



Arnold Daghani, Watercolour, painted for his wife Nanino, 1 Jan 1943, while they were in Mikhailowka forced labour camp (Arnold Daghani Collection, University of Sussex).

## HOW TO PORTRAY THE HOLOCAUST IN THE ARTS

**BILL SMITH, *The Life and Death Orchestra*, Brighton**

What a curious power words have ...<sup>1</sup>

The world is ruled by neither justice nor morality;  
crime is not punished nor virtue rewarded,  
one is forgotten as quickly as the other.  
The world is ruled by power [...].<sup>2</sup>

*Tadeusz Borowski*

I am not Jewish. I do not have any relatives who were in any way involved in the Holocaust, and yet I am making a film about the subject. I do not know where my original motivation came from. In 2000, I was involved in making the album *Songs for the Betrayed World* with The Life and Death Orchestra.<sup>3</sup> On that album is the song 'This Way For The Gas', which I adapted from the short story by Tadeusz Borowski 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen'.<sup>4</sup> I was totally fascinated by the writings of Borowski, and I am now in the process of making a film based loosely on his life and the lives of the members of the underground Essentialist Club,

<sup>1</sup>Tadeusz Borowski, 'A Day at Harmenz', in Borowski (1976), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Tadeusz Borowski, 'The January Offensive', in *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup>The CD is included as a supplement, attached to the back of this volume.

<sup>4</sup>This is the title of one of the short stories about Borowski's experiences at Auschwitz, published in his collection of short stories with the same title, Borowski (1976), pp. 29-49. Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951), a Polish writer, was arrested by the Nazis in 1943 and sent to Auschwitz; in late 1944 he was transported first to Dautmergen in southwest Germany, a satellite camp of Natzweiler concentration camp, and finally to Dachau where he was liberated by the Americans. His collection of stories was originally published in 1959 in Polish under the title *Pożegnanie z Marią* (Farewell to Maria), Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy; first English translation New York: Viking Penguin, 1967.

based in Warsaw in the early 1940s, when 'going clubbing' was a capital offence. That sounds trite but the reality is starkly true. The poets, musicians, writers and artists who attended this club risked their lives every time they went.

I found it very hard to understand how the cruelest acts could be undertaken by seemingly the most civilised people. The twentieth century was not the Dark Ages: it was even more evil, with more people killed by genocide than in any previous century, and the Holocaust was unique in the annals of a long collection of evil genocides. I was led to investigate the depths of this evil, asking where it came from. Is it still in us? If so, in which of us? And of course, how can we rid humanity forever of this appalling stain on our character?

In the course of my research I found many writers, artists, musicians who had described their experience of the Holocaust. I come from Brighton, and I was amazed to find that one of the great Holocaust artists, the painter and writer Arnold Daghani, who was from a German-speaking Jewish family in Suceava, Romania, actually came to live in Brighton and Hove.<sup>5</sup> The story of how he painted his works in secret and subsequently smuggled them out as he made his escape from a forced labour camp at Mikhailowka in the Ukraine, where everyone else was murdered, would make a great film in itself. Daghani's message is entirely conveyed in his true depictions of the camp. As he wrote,

I have preferred setting out the facts to interpreting them. I have provided plenty of nails. May others hammer them in.<sup>6</sup>

There are many books about the Holocaust and to those who say it's an 'industry',<sup>7</sup> all I can say is: I do not agree. There are not enough. It is the most important thing you could ever write, paint, compose about. Do we need more cookery books? However, even in the pantheon of Holocaust literature, the writers and artists and composers are less well known than the eye-witness account books. But the poets, painters and musicians were what I was drawn to.

Daniel Weissbort's anthology *The Poetry of Survival*<sup>8</sup> was given to me by chance. As a musician/composer I set some of the poems in this volume to music, and this led me to more poems and eventually to work with The Life and Death Orchestra in compiling the album. The album's title, *Songs For The Betrayed World*, outlines my own conclusion. The phrase itself comes from a poem by Zbigniew Herbert<sup>9</sup> with a translation by Czesław Miłosz<sup>10</sup> in which he talks about offering 'to the betrayed world a rose'<sup>11</sup>. My aim was to do that.

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Daghani (1909–1985); a collection of 6,000 of his works are now housed in the archive of the Centre for German Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex, [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/cgjs/daghani\\_catalogue.php](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/cgjs/daghani_catalogue.php) (accessed 23 December 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Daghani (1961).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Finkelstein (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Weissbort (1991).

