, POLAND

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner¹
Chicago, IL, USA

The hush in the forest is calming at first
and then not. No songs to sing along this via dolorosa
except Kaddish. I walk on pine needles decades
after thousands were herded like animals to the pit
that is just ahead. The silent whispers of the dead

linger, caught even in the branches of these straight
pines, still sloughing, still seeping into the soil.
Yes, Baumgartner is written in the death
roles at Auschwitz, Peláez in the archive
of victims and survivors, but this is not my story,

each name a blood line, each silenced voice words
unlinked from mine. This is not my story, yet I,
a Jew of the New Testament, am stumbling along,
my year-old child clinging to my neck.
For a flash of a second I am aware of one sharp
breath and the beginning of a fall into the abyss.

This is not my story, I keep repeating.
This is not my story.

1. Jill Peláez Baumgaertner is Poetry Editor for *The Christian Century* and served as Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies at Wheaton College from 2001–2017 and Acting Provost from 2017–18.

SCIANA PLACZU

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner
Chicago, IL, USA

Kazimierz, Poland

The Jewish headstones broken under Nazi tanks,
the annihilation so complete even death's work
crushed, the testament of lives obliterated.

These headstones now puzzle-pieced to form
a thirty-foot wall, each stone, each fragment
with their menorahs, candles, pitchers, broken

branches, a person in each symbol, a name.
A jagged slash, like lightning, from ground
to full height, dark with shadow like a rent

garment, wide enough to step through
into another world of mist and pine-needled
floor, the forest filtering daylight like looking

through the sheerest organdy, a place to stand
with beauty, a place to stand with beauty
ripped apart like the curtain of the temple
torn in two.

CONCENTRATION

Jill Peláez Baumgaertner
Chicago, IL, USA

“. . . In this connection, it is to be borne in mind that only cities which are rail junctions, or at least are located along railroad lines, are to be designated as concentration points.”—Heydrich’s Instructions to Chiefs of Einsatzgruppen, September 21, 1939²

“The area of the camp is so small that, had the new arrivals stayed alive for even a few days, it would have been only a week and a half before there was no more space behind the barbed wire for this tide of people flowing in from Poland, from Belorussia, from the whole of Europe.”—Vasily Grossman, 1944³

The word itself:
to focus
to compress
to remove all
distractions
to create less and less
space
for interruption
to fill the smaller
and smaller
spaces with
more and more.

The word
becomes sinister.

2. Cited in Dawidowicz, ed., *A Holocaust Reader*, 60.
3. Cited in “Excerpts from ‘The Hell of Treblinka,’” [n.p.].

To cut even
that space in half
to cut the half
space by two-thirds.

Packed
into stinking rooms
and then transported
crushed standing
in boxcars
6000 a day
Treblinka.

The camp map:
storehouse for victims'
property
disguised as a train station
execution site
disguised as hospital
barracks where women
undressed
had heads shaved
barracks where men undressed
"the Tube"—the path
to the gas chambers
three old
ten new gas chambers
the cremation pyres.

Today we walk
the forest path
now level ground
the forest path
the forest path
then the clearing
and the ragged stones
standing, these stones
a compression

a concentration
of heat and pressure
pushed
by the earth's crust
from its core
the stones
the rocks
spaced in the clearing
lined up
a congregation
of what's left
after suffering
nothing but jagged
edges,
the silence
its own Golgotha.

Bibliography

Dawidowicz, Lucy S., ed. *A Holocaust Reader*. Library of Jewish Studies. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1976.

Facing History and Ourselves. "Excerpts from 'The Hell of Treblinka' by Vasily Grossman, 1944." Online: <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-human-behavior/hell-of-treblinka-vasily-grossman>