IN THE CAMP
(The Naked Poem)

Max knows names.
He even escaped once,
Two months was he outside.
Fat Max eats with Heinrich
The guard on Tuesdays.
Heinrich the guard is a sausage,
A sausage-eater.
My arm is thinner than yours,
Both are broken broomsticks.
Max the name-knower
Talks too much
To Heinrich the smiler,
He should have got away
For good. His tongue
Is like a cat’s
(Remember cats once?)
On Tuesday nights.
Today is Monday.
You and I are hungry.
Tonight we are going to eat
Fat Max and his names.

Dawn, 10/28/72
On IN THE CAMP (THE NAKED POEM)

Over the years, I have used images and phrases from dreams many times in my poems—such material invariably has authenticity for me; I trust it—but only once has an entire poem been "dictated" to me in a dream. That poem is "In The Camp."

I say "dictated" because this poem appeared in the dream as it appears on the page; all of the words, and even the punctuation, remain unchanged. The circumstances are as follows. I awoke in an October dawn seeing the whole poem before me and rushed to the nearest table, transcribing the whole as fast as I could before it faded. The line-breaks and rhythms I knew were right, and I never hesitated in what were, I suppose, the 60 or 90 seconds that were needed to scribble it down. The experience was an exhilarating one, and it convinced me that the notion of the poet as the vehicle of the muse is a true one, not romantic balderdash.

For me, the poem was completely lucid, no doubt a holdover from the dream, an incident (or rather the plotting of one) in one of the death camps towards the end of World War II. There's no point in trying to trace the cause of such a dream, but I am reasonably certain of some of the sources. I still remember vividly the first newsreels (quickly suppressed, as it turned out) of the death camps and their survivors in the spring of 1945. I was an adolescent and completely ignorant of such places until seeing that shocking footage, much later to be used by Resnais, Marcel Ophuls, and others. The horror of what Nazism had done to the Jews bit deeply into me, a Gentile. And, of course, in later years I read about those places and learned of their "systems" and of the use of Kapos, which is where the dream focuses.

The one thing that the dream did not give me was a title, but almost immediately after copying out the poem I wrote "The Naked Poem" above it, partly because I had been sleeping raw on a warm night and had never written a poem in the nude before and partly because the material itself was so naked and raw. Friends found the title confusing, and so I changed it to "In the Camp" as a pointer for readers, a needless one in my opinion. I still prefer "The Naked Poem."