

# Three Child Survivors

Translated from the Hungarian & edited  
by Thomas Ország-Land (January 2016)

I.

THE 20179TH



by **András Mezei** (1930-2008), poet, publisher and journalist, a dominant voice of the Hungarian Holocaust

Like ink on the blotting paper, the number  
tattooed in Auschwitz splinters and spreads  
on the inside of my lower left arm  
when I ride the tram in the summer  
and, forgetting myself, I happen  
to reach up in my short-sleeved shirt  
to hang on to the strap.

\* \* \* \* \*

May I never lift my right arm  
if I forget the mark on my left.

## II.

### TABLETS OF STONE



**by Magda Székely (1936-2007), poet, translator and literary editor, Mezei's  
muse, mentor and wife**

#### 1.

The past was horrible. Harsh rules  
were imposed... and quickly scrapped.  
Live declarations writ in stone  
and on the cross lit up the minds.  
The roar of looming, cloven skies  
shook the bones of timorous prophets.

Soaring visions and columns of fire  
illuminated the gloomy deserts.

Yet the present is far more confounding.

Jonah defied the Word of the Lord,  
but recognized the Voice. He knew  
the task, the flesh, the town, the desert.  
Tarshish and Niniveh,\* brother cities,  
like eggs, today they look the same:  
you cannot tell if you're coming or going,  
just fleeing one, or approaching the other.

The sky turns thin and grey. Divine  
revelations do not move us.  
Today, we wage our wars in silence  
and cherished heralds do not assist us.  
Unaided, we must comprehend  
our tasks in life and death – and if  
we fail to raise our voice in time,  
all earth and sky may perish with us.

Surrounded by the desert's dust,

I feed on locusts and rare grasses.

The sound of the breakers has retreated  
along the distant, sandy beaches.

The leviathan spared me. But the heavens  
yield no manna for my sake.

Above my head, a burning crown.

Relentless sunshine beats me down.

My words are arid like the landscape.

There's hope when any person wishes  
to warn the foolish folks to mend  
their guilty ways in the hope of averting  
the certainty of retribution.

But with the most appalling horror  
discharged already in the past,  
there is no caution left to issue.

There's nothing more compelling than  
a nightmare that has come to pass.

Each night, I guard a silent field

of bones beneath a broken altar.

The corpses hold me in their gaze

and I, who have survived alone,

must speak out. Words remain in vain.

But they must not remain unspoken.

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\*A prophet dispatched to Niniveh sought to shirk his task by escaping to Tarshish (The Bible/Book of Jonah).

### III.

#### ABSENCE



**by Vera Szöllös** (*b. 1937*), poet and short story writer, a chronicler of the Holocaust as well as the subsequent Soviet occupation

...Then he gently closed the door. His absence  
reverberates throughout the gaping home.

The coat my father did not take with him  
still bears the skinny presence of his shape.

His instruments prepare themselves for action.

His books await his hand to turn the pages.

His barely opened packet of tobacco  
reinvents his fiddling bony fingers.

The mottled mat extends towards his steps.

The mirror glints towards his specs. The lens  
of his empty camera dimly stares.

The fragrance of his pipe still fills the drawer.

The hand of his voltmeter lying limp,  
the power disconnected... But his friend  
has repaired the dodgy wireless,  
and it has played the Scottish Symphony!

He's everywhere, and yet so far away.

Just sometimes, when I try to learn to live  
with his absence, I still sense his breath  
behind me as he softly strokes my hair.

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✖ **Thomas Ország-Land** (b. 1938) is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes for *New English Review* from London and his native Budapest. His last book was [Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge](#) (Five Leaves) and [here](#).

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