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"No human light there now": Pearse Hutchinson and the
vanished world of Europe's Jews

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before the war
 many in kaftans
 The Germans took them away
 After another pause:
 They never did us any harm
 not that I could see

The community of Haarlem Jews amounted to 1130 in the year 1930, but these numbers were swelled in the years following by an influx of German Jews, who, like their predecessors, were escaping from persecution, formerly from Spain, Portugal and Eastern Europe, and now from Nazi Germany. In 1942 Haarlem Jews were rounded up and deported mainly to Ravensbrück, of whom only 12 returned alive to their home town. Also the family ten Boom was arrested for operating a safe house and hiding place in their watchmakers' shop called in Resistance circles the BJ, short for Barteljorisstraat where the shop stood. The father, Casper, who as a Calvinist revered Jews as "God's Chosen People", died at 84 at the hands of his German captors after ten days of maltreatment. Most of the other family members perished in Ravensbrück after saving an estimated 800 Jewish and resistance-fighters' lives² – a true example among many others of what Pearse refers to in the same poem as "Dutch courage / (as a coward called it)".

The title of the poem derives from the fact that Pearse's father Harry Hutchinson used to speak "with affection of Odessa / and of Clanbrassil Street" ever since *his* father William Hutchinson, the skipper of a cargo boat, brought his wife and children on a world voyage, among other places to Odessa, that great city on the Black Sea of uniquely mixed ethnicities – Russians, Ukrainians, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Germans, French, Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Georgians and, before World War I, with nearly 30% Jewish population, a Jewish community in which all classes, as Lionel Trilling has put it, "seem to have been marked by a singular robustness and vitality, by sense of the world, and of themselves in the world".³ Pearse's father was so impressed by the atmosphere of the city that he reminisced about it for the rest of his life, and used to bring the child Pearse by the hand on walks through Dublin's vibrant "Little Jerusalem" in the area of Clanbrassil St., undoubtedly because the streets crowded with Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) chattering in Yiddish in a very outdoor community of street traders, drapers, cabinet-makers, kosher butchers, bakers and fishmongers in "scenes more in keeping with nineteenth-century Russia than with twentieth-century Dublin" (Ray

2 Cf. Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place*. New York: Bantam, 1971.

3 Lionel Trilling: "Introduction". In: Isaac Babel: *Collected Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, p. 19.

Rivlin)⁴ reminded him of the street life of “commercial, multi-racial, loudly coloured and noisy Odessa” as described by Leon Trotsky.⁵ Pearse still recalls the shop names of “Little Jerusalem”: Shapiro’s tobacconists, Rosenberg’s greengrocers, Citron’s chemist shop, Weinrouck’s or Clein’s bakery, Rubinstein’s or Ehrlich’s butchers. His father’s contagious fascination must have exercised an influence on the young Pearse that was to immunize him against racism, and more indeed: to attract him to Otherness.

Needless to say, Fascism put paid to the flourishing Jewish community of Odessa, the worst of many atrocities being that perpetrated in October 1941 by Rumanian fascists in which 19,000 Jews were arrested, taken to the harbour area, doused with petrol and burnt alive. In February 1942 after the final deportations to German death camps had taken place, the city of Odessa was proclaimed “judenrein” (cleansed of Jews).

To move on to another poem, the first two stanzas of “Ostfriesland” read as follows:

I’m eating with four Germans
in a small East-Friesian town
magnificent Italian food.
Our host, a gallant man
who keeps on bringing out
books and records in the Nahsprachen –
tongues near to German –
for example: Plattdütsch.
And,
for example,
Yiddish.
He tells us, over
the sumptuous food,
there lives here now
only one Jew.
For a wild second I wonder
is it him?⁶

In May 1981 Pearse visited the East-Friesian town of Leer as part of a Northern German reading tour. The host was the man to whom the poem is dedicated, Theo Schuster, a publisher and bookseller. On Pearse’s surmising whether Schuster might himself have

4 Ray Rivlin, *Shalom Ireland*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003, p. 1. See Chapter 1 “Clanbrassil Street” pp. 22-45 for an affectionate evocation of the atmosphere.

5 Leon Trotsky, *My Life – an Attempt at an Autobiography*, Dover: New York, 2007, p. 95.

6 Pearse Hutchinson, *Barnley Main Seam*, p.25.

been the one Jewish citizen left, Schuster wrote to me:

To my knowledge the only Jew in Leer was an engineer called Roger Gans, former representative of the steelworks Salzgitter Hütten for South America. He had lived for a long time in Peru and was – like so many Jews – more German than the Germans. We were friends. He and his wife died relatively suddenly years ago.

