

Poems of the Second World War

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High Flight

by John Gillespie Magee (1922-1941)

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...

Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew –
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Magee was a fighter pilot and poet, who served in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He wrote this poem after flying his Spitfire 33,000 feet up into the sky, where he 'touched the face of God'. He was killed just a few months later, when the plane he was flying accidentally collided with another plane. He was 19 years old.

The Little Smuggler

by Henryka Łazowertówna (1909-1942)

Over the walls, through holes, through the guard posts,
Through the wire, through the rubble, through the fence,
Hungry, cheeky, stubborn,
I slip through, I nip through like a cat.

At midday, in the night, at dawn,
In snowstorms, foul weather, and heat,
A hundred times I risk my life,
I stick out my childish neck.

A rough sack under my arm,
Wearing torn rags on my back,
With nimble young legs
And in my heart constant fear.

But you have to bear it all,
And you have to put up with it all,
So that tomorrow you
Will have your fill of bread.



The Little Smuggler

Over the walls, though holes, through bricks,
At night, at dawn, and in day,
Cheeky, hungry, crafty,
I move as quietly as a shadow.

And if the hand of fate unexpectedly
Catches up with me one day in this game,
It is an ordinary trap of life.
Mother, don't wait for me anymore.
I will not be coming back to you again,
The voice will not be heard from afar;
The dust of the streets will bury
The fate of the lost child.

And I have only one request,
And the grimace is set on the lips:
Who, Mother, will bring you
Your bread tomorrow?

This poem tells the story of a young child living in a ghetto in Warsaw, Poland, during the Second World War.

Jewish people trapped in ghettos were given rations of only 200 calories a day. Because of this, small children bravely sneaked out of the ghetto to smuggle and bring back more food from the other side.

The poet, Henryka Łazowertówna, was killed by the Nazis in 1942.



Our Town is Burning

by Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942)

It's burning, brothers! It's burning!
Oh, our poor village, brothers, burns!
Evil winds, full of anger,
Rage and ravage, smash and shatter;
Stronger now that wild flames grow --
All around now burns!
And you stand there looking on
With futile, folded arms
And you stand there looking on --
While our village burns!

It's burning, brothers! It's burning!
Oh, our poor village, brothers, burns!
Soon the rabid tongues of fire
Will consume each house entire,
As the wild wind blows and howls --
The whole town's up in flames!
And you stand there looking on
With futile, folded arms,
And you stand there looking on --
While our village burns!

The background of the page is a stylized illustration of a town engulfed in flames. Buildings with windows are visible, some with smoke rising from them. In the foreground, a crowd of people is shown in silhouette, looking towards the burning town. The overall color palette is dominated by oranges, yellows, and browns, reflecting the fire and the somber mood of the poem.

Our Town is Burning

It's burning, brothers! Our town is burning!
Oh, God forbid the moment should arrive,
That our town, with us, together,
Should go up in ash and fire,
Leaving when the slaughter's ended
Charred and empty walls!
And you stand there looking on
With futile, folded arms,
And you stand there looking on --
While our village burns!

It's burning, brothers! Our town is burning!
And our salvation hands on you alone.
If our town is dear to you,
Grab the buckets, douse the fire!
Show that you know how!
Don't stand there, brothers, looking on
With futile, folded arms,
Don't stand there, brothers, douse the fire! --
Our poor village burns!

The poet and songwriter, Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942) wrote this before the war, in 1936. It was sung in many ghettos and camps in defiance of the Nazis and their horrific actions during the Holocaust.

A Beam of Sunlight

by Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942)

A beam from the sun falls across my bed,
It's how the spring is heralded,
It starts to wake me with tender affection:
Get up, man, it's dawning,
Hear the cock crow!
The spring, the monarch of love is aglow
And coming from every direction.
Get up, man, it's dawning,
To me the beam says,
And warm and gentle I feel its caresses—
Go out, spread the news with elation,
On field and forest will soon be unfurled,
On all kinds of birds, on man, on the world,
The long awaited salvation.
Get up man! It's dawning,
The beam says to me,
Here's a sunbeam-bouquet, look up and see,
It's springtime, the time of good news,
Soon will come blossoms, and seeding, and birds,
And nestlings and freedom and bright cheerful words
For all mankind, and for you also, Jews.

The poem by Yiddish poet Mordechai Gebirtig reveals his optimism during the Nazi occupation of his country, Poland, during the Second World War.

