

“Reality Is the Satire:”
The Will to Hope in the Writings of Jura Soyfer

Madelyn Stone
Northeastern University
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Jura Soyfer wrote his final piece as a prisoner. A poem, lyrics set to music by composer and fellow inmate Herbert Zipper, “Dachau Song” resonated with the themes that had occupied Soyfer’s work throughout his brief career. In the yard of the concentration camp, six months before the outbreak of World War II, where the largely political prisoners found their freedom curtailed to the most extreme degree, the men sang the verses with recognition of their satiric force. The words spoke powerfully to this most extreme case of oppression, through stanzas teeming with vivid imagery and feeling:

Heave the stone and drag the truck,
Let no load’s oppression show,
In your days of youth and luck
You thought lightly; now you know.
Plunge your spade in earth and shovel
Pity where heart cannot feel,
Purged in your own sweat and trouble
Be yourself like stone and steel.¹

They hold a resonance today, even beyond their historic and literary value. The dictum of the chorus, “Arbeit macht frei,” posed a dark irony against the landscape of 1930s Western Europe, but the glint of humor and hope in the critical awareness of this irony allowed meaning in a reality that felt like satire itself.

Jura Soyfer was born in Kharkov, the first capital of Ukraine, on December 8, 1912. His parents were Jewish, his father a middle class businessman working in the Russian steel industry. A governess taught Soyfer and his sister French. At the age of eight he became a refugee, his family fleeing the Russian revolution via Georgia and Turkey. They finally settled in Vienna in 1921. Soyfer soon became fluent in German, and popular in school for the humorous sketches he

¹ Horst Jarka, ed. and trans., *“It’s Up to Us!”: Collected Works of Jura Soyfer* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1996), 532.

wrote as diversions.² Relative financial security allowed them a comfortable apartment in the city's third district, where approximately ten percent of the population was Jewish. As his father Wladimir Soyfer's attempts at small business ventures in Vienna floundered, the family suffered financial setbacks that left Soyfer with limited resources when he eventually moved away from home.³ The Soyfer family was not religiously orthodox. Growing up, Soyfer did not inherit a strong sense of Jewish religiosity from his parents, and though he never formally gave up the faith, friends claimed he considered himself an atheist.⁴ Unlike those of his parents, Soyfer's politics became increasingly liberal from the time he was a teenager. He imbibed the climate of the era and the city around him, spurning the conservative ideologies of his Bolshevnik Revolution-fleeing parents.⁵

The Vienna of this time was a liberalizing place, politically shifting after the turmoil of war and economic depression. Under Social Democratic control, the "Red Vienna" of 1918 to 1934 proved an island of affluence and intellectualism compared to the poor, conservative, clerical countryside surrounding it. Economic and political uncertainty beleaguered the city like most other metropolitan centers of the time, and threats of conservative dominance loomed, but liberalism temporarily prevailed. With additional taxes, social programs expanded, unemployment decreased and health standards improved. Women had achieved suffrage and

² Horst Jarka, "Jura Soyfer: A Jewish Writer under Austrofacism," *Shofar* Vol. 5, No. 3 (1987): 18.

³ Horst Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures of Austrian Literature: The Interwar Years 1918–1938*, ed. Donald G. Daviau (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1995), 422.

⁴ Jarka, "A Jewish Writer under Austrofascism," 19.

⁵ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 422.

were active in parliament. For the first time in Austrian history, Jews had equal access to state office.⁶ At school, Soyfer encountered the Association of Socialist Middle School Students.⁷

He was 14 when Vienna's Palace of Justice went up in flames. Six months after a clash between right and left-wing paramilitary groups left an eight-year-old boy and a war veteran worker dead, a jury acquitted the conservative defendants despite their confessions of guilt. Riots of protest broke out spontaneously, consuming the city. Mobs charged city hall, the opera house and police headquarters. They set fire to the law courts and burned the offices of the prime minister's party newspaper. Police and military fired on the crowds, leaving nearly ninety protestors dead and hundreds wounded. The violence and ensuing strikes paralyzed the city temporarily, but the impact lodged itself in political consciousness, seeding a civil war still seven years in the future.⁸

The events of 1927 embedded themselves in Soyfer's consciousness as well. He became politically active and began writing poetry from age 14. At 15 he joined the Socialist Association of High School Students, where he took a leading role.⁹ His poetry, prose sketches and reviews appeared in the organization's monthly publication, *Schulkampf*, and by age 17 he was writing for the Social Democratic Party's cabaret productions and party rallies. In 1931 Soyfer enrolled at the University of Vienna to study history and German, two subjects particularly prone to the

⁶ Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, "Austria: Interwar," in *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 46.

