Nearly fifty years ago, on 14 June 1947, some 50,000 visitors from Poland and abroad gathered in Oswiecim, a sleepy town of 10,000 residents on the southeastern border of Upper Silesia. It was a public event, a ceremony, a spectacle of sorts, and the occasion was the seventh anniversary of the day in 1940 when 728 Polish prisoners were brought to newly-remodeled military barracks in Oswiecim—barracks which would serve as a concentration camp for the next five years. But the concentration camp in Oswiecim—"Auschwitz," as the Germans called it—would become much more than a prison for the internment of Polish conspirators. The entire Auschwitz complex, with its branch camps Birkenau and Monowitz, its numerous auxiliary camps in the region, its inmates from countries throughout Europe, its massive storehouses, its "Block of Death," starvation cells, gallows, and with its gas chambers and crematoria—Auschwitz would become the largest death factory in all of Europe, the site where more than a million perished at the hands of the German occupiers. And so on this June day thousands gathered to remember the dead of Auschwitz, to commemorate their legacy, and to participate in the dedication of the grounds and structures of the "State Museum at Oswiecim-Brzezinka."

The grounds of the former camp were intended to serve as both a historical artifact and an admonition to future generations. As the Polish Prime Minister Jozef Cyrankiewicz stated in his dedicatory speech: "The Museum will be not only an eternal warning and document of unbound German bestiality, but also at the same time proof of the truth about man and his fight for freedom—a document arousing intensified vigilance so that the genocidal powers which bring destruction to the nations will never rise again." And as a charge to former prisoners attending the event, Cyrankiewicz called on the survivors of Auschwitz to be at the forefront of a struggle for a new beginning—the "beginning of a new world in which there would be no place for the smoking chimneys of crematoria." At the conclusion of his speech the prime minister declared the museum officially open and the crowd joined in the singing of Rata or "Pledge," a patriotic Polish anthem from the time of the eighteenth-century partitions.

The crowd then walked the three kilometers from Auschwitz I, the base camp, to Birkenau, the spacious moor which had served as the massive extermination center of the Auschwitz complex. Wreaths were laid in memory of the victims, a cross was erected atop the ruins of one of the crematoria, and the day's ceremonies were concluded with the singing, once again, of Rata:

- We will not abandon the soil from which our ancestry comes;
- We will not allow our native tongue to be buried;
- We are the Polish nation, the Polish people;
- We are the royal tribe of the Piast.
  —So help us God

To the last drop of blood we will defend the Spirit.
Until into ashes and dust
The Teutonic storm does fall,
For every doorstep is for us a fortress.
  —So help us God

No more will the German spit in our face
Nor germanize our children.
Our legion will arise, and the Spirit will lead us;
We will go where the Golden Horn sounds
  —So help us God

A call for a new world order based on international solidarity, a museum documenting Nazi atrocities in Poland, a vengeful, anti-German patriotic anthem, and a...
I went to bed and closed my eyes,
Groaned in pain, then woke up,
Wrestling with the space of light years
Drew the curtain over my face,
Shut the window shut.

The door creaked, and the croaking of crickets
Lured the thought of war's end,
I tossed and turned until the dawn,
Tossed and turned until the dawn of war.

A bell, a bird, a song,
The moon, the stars, the night
The sun, the morning, the day
The morning, the end.

Joseph Hahn
Poet