

EDWARD HIRSCH

Prayers of an Unbeliever

Walk with me through the Old City at dusk.

I want to see the Polish women scrubbing the stairs
and smell the cleanser burning off the stone.

Let's wander over to Sienna and Śliska

in memory of the doctor in the attic
who muttered the prayers of an unbeliever

while children slept in the orphanage downstairs.

Look at the women throwing open
the windows and beating out the rugs

in a perpetual war on dust.

...

There's nothing left here of August 5, 1942—
it has all been disinfected—

when 200 children marched steadily

in groups of four
under a green flag with a four-leaf clover

through the hushed Warsaw streets

to the Umschlagplatz, near the railway station
with chlorinated freight cars.

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Lord in whom I can't believe,

I am going to walk through the Old City
and then lie down with my love

in this dirty world

which is both the Song of Songs
and the Book of Lamentations.