⁷ Karl Müller, "Jura Soyfer: 'Geschichtsstunde im Jahre 2035.' Zu einer szenischen Lesung der Elisabethbühne Salzburg." Event series: "Vergangene Utopien" at Nonntal Cultural Center, 29 August 1994, www.uni-salzburg.at/fileadmin/oracle_file_imports/550889.PDF.

⁸ Anthony Bushell, *Polemical Austria: The Rhetorics of National Identity from Empire to the Second Republic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 147–148.

⁹ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 422.

distortions of Nazi influence.¹⁰ The university itself propagated anti-democratic politics and anti-Semitism, ideologies increasingly entangled with racial discrimination. Horst Jarka, Soyfer's most exhaustive biographer, translator and critic, has noted that the lectures Soyfer heard in class "made him turn more and more from his books to the history that was being made in the streets and continue his active part in the political battle in the way which he felt best suited his talents: as a writer of political verse and journalistic prose."¹¹

While at university, Soyfer began publishing in the Social Democratic party's prestigious *Worker's Newspaper*, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, to which he contributed until 1934.¹² Though known for its quality journalism, the publication and Soyfer's own pieces had an obvious agenda. Still, Soyfer's touch was light. His involvement in full-fledged communist propaganda likely did not extend beyond a single handbill he authored anonymously.¹³ Biting references to the Austrian political scene ground much of his writing in its time and place, references to figures and events enriching his work for his specific audience. In one February 1932 poem, 32 lines long, ("Kapitalistischer Segensspruch") he references the nearby coal-mining town of Leoben's economic struggles, the country's persisting job shortages, the politically-fueled banking crisis of 1929, the exploitation of the unemployed paid to march in Heimwehr marches, and the corruption of high-salaried bank directors in the midst of economic turmoil, among other things. Each stanza ends with the opening lines of what was then Austria's national anthem, roughly:

¹⁰ Horst Jarka, "Jura Soyfer—A Writer of the Austrian 1930s Only?" in *From Wilson to Waldheim: Proceedings of a Workshop on Austrian-American Relations 1917–1987*, ed. Peter Pabisch (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1989), 140.

¹¹ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 423.

¹² Michael Burri, "Jura Soyfer and Literary Tradition," in *Jura Soyfer and His Time*, ed. Donald G. Daviau (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1995), 51.

¹³ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 426.

“Blessed be endlessly, Wonderful native land!” Obscure now, the references tapped an irony intelligible on any level, still provocatively clear—and as clearly provocative.¹⁴

The same year, Soyfer made a trip to Berlin as a correspondent for the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. His letters home, to his then-girlfriend Marika Szecsi, speak of his anxieties as an aspiring journalist, desperate to write articles with the meaning he sought and the caliber to support himself financially.¹⁵ He describes hearing Hitler speak: “I was flabbergasted at the inanity and brutality of this mass-enchanter (Massenbezauberers).”¹⁶ The coined word evokes the sense of caricature Soyfer must have sensed in real life, aware of the then-candidate’s theatricality and his own aversive resistance to the Nazi party leader’s pandering, melodramatic rhetorical tactics. In the same letter, his broader sympathies are explicit: “The working class of Germany has revolutionized through and through, and tears come to your eyes when you see how these magnificent proletarians must go out with all their fighting energy at the unemployment offices because Wels is Wels and Thälmann is Thälmann,” making reference to two liberal German politicians who were unable to fend off far-right encroachment.¹⁷

Soyfer filed five articles for the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* from Germany in 1932.¹⁸ His briefs restricted political editorializing, since he was only an “occasional correspondent,” but gave him his break into writing the important pieces he’d been chasing.¹⁹ By the end of his trip, his confidence had buoyed, evident in one of his letters to Szecsi: “At least I have soundly kicked in

¹⁴ Horst Jarka, *Jura Soyfer: Das Gesamtwerk* (Vienna: Europa Verlag GesmbH, 1980), 57.

