

# Three Holocaust Survivors

Translated from the Hungarian & edited by Thomas Ország-Land (August 2014)

1.

Magda Székely

## THE PYRE

A terrible throne. It hovers above

the vortex of a pillar of fire.

Instead of seraphs and griffins, small figures

bustle below, their bones aglow.

Their brittle arms: a blighted forest

of flapping wings or flailing rods

gesticulating, lost in space

amidst the silent spokes of light.

The atmosphere grows dense and charged.

A beam shoots out, it tethers the earth

to heaven, tightens, divides into rungs  
and becomes a ladder. I hold its base.  
Below my feet, the ground gives way.  
Above, the heaven, harder than steel.  
It rings out sounds in rhythm and rhymes.  
Thus sings the chorus of the saved:

*Behold, I am holy and holy and holy,  
devoid of flesh, comprising gas  
and soap and gas and soap and gas  
...holy and clothed in loathsome glory.*

Each face: a yearning flame in the fire.  
But who can recognize such faces?  
The very sky is burning, burning...  
ablaze with our naked decay of life.  
And even she is among these cherubs,  
these ruined cherubs of thirty kilos,  
and even I cannot pick out her face  
among six million flickering faces.

The ladder leading into the fire  
lures me towards the heavenly flames.  
The radiant rungs of the ladder draw me  
away from its narrowing base, the soil.  
I am seized by fear. It drags  
me upwards. I resist in vain.  
I sink my teeth and pain and life  
into the altar's glowing embers.

Six million incandescent columns  
of ore, like urns, consumed in the flames,  
and who can say which was whose mother?  
The fire licks and coils and leaps,  
engulfing my bones. Behold, I'm here  
beyond ravines, past hills, all obstacles,  
and here I stand ablaze with them:  
ablaze... for they are also burning.

2.

**György Timár**

**THE BOMB SHELTER, AFTERWARDS**

There was a war and you, small pig-tailed person,  
you lost the war by holding on to life.

The roundabout whizzed past: the flaming breath  
of its lines of horses spread the stench  
of graves. For you, it will persist forever.

Your tightened lips involuntarily twitch.

The skin beneath your eyes turns dark and worn.

You'd dart away – but, like a wounded bird,  
you plunge back to the ground you would escape.

Your silence hides a low, unceasing whine.

Our merriment and crisis fineries

invade you like a loathsome, anxious fever.

You can't repel a call for intimacy

though you perceive a film of soiled blood

infecting everything within your touch.

You hide here in the cellars from the world,

whose callous cruelty prevents your healing.

You hesitantly try to re-assemble

the coloured, shiny shards of a piggy-bank:

your shattered childhood. May the pieces fit.

There are no windows here, no skies, no future.

The cellars will be left to store our junk.

I stand above your resting, ruined body.

You fix your gaze on me. Your helplessness

floods over me. I mourn your loss and mine.

**3.**

**Judit Tóth**

## RESURRECTION

I'm not surrounded by wire fencing

charged with deadly current.

And if I tried to flee, the guard would

not dream of opening fire.

Each night, the chimneys foul the air.

Each night, I burn to ashes.

Each morning reassembles me

broken and astounded.

**Magda Székely** (1936-2007): Poet, translator, literary editor. One of the greatest Holocaust poets to survive the horror.

**György Timár** (1929-2003): Poet, translator, journalist.

**Judit Tóth** (b. 1936): Poet, translator, novelist, academic who lives in Paris and visits her native Budapest very seldom.



**THOMAS ORSZÁG-LAND** is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes from London and his native Budapest. His poetry appears in current, forthcoming and very recent issues of *Acumen*, *Ambit*, *The Jewish Quarterly*, *The London Magazine*, *The Hungarian Quarterly* and *Stand*. His last book was