

At Last, We Are Certain by András Mezei

Translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (December
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1.

Hunger: The Facts

The skin turns bluish white.

The nails bend into claws.

The eyelids swell, and liquid

oozes from the tissues

beneath the skin and moistens

the swollen legs or hands

upon the lightest touch.

A coarse and wiry pelt

covers the body all over.

The eyelashes strangely lengthen

while, like a moth that nears the flame,

the victim slowly approaches

the ultimate transformation.

The skin turns deathly pale,
the arms, the legs, the torso
are bloated and the brain
becomes soft and dilated.

The heart has shrunk, already
it's smaller than its owner's fist.

The victim's daily diet
comprised 300 grams of soup
and 60 grams of bread.

2.

Snails, Grass & Data

The columns shrunk – for the frail ones fell behind
or sought survival by scooping up some snow
to quench their thirst in the mountains along the route
to Dachau, or briefly stooped to tighten their boots
or pick up a snail or a fistful of grass or rape
to fill their mouths and fool their famished stomachs.

They often died in the intermittent fire

provoked by their looting and insubordination,
like mother caught with clover filling her mouth,
and sister with crushed snails in her gaping mouth.
Their corpses were abandoned among the fruit
of the fields: the snails, the grass, the rape, the clover.

Some 13,000 civilian captives dispatched
on a 300km march
that took 8 days. Some 1,800 arrived.

3.

Letter from Nusi

Derecske, June 6, 1944

And now at last we are quite certain
we shall be taken shortly – but where?
Kolozsvár? Várad? Újfalu?
And then the wagons? Where from there?
But you don't need to fret about us,
outside, the bags are all prepared,
the basket of food, a pot of honey,

a pair of backpacks, the bedding linen –
the cart is waiting by the portal
for grandma's ride (poor gran's old feet!)
and mum has sent a card to dad.
No time left. Still, what really matters,
the place is tidied up for winter.
Sanyikám, darling, I take my leave.
And tell our father he's in my heart.
Whatever our lot, we shall be safe –
God shall provide.

4.

His Own Command

He prescribed a frostbite ointment
for the sore foot of the guardsman.
And he still explained on the way
which chemist could supply it that day
under the rules of the early siege
of Budapest, as the soldier limped

along with him towards the place
of execution. The Jewish doctor
obeyed his own command.

5

A Camp by the Village

I

That day, in the village inn at Balf,
the merrymaking camp commander
staked a litre of wine on the wager:
now, could he raise the courage to kill
a Jew, any Jew, there on the spot?
And while he passed the time of day
over the wine, that day, in the camp,
no-one collapsed in the cold from exhaustion,
barefooted, shirt-sleeved in the snow,
while that litre of wine still lasted
the prisoners all survived that day, and
the calm of the Lord thus entered the camp.

II

Day after day, some people left open
the warm, dry carpenter-shop at night,
some did not bolt the stable door,
some heaped the coal on in the wash-house,
some requisitioned Jewish labourers
and let the weak, frost-bitten creatures
rest in the shed, some every day
left scraps of food in secret places,
some passed on messages and hope:
Ernest Wosinski, the manager
of the bath-house at Balf, and his family,
and John Fleck, the innkeeper at Balf,
and Margaret Jáger, and Lágler the baker,
and Rosie Pötl and Martin Pöttl,
and Mrs. István Szabó, a housewife.

III

There were ten just souls. But what crimes
weigh down the conscience of the village?

Had but the Lord seized only ten
scoundrels infecting the soul of the people,
Sodom would never have arisen
anywhere in this blessed country.


6

The Scale

Measured under Mengele's scale,
Peter stretched and strained but hardly
reached the string with the top of his head.
Béla failed and trod on regardless.
Tiny Árpi was led to the gas
still on tiptoes. The tallest among them
had to raise the string of death
over his head to get past the scale
and accompany the frightened
children, beneath the Eternal's gaze.



András Mezei (1930-2008) was a major poet of the Hungarian Holocaust. More of his poetry in Thomas Land's English translation and an assessment of the place of Holocaust poetry in the English literature of our time appear in *Too Much Toothache: The Malaise of Modern Poetry* by Alan Dent (The Penniless Press, England, 2015).

 **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, also including work by Mezei, was *Survivors: Hungarian Jewish Poets of the Holocaust* (Smokestack, England, 2014).

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