

Lori Laitman (b. 1955)  
Vedem

Libretto by David Mason

Lyrics and text based on the true story of Vedem, the secret magazine published by a group of teenage boys imprisoned in the Terezín concentration camp, L417, Home One. Poems by Petr Ginz, Hanuš Hachenburg, Zdeněk Ornest, and Josef Taussig. English translations by Paul Wilson from: *We are Children Just the Same: Vedem, the secret magazine by the boys of Terezín*. © 1995 by the Jewish Publication Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Permission to use the libretto by David Mason was granted by the author.

### Part One: The Transports

#### [1] Hear My Story Now

A MAN

Oh hear my story now.  
Hear my story as it comes to me,  
for I am vanished from the world you love,  
and I am nothing without memory.

I was a child of Prague, oh hear.  
I played beside the Vltava  
and saw the seagulls sail the air,  
trailing barges in the sun.

I heard the armistice of calling doves.  
I saw the lovers walking arm in arm.  
I saw men sweeping out their shops.  
The loaves of bread were steaming warm.

CHORUS

Hear our story now.  
Hear our story as it comes to us,  
for we are vanished from the world you love,  
and we are nothing without memory.

A YOUTH

Hear my story now.  
I ran for hours through all Josefov,<sup>1</sup>  
forgetting how the day was passing by,  
and suddenly saw that it was dark.

The snowflakes falling through the bridge's arch,  
the streetlights glowing through a winter cloud,  
the children skating on an icy pond,  
the things we were afraid to say aloud.

CHORUS

Oh hear our story now.  
Hear our story now, oh hear.

A MAN

One day the Germans came, oh hear.  
The transports took us north to Terezín,  
a fortress city of the old empire.  
Behind the walls the streets were orderly,  
and we were made to work  
until we saw that it was growing dark.

CHORUS

Hear our story now.

A WOMAN

This was our ghetto life in Terezín.  
The transports brought us to prepare the way.  
When I learned I was bound for Terezín  
I wondered how long I would have to stay.

CHORUS

Hear our story now.  
Hear our story as it comes to us,  
for we are vanished from the world you love,  
and we are nothing without memory.

Remember how it was your mother kissed,  
your father chanted from the open book.  
Remember laughter when we broke our bread.  
Remember everything we dearly missed.

A MAN

I pushed a garbage cart in Terezín  
and saw the transport bringing children in.

A WOMAN

They were the only future we could have.  
I taught the children how to draw and paint.

A YOUTH

It was so strange to be away from home  
that I would cry myself to sleep at night.  
Our teachers taught us how to draw and paint.  
We had musicians for an orchestra.

TUTTI

The soul cannot believe that we will die  
so we make beauty to delay our death.  
We sing of life recalled in Terezín  
and everything they came to take from us.

CHORUS

Hear our story now.  
The geese flew sadly over Terezín.  
The winter bowed our heads to work and play.  
We learned a ghetto life to stay alive.

The soul cannot believe that we will die  
so we make beauty to delay our death.  
We sing of life recalled in Terezín  
and everything they came to take from us.

A MAN

Hear my story now...

A WOMAN

Hear my story now...

A YOUTH

Hear my story now...

TUTTI

Oh hear!

**[2] Memories of Prague**

How long since I last saw  
The sun sink low behind Petrín Hill?  
With tearful eyes I gazed at you, Prague,  
Enveloped in your evening shadows.  
How long since I last heard the pleasant rush of water  
Over the weir in the Vltava River?  
I have long since forgotten the bustling life on Wenceslas Square.  
Those unknown corners in the Old Town,  
Those shady nooks and sleepy canals,  
How are they? They cannot be grieving for me  
As I do for them. Almost a year has passed.  
For almost a year I have huddled in this awful hole.  
A few poor streets replace your priceless beauty.  
Like a beast I am, imprisoned in a tiny cage.  
Prague, you fairy tale in stone, how well I remember!

— nz (*Petr Ginz*)

**Part Two: Home Number One**

**[3] Home Number One**

CHORUS

Our mothers said goodbye to us,  
our fathers said goodbye to us.  
The barracks were so cold,  
the buildings all lined up in rows.  
When winter came the water froze,  
and we were growing old.

Home Number One, L417—  
all boys, all boys, our toys removed,  
our stutters and our scabby skin,  
our manners never much improved.

