

The Voices of the Ghetto Still Address Us by András Mezei

translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (September 2015)



European Ghetto scene 1944

Seven decades after the Hungarian Holocaust, a child survivor confronts the modern reader with the living voices of that tragedy. András Mezei (1930-2008) entrusted his translator with a retrospective exploration for our time. His voices of the Holocaust address us with urgency and directness. There are many voices of the past speaking to us of terror, folly, greed, cruelty and absurdity. They could be incomprehensible; Mezei's poetry makes them sound like our own voices.



András Mezei

Mezei is a major Jewish-Hungarian poet. He survived the Nazis' attempt at the 'ethnic cleansing' of Europe in the Budapest Ghetto where some 17,000 souls perished around him from hunger, disease and the fancy of uniformed bandits. Unlike the other great poets of the Holocaust like Paul Celan, Primo Levi and Miklós Radnóti, Mezei declines to come to terms with death – indeed, his work is a celebration of the unconquerable spirit of his people. And unlike Anne Frank, that other brilliant chronicler of the tragedy, Mezei had the luxury of time to give voice, at the height of his literary powers, to the victims, the perpetrators and even the passive bystanders.

More of his poetry in Thomas Land's English translation appears in [Christmas in Auschwitz](#) (2010), both available from Smokestack Books, England.

NIGHTMARES: THE SURVIVOR

How many nights must pass before

I need not wake up anymore?

2

POOR FOLK

If you and your family must be taken away,

at least do right by us, we are poor folk

and to you it is now all the same –

we'll send the children over to collect,

may the Eternal Lord keep you

and we will save your valuables,

in case you return.

3

A CHORUS OF PIOUS SOULS

A dreadful silence, even at Yom Kippur.

My Lord, there must have been a weighty reason.

The horror of the graves in mute fruition –

My Lord, there must have been a weighty reason
that no relief came in our desperation,
my Lord, there must have been a weighty reason:
instead, the gendarme came to us, death and oppression,
my Lord, there must have been a weighty reason,
the hell of the Old Ghetto, persecution –

My Lord, there must have been a weighty reason:
our words took wings, our souls... soared in devotion,
my Lord, there must have been a weighty reason
that He who had given the Torah showed no compassion
my Lord – there must have been a weighty reason.

4

DELIGHT

The New Hungarians, a patriotic paper,
called solemnly on 16th May 1944
for the summary execution of 1,000 Jews
as retribution for each bombing raid on the capital.
Dad said, *Our patient newsprint can bear a lot.*

And after the following air raid, my father and I,
conscripted labourers marked with the Yellow Star,
returned elated from rubble clearing duty
and cheerfully carried our spades and pick-axes home
(an assembly point also marked with the Star of David)
for we thought the execution took place, so far,
only in *The New Hungarians'* columns.

5

TALLY

Counting heads at the gate,
the guard... the guard kept tally.
Beneath a detailed statement
about the deportation,
1,007 lives
are described on the sheet
by groups of vertical lines
crossed out

6

GUSTAV!

Feinstein, a Jewish resident,
recognized his neighbour
in the execution squad.

And he cried out to him:

*Gustav! be sure to aim
straight between my eyes!*

7

GRACE

How tranquil are

Your children

starving to the bone...

shuffling to Your throne

beyond despair and hurt:

spare for them,

my gracious Lord,
the odd clean shirt!

8

TUMBRILS

These two-wheeled tumbrils are not for milkchurns
nor for Tobias the milkman,
nor for the fruit
of the Indian summer,
ripe apricots, melons and apples on the canvas,
nor whistles, nor spinning-tops,
hairpins and bras,
nor labourers' shirts,
nor sewing-cottons, nor buttons nor boots.
These whining tumbrils
that bump along slowly
the desolate back-streets
carry no fleece-wool nor rags, nor goose feathers.
The peddlers do not sing.
Soft Kaddish and silence,

silence, silence,
lament behind them.

9

IN THEIR PLACE: A DAUGHTER

My daddy's lost children: Eve and little Joe.
My mummy's lost children: Stevie and little Paul.
My daddy's marriage, a legendary love match.
But mummy mourned at every river – I know
she wished to die.

My daddy declared:
his parents' graves lay here.
And mummy declared
that people should not forsake
their parents' final resting place.

And thus they merged their equal losses, although
at first it was only
beneath the canopy,

for the law took its time to confirm
the death of mummy's husband and daddy's wife.

Mummy wanted no children
after Stevie and little Paul;
but after Eve and little Joe,
my daddy yearned for babies more and more.

That is why I am here. I was named
after daddy's late daughter. I live in their place.
My mourning father was 54 years of age
and my mother was 42
when I was born.

10

VOICES

Suddenly I speak in my mother's voice.
Suddenly I speak in my father's voice.
Suddenly I hear my people speak
in my voice.



Thomas Ország-Land, (b. 1938) is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes from London and his native Budapest. He contributes to the *New English Review* as well as *Acumen*, *The Author*, *The Hungarian Quarterly*, *London Magazine*, *The Jewish Quarterly* and *Stand*.

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