¹⁵ Daviau, *Jura Soyfer*, 52.

¹⁶ Horst Jarka, ed., *Sturmzeit, de Briefe Jura Soyfers, 1931–1939* (Vienna: Verein zur Forderung und Erforschung der antifaschistischen Literatur, 1991), 41.

¹⁷ Jarka, *Sturmzeit*, 41.

¹⁸ Burri, “Jura Soyfer and Literary Tradition,” *Jura Soyfer and His Time*, 52.

¹⁹ Jarka, *Sturmzeit*, 40.

the wall that separated me from the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*'s front page."²⁰ Soyfer continued writing journalistic pieces for the next five years, his last report appearing when he was already imprisoned in November 1937.²¹ He wrote in many other forms during the same period. His writings span a broad range of genre: short and long prose, poetry and lyrics, reports and reviews, opinions and critiques, letters and dramas. Even writing as prolifically as he did, he tutored on the side just to make ends meet. The English poet John Lehmann, working as a journalist in Vienna, took Russian lessons from Soyfer. Lehmann also had a secret cupboard built in his apartment for the stacks of illegal political pamphlets Soyfer supplied him. Lehmann described him vividly:

“Yura Soyfer was a delicate-looking man, of just under average height, in his middle twenties. He had a soft voice, a gentle expression and great charm of manner; but under this mild exterior he concealed, as I was later to realize, not only a subtle understanding of his fellow-men but also a strong will and cool courage. His family was poor, and he earned far too little himself to live even an averagely comfortable life; but I never once heard him complain about it. His work as a poet and the pursuit of his political ideals absorbed him entirely.”²²

Censorship increasingly circumscribed what Soyfer could publish, perhaps nowhere more distinctly than in the case of his novel. He called it *Thus Died a Party*, and considered it his most important work. He started on the manuscript in the wake of the February 1934 uprisings, when the government's ensuing clampdown banned the Social Democratic Party and Austrofascism took hold. Based on the few chapters Soyfer showed him, Lehmann called it “the real thing,” and noted “I was particularly struck by the sensitive skill Yura had shown in creating atmosphere and in conveying the erratic, psychological weather of a group of characters waiting for a battle to

²⁰ Jarka, *Sturmzeit*, 64.

²¹ Burri, “Jura Soyfer and Literary Tradition,” *Jura Soyfer and His Time*, 52.

²² John Lehmann, *The Whispering Gallery: Autobiography I* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1955), 294.

begin.”²³ Tragically, the book itself became a permanent victim of its time. Authorities destroyed the manuscript when they first arrested Soyfer in 1937 and it now exists only in the fragment John Lehmann preserved. Fortunately, much of Soyfer’s work did make it to publication and survives intact. His poems appeared every Saturday in the pages of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, which had 80,000 readers. The pieces often ran alongside political cartoons, expanding on their incisive commentary.²⁴ He also published in the Social Democratic illustrated weekly *Der Kuckuck*. Largely political, the verses pressed the bounds of acceptability even in Vienna’s liberal years. Within a socialist ideology, he critiqued an array of targets. Pragmatic, but not pessimistic, ever the hopeful cynic, he touched on the ironies of the political and socioeconomic situation with insight that made the absurd readily apparent.

Soyfer did not limit his commentary to Europe. His references to issues in the United States are just as insightful and at least as intriguing, though he never set foot on American soil. In “*Barackenlager Shanty-Town*,” a 1933 poem, he evoked the contradiction of New York City: seeming capital of the world, with the largest circulation of money—yet filled with unemployed workers living in marginalized shantytowns. He called for racial equality in “Object Lesson in Race Theory.” This 1933 poem, published in *Der Kuckuck* as verse commentary accompanying a photograph, describes two men—one black, one white—waiting outside a welfare office. Each is unemployed, we are told: “But all that sameness doesn’t count. Hair and skin are paramount.” He also scorned the subtler hypocrisy in honoring a working-class mother with an official welfare handout on Mothers’ Day, a specifically American invention.²⁵ He spoke out against the

²³ Lehmann, *Whispering Gallery*, 297.