All boys, all boys, enduring days  
by work and lessons in the maze.  
Inspections came from the SS,  
but when was anybody's guess.

What was the wind that blew above  
and made the flags snap at the air?  
Why was the gray saluting glove  
accompanied by such a glare?

Our teachers gave us books and paint.  
When wind cut like a knife  
and loneliness would not relent,  
our teachers gave us life.

**[4] Five**

This morning at seven, so bright and so early  
Five novels lay there, sewn up in a sack  
Sewn up in a sack, like all of our lives,  
They lay there, so silent, so silent all five.

Five books that flung back the curtain of silence,  
Calling for freedom, and not for the world,  
They're somebody's novels, someone who loves them...

They called out, they cried, they shed tears, and they pleaded  
That they hadn't been finished, the pitiful five.

They declared to the world that the state trades in bodies  
Then slowly they vanished and went out of sight.

They kept their eyes open, they looked for the world  
But nothing they found. They were silent, all five.

— Academy (*Hanuš Hachenburg*)

**Part Three: Vedem**

**[5] Vedem**

CHORUS

What could we do but work and wait?  
The rumors ran like rats in Terezín.  
Our teachers kept us organized,  
and some of us had made a magazine.

*Vedem* was the home for what we wrote  
and read aloud on evenings when we gathered.  
*Vedem* was our poetry and prose.  
*Vedem* was how we weathered life inside the walls.

Though we had football matches,  
though we had drills at school,  
we lived for what we wrote and painted,  
as if imagination were a jewel.

A MAN

I kept the children busy.  
I kept their minds off hunger,  
suffering and grief.

A WOMAN

I kept the children busy.  
Our future lived before our eyes  
in suffering and grief.

A BOY

I saw the mountains of the moon.

SECOND BOY

I saw the house where I was born.

THIRD BOY

The geese flew sadly over Terezín.

FOURTH BOY

The rivers ran toward a distant sea.

FIFTH BOY

The transports came and left and came again.

CHORUS

We lived for what we wrote and read aloud:

**[6] Just A Little Warmth**

I envy you a little warmth, my friends,  
When, numb with cold, I crawl out of my bed,  
When nothing else but coldness could I feel  
Still wrapped in all the lovely dreams I had.

No wish have I to wash under the cold tap  
Slowly I drown, not in my shame, but filth.  
Oh, lovely warmth, oh warmth so dearly purchased,  
I want to warm myself in your kind lap.

And when at last, with heavy heart I wake,  
And know that I am starving, I would weep  
For all the hope that I must now abandon.  
I only want to sleep and sleep and sleep.

— Orce (*Zdeněk Ornest*)

**[7] In Terezín the Mind Was Free**

CHORUS

In Terezín the mind was free,  
the hand was free to paint and draw.  
People somewhere slept on peacefully,  
but we knew fear, more fear, oh so much fear at what we saw.

A BOY

I could not sleep because some children disappeared.

SECOND BOY

I missed my mother.

THIRD BOY

I was trying to be brave.

FOURTH BOY

I heard the executions.

FIFTH BOY

I saw the man who died of fever.

**[8] Thoughts**

I stood at the corner and looked out the window  
To a place where heart is divided from heart  
On the bed lay Had's limp shadows,  
When a madman suddenly lifted his hand, crying:  
"Mummy!...  
Mummy come here, let's play together  
And kiss and talk to each other!"  
Poor people, madmen, miserable figures,  
Wrapped against the weather, they went  
Shivering with cold, and wanting to shout  
Before their days were done:

"Mummy, hold me, I'm a leaf about to fall.  
Look how I wither, I feel so cold!"  
As the awful chorale echoed across the barracks,  
I – swept up in it – sing along with them.

— Ha- (*Hanuš Hachenburg*)

**[9] Like Leaves About To Fall**

CHORUS

We were like leaves about to fall.  
The lovely tree that was our past  
could not have held us any longer  
in the winter's blast.

Over the walls of Terezín,  
our dreams flew by like heavy clouds.  
The snow fell deeply from the sky  
and muffled all the roads.

A MAN

I saw a small boy sitting at a table,  
clenching a pencil in his tiny fist  
as if he drew on all his strength  
to make a house as best as he was able,  
imagining the home that he had missed.  
I saw a boy who stretched out all his length  
and I knew well, too well what he was dreaming of...

