Poetry, Survival & The Holocaust

a review and interview with Thomas Ország-Land

Making the Impossible, Possible

by Frances Spurrier (August 2016)

Can poetry confront the evils of our time? Frances Spurrier, Reviews Editor of the eminent British literary forum Write Out Loud and herself an award-winning writer, teacher and critic, considers recent poetry issued by Thomas Ország-Land, a Jewish-Hungarian poet and foreign correspondent, and she interviews the author.

1. A Review

‘Kindle the wind and stir up the storm,’ instructs the narrator in ‘The Reed,’ the opening poem of this new E-chapbook. The poem celebrates the ‘wonder of wounded nature.’ It has the feel of an eco-poem – but the storm here represents also a passion for life that the collection praises. And what is ecology but a passion for life?

Reading for Rush Hour: A Pamphlet in Praise of Passion
By Thomas Ország-Land
Snakeskin/England, 2016

This pamphlet follows on from Thomas’ earlier, ground-breaking work writing and translating an anthology of poems entitled ***Survivors: Hungarian Jewish Poets of the Holocaust’* (Smokestack, 2014).** Some poets included in it, such as Miklós Radnóti, are becoming anthologized and widely quoted in Britain; but others such as Tamás Emod, György Faludy, Eszter Forrai, and Hanna Szenes are still much less known. The book gives them a voice in English for the first time and foregrounds the uncomfortable truth that, during the Second World War, many Jewish Hungarians died not at the hands of the German Nazis but on forced marches perpetrated by the regular Hungarian Army.

One poem in the pamphlet, ‘The Lion Tamer,’ asks who among us is behind the bars and who behind the mask. One line in this piece – ‘I have outfaced the adulating crowd’ – puts me in mind of Frost being acquainted with the night. Thomas, who survived the Holocaust as a Jewish child and participated as a journalist in the 1956 anti-Soviet Budapest uprising at the age of 18, has got as close to that night as most would ever wish to be. This is a poet who knows the value of life.

In the title poem ‘Reading for Rush Hour,’ the cast of characters includes ‘reliable Richard’ with his ‘tranquilized, loyal wife I (cannot help knowing)’ and ‘Orgie Porgie… so well imitating the shades in the money profession/he managed to die of repression.’ And we meet ‘Thomas Wonder-Land, Esq.,/a master of gaining the gullible graveyard’s affection/for any truth without actually being a liar’ and ‘property agent Alec so good at selling/he can disregard the essential use of a dwelling.’

Where have these characters emerged from? ‘Reading for Rush Hour’ becomes reading the rush hour.

The work is quite formal, with a strong sense of rhythm and rhyming as well as

humour in the treatment of even very serious themes. In '*Life Insurance*,' for example, the narrator requests 'a policy to answer every threat/in life from passion, treachery and debt.'

My verdict: A very enjoyable and well-rounded pamphlet from this poet and distinguished translator.

2. The Interview

FRANCES: You wrote, translated and edited the anthology *Survivors: Hungarian Jewish Poets of the Holocaust* (Smokestack, 2014). The book has been described in *New English Review* by Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, Chair of Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas in Dallas, as a pioneering work in that, until now, there has not been a substantial anthology of Hungarian Holocaust poetry. What were the special challenges in producing this volume?

THOMAS: I wanted to write good English poems true to their Hungarian originals in meaning, form and spirit. To achieve that, the translator I believe must be equal to the poet whose work is being translated. That's not very easy… because the authors whose work appears in this collection are truly great poets.

Originally, I would not have dreamed of taking on such a challenge. I set out merely to learn the craft of English poetry by translating the work of my betters from my native Hungarian into my adopted English. I saw myself as an art student in a public gallery copying the paintings of dead masters in order to comprehend their techniques.

But when a translation works – and the translator knows when it works – it soars to give the original composition new life. Eventually, it gave me enormous pleasure to dig the literary remains of great friends and teachers out of their premature graves and to introduce them to the living current of world literature. Indeed, I have never stopped.

FRANCES: There is the greatness of the work, and the indisputable courage of those who wrote it, often in extremis. Can poetry make the changes the world needs, or do we poets and academics hope that it can because for us there is only the pen and not the sword?