²⁴ Jarka, “Jura Soyfer—A Writer of the Austrian 1930s Only?” *From Wilson to Waldheim*, 126.

²⁵ Jarka, *Gesamtwerk*, 190; Horst Jarka, “Jura Soyfer and the United States,” in *Jura Soyfer and His Time*, ed. Donald G. Daviau (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1995), 23.

handling of the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the Scottsboro trial. He ridiculed Washington's treatment of World War I veterans left without promised bonus payments:

In Washington people were irritated
Because unemployed called for food²⁶

Like the insight of his irony, the literary quality of his poems and his prose resonates timelessly. In a poem published in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* in January 1933, titled "Lullaby for an Unborn Baby," Soyfer's lyrics probe issues still uncomfortable and contentious today:

Sleep baby, sleep.
The State protects its sheep.
Abortion cannot harm you
The State needs you to arm you.
In war the graves are wide and deep.
Sleep, baby, sleep.²⁷

Two months after this poem's publication, Austria's fascist chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss invoked an emergency decree to declare his absolute power. Dollfuss's press laws required the inspection of newspapers two hours before circulation.²⁸ Local judicial and police officials monitored the papers, excising any copy that might cause so-called injury to patriotic, religious or cultural sensibilities. Large sections of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* began disappearing entirely, the empty spaces speaking loudly of a deepening societal divide. Its journalists took the blows in stride, mocking their short-statured chancellor in cartoons. In one, Dollfuss presses his face in seeming disbelief against the front page of the newspaper, so clear it has become a mirror displaying only his reflection.²⁹

²⁶ Jarka, *Gesamtwerk*, 52.

²⁷ Jarka, ed. and trans., "It's Up to Us!" 7.

²⁸ Deborah Holmes, "Elias Canetti in Red Vienna," in *The World of Elias Canetti: Centenary Essays*, ed. William Collins Donahue and Julian Preece (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 92.

²⁹ Holmes, "Elias Canetti in Red Vienna," 96.

Soyfer's work was growing more dangerous. Yet he persisted in his critiques, writing some more incisive than ever. As late as April 23, 1933, he published pointed satirical barbs at the Nazi party. His poem "Heil Hitler," printed in *Der Kuckock*, posed his themes candidly:

Germany, Germany, shouting "Heil!"
 Did you ever ask yourself, Why?...
 You let them fool you, you let them win,
 Now years of slavery begin.
 Years of blood will come over the land
 Then you'll understand.³⁰

The poem's darkness is in sharp dissonance with Soyfer's work after censorship intensified in 1934. The forceful suppression of Socialism, following the execution of nine Social Democratic leaders, the imprisonment of members and the banning of their party, propelled Soyfer to join the underground Communist party as his only effective channel of resistance against Austrofascism. His journalistic career all but foreclosed by the destruction of the Socialist press, Soyfer explored the possibility of teaching, but his status as a Jew would have prevented him from procuring the necessary certificate.³¹ He was able to find work in the summer of 1934 at a Socialist Zionist youth camp in Yugoslavia where he received an invitation to lecture. Religion was of little concern to him, though he and most of his friends were nominally Jewish, and he found the Zionist stance intriguing. He wrote to Szecsi: "I'm learning Yiddish songs (marvelous) and discussing Zionism, one of the trickiest social imperialistic missions, which is not so easy to refute as you think."³²

He worked intently on his novel while in Yugoslavia and, upon his return to Vienna, supported himself with pseudonymous freelance work for the *Wiener Tag*.³³ Although steeped in

³⁰ Jarka, ed. and trans., *"It's Up to Us!"* 27.

³¹ Jarka, ed. and trans., *"It's Up to Us!"* 540.

³² Jarka, ed. and trans., *"It's Up to Us!"* 541; Jarka, ed., *Sturmzeit*, 70, 76.