**[10] Love in The Floodgates**

My darling, I'd love to kiss you so  
But you're all wrapped up from head to toe.  
Five panties, two dresses, a cap and a hat,  
How can a chap get his arms around that?

— *Josef Taussig*

**[11] We Were Alive, Approximately**

CHORUS

We were alive—approximately.  
We knew the mind was always free.  
But some days, some days it was hard.  
When, when would this end, oh Lord?

**Part Four: A Model Ghetto**

**[12] A Model Ghetto**

ONE YOUTH

Who are those strangers there?  
Why are the children made to stand  
with faces washed and tidied hair?

ANOTHER YOUTH

They've brought more foreigners to see  
the model camp of Terezín.

WOMAN

Theresienstadt,  
Theresienstadt,  
it is an ideal ghetto  
for the Jews.

MAN

Theresienstadt,  
Theresienstadt,  
come one and all  
to see the news.

TUTTI

Theresienstadt,  
Theresienstadt,  
they are so happy  
and so clean.

Before it will burn,  
all Europe can learn,  
the excellence  
of the machine.

We've made the model *stadt*  
where Jews live better than  
the rest of Europe—see!  
They make their charming art,  
eat a healthy diet  
regularly.

The Red Cross came,  
the Red Cross saw  
that we are not  
above the law.  
We are the race  
of Goethe, Schiller,  
Beethoven, whose names  
we cannot disgrace.

The Red Cross came,  
the Red Cross saw  
how Jews performed  
an opera!

Theresienstadt,  
Theresienstadt,  
come one and all  
to see the happy Jews.

CHORUS  
Stop!  
Why can't we say it?  
Stop!  
Why can't we make it happen?

Stop!  
These are more lies that you are telling.  
Stop!  
And after this who can believe you?

Our eyes are open.  
Our mouths are shut.  
We know the SS  
can come with guns.

We make our music  
as best we can.  
All goes according  
to their plan.

They show the strangers  
how clean we are,  
our happy ghetto  
under the star.

But we are not free.  
Don't leave before we tell you!  
Our mouths are shut.  
These are more lies that you are telling.

Stop!

### Part Five: They Are Gone

#### [13] They Are Gone

A RABBI  
And then the transports came again  
and we could see the disappeared  
became each day more numerous,  
more children gone as soon as they had come.

I was a rabbi in the ghetto, known  
for helping out the sick, for reading books  
to those who could not take care of themselves,  
and I had heard about the Polish camps<sup>2</sup>  
but said no word of them to anyone.  
And then the transports came again...

CHORUS  
The soul cannot believe that we will die  
so we make beauty to delay our death.  
The geese flew sadly over Terezín.  
The autumn bowed our heads...

#### [14] Farewell to Summer

I should like to write as you do, poets,  
Of spring's end, of love and sunny days,  
Of tender evenings spent in the moonlight  
Of birds and flowers, of trees in bud.

I should like to say farewell, as you who are free,  
With a walk in the woods, with a river, and fruit,  
As in times of old when we were like you are  
When I was not, as today, broken and forlorn.

I would like to take leave of the summer as you do,  
In the sun, stopped short by my prison grate,  
To fondle a fading bud for a while—  
I cannot, I cannot—for I live behind bars.

— Orce (*Zdeněk Ornest*)

#### [15] We Were No Different Than You

A RABBI  
Where are they? Where are they now?

CHORUS  
We went beyond the walls  
and we did not return.

A RABBI  
Jiří Bauer, Hanuš Beamt,  
Zdeněk Bienenfeld, Bedrich Blum...

A WOMAN  
Where are they? Where are they now?

A RABBI  
Herbert Fischl, Petr Fischl,  
Zdeněk Freund, Jiří Frisch...

CHORUS  
The transports took the very old.  
They came and took the very young,  
and all the boys who lived for *Vedem*,  
lived for their poems and stories,  
lived for painting, lived for song  
and for each other.

A WOMAN  
Where are they? Where are they now?

CHORUS  
Home Number One, L417.  
Our friends were going far away.

A RABBI  
Petr Gelber, Petr Ginz,  
Pavel Goldstein, Hanuš Hachenburg...

A WOMAN  
The names go on and on.

A RABBI  
All to oblivion.

CHORUS  
The geese flew sadly over Terezín.  
The voiceless snow came down  
and settled in the quiet streets.  
The barbed wire listened to the wind's lament.

