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,
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
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 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.

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.

A MAN
Hear my story now...

A WOMAN
Hear my story now...

A YOUTH
Hear my story now...

TUTTI
Oh hear!

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!

—Iz (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:


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 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.

— 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


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 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.

1 The Jewish district of Prague.
2 Many of the inmates of Terezín were sent to Auschwitz in Poland.
[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...