

WHEN IT HAPPENED

Hilda Schiff

I was playing, I suppose,
when it happened.
No sound reached me.
The skies did not darken,
or if they did, one flicked
away the impression:
a cloud no doubt, a shadow perhaps
from those interminable aeroplanes
crossing and recrossing
our sunbleached beaches, Carbis Bay
or the Battery Rocks, where
all summer long we had dived
and cavorted in and out of
the tossing waters, while
the attention of the adults,
perpetually talking,
seemed focused,
unaccountably,
elsewhere.

No sound reached me
when it happened
over there on that
complicated frontier
near Geneva. (Was the sun
shining there too?)
I did not hear you cry out,
nor feel your heart thump wildly
in shock and terror. 'Go back,'
they shouted, those black-clad figures.

'Go back. You are not permitted to cross.'
Did the colour drain from your face?
Did your legs weaken?
'You are under arrest,' they barked.
'Go back and wait.' Back to the
crowd waiting for the train, the train. . . East?
Did you know what it meant?
Did you believe the rumours?
Were you silent? Stunned? Angry?

Did you signal to them then,
When it happened?
To the welcoming committee
one might say, on the other
side of the border.
To your husband and his friends
just a few yards away,
there, beyond the barbed wire,
beyond the notices saying,
'Illegal refugees will be shot.'
They called across, they said,
'Run, jump, take the risk,'
the frontier is such a thin line,
the distance so short between you and us,
between life and death,
(they said afterwards).
How was it you lacked
the courage (they said
afterwards, drinking tea).

No sound whatsoever disturbed me
when it happened.
I slept well. School
was the same as usual.
As usual I went swimming,
or raced down the hill
on my scooter or on foot
laughing with friends.
Often at night
in the dark of my bed,
I would hear the trains being
shunted down at the station,
their anguished whistling
stirring my imagination
drawing me towards oblivion.
At last, no more embarrassing letters
arrived in a foreign language
witnessing my alienation
from the cricketing scene.

Distracted and displaced
when it happened
I did not hear you ask
which cattle truck to mount,

nor, parched in the darkened
wagon, notice you beg for
a sip of water. On the third day,
perceiving the sound of Polish voices,
I did not catch you whisper to your neighbour,
'It is the East. We have arrived.'
Nor, naked and packed tight
with a hundred others
did I hear you choking
on the contents of those well-known
canisters marked 'Zyklon B Gas'
(It took twelve minutes, they say.)
I was not listening
when it happened.

Now I hear nothing else.

[Carbis Bay and Battery Rocks are beaches in England. Cricket is a very popular sport in England, almost representative of British culture, similar to baseball in the United States.]

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About the Poet

Hilda Schiff compiled and introduced the book, *Holocaust Poetry*, which is one of the main works on Holocaust poetry. A poet herself, and also a short story writer and editor, Hilda Schiff was born in central Europe and came to England as a small child. She was educated at the Universities of London and Oxford, where she went on to teach and engage in research.