³³ Jarka, ed., *Sturmzeit*, 70.

in his own Communist cause's polemics and the propaganda, Soyfer approached the novel with subtlety and literary poise. In the vein of such writers as Johann Nestroy, Helmut Qualtinger, Carl Merz and Karl Kraus, Soyfer's satire incisively critiqued the political dimensions of malleable mentalities and the sociological forces that gave rise to them. By incorporating many characters and no single, central narrator, he puts the emphasis on his own shattered Social Democratic Party. An empathetic insider, Soyfer began a fictionalization that offered a serious critique of the party as a social organism, hopeful yet fatally flawed.³⁴ Its own structural weakness contributed to its downfall more than did corruption. As a document of its era, the surviving fragment of the novel is striking. References to antisemitism, the newspapers *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and *Das Kleines Blatt*, the political foment spurred on by specific events in Austria and Germany, politicians from Mussolini to Dollfuss to Hitler, and details such as the swastika flag and haze of Flirt cigarettes reiterate Jarka's characterization of the book as a "realistischen Zeitroman."³⁵ As Otto Tausig stated in the first published collection of Soyfer's work, released in 1947, Soyfer did not focus on writing explicitly political pieces as direct calls to action. Rather, he was a skilled writer, a poet, as well as a political person. Thus, more incidentally than intentionally, Soyfer was a political poet.³⁶ The literary qualities of the novel Soyfer started attest to this poetic sense, his ambitions of characterization and style speaking to a literary focus more than a predominantly ideological one. At the same time, the heightened sense of urgency in the political climate bound Soyfer to his principles all the stronger, even as those socialistic tendencies circumscribed his ability to support himself through writing.

³⁴ Jarka, ed. and trans., "*It's Up to Us!*" 542–544.

³⁵ Horst Jarka, *Jura Soyfer: Leben. Werk. Zeit.* (Wien: Löcker, 1987), 380.

³⁶ Otto Tausig, "Über Jura Soyfer," in Jura Soyfer, *Vom Paradies zum Weltuntergang*, ed. Otto Tausig (Vienna: Globus, 1947), 20.

It was in this period of heightened censorship and political repression that Soyfer turned to the cabaret for artistic expression. In the literally underground theatres of Vienna, cropping up in the basements of coffee houses, Soyfer's sketches and plays allegorized the troubling shifts he saw around him.³⁷ In his plays, unemployed young people travel thousands of years into the past to discover the reason they can't find jobs, a diver explores an underwater dystopia of oblivion where no one remembers how to feel love or hate, hope or despair. The plays' farcical couching in the model of old Viennese popular comedies cleared the censors, who sat in on dress rehearsals.³⁸ The criticisms of the fascist ascension were and are scathing, even in the creative ways Soyfer was forced to express them. It was part of Soyfer's genius that he was able to inject his witty criticisms of the government (and many others) into a political climate characterized by extreme repression.

His stage debut, *Der Weltuntergang*, encapsulated many of the themes that made his work dangerously relevant. In English, *The End of the World or Doomsday*, this production premiered on the underground cabaret stages of Vienna in 1936—even as German forces occupied the Rhineland, Berlin propagandized the world at the Olympic Games and the Nazi Reichstag placed the Gestapo above the law. The play posited an impending doomsday averted through compassion: the comet that a personified solar system sends hurtling toward earth falls in love with the planet and turns away. His final soliloquy expresses the contradiction Soyfer must have felt in his own environment of anguish and artistry:

Full of hunger and full of bread is this world,
Full of life and full of death is this world,
Limitless in wealth and beggary.

³⁷ Jarka, ed. and trans., "*It's Up to Us!*" 547.

³⁸ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 444; Daviau, "Introduction," *Major Figures*, 54, 58; Leon Askin with C. Melvin Davidson, *Quietude and Quest: Protagonists and Antagonists in the Theatre, on and off Stage* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1989), 153.

Blessed and cursed is this world,
 Radiant with beauty and health is this world,
 And its future is grand and lovely.³⁹

Satirizing a darkening political reality, tempered by the optimism of a young writer bold enough to criticize an authoritarian regime, the play offered a redemptive resolution that its author would fail to find in his own lifetime.

