

Journeys to Hell by András Mezei

translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (June 2016)



Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz

1.

DEPORTATION

The people they've lived with in the village
are being herded in front of closed portals,
still and silent each. The fences
would conceal all sight, all feelings,
except for the tea-rose, the violet and weed
leaping through to reach out towards them.

2.

HASTE

After the Jews had been taken
the gendarmes combed through all of Derecske

and found granny Krammer in hiding,
she was ninety-three years of age,
and also Eve Németi's little brother,
just three years old and a day or two.
They were dispatched in earnest haste
to the rest of the transport still in Nagyvárad
to catch up with the deportation,
so that even those two should not be missing
from the round six million.

3.

CATTLE-TRUCKS

It no longer matters which wagon it was,
whose lips held fast against that crack
between the planks of the cattle-truck,
who sucked clean air through that tiny space,
which district filled whose lungs with the fragrance
of rainsoaked hay, of snow on the meadows –
it no longer matters who found that teat
in that crowded box-car amidst the putrid

steam of urine and stench of excrement,
who found it crawling among sore feet,
that nipple bursting through the crack
to feed on oxygen-enriched air,
who feasted like a babe on the breast,
which prisoner's life was thus extended,
whether it was a Jew or a Serbian
whether a Russian or a Hungarian
whose heart at last could beat more calmly,
who thus gained time whilst surrounded by death –

and whose eyes have locked on to that unearthly crack
ever since then, in this blinded wagon
which is our world, that crack, that crack
admitting a light beyond our reality,
a light through which the whole train of cattle-trucks
passes forever with all those captives –
a light that burns like a beam from hell.

4.

STATISTICS

No cry of anguish, no manner of wailing
is more heartrending than the sheer numbers:
147 trains
for the transportation in 51 days
of 434,000
provincial Jews by 200 SS troops
aided by 5,000 Hungarian
gendarmes and hundreds of volunteers –
they were detained at first in the ghettos,
they were then taken into the brick-works
already stripped of their family savings,
then caged in cattle-trucks, 80 in each, and
conveyed without water and food to Mengele
from the first day of the occupation –
processed by people obeying orders
who never outdid the German commands
but willingly obliged the commanders –

Nearly half a million provincial Jews:
nearly 10% of them stayed alive.

5.

FLAMES

The ones who gave up their personal cyanide tablets
to spare a child from agony in the gas –
themselves have kindled the burning bush,


the ones who approached the end with dignity
herded to cruel death but not like cattle –
themselves have kindled the burning bush,

the ones who were able to dig their graves and toss
hell behind themselves with each clump of earth –
themselves have kindled the burning bush.



András Mezei in Israel

ANDRÁS MEZEI (1930-2008): a child survivor of the Hungarian Holocaust who emigrated to Israel after the war but returned to Budapest to become a prominent poet, novelist and essayist. He is heavily ignored by his country's present literary establishment, but his Holocaust poetry in English translation is widely published and increasingly being taught in the West – see *Christmas in Auschwitz* (Smokestack/England, 2010).

 **THOMAS ORSZÁG-LAND** is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes for *New English Review* from Europe and the Middle East. His last book was [*Reading for Rush Hour: A Pamphlet in Praise of Passion*](#) (Snakeskin/England, 2016).

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