I am not a Jew, though I assume on the basis of various indications that – like so many who do not know it – I have a few drops of Jewish blood in my veins.⁷

When Hitler came to power, Leer had a population of about 12,000, of whom 2.5% were Jewish, perfectly ordinary petite bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, tradesmen, butchers and cattle-dealers. Only one had made it onto the second rung from the bottom of the municipal administration ladder, an assessor named Heinrich Urbach in the district court, and he was sacked in April 1933, allegedly “to restore the dignity of the German Civil Service”. In the same month the boycotting of Jewish businesses started. The cumulative restrictions that were imposed on the Jews between 1933 and 1942 are well known, but let us enumerate some of the more fastidious measures lest we forget: 1935, Jewish schoolchildren cannot be given awards for special achievements or use the same sports grounds or changing rooms as others; Jewish newspapers cannot be sold; Jews cannot marry non-Jews or employ non-Jewish servants: can no longer vote. 1938: Jewish householders have gas and electricity cut off; the licence for Jewish doctors and lawyers to practise is withdrawn; all Jewish street-names are removed, Jews are prohibited from carrying weapons, owning cars, going to the cinema, theatre, concerts and exhibitions. 1941: Jews cannot have private telephones, borrow books from public libraries, use public telephones or public transport. 1942: Jews are not allowed to visit “Aryans” or possess bicycles. They receive no ration cards for tobacco or cigarettes. They have to deliver up stoves, cooking pots, vacuum cleaners, immersion heaters, hair-dryers, irons, gramophones and playing records, typewriters, binoculars and cameras. All Jewish schools are closed; blind or deaf Jews are not allowed to wear armbands on the streets; Jews are banned all meat, eggs and milk. Then the entire Jewish community of Leer was deported.

Pearse, leafing through a book in Theo Schuster’s shop, found a photo of the town synagogue:

Built in the 1880s, burnt down,
like so many,
on Kristallnacht.

7 Email to Eoin Bourke, 10/25/2007.

At 2 a.m. on the 10th of November 1938 the SA were summoned to assemble in a schoolyard where the Nazi Lord Mayor Erich Dreschner gave them exact instructions to break the windows of Jewish businesses, set fire to the synagogue on Heisfleder Straße and to burn down the adjoining house of the synagogue cantor Joseph Wolff with the words: “We want to smoke out the wolf from his den”. Dreschner himself took part in the acts of arson in which several canisters of petrol were used to set fire to curtains and chairs. The fire brigade was present only to prevent the fire from spreading to neighbouring buildings. The police were ordered to stay in their barracks while other SA bands drove Jews from their homes to the local slaughter-house. Jewish houses were broken into, the furniture smashed and the occupants brought away in vans. Local non-Jews looked on with some dismay. In the slaughter-house, SA men surrounded the Jews, brandished butchers’ knives and threatened to set fire to the straw. A local newspaper, *Die Ostfriesische Tageszeitung*, devoted no more than four lines to report on it, fallaciously ascribing the actions to an outbreak of “Volkszorn” (popular wrath): “Last night the people gave vent to their anger, after which order was quickly re-established and peace and quiet returned to the streets.” The “Night of the Broken Glass” was a clear signal of worse to come. As Umberto Saba wrote in his poem “Broken Glass”, “[...] in a cracked pane’s tinkle / you hear your sentence passed”.⁸ One man, Karl Polak, was taken from his parent’s home that night, locked up in a pigsty in the stockyard and then, like all of the Jewish men, deported to a makeshift concentration camp. He was to survive several years in Sachsenhausen and Birkenau and to return at the end of 1945 to Leer, where he, like all of the few returnees, was received coldly because others had taken over his property. A report says: “He was only seldom greeted by his former neighbours”.⁹

“Leer”, as it happens, is the German word for “empty”. Pearse’s poem transports us again out of this empty world to one of those unexpected side-roads, this time to the Polish shtetl of Zamość and to a less depressing aspect of Jewish history when he listens to an LP from Schuster’s shop of Itschak Leib Peretz’s affectionate and droll vignettes of the pious but humanly peccable shtetl Jews being read in Yiddish by Zvi Hofer, a recording in which

his passion speaks again, his vivid zest,
all that humour and variety
which even goyim can tell (with the aid

8 Umberto Saba: *Thirty-One Poems* (translated by Felix Stefanile). Manchester: Carcanet, 1980, p. 40.

9 This and other information on Leer in the Third Reich was drawn from Menna Hensmann, *Dokumentation "Leer 1933 – 1945"*, Ostfriesland: Stadt Leer, 2001, as well as from an excellent school project produced by the 10th class of the Fließe Secondary School, Leer, that was put on the Internet under <http://nibis.ni.schule.de/~rs-leer/natsoz/jud07.htm>.

of certain famous books) all that life
 defying oppression, prejudice, all the narrowing forces,
 abounds again, speaks Yiddish again, in Zvi
 Hofer's abundant voice
 as rich as Hebrew itself.