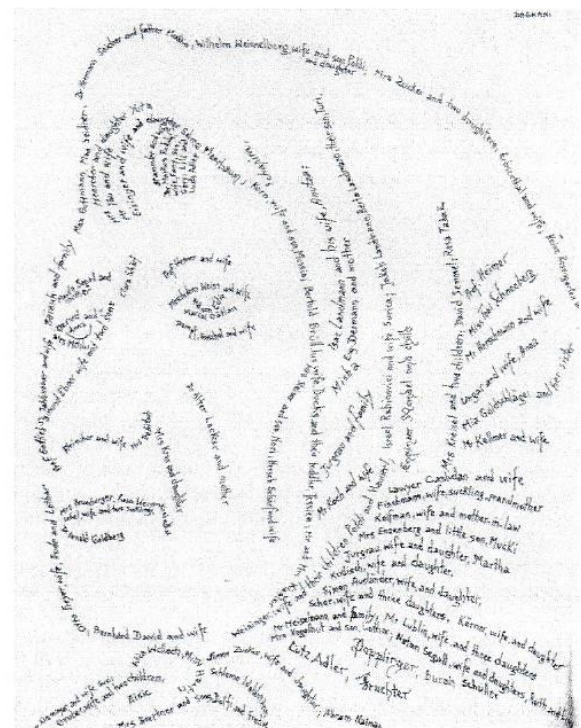
<sup>9</sup> Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998), Polish poet, essayist, and playwright. He was a member of the Polish resistance movement and during the Second World War one of the best known Polish writers.

<sup>10</sup> Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), Polish poet and writer. During the German occupation of Poland he attended underground lectures and helped Jews find shelter from the Nazis. In 1980 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature; in 1989 he was named a 'Righteous among the Nations' by the state of Israel for risking his life to save Jews from extermination in the Holocaust.

<sup>11</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, 'Five Men', in Weissbort (1991), pp. 149–50 (quote p. 150).



Tadeusz Borowski. Kindly supplied by Alicia Nitecki, Waltham, Massachusetts.



Arnold Daghani: Untitled calligraphic portrait of a woman prisoner wearing headscarf of names (Arnold Daghani Collection, University of Sussex).

Arnold Daghani: Kneeling Woman (Arnold Daghani Collection, University of Sussex).

It has been asked, can there be art about Auschwitz? The answer to me is obvious: Anne Frank, Lee Miller, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and films such as *Life is Beautiful*, *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist* make the case.<sup>12</sup> However, while I was making the album I had correspondence with Elie Wiesel about using words from his great book, *Night*<sup>13</sup>, as a song. We talked about whether music demeans suffering. Is the complete experience impossible to transfer? In the end he did give permission to use his words on the album, and one day I would like to write, with his blessing, an opera based on the whole book. It is one of the great books of history.

If you cannot create music to express suffering, however extreme, we would never have had any protest music, whether it be 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holliday, 'Babi Yar' by Dmitri Shostakovich, 'The Slave's Lament' by Robert Burns, or more recently 'Killing in the Name' by Rage Against the Machine.<sup>14</sup> I guess the question arises because of Theodor W. Adorno's now-famous quote, 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.<sup>15</sup> Adorno is saying, how can you express the inexpressible? But for me and many others there is a greater imperative: the need to give voice to your feelings at the horror. If it is unspeakable, it is hidden from history. So for me freedom is paramount: the freedom to express is everything. Some of the art from the Holocaust is very difficult even to look at. David Olère's canvas 'Gassing' epitomises this.<sup>16</sup> After being freed from Auschwitz, Olère was able to paint the terrible scenes of the gas chambers that he held inside his head. His collection of paintings is entitled 'The Eyes of a Witness'.

Among the truth-tellers of the Holocaust was the poet and prose writer Tadeusz Borowski whose slender volume *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* continues to occupy a place apart in Holocaust literature. He describes in everyday fashion the truth about what it was like to work in and around the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Its power is its ordinariness. As a composer I tried to underline that ordinariness by giving the song version of his words an everyday ballad feel. The tune comes over and over again, to emphasise the repetitive nature of what happened there

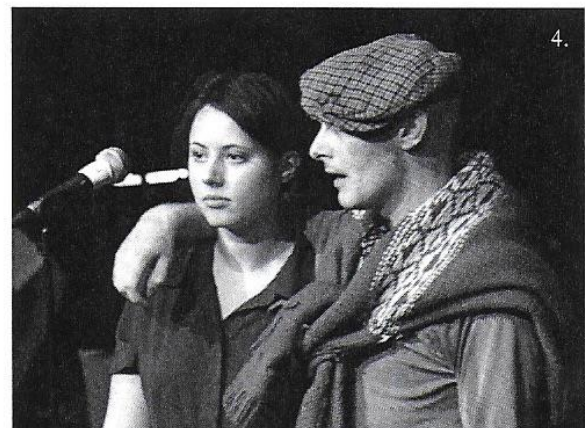
<sup>12</sup> *Life is Beautiful*, Italy 1993. Directed by Roberto Benigni, starring Roberto Benigni, Nicoletta Braschi, Giorgio Cantarini; *The Pianist*, Poland 2002. Directed by Roman Polanski, starring Adrien Brody, Thomas Kretschmann, Emilia Fox; *Schindler's List*, USA, 1993. Directed by Steven Spielberg, starring Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley.

