

Chapter & Verse

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Postcards from Hell: Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944)



When a mass grave was exhumed in Hungary after the Second World War, bodies of Jews shot by the Nazis were found. In the pocket of one the victims, a small exercise book containing poems written in pencil was found. These writings are perhaps the greatest war poems of the 20th century.

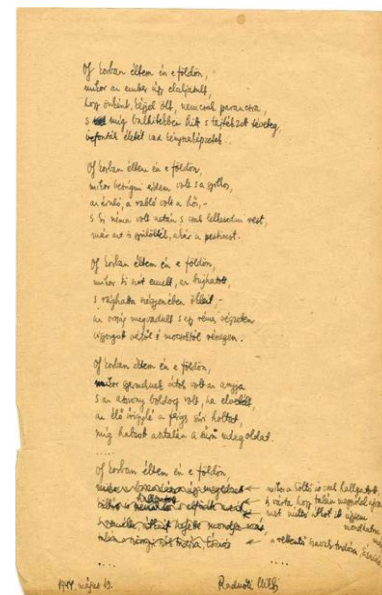
Miklós Radnóti was a Hungarian Jew who born in Budapest in 1909. His first collection of poems was published when he was just 21. His second collection was confiscated by the authorities on the grounds of indecency and Radnóti was sent to prison for a short period. In 1935, he married Fanni Gyarmati and they settled in Budapest. In 1937, a collection prophetically entitled, *Walk On, Condemned* was published. In the same year, *Postcards From France* was written and Radnóti was to call later poems *postcards* but they were essentially postcards from Hell.

In the 1930's, the Hungarian government become more and more fascist, partly as the result of promises and threats from Hitler. Hungary relied heavily on trade agreements with Nazi Germany and they did not want to risk becoming economically and politically isolated. In 1939

the Hungarian government introduced a system of forced labour service. Although this law had most effect on the Jewish population, it also included minorities such as gypsies and left wing critics of the government.

Radnóti being both a Jew and an outspoken critic of the extreme right wing government had no hope of escaping this brutal law and in 1940, he was compelled to join a series of forced labour battalions which involved him carrying out hazardous tasks such as dealing with explosives on the Ukranian front. It's hardly surprising that so many of his poems deal with the inevitability of his own imminent death. This acute awareness of death gives him a deeper sense of the miraculous nature of life: to live in this *war sound - filled silence* requires the skill of a tightrope walker while at the same time bearing witness: *to see that and this*.

In 1944, the year in which Germany finally invaded Hungary, Radnóti, having somehow survived



A page from Radnóti's exercise book

four interminable years in the forced labour battalion, was deported to the Nazi concentration camp of Bor in Yugoslavia. As the Russian army approached, the camp was evacuated and thousands of half-starved prisoners were forced to march hundreds of miles through Yugoslavia and Hungary. This long march became a death march as prisoner after prisoner died

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. Postcard 1

Out of Bulgaria, the great wild roar of the artillery thunders, resounds on the mountain ridges, rebounds, then ebbs into silence while here men, beasts, wagons and imagination all steadily increase; the road whinnies and bucks, neighing; the maned sky gallops; and you are eternally with me, love, constant amid all the chaos, glowing within my conscience, incandescent, intense. Somewhere within me, dear, you abide forever, still, motionless, mute, like an angel stunned to silence by death or a beetle inhabiting the heart of a rotting tree.

Foamy sky

The moon sways on a foamy sky,
I am amazed that I live.
An overzealous death searches this age
and those it discovers are all so very pale.

At times the year looks around and shrieks,
looks around and then fades away.
What an autumn cowers behind me again
and what a winter, made dull by pain.

The forest bled and in the spinning
time blood flowed from every hour.
Large and looming numbers were
scribbled by the wind onto the snow.

I lived to see that and this,
the air feels heavy to me.
A war sound-filled silence hugs me
as before my nativity.

I stop here at the foot of a tree,
its crown swaying angrily.
A branch reaches down - to grab my neck?
I'm not a coward, nor am I weak,

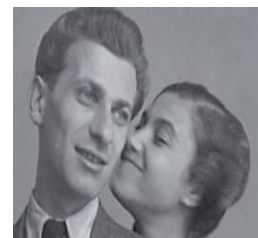
just tired. I listen. And the frightened
branch explores my hair.
To forget would be best, but I have
never forgotten anything yet.

Foam pours over the moon and the poison
draws a dark green line on the horizon.

I roll myself a cigarette
slowly, carefully. I live.

The writing of those *postcards* cost the poet his life. One of the soldiers guarding the prisoners was so incensed seeing Radnóti scribbling away in his exercise book that he beat him with its rifle butt and kicked him with his heavy boots. This beating so weakened the poet that he was barely able to walk and, like all such prisoners in that condition, he was mercilessly shot in the back of the head. In the fourth and final of his postcard poems written on the last day of October, 1944, in describing the death of a companion, he foretells his own end.

Fittingly, it was his wife who discovered the poems in her dead husband's pocket. It was her image which had kept him going when living seemed impossible. In his poem, *Letter to my wife*, he writes: *You were what is real, returned to dream in essence.*



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through exhaustion, disease and starvation along the route. It was on this march that Radnóti wrote his bitterly ironic *postcard* poems.

Postcard 1 is the first of those missives from Hell which contain a touching reference to his wife who resides, *stunned to silence* within his heart.

Postcard 4

I toppled beside him; his body already taut,
tight as a string just before it snaps,
shot in the back of the head.
"This is how you'll end too; just lie quietly here,"
I whispered to myself, patience blossoming from dread.
"Der springt noch auf," the voice above me said
but I could only dimly hear
through the filthy blood slowly sealing my ear.