The rivers froze, and one by one  
the lights went out,  
and then in crowds we died,  
and ash, not snow,  
was falling from the Polish sky.

A RABBI  
Herbert Maier, Leos Marody,  
Ota Pacovsky, Norbert Picela...

CHORUS  
We wanted life like you.  
We drew and wrote and sang our dreams,  
and wept when we were lonely,  
and walked beside the living streams.

A WOMAN  
Remember them.

A RABBI  
Josef Taussig, Zdeněk Weinberger,  
Jiří Zappner, Erich Zinn...

CHORUS  
Remember us. We were  
no different than you.

A WOMAN  
The geese fly sadly over Terezín.  
I hear the music made behind the walls.  
I see the drawings, read the poems.  
These children learned to dream  
but died in huddled fear.  
Why? All my life I will ask why...

A RABBI  
The geese fly sadly over Terezín.

CHORUS  
We were alive like you.  
We dreamt of food and love.  
We saw the transports come and go.  
We heard the rifle shots.  
We saw the lurching dogs.

The soul cannot believe that we will die  
so we make beauty to delay our death.  
Remember us. Remember us.  
We were no different than you.

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish district of Prague.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the inmates of Terezín were sent to Auschwitz in Poland.

## Fathers

Poems by Anne Ranasinghe and David Vogel

"You, Father," "Last Night I Dreamt," and "Don't Cry" are from the book *At What Dark Point*, © 1991, Anne Ranasinghe, used by permission of the poet. "I Saw My Father Drowning" is from the book *Selected Poems* by David Vogel, translated by A.C. Jacobs (1976). Permission granted by The Menard Press on behalf of the Estate of A.C. Jacobs.

### [16] Don't Cry, fragment 1 (Anne Ranasinghe)

*Please refer to the complete poem printed for track [22]*

### [17] You, Father (Anne Ranasinghe)

*From An Old Photograph*

You, Father, stand in your heavy dark coat  
Against the winter tree. Ice on the lake,  
And two small ducks that were caught afloat  
By winter, frozen. The sun is behind me as I take  
This photograph, and what I make  
Is a last sad record, though I could not have known.

The sun behind me is cold and white  
And projects my elongated shadow.  
It falls black between us, yet lies so light  
On the innocent, powdery snow.  
You do not smile, is the sun in your eyes?  
Or, now I wonder, could you have known?

### [18] Don't Cry, fragment 2 (Anne Ranasinghe)

*See [22]*

### [19] Last Night I Dreamt (Anne Ranasinghe)

Last night I dreamt back to forgotten  
And sleeping images of childhood days.  
How green the grass upon the swelling hillside  
Patched with the dazzling gold of buttercups,  
The firs stand dark and tall, still in the midday heat  
Above the fields of wheat as yet uncut,  
How still the murmuring summer's day  
How still my father's valley.

And I am searching up among the trees  
Alone among the dark and silent fir trees,  
And panic growing as I lose my way  
And cannot find what I am searching for,  
Then, screaming run along the river  
That moves like molten lead beneath the willows,  
Run down the hill, across the bridge and homewards  
Towards my father's house. But when I reach it  
It is not there nor any trace of it.

I woke. And putting out my hand  
I searched for you,  
Put out my hand and searched the empty night  
Vibrating only with the hollow echo  
The hollow echo of my waking dream.

### [20] Don't Cry, fragment 3 (Anne Ranasinghe)

*See [22]*

**[21] I Saw My Father Drowning** (David Vogel)

I saw my father drowning  
In surging days.  
His weak hand gave a last white flutter  
In the distance,  
And he was gone.

I kept on alone  
Along the shore,  
A boy still,  
With small, thin legs,  
And have grown as far as this.

And now I am my father,  
And all those waves  
Have broken over me,  
And left my soul numb.

But all I held dear  
Have gone into the wilderness  
And I can stretch out a hand to no one.

I am happy to rest  
In the black cradle of night,  
Under the sky's canopy,  
Studded with silver.

**[22] Don't Cry** (Anne Ranasinghe)

Don't cry  
Because the pot is broken  
It had long been cracked.  
But gather the shards  
Dig a deep hole  
And bury them.

And the rain will smoothen  
The disturbed earth,  
The sun will bake, and wind trace  
New landmarks  
Till finally you won't remember  
Even the place...