<sup>13</sup> Wiesel (2008). The original, much longer version was published in 1956 in Yiddish in Buenos Aires under the title *Un die Velt Hot Geshvign* (And the World Remained Silent); in 1958 a shorter version was published in French under the title *Nuit*, and the first English version was published New York: Hill & Wang, 1960.

<sup>14</sup> For Billie Holliday, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>; for Dmitri Shostakovich, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pVP0rivMs8>; for Robert Burns, see <http://www.robertburns.org/works/371.shtml>; for Rage Against the Machine, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxk3c\\_SbWMg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxk3c_SbWMg) (all accessed 23 December 2013).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Adorno's quote, see also Robert Priseman's article 'Painting the Holocaust: Can there be Art after Auschwitz?' and Fabian Freyenhagen's article 'Is Making Movies After Auschwitz "Barbaric"? Lanzmann's *Shoah* as an Adornian Film' in this issue, pp. 33–8 and 39–45.

<sup>16</sup> David Olère (1902–1985), Polish born French painter and sculptor. In 1943 he was deported to Auschwitz concentration camp where he was assigned to the Jewish Sonderkommando and forced to empty the gas chambers and burn the bodies at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He also had to work as an illustrator for the SS, writing and decorating their letters. He was able to draw when still at Auschwitz, which gives his drawings of the concentration camp, including the crematoria, a high documentary value. He continued to artistically illustrate his own experiences at the concentration camp and the fate of those who did not survive until 1962. For more information see <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/gallery/olere.htm> (accessed 23 December 2013). An overview of his work can be seen at <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=david+olere,gassing&client=firefox-a&hs=J2i&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&channel=np&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=Az3hUsfQB6PT7AaAm4DACA&ved=0CCwQsAQ&biw=1024&bih=457> (accessed 23 December 2013).



The Life and Death Orchestra in rehearsal and in concert:

1. From left to right: Nick Pynn, Bill Smith, Herbie Flowers, Angi Mariani, Bob Taylor, Bim Sinclair and Joe Burke (accordion player standing in for Tom Arnold who was away).
2. Andrew Sherwood (right) conducting the Brighton Youth Orchestra performing Songs For The Betrayed World, dancing by The Life and Death Orchestra.
3. From left to right: Adele Zizi (playing part of Maria Rundo), Seth Morgan (playing the part of Tadeusz Borowski), Guy Picot (playing part of Arnold Daghani), Jenny James (playing part of Nanino Daghani) and Andrew Sherwood (conductor).
4. Adele Zizi and Seth Morgan.
5. Angi Mariani.
6. From left to right: Joe Burke, Nick Pynn, Angi Mariani, Bim Sinclair, Bill Smith, Bob Taylor, Julian Tardo.

as an ordinary everyday occurrence. My collaborator Angi Mariani and I adapted his story with no frills. A few chilling chords, however, tell a different story. This is *song noir* at its most extreme. He outlines his seeming selfishness, and in our adaptation of his great prose work, the lyrics are:

*I lie against the metal and dream of my bunk  
suddenly I see the camp as a haven of peace  
others may be dying  
but I've still strength and food  
for this living moment,  
for today.  
It's this way for the gas.<sup>17</sup>*

However, the film we are currently doing refutes any guilt or responsibility he might have felt for anything that happened there. The truth is that people do want to survive, that is absolutely natural, but it is the environment that determines how people act. Put prisoners into a monstrous world and by necessity, whether it be Borowski or you or me, we will act what can seem selfishly in cosy retrospect.