Overall, six million Jews perished during the war.

Gebirtig died, aged 65, when he was killed by a Nazi guard in the Krakow Ghetto.

A Gunner's Day

Author unknown

A gunner's day is never done,
Up at dawn before the sun.
With the roar of engines in his head,
Wishing he could have stayed in bed.

Chow at four, dried eggs and such,
Won't have time to eat too much.
Briefing at five, the crew is all there,
And ever anxious to be up in the air.

See to your chute, ammunition, and guns,
For the boys all know it's not for fun.
Jerry will be there high up in the blue,
Waiting for someone, perhaps for you.

Take off at six or maybe six-thirty,
Hope no one has a gun that is dirty.
Form a group at 12,000 feet,
See the formation, they really look neat.

Put on your mask the air is getting thin,
Off to battle, some with a grin.
We're over the water, now test your guns,
Enemy coast, here comes the fun.



Flak at six and flak at twelve,
"Look out!" you heard the bombardier yell.
Here come the Fighters, coming in low,
Maybe they're ours, don't shoot 'till you know.

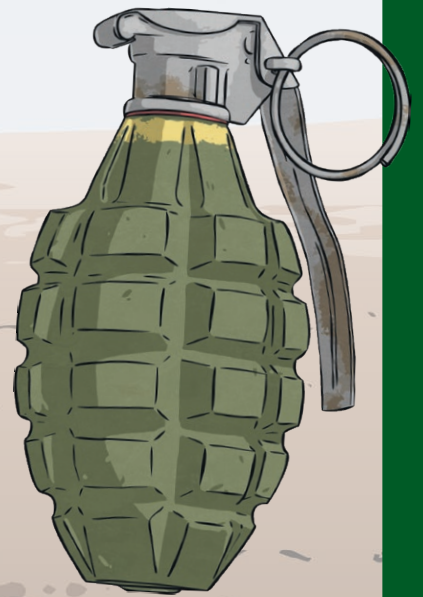
P-58's and P-38's
Our escort is here, they're never late.
They're fighting fools, each man and his ship.
There is never a Jerry that they couldn't whip.

The air is cold, just fifty below,
Turn up the heat so you don't freeze a toe.
A sharp lookout boys, the target is near,
We don't care to meet the enemy here.

There is the target, plenty of flak,
"Bombs Away!" boys now we turn back.
Coming out of the sun, there are enemy ships,
Aim true boys, we've still got more trips.

There goes one down, another one too.
Our Fighters are busy to see non get through.
There one flames in the sky, as another goes down.
The pilot bails out, he makes it safe to the ground.

Then in our tail our guns start to roar,
There's blood on your guns, you shoot as before.
Your ship is hit, but still flies through the air,
You think of your loved ones and whisper a prayer.



Smoke from the target leaps high in the sky,
“We’ll show them damn Jerries we know how to fly!”
The Fighters have left us, the few that are left.
Our Fighters that got some, we got the rest.

We’ve been up six hour, two hours to go.
Though were doing 200, it seems very slow.
England at last, the tail gunners learn.
We think of our buddies who will not return.

We’re over the field the crew gives a sigh,
We have finished another to do or to die.
Wheels touched the ground with a screech and a bump,
Our ship brought us back over the hump.

We’re tired, dirty, thirsty, and sore,
The sun has gone down an hour before.
First clean your guns, do it good boys,
For that gun’s life is mine or yours.

A sandwich and coffee, your chute you turn in,
Down in the briefing room, turn in your gun.
Two meals, both in the darkness of night,
Get on your nerves, but you’re still ready to fight.

The mess hall is warm in the cold of night,
You sit down to eat, and talk between bites.
You talk of the Fighters, theirs and ours, too,
And of the boys that didn’t get through.

Of ships going down exploding in air,
The bullets that missed your head by a hair.
Your ship full of holes, guess Joe is in bed,
He has a flak fragment lodged in his head.

Then head for your sack at nine or ten.
A letter from home, another from her.
I love you she wrote, then you know you've won,
A gunner's day is never done.

The author of this poem is unknown. It is a chronological report of a day in the life of a gunner. The line, 'A gunner's day is never done' opens and closes the poem. This repetition and the detail of the mundane life suggests to the reader that wartime was also time of boredom, as well as many other hardships.