

FALUDY György

**BECAUSE I WAS FLESH: The Autobiography of Edward Dahlberg.**  
New Directions. 234 pp. \$5.

**MY HAPPY DAYS IN HELL. By George Faludy. Morrow. 469 pp.**  
\$5.

A reviewer is rarely blessed with a truly extraordinary book to write about, yet I have two. They are worlds apart, yet alike in one thing: they had to be written if their authors were to know peace.

*Because I Was Flesh* is a necessary act of filial piety, born of shame and love, and it burns with the fevers of a boy's imagination recollected without much tranquillity by the man he has become. *My Happy Days in Hell* had to be told to the world, and that may be why the poet who wrote it survived.

Edward Dahlberg's book is called an autobiography, but it is above all the portrait of a woman, his mother, the meaning of whose life is simply the fullness with which she lived it. The squalor of the life of a lady barber in the roaring Kansas City of the early 20th century and the lonely strangeness of a neglected boy without a father or with too many, quite transient fathers, which is even worse, are fascinating and terrible, especially in Dahlberg's elegant prose. The heart's ache was never forgotten and never overcome by the boy or the man, but the woman was of other, stronger, and much more passionate stuff. Dahlberg wants her to be remembered, and she will be: the portrait of Lizzie is a great one, fit to be placed by the side of the most-realized, driven, love-tormented women of fiction.

Dahlberg set himself an immensely difficult task: to write an epitaph which recounted a life, and to make memorable a life which had no obvious reason to be remembered, except by a son or a lover. It is easier in fiction, where the story lends drama to the life, but in biography the memorable is, almost inevitably, what is acted on the public scene—the life of a Wellington

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Aspects of Europe and North Africa during the Nazi conquests and the actions of people who become refugees not for the moment, but as a way of life, are wonderfully perceived, but the unforgettable story is that of a prison camp in which Faludy was interned in the days of Hungarian Stalinism.

What Faludy tells us strikes utterly true because it is almost uninventable. And one may still remember the background and see some similarity of idiocy and horror. The meteorologist who is in jail because he predicted an inrush of icy cold air from the direction of the Soviet Union may remind the reader, for example, that a Russian Czar forbade the use of the word "revolution" to describe the spheres.

We are used to the idea that, in contrast with Nazi bestiality, Soviet prison guards simply worked people to death while feeding them little. More efficient, and no less final. This seems to be true as policy, but it does not account for what this book shows us, the personal behavior of the sadists who held prison jobs.

Curiously, Faludy manages to invest his incidents with still greater significance by a device much like Dahlberg's. Events do strike him occasionally as very like scenes in Aeschylus, but much more regularly they bring to his mind the old Turkish occupation of Hungary, medieval heresy trials, or the conduct of a Roman proconsul. The European classical education and sense of history are used to explain what is happening as it happens, to see it in historical perspective, and even to anticipate consequences of the kind that are familