

Context for "So I Learn Life's Greatest Art," by Irena Bobowska



Irena Bobowska was born in 1920 in Poznan, Poland. She was a poet and an active member of the Polish Resistance, though confined to a wheelchair since childhood. She was imprisoned in 1940 for editing an underground newspaper, *Pobudka* (Awakening). She wrote articles and was involved in the newspaper's production and distribution. She also took part in the transportation of documents and weapons for the resistance. Bobowska was captured by German officials on 20 June 1940, along with other *Pobudka* staff. Throughout her imprisonment, ultimately in Berlin, German officers subjected her to physical and mental torture, including the removal of her wheelchair, leaving her to crawl on the floor of her damp, vermin-infested cell. She was denied visits from her family. She nonetheless managed to smuggle out of the prison a number of poems, some of which reached Polish women prisoners in

Auschwitz and other prisons.

Bobowska was tried on 12 August 1942, and was allowed to make a speech in her defense. She spoke for 30 minutes, during which she neither pleaded for mercy nor offered justification of her acts. Instead she listed German atrocities in the Second World War. She concluded her speech, "Today you judge me, but one day you will be judged by somebody higher" and pleaded guilty to the charges she faced. The German court sentenced her to death. She was executed by beheading on the guillotine.

Bobowska's legacy includes the poems she wrote and pictures she drew while in prison, depicting the inner struggle to retain dignity when faced with inhuman conditions. (*Poetry of the Holocaust, An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Jean Boase-Beier and Marian de Vooght)

So I Learn Life's Greatest Art...

So I learn life's greatest art:

Always and everywhere to laugh

And to suffer pain without despair,
And not to mourn for what is gone,
And not to fear what still must come!

I have got to know the taste of hunger
And sleepless nights (once, long ago)
And I know the jab of cold
When you want to roll up in a ball
And I know what it means to shed tears of weakness
Sometimes in the light of day
Sometimes in the dark of night

And I have learned in my thoughts to hurry
Time, that loves to drag remorselessly,

And I know how hard I must fight with myself,
Not to lose heart, not to lose spirit
On this journey that seems without end.

And still I learn life's greatest art
Always and everywhere to laugh
And to suffer pain without despair
Not to mourn for what is gone
And not to fear what still must come.

Someone's fingers stroke across the keys
And the violin's strings are touched by a hand
Some distant tune comes near –
I want to remember but the sounds blur
At night I dream of our piano–
Black and shiny it stands by the wall –
And waits for me when the grey days are past
I will go back to it – when I am free again...
But for now I just dream and compose my rhymes
Sometimes – though rarely – shedding tears
And tell myself fairytales,
And laugh when I dream

I construct a shining, light-filled future
As its basis kindness
And then my cell ceases to be dark
The sun shines gold through the bars – And in the bright sun's rays
In the glow of true hallucination
The soul bathes as in a stream
And my heart beats more lightly.

Through the stars, the moon, through the rays of the sun
Through everything that glows
I send my greetings home
And my heart full of longing
Through the trees, the bushes, through the breath of the wind
Through everything that blooms and grows
I send my greetings home

And my dreams of spring
Through the fresh green, through the blue of the sky
Over the sparkling play of the rainbow's colours
I send my greetings home
In the sounds of a song of lament.