As so often in his poetry, Pearse champions minority languages threatened by hegemonic powers. Unfortunately the "narrowing forces" triumphed in the case of Yiddish, that unique mixture of Middle High German, Slavic, Hebrew and Aramaic spoken by 12 million East Europeans before the Third Reich. The Nazis killed it by killing as many of its speakers as they possibly could. As the Ukrainian Yiddish writer Dovid Bergelson put it: "Usually the poets leave a people bereaved, but I was left bereft of my people." The beautiful town of Zamość, known as the Padua of the north, now "judenfrei", was doubly desecrated by the imposition of the name "Himmlerstadt". The Nazi genocide was completed by Stalin's cultural extermination. Bergelson himself was among the 13 Yiddish artists and writers who were shot dead in the basement of Lubyanka prison in Moscow in the "Night of the Murdered Poets" in August 1952.

Emptiness is also the theme of Pearse's poem "Judengasse", but then it, too, is ultimately about defiance. The incident described occurred in January 1952 when Pearse was spending six weeks in Schloß Leopoldskron ("the dead bishop's castle" mentioned in the poem) as a guest of the Seminar in American Studies in Salzburg. The enormous Rococo mansion was built in the 18th century by Prince Bishop Baron Leopold Anton von Firmian. Firmian went down in history for expelling 22,000 Protestants from Salzburg because his plan to have them converted by the Jesuits failed despite courts of inquisition and jail sentences. He conveniently charged them an exit levy and confiscated their property. The expulsion is referred to formulaically in present-day Austrian documents as "one of the darkest chapters of Salzburg's history".¹⁰ That is debatable and smacks of a suppression mechanism, as the Austrian Protestants were not put to death but were welcomed with open arms by the King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm I. What the "dead bishop" had done was criminal, but worse by far is what happened to the Jews of Salzburg before and after Firmian. Discriminatory measures were introduced in 1267 by the Church authorities ordering the wearing of the ridiculous pointed Jew's hat, a ban on visiting Christian inns or bathhouses and on fornication with Christians. In 1349 the Christian mob accused the Jews of having caused the Black Death by poisoning the wells. The main evidence for this absurd charge was that Jews were less affected by the plague, but that was due to their ritual *Nitilat Yada'im*, the washing of hands before meals. More than 1200 Jews were beaten to death or burnt alive. In 1377 Bishop Pilgrim II confiscated the synagogue in the Judengasse and gave the property to his

10 "Geschichte Schloss Leopoldskron", www.schloss-leopoldskron.com, p. 15-16.

brother. In 1404 Bishop Eberhard III had all Jews of Salzburg arrested, led to the stake and “burnt to dust and ashes for the greater glory of God”, after torturing them into confessing that they had stolen a sacred host and stabbed it with knives to re-enact the crucifixion. In 1437 the former synagogue in the Judengasse became – fittingly enough – the “Gasthof zur Hölle” (the Inn of Hell). From 1418 Jewish women had to wear a little bell on their person to warn Christians of their approach. In 1498 the Jews were forced to confess having stolen a golden monstrance from the convent of Nonnberg, whereupon Archbishop Leonhard von Keutschbach proclaimed “the banishment of Jews from the Archdiocese of Salzburg for evermore” – and promptly confiscated their entire property. A plaque was mounted on the town-hall showing a fat sow suckling Jewish children. The motif of the “Judensau” was pure projection on the part of pork-eating Christians against those who perceived pork as unclean. Two centuries later, one single Jew was permitted to settle in Salzburg, three centuries later another one. Travelling Jews had to leave the city after one hour. By 1882 there were 115, by 1890 141, but between then and Hitler’s Annexation of Austria in 1938 never at any time did they form more than 0.1% of the Salzburg population. In the Kristallnacht 71 men were arrested and sent to Dachau. Subsequently, Salzburg was yet again made “judenrein” by forcing the entire Jewish population to move to Vienna. Their property was taken over *in toto*. In 1940 the Jewish graveyard was sold cheaply to a carpenter’s wife who turned the mortuary into a pigsty. She sold off most of the gravestones to give the pigs more room to forage about in the graveyard.

