

THE FIRST ONES

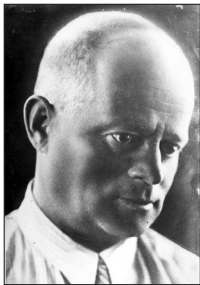
Itzhak Katzenelson

- 1 And it continued. Ten a day, ten thousand Jews a day.
That did not last very long. Soon they took fifteen thousand.
Warsaw! The city of Jews — the fenced-in, walled-in city,
Dwindled, expired, melted like snow before my eyes.
- 2 Warsaw, packed with Jews like a synagogue on Yom Kippur, like a busy market place —
Jews trading and worshipping, both happy and sad —
Seeking their bread, praying to their God.
They crowded the walled-in, locked-in city.
- 3 You are deserted now, Warsaw, like a gloomy wasteland.
You are a cemetery now, more desolate than a graveyard.
Your streets are empty — not even a corpse can be found there.
Your houses are open, yet no one enters, no one leaves.
- 4 The first to perish were the children, abandoned orphans,
The world's best, the bleak earth's brightest.
These children from the orphanages might have been our comfort.
From these sad, mute, bleak faces our new dawn might have risen.
- 5 At the end of the winter of forty-two I was in such a place.
I saw children just brought in from the street. I hid in a corner —
And saw a two-year-old girl in the lap of a teacher —
Thin, deathly pale and with such grave eyes.
- 6 I watched the two-year-old grandmother,
The tiny Jewish girl, a hundred years old in her seriousness and grief.
What her grandmother could not dream she had seen in reality.
I wept and said to myself: Don't cry, grief disappears, seriousness remains.
- 7 Seriousness remains, seeps into the world, into life and affects it deeply.
Jewish seriousness sobers, awakens and opens blind eyes.
It is like a Torah, a prophecy, a holy writ for the world.
Don't cry, don't... Eighty million criminals for one Jewish child's seriousness.
- 8 Don't cry... I saw a five-year-old girl in that "home".
She fed her younger, crying brother...
She dipped hard bread crumbs in watery marmalade
And got them cleverly into his mouth... I was lucky
- 9 To see it, to see the five-year-old mother feeding him,
And to hear her words. My mother, exceptional though she was, was not that imaginative.
She wiped his tear with her laughter and talked him into joy.
O little Jewish girl, Sholem Aleichem could not have done any better. I saw it.

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- 10 I saw the misery in that children's home.
I entered another room — there, too, it was fearfully cold.
From afar a tin stove cast a glow on a group of children,
Half-naked children gathered around the glowing coal.
- 11 The coal glowed. One stretched out a little foot, another a frozen hand,
A naked back. A pale young boy with dark eyes
Told a story. No, not a story! He was stirred and excited —
Isaiah! you were not as fervent, not as eloquent a Jew.
- 12 He spoke a mixture of Yiddish and the holy tongue. No, it was all the holy tongue.
Listen! Listen! See his Jewish eyes, his forehead,
How he raises his head... Isaiah! you were not as small, not as great,
Not as good, not as true, not as faithful as he.
- 13 And not only the little boy who spoke in that children's home,
But his little sisters and brothers who listened to him with open mouths —
O no, you countries, you old and rebuilt European cities,
The world never saw such children before; they never existed on earth.
- 14 They, the Jewish children, were the first to perish, all of them,
Almost all without father or mother, eaten by cold, hunger and vermin,
Saintly messiahs, sanctified by pain... O why such punishment?
Why were they first to pay so high a price to evil in the days of slaughter?
- 15 They were the first taken to die, the first in the wagon.
They were flung into the big wagons like heaps of dung —
And were carried off, killed, exterminated,
Not a trace remained of my precious ones! Woe unto me, woe.

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About the Author

Yitzhak Katzenelson (1886–1944) was a Polish educator and writer. In 1939, he left Lodz for the Warsaw ghetto. In Warsaw, he wrote for the underground and was an active contributor to education in the ghetto. In 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz with his one surviving son, where they both perished.