THOMAS: I am a journalist as well as a poet. I recently came to Jerusalem, 'the

navel of the world,' in the hope of making a difference. I have seen the pen – mine as well as the others' – succeed far better than the sword. Weapons can only frighten, maim or kill people. If we want to change the world, we must seek to change the minds of the living. The best poetry, in my experience, can be more effective at that than the best polemics.

FRANCES: In an interview with David Cusco I Escudero, the Editor of *El funàmbul (The Tightrope Walker)* you said that *humanity must look to the future and cannot afford to despair.* That is true. Yet it is also true that humanity cannot afford to forget. Do you see the role of Holocaust poetry changing to encompass this balance?

THOMAS: All our accumulated experience, even the most painful, improves our collective chances of survival. In our best interest, we must neither despair nor, as you say, forget. I believe that good eyewitness poetry, more than anything else, may perhaps enable humanity to remember by re-experiencing the horror of the wrong turns in our modern evolutionary history without actually repeating them.

FRANCES: We know now that any artistic representation or public discussion of the Holocaust was banned in Hungary after 1949 at the personal instruction of Stalin. Today, there are new pressures for denial. How do you respond to them?

THOMAS: Perhaps the most horrific events of the Holocaust took place in Eastern Europe. Many governments, institutions and private citizens there happily participated in the process that divested people of their humanity and – as Zsuzsanna Ozsváth put it – turned them into ashes. Many enriched themselves, at their own initiative, by plundering the personal and communal assets of the victims. They became, literally, grave-robbers.

After the war, when the region came under the Soviet yoke, its new Communist administrators sought under Stalin's orders to shift all blame for the Holocaust on the defeated rule of Nazi Germany. A quarter century after the Soviet collapse, many East European countries today abuse their nascent independence as well as the truth by pretending still to have been victims rather than perpetrators of the Holocaust, shirking any moral or financial responsibility for their deeds committed within living memory.

My own response to this is one of outrage. My Holocaust poetry, both translated

and original, confronts the lies. But that is very far from being my sole purpose. The lies will be swept away in time as they always are. I want to erect a living memorial to a monumental, tragic folly of humanity to ensure that it should never recur.

FRANCES: There is a simple humanity about some of the poems in *Survivors,* an essence of humanness, almost – perhaps as poetry may be our last response to the incomprehensible. Do you believe some people are afraid of poetry, particularly Holocaust poetry?

THOMAS: Poetry at its best reaches deep into the soul and may stir and even liberate long-suppressed memories and emotions, with unpredictable effects. They are suppressed for a reason – guilt in the family, for example, in the case of the Holocaust – a potential source of great pain that people quite reasonably might not wish to confront. However, a suppressed load of guilt can weigh down and cripple the soul.

FRANCES: Tamás Emod's poem *Message in a Bottle* included in the *Survivors* anthology sounds the following worryingly modern note.

'…you in whom we have placed our faith and hopes

in vain, for we shall never reach your shores:

'free shores, our home ever since the centaurs' idylls,

cultured Europe, our ancient, classical cradle.'

Is this the wrong kind of timelessness, or perhaps the only kind? I also note that you refer to the current refugee crisis in your pamphlet…

THOMAS: You've picked up the very lines from a Tamás Emod poem that caused me to translate several of his pieces for my book. The poem is a desperate cry by a writer who could foresee the horror that was about to engulf his world and who knew that neither he nor his poetry would reach sanctuary on England's free shores – except perhaps in the distant future, as a message in a bottle.

His message has at last arrived. I am honoured to be the messenger. I am also deeply troubled by it. What has become of us – Emod's 'cultured Europe'! – if we can ignore the fate of vast populations on the move across the seas who are

prepared to risk everything to escape war and destitution?

FRANCES: Is a different state of mind required for translating the work of others compared with writing your own?

THOMAS: Not for me. I am more interested in poems than in poets (myself included). Every poem, for me, is a translated poem in the sense that it embodies a recognition of some manifestation of the world originally conceived in a pre-verbal state, which is then allowed to assume the most suitable form of expression in mature language. The better the poem manages to describe that original perception, the closer it is to the truth. I really do not care whether it is my truth or somebody else's.