Pearse’s poem starts with the lines:

Over lunch at the long table in the lakeside castle
 someone names
 a Judengasse.
 To which another says:
 ‘It’s an empty lane.’¹¹

a group of four writers including the English novelist William Sansom take off into the city to see for themselves and find it indeed deserted:

No human light there now,
 no sign of houses or workshops,
 alive or empty.
 Seven years after the war,
 only the moon to glisten
 the wet ground

11

Pearse Hutchinson, “Judengasse”, in P.H., *Collected Poems*. Oldcastle: Gallery, p. 262.

of an empty lane.

The emptiness which they encountered did not only date from 1938. The repeated expulsions had begun, as we saw, 500 years previously, and had their roots in Christian bigotry. The Nazis replaced the Christian atrocities by assembly-line genocide on a massive and endlessly ramified scale, but their pathological anti-Semitism was a direct descendant of the Christian one. Some of the patterns, indeed, were set by the prince bishops: for instance, the instrumentalizing of the lowest instincts of the mob to redirect its aggressions away from authorities themselves onto the Jews, or the sheer greed behind the ideologically dressed-up confiscations. The Nazi process of so-called “aryanization” constituted the largest transfer of valuables in the world’s history. Schloß Leopoldskron, owned and inhabited from 1918 to 1939 by one of the world’s greatest theatre impresarios and the founder of the renowned Salzburg Festival, Max Reinhardt, was “aryanized” as an “asset belonging to hostile and subversive Jewry” by the local Gauleiter Friedrich Rainer while Reinhardt and his wife Helen Thimig were away in America in April 1939. Even today, after the Shoah, living witnesses have confirmed that Salzburg, now with a diminutive Jewish community of between 60 and 80, is still characterized by an “anti-Semitism without Jews”.

Describing that walk to the Judengasse, Pearse’s poem tells of William Sansom’s spontaneous reaction to its emptiness:

Sansom is dark-haired, portly, a little flushed.
He’s tightly encased in a dark suit, with a dark tie and
a white shirt.
Impeccable. Handsome. Not undebonair.

Suddenly without a word
he up-ends himself, launches, flailing,
into a series of cartwheels along the wet lane to
its empty end,
then barely pausing repeats the performance all the
way back again
to land at our feet, exhausted.

We help him up, and back to the dead bishop’s castle.¹²

When I recently asked Pearse what he thought Sansom’s act meant, he said without hesitation: “A howl.” That could not have better expressed my own reading of it. A

12 Ibid., p. 262-263.

howl – of rage, of defiance, a demonstration of abhorrence by means of a physical act rather than of speech, because, as one rediscovers every time one tries to verbalize the Holocaust, it is ultimately “unspeakable” in the literal sense of the word. The fact that the Judengasse had been evacuated several times over before the Third Reich and that by 1938 it probably had very few or even no Jewish inhabitants left does not detract from the eloquent metonym of the lane’s emptiness in 1952. Just as Sansom expressed his anguish by acting it out while leaving it unspoken, Pearse’s poems, too, rather than alluding to the unspeakable atrocities employed in eradicating Europe’s Jews, focus poignantly on the physical void and emotional vacuity of the Holocaust’s aftermath.

The post-war Austrians as a whole (with many laudable exceptions) have managed to offload the burden of remorse with consummate skill, particularly by means of disingenuously styling themselves “Hitler’s first victims”, as if the Anschluss had been forced upon them against their communal will. Historical fact has been sacrificed to the maintenance of the “Sound-of-Music” spirit dominating Salzburg. The once empty Judengasse, too, scene of so many violent expulsions, has since been translated into the Sound-of-Music idiom. There would be no room today to cartwheel between the consumers and pleasure-seekers thronging the street to avail of the commodities and services on offer, whether it be to buy Christmas kitsch, to partake of chocolate balls called Mozartkugeln or sausages shaped like violins, to enjoy a pint of Guinness in the Shamrock Irish Pub, to have their coiffure done by a world-champion hairdresser, their pelvic muscles trained to increase their sexual performance, their eyelids reshaped or tear sacs removed by plastic surgery, or to have a luxurious rose-blossom bath in the five-star hotel now occupying the site of the expropriated synagogue.

It is as if even the very street itself had forgotten its own history. It is to Pearse Hutchinson’s credit that with these and other poems, such as those on the subject of Mallorcan Jews as well as his wonderful translation of Umberto Saba’s “The Goat”, he has addressed that amnesia and shone a kind light on the vanished.