

HABE, Hans (Bikessy János)

A BOOK FOR TODAY

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# 'Hawking Jews, Door to Door'

«A Kuldetés»

By DONALD MINTZ

**THE MISSION** By Hans Habe. Translated from the German by Michael Bullock. 319 pages. Coward-McCann, Inc. \$6.

On the initiative of President Roosevelt, an international conference on refugees convened at Evian-les-Bains on the French shore of Lake Geneva in July of 1938. It accomplished very little. In 1938, after all, "refugee" meant essentially "German Jew" or "Austrian Jew." There was nothing much to do with, for, or about them except to grant asylum. And at that point in the world's political and economic affairs, no country wanted a large group of immigrants, particularly immigrants whose money and goods were confiscated before they began their journey. Moreover, some of the speeches enshrined in the conference's records make perfectly clear that while most immigrants were considered undesirable, Jewish immigrants were uniquely unacceptable.

But Hitler had another idea. Suppose he sold the Jews. If he could get the world to buy (\$250 a head and a great, special offer: any family regardless of size for only \$1,000), he would get rid of Jews, collect a lot of money and, since it was stipulated that sales could be made only to authorized governments, not to private organizations or

individuals, drag the participating states down to his own shocking level at the same time that they were carrying out a genuinely humanitarian mission. And if there were no takers — well, that would prove that nobody wanted Jews which is about what he had been saying all along.

A marvelous idea, no doubt, but not the sort of thing likely to be a big hit with public opinion — and in 1938 Hitler still cared. The offer had to be kept quiet.

So a private emissary was sent to the conference — sent by the Gestapo though he was a Jew and ostensibly the agent of the Jewish Community in Austria. His task, put bluntly, was to go "hawking Jews from door to door" as Ambassador Myron Taylor thinks of it in Hans Habe's new novel on the subject, "The Mission." The emissary, called Professor Henrich von Benda in the book, was to offer a first installment: 40,000 Austrian Jews against an appropriate payment by August 1. In the event the sale was not made, the 40,000 were to be sent to concentration camps.

The sale, of course, was not made, and the offer was neither widely reported at the time nor made widely known subsequently.

Habe covered the conference for the Prager Tagblatt, a German language paper in Prague. He had known the man he calls Benda previously, and Benda confided in him

during the conference. Working from his private knowledge, from the conference's records and scattered other documents, he has constructed an historical novel that while not likely to be considered one of his best books is bound to attract considerable attention for its subject and for the complexity of the moral dilemmas the conference participants thought faced them.

Thomas Mann had high regard for Habe. In the best parts of "The Mission," one can see why. Habe's long, leisurely descriptions and careful discussions of changing human relationships are vivid and impressive. Fundamentally, they are an aspect of a style whose funeral sermon has been preached often enough but which nevertheless remains alive. One wonders how much of the relative simplicity of the diction results from a sort of modernization within the tradition and how much is a by-product of Michael Bullock's idiomatic translation.

The difficulty with "The Mission" as a novel is that the historical material forced too much plot on Habe. When he is impelled to take us through the diplomatic maze, he slips into a journalistic style, mostly, it seems, to keep the book comparatively short. But given the complexity of the events it narrates and Habe's approach to the novel, what it needed was to be allowed to grow.