As in his other writings, Soyfer's plays focused on the plight of struggling workers, many of whom were recently unemployed. Of course, this group had the least capacity to afford to see Soyfer's plays. Even some of his own friends did not have the financial means to go to the theater. Soyfer's optimistic exhortations for people to wrest control and take their fates into their own hands could not resonate with their intended audience directly, though they retained their import. *Eddie Lechner's Trip to Paradise*, his longest-running play, encapsulated this irony in its three months of relative success, as its title character was an unemployed worker desperately wishing for work. In Soyfer's other plays, more abstract conceptions dominated, satirizing the Austrian state through fanciful distortions. *Astoria* critiqued the corruption of politicians through the caricature of an imagined country, invented and sustained by officials' vanity. The clear parallels between *Astoria* and Austria, the former revealing faults none-too-flattering in the latter, galled the censors and necessitated many revisions in the script. Soyfer optimistically staged the play regardless, though its run was ultimately the shortest of all his productions, and may have been closed at the censors' orders.⁴⁰ His next play, *Vineta*, ventured further into absurdity, recounting the story of a city literally sunken into an oblivion: its citizens live underwater, remembering nothing and repeating illogical inanities. The vision is a dark one. Yet, since Soyfer framed the narrative as a story that an old man tells with hindsight, the audience

³⁹ Jarka, *Gesamtwerk*, 561.

⁴⁰ Jarka, ed. and trans., "*It's Up to Us!*" 556.

enters it knowing escape is possible. On the edge of his own dystopian abyss, Soyfer maintained an optimism that allowed an avant-garde humor to pervade even his darkest works.

Horst Jarka has noted Soyfer was not immune to the tendency to trivialize the object of ridicule through humorous critique. “But more than any other satirist in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*,” Jarka noted, “he drew revolutionary conclusions from his satiric exposure of the enemy, incited his readers to fight fascism in Austria, and he clearly foresaw that Hitler’s politics, if not stopped, would inevitably lead to war.”⁴¹ Soyfer’s writings show an effort to balance the censor’s restrictions and the nature of the satirical medium with a serious grasp of the political situation, as he knew the severity of the threat the fascist state posed. Still, as the optimistic conclusion of his plays suggest, he kept alive the hope that the worst fate would ultimately be averted. All of his plays, in fact, despite their dark ironies and scathing social critiques, conclude with open-endedness. Soyfer’s faith in humanity illuminates a brighter path for the future, without denying the gravity in the problems of the present.⁴² This present was a time that both made and destroyed him. In his will to confront controversy, both bold and clever in his use of words as weapons, Soyfer took on a tide he knew he could not reverse. He entreated his audience for awareness, for empathy, for reason. Yet he knew all too well the depth of the absurdity that any appeal to rationality had to face. His work recognized the irony of life, which needs no distorting. Horst Jarka put it succinctly: “Reality is the satire.”⁴³

In a tragically apt way, Soyfer’s own story turned on ironies he might have concocted for a stage farce. Tailed by police who mistook him for the head of the left’s propaganda machine, he confirmed their misguided suspicions with the content of his plays. When the officers

⁴¹ Jarka, “A Jewish Writer under Austrofascism,” 20.

⁴² Jarka, “Jura Soyfer and the United States,” *Jura Soyfer and His Time*, 27.

⁴³ Jarka, “Jura Soyfer—A Writer of the Austrian 1930s Only?” *From Wilson to Waldheim*, 149.

apprehended him, the materials they found in his apartment gave them enough reason for an arrest even after they realized their mistake. An amnesty program secured his release after three months, just before Nazi Germany invaded and absorbed Austria in the 1938 Anschluss, leading to heightened repression. When Soyfer tried to escape with a friend by skiing over the Swiss border, he was rearrested, the half-finished play in his bag confiscated and lost. He was taken to Dachau and later Buchenwald, where his forced labor included moving corpses. Behind the archival record of orderly documents, structured with ticked boxes and signatures, the chaos of a warped reality took the oppression and suffering he already knew to an extreme. After four months in Buchenwald, he contracted the typhus that would kill him on February 16, 1939, at age 26.⁴⁴