What is also amazing about Borowski and his colleagues at the Essentialist Club and the underground university in Poland is that they tried to carry on with their artistic lives as if the Nazis had not invaded Warsaw. There were Nazi tanks and soldiers and police in the streets, there were posters saying, 'By order, no cabarets, no theatre, no schools, no universities, no dancing, no speaking Polish'. People were hunted and then:

A long column of automobiles stationed itself at the end of the avenue and waited for street cars, like a tiger tracking antelope. We spilled out of the moving trolley bus like pears and tore diagonally across a field newly planted with vegetables. The earth smelled of spring ... And in the city, on the other side of the river, as in a deep jungle people were being hunted.<sup>18</sup>

Borowski believed that an artist's role was to tell the truth. Their club was called the Essentialist Club. He was a moody, melancholic, sometimes angry young man, a bohemian in any age, although he was always smartly be-suited. What do bohemians brilliantly do in any age? They scoff at everything, they write melancholy poems, they try to get off with beautiful but totally unavailable not-in-a-million-years girls, and all the time they smoke. Borowski *was* the original existentialist even if he was young and still had hope.

Despite the madness of war, we lived for a world that would be different. For a better world to come when all this is over. And perhaps even our being here is a step towards that world. Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible,

<sup>17</sup>The Life and Death Orchestra, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen: Songs for the Betrayed World*. Adaptation of the story by Tadeusz Borowski by Bill Smith and Angi Mariani.

<sup>18</sup>Tadeusz Borowski, 'Graduation on Market Street', cited in Jan Kott, 'Introduction', in Borowski (1976), p. 13.

that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for one day? It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity. It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes mothers renounce their children, or wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation. Ah, and not even the hope for a different, better world, but simply for life, a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers.<sup>19</sup>

Nowadays in Europe there are many bohemian clubs, many gay clubs. It used to be risky to go to them, and in some parts of the world it still is. That was the everyday life for Borowski and his fellow clubbers, the only difference being that if they were caught at their club, they risked execution. Their attitude was, if we don't go we might as well be shot.

At the same time as Borowski was a street poet; some of his colleagues were street fighters in the Polish Resistance. Eventually, his fiancée Maria Rundo, a member of the Resistance, was captured by the Nazis, and Borowski himself was arrested when he went looking for her: he with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in his pocket, she with a book of Borowski's own poems. They were both sent to Auschwitz, and they were sent there, as the guard says in our film, because 'it's not what you've done, it's what you are.'

Just after Auschwitz Borowski wrote one of the great love poems of all time, a song of longing for the girlfriend that he spent many hours with, on her bunk in Birkenau, after getting a job as a collector of infant corpses in the women's prison.

### The Sun of Auschwitz

*You remember the sun of Auschwitz  
and the green of the distant meadows, lightly  
lifted to the clouds by birds,  
no longer green in the clouds,  
but seagreen white. Together  
we stood looking into the distance and felt  
the far away green of the meadows and the clouds'  
seagreen white within us,  
as if the color of the distant meadows  
were our blood or the pulse  
beating within us, as if the world  
existed only through us and nothing changed  
as long as we were there. I remember*

<sup>19</sup> Tadeusz Borowski, 'Auschwitz Our Home (A Letter)', in Borowski (1976), p. 121-2.

*your smile as elusive  
as a shade of the color of the wind,  
a leaf trembling on the edge  
of sun and shadow, fleeting  
yet always there. So you are  
for me today, in the seagreen  
sky, the greenery and  
the leaf-rustling wind. I feel  
you in every shadow, every movement,  
and you put the world around me  
like your arms. I feel the world  
as your body, you look into my eyes  
and call me with the whole world.*

*(Munich, 1945)<sup>20</sup>*

You would never know from reading this poem that they were in an extermination camp. You could read it as escapism, but it is not, because the subject of this poem is true love and nothing else impinged on that feeling. There were love affairs in Auschwitz. It was the real world and everything was there – football fields, factories, a brothel, concert halls and gas chambers. It was an upside-down world, ruled by criminals and power-hungry madmen. These were the people you were supposed to look up to and admire. Borowski spells it all out and makes it so real that we can easily see ourselves there:

But this is how it is done: first just one ordinary barn, brightly whitewashed – and here they proceed to asphyxiate people. Later, four large buildings, accommodating twenty thousand at a time without any trouble. No hocus-pocus, no poison, no hypnosis. Only several men directing traffic to keep operations running smoothly, and the thousands flow along like water from an open tap. All this happens just beyond the anaemic trees of the dusty little wood. Ordinary trucks bring people, return, then bring some more. No hocus-pocus, no poison, no hypnosis.

Why is it that nobody cries out, nobody spits in their faces, nobody jumps at their throats? We doff our caps to the S.S. men returning from the little wood; if our name is called we obediently go with them to die, and – we do nothing. We starve, we are drenched by rain, we are torn from our families. What is this mystery? This strange power of one man over another? This insane passivity that cannot be overcome? Our only strength is our great number – the gas chambers cannot accommodate all of us.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Tadeusz Borowski, 'The Sun of Auschwitz', translated from the Polish by Tadeusz Pióro with Larry Rafferty and Meryl Natchez, in Zych (1999), p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Tadeusz Borowski, 'Auschwitz Our Home (A Letter)', in Borowski (1976), p. 112–13.

