

Disturbing, Distant, Muffled Sounds by Miklós Radnóti

Translated from the Hungarian & Edited

by Thomas Ország-Land (May 2016)

THE HOLOCAUST did not begin with the gas chambers; and some people who cared or dared to look discerned quite early the direction of the unfolding tragedy. The poem below, dated June 8 1940, mourns the WW2 dismemberment of Poland that was followed shortly by the “resettlement” and murder of up to 18,000 Hungarian Jews in Galicia/Ukraine. Its author entered the storm deliberately with notebook in hand to record the brutality and chaos of the Holocaust in orderly classical metre.

1.

FOAMING SKY

The moon is rocking on a foaming sky –

I am amazed that I’m alive.

Tenacious death is searching through our time;

its breath turns people ashen.

The year looks back from time to time and screams

appalled, and looks again and faints.

What pain-dulled autumn skulks once more behind me,

and what a ruinous winter!

The woodland bled, and in the whirling time
each hour bled. And in the snow
the scrawling wind recorded dreadful numbers
upon the killing fields.

I've lived to see a lot. The air is weighty.
A lukewarm silence masking tiny
disturbing, distant, muffled sounds surrounds
me – like before my birth.

At last, I pause. I rest beneath a tree.
It rustles in a frightening rage.
A branch then reaches down. To throttle me?
I'm neither frail nor faint-hearted,

just tired. So I freeze. The hostile branch
frisks through my hair in nervous silence.
I should forget it... No, I've never yet
forgotten anything.

The rushing foam engulfs the climbing moon.

A streak of dark-green poison creeps
across the sky. I slowly roll a cigarette,
with care. Still, I'm alive.



HUNMILIATED JEWISH CAPTIVES forced to dig their own grave before their murder by a unit of the Hungarian invasion force on the Eastern Front during an earlier phase of WW2. This photograph, taken by First Lieutenant József Mélión, was one of many produced by soldiers for their folks back home, demonstrating the institutionalized, casual cruelty of the army in its treatment of the conquered civilians.

2.

THE WITNESS

I am a poet, and I'd be rejected
even if I mumbled in disgrace,
de-daa, de-daa... no matter: lots of devils
are happy to sing in my place.

I've justified, believe me, every caution,
the searching eyes and ears of every sleuth!
For I'm a poet destined for the stake,
a witness who tells the truth.

A poet – and I've noted what I've seen,
that snow is white and blood and poppies red
and that the poppies' downy stems are green.*

I know my own blood shall in time be spilled
...for I have never killed.

**Red, white & green: the Hungarian tricolour.*

3.

OF THE WIFE: A DOTTY SONG

The door bursts into laughter: she arrives.
The flowerpots greet her with secret trembles,
and in her hair a sleepy, slim, blonde streak
chirps up: the tiny cry of a frightened sparrow.

In turn, an aging light-flex shouts with joy
and twists its awkward shapes in space towards her.
All objects spin around. I can't keep track.


She has come home, she'd been away all day.

She holds a petal of a giant poppy

and uses that to drive away my death.



MIKLÓS RADNÓTI (1909-1944), probably the greatest among the world's Holocaust poets. He was a Hungarian patriot murdered by the Hungarian Army as a Jew while displaying a white armband marking his well-documented, sincere conversion to Catholicism. English translations of his final poems eventually found on his body have attracted a robust international reputation.

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