FRANCES: You write that, after leaving Hungary, 'I switched to English as soon as I could.' To a writer, that must have been particularly hard…

THOMAS: I dropped out of high-school at 16 to become a professional writer. I left the country two years later, after serving as a cub-reporter on the staff of *A Magyar Függetlenség (The Hungarian Independent),* the flagship daily newspaper of the revolution. I was by then entirely committed to a life in letters – but I had no hope of ever returning home. I declined the option of becoming an emigré writer. My sudden inability to communicate gave me probably the biggest shock of my adult life.

FRANCES: Your last pamphlet seems to be focused on making the best use of the time we've got. It even warns against life 'devoid of intensity, mischief or love or sin.' Why?

THOMAS: You read me very well. Lucky people here in the West are hugely empowered, limited mostly by time and our desires… We have the means to enrich the lives of our loves and especially our children. Or we can make them and ourselves miserable.

We can attempt to erect structures of words or thoughts or bricks or bites that may survive us literally for millennia and even alter the shape of the future – dare I say to our own image. We can devote our lives to eating sweets. Or we can choose to squander our invitation to the feast by denying our own passion and pretending to live our lives devoid of our own intensity or even a sense of mischief or love or sin. Which is the way to lose everything.

FRANCES: Given that the twentieth century was a century of murder, the twenty-first has to be an improvement. Yet this is poetry of a divided society. Is there a sense of waste here, or is a restless and fractured peace an attainment of sorts?

THOMAS: This is poetry of foreboding, I am afraid. The dominant symbols of the last century may well remain Auschwitz and Hiroshima. But we have developed the means of committing mass murder on a far greater scale. Many rulers of states and terrorist organizations are openly fantasizing about that.

We are having a rough time, but we have survived worse, the Cold War for example. But for survival, this time we really must put aside our tribal enmities. I think it is the task of poets, most of all, to direct humanity's gaze towards collective survival.

FRANCES: I thought I spotted Andrew Marvell among your lines ('our pleasantly prudent lives would stroll on forever/if the passion of mortals yielded to prudent control') and Eliot ('Faces, dead faces, O/the faces, the faces I know.') Who are your influences?

THOMAS: Marvell I love, Eliot I loathe. Both are my teachers. I have had many teachers including the writers, critics and editors who have reviewed and improved and taught my work, such as you and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, and Nicholas Bielby, Andy Croft, Alan Dent and George Simmers. I count among my teachers the poets whose work I have translated into English, and those who have translated mine into their own languages (including Hungarian).

The greatest among these masters was György Faludy (1910-2006), a Hungarian poet equal to his beloved Auden, Lorca, Mandelstam and Yeats, who was my teacher all my life and my close friend towards the end of his. Among the contemporary English poets, my best teacher is also my best friend, Bernard Kops.

FRANCES: You write that what matters most in poetry is the passion expressed by the words. Is poetry no more and no less than a manifestation of the passion for being?

THOMAS: Poetry can and should express our passion for being, as well as a lot of other things. Our passionate intensity is our greatest source of power in any sphere, from the boardroom to the battlefield. It is also the force that can

turn a good poem into a great one.

Many people are embarrassed by each other's passion, and even by their own. They fear the effect of destructive passion that can do great harm. But all passion is not destructive… while all suppressed passion can easily become that.

FRANCES: You were 18 when you were forced to leave your country. What would you say to your 18-year old self if you could meet him now?

THOMAS: I would say to him that I am glad he had the chutzpah to try… but I would be more interested in what he might say to me.

He would be overjoyed that an accomplished, serious lady like you should ask me such marvelous questions. He would be delighted that I have managed to become a poet against all the odds, and an English poet at that. He would be astounded that I am still alive. Most importantly, he would approve of my plans for our next book.

THOMAS ORSZÁG-LAND is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes for *New English Review* from Europe and the Middle East. His last book was *Reading for Rush Hour: A Pamphlet in Praise of Passion* (Snakeskin/England, 2016).

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