Stark and startling are the arbitrary circumstances of Jura Soyfer's death: the narrowly missed opportunities that only cumulatively prevented him from escaping to a presumably long, productive life abroad. Still six months from the outbreak of war, his friends had been able to procure a visa for him to enter the United States, but the typhus claimed him just days before his anticipated release.⁴⁵ The degree to which his death has come to define his life is distressing, particularly in the sense that such delineation is emblematic of millions more who perished over the following six years. At such a young age, with such an abruptly interrupted career, Soyfer left a legacy both easier to discount and harder to ignore. The satire in his own reality is troubling and telling. In his voice's persistence, despite the fascist authorities' censorship and ultimate murder, there is an irony that complicates perceptions of satire itself. Soyfer's aspiration to find the humor and the hope in the darkest of situations seems at once admirable and

⁴⁴ Jarka, ed. and trans., *"It's Up to Us!"* 562–563.

⁴⁵ Jarka, "Jura Soyfer," *Major Figures*, 450.

dangerous. His ability to make meaning on the margins is startling, his writing stunning in navigating the thin lines of clarity and subtlety, levity and gravity, cynicism and hope.

Even in the concentration camp, the seeming epitome of cruelty and repression, he managed to subvert the strictures and affirm a sense of self. He colluded with fellow prisoners in expressions of culture and resilience, a creator and a comrade to the end. His friend and fellow prisoner, the composer Herbert Zipper, remembered how he and Soyfer endured by focusing on the outside world more than on their inner fears, how they felt being in the camp had irrevocably changed them, and how Soyfer planned to write about his experiences if he survived. He remembered how Soyfer and he smuggled water to restrained prisoners, how they volunteered for grizzly tasks just to witness and experience what was happening in the camp. While carrying bodies from the sick ward, already ill with typhus himself, Soyfer gave Zipper French lessons.⁴⁶ In the midst of so much deprivation and death, Soyfer continued to write cabaret pieces that the prisoners performed, to the grudging admiration of the guards. As one fellow inmate described to John Lehmann, “Yura, the gentile, smiling, fragile intellectual, had developed into a tower of physical strength and spiritual endurance.”⁴⁷

While at Dachau, Soyfer wrote the lyrics of a song that has gone on to become his most famous legacy. He conceived the lyrics as a way to raise morale, composing them in the style of his satiric poems and reciting the piece to Herbert Zipper to set to music. The lyrics reclaim the irony of the infamous cast-iron phrase, “Arbeit macht frei”—“work makes you free.” The taunting expression of futile propaganda was soldered into the gates of Dachau as it was at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Called simply “Dachaulied,” “Dachau Song,” the

⁴⁶ Paul F. Cummins, *Dachau Song: The Twentieth-Century Odyssey of Herbert Zipper* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 105.

⁴⁷ Lehmann, *Whispering Gallery*, 301.

song's verses confront the sick contradictions in the camp and world around him. The song spread throughout the camp and beyond, to an extent Soyfer could hardly have anticipated. "Dachau Song" became the source of the title for a 1942 anti-Nazi propaganda film produced by the British Ministry of Information, called *Lift Your Head, Comrade*.⁴⁸ In the film, Jewish émigrés in the British army sing the song as a battle cry in solidarity with the anti-fascist cause. It has been published and performed many times since. A driving rhythm presses the words forward, elevating their lyricism. The yearning of the human spirit toward freedom resonates in the shifting keys. The resilience of sincere expression in the face of senseless suffering echoes in the marching beat. Cynicism melds with aspiration, accumulating in a catchy complexity that resonates long after the final chords:

The slogan of Dachau is burnt on our brains
And unyielding as steel we shall be;
Are we men, brother? Then we'll be men when they've done,
Work on, we'll go through with the task we've begun
For work, brother, work makes us free.

⁴⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive. "Propaganda Film About Jewish Emigres in the British Army." https://www.ushmm.org/online/film/display/detail.php?file_num=5305

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