

# Empty Reels by András Mezei

Translated from the Hungarian & Edited  
by Thomas Ország-Land (November 2016)



ANDRÁS MEZEI (1930-2008), a child survivor of the Hungarian Holocaust, emigrated to Israel after the war but returned to his homeland to research, digest and record in eyewitness poetry the destruction of his family and experiences in the Budapest Ghetto as well as the testimonies of fellow survivors. He became an influential author, editor and publisher of both the Soviet era and the subsequent post-Communist reconstruction. Today, his work is conspicuously being ignored by the Hungarian literary establishment but, in English translation, it is winning a place on the curricula of Western universities. (photo: András Mezei in 1970)

1.

ROADS

You're lost in grief abroad

forever –

in cobblestones, asphalt.

The hostile god of the land

swoops down upon you.

You know your life is only

the road to resurrection:

certainly.

And your belief

brings no relief.



2.

## **POSSESSIONS**

Thirty-four cities throughout the Reich received  
735 goods-trains comprising  
a total of 29,000 wagons bringing  
fabrics, carpets, paintings, sofas, bookshelves,  
beds and dining tables, tablecloths, plates  
and knives and forks and spoons and ivory chopsticks  
and fine assortments of silver and pewter tableware  
with a metallic aftertaste... this loot collected  
from 71,619  
homes in Belgium, France and Holland alone,  
possessions giving pleasure throughout the Reich –  
if the final solution could not be otherwise,  
at least the little bracelets, the evening shoes,  
the fragrant ballgowns by the baleful were welcome,  
and the leather jackets and furs. The sender:  
Dr. Rajakowitsch, Liquidation Dept., SS.

3.

## TOWARDS THE DNIESTER

As the marchers dragged themselves forward,  
the bare-footed peasants by the road  
picked out the choicest boots and trousers  
and, at their bidding, the guards  
shot down the occasional well-clad prisoner  
in exchange for a handful of notes.

The deathmarch stumbled on towards Orhei.

The peasants collected their wares.



## MY FOLK


Those tottering figures who wandered away  
from the lengthy disintegrating  
marching columns of the deported,  
who left the highways  
and took to the fields  
soaked by the icy November showers  
in flapping rags like windblown scarecrows,  
those were my people, such easy targets  
for the guard, folk hunted like rabbits,  
yet who still attempted to beg,  
yet who still were shot down while trying –  
I remember them  
every morning  
when I take on the day and the dross  
has not yet gathered in my heart.

5.

## KEEPSAKES

I praise my father's compass. He chose to disperse us  
to save us the pain of witnessing each other's fate.  
That's how I've come to treasure forever these gifts  
from my late mother and sister and baby brother:  
empty reels, their keepsakes from different camps.

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 **THOMAS ORSZÁG-LAND** is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes for *New English Review* on Europe and the Middle East. His last book was [Reading for Rush Hour: A Pamphlet in Praise of Passion](#) (Snakeskin, 2016), both in England. His work appears also in current issues of *Acumen*, *Standpoint* and *The Transnationalist*.

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