After the war Borowski returned to Poland where he was faced with a new communist Polish government who wanted martyr books. They wanted to paint the people who had fought for communism as heroes, almost God-like to inspire the masses, to build more dams and manufacture more goods in factories. The whole of Eastern Europe was on the way to socialist realism, and almost all the Western radical intellectuals, idealistic but naïve – Picasso, Aldous Huxley and others – were the cheerleaders. In our play, we summed up Arnold Daghani's views as: 'If impressionism is painting what you see and expressionism is painting what you feel, socialist realism is painting what you are told to see and feel.'<sup>22</sup>

Nobody, it seemed – whether on the left, right or middle – wanted to look at the fact, the appalling barbarism of the Holocaust. Everybody had an agenda for the future which demanded changes to the real truth. Nobody in Poland wanted to look at that truth. Nobody except Borowski, whose childhood had been blighted when his father and mother were taken away from him by the Russian authorities for a decade for being bourgeois. Borowski's father's crime? He had a bookshop. His mother's crime – she protested. For Borowski, the only difference between the new Communists and the Nazis was the colour of the uniforms.

However, Borowski, like his parents, was a patriot. He did want Poland to prosper, and over time began to doubt that his truthful literature was doing any good. He would have preferred to be a man of the people but he was caught between two worlds, intellectuals and workers.

You know how much I used to like Plato. Today I realize he lied. For the things of this world are not a reflection of the ideal, but a product of human sweat, blood and hard labour. It is we who built the pyramids, hewed the marble for the temples and the rocks for the imperial roads, we who pulled the oars in the galleys and dragged wooden ploughs, while they wrote dialogues and dramas, rationalized their intrigues by appeals in the name of the Fatherland, made wars over boundaries and democracies. We were filthy and died real deaths. They were 'aesthetic' and carried on subtle debates.

There can be no beauty if it is paid for by human injustice, nor truth that passes over injustice in silence, nor moral virtue that condones it.<sup>23</sup>

He started working for the government, in modern terms as a PR man. He was very conflicted about this. He was sent to other Eastern European countries as a cultural ambassador and wound up in Berlin where he could easily see what was happening in the West. As Maria, by now his wife, says, 'luxury behind window displays, hunger and prostitution on the streets and despair in the heart'.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, of course, as his friends reminded him, the West had the free music of John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie, and writers like Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene and Arthur Koestler.

So on the one hand, the West had appalling inequality and deathly misery for those at the bottom, but it also had freedom to write and record. On the other hand, in the East the people were looked after by the state and the ideal of everyone sharing everything was being put into some

<sup>22</sup>The Life and Death Orchestra with the Rainbow Chorus and Members of the Brighton Youth Orchestra conducted by Dominic Nunns, *This Way For the Gas, Ladies & Gentlemen: An Astonishing Musical about Darfur & Auschwitz*. Brighton Fringe Festival, Udderbelly, 22-27 May 2007. For a more detailed discussion of Daghani's views which is summarised in the quote, see Schultz (2009).

<sup>23</sup>Tadeusz Borowski, 'Auschwitz Our Home (A Letter)', in Borowski (1976), pp. 131-2.

<sup>24</sup>Letter M.[aria] Borowska to W.[anda] Leopold, Berlin, 15 October 1949, in Drewnowski (2007), p. 281.

practice even if the leaders still lived in comparative Soviet luxury. But there was no freedom at all to write and record the truth. The Soviet government had decreed what the truth was, and the truth was communism.

There are many theories about what happened to Borowski. The facts are simple: his wife had a baby, and a few days later Borowski put his head in a gas oven. It could have been for personal reasons, it could have been because his work was being suppressed, it could have been because he was a melancholic all his life. It could have been just the same if he had lived in a palace all his life instead of being locked up in a concentration camp. No one really knows. What is left, though, are the true stories of what actually happened at Auschwitz, where nothing is hidden and the truth is there for all to see, recorded by Borowski in the style of a journalist/documentary film-maker before those mediums were really invented. And if you know the truth, you can learn what to do.

I hope my film does justice to one of the greatest poets of all time. As John Keats said, another above-average poet, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>25</sup>

## Further Reading

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## Website

The Life and Death Orchestra's website: <http://www.lifeanddeath.org>

<sup>25</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', lines 49–50, in Keats (2001), p. 289 (first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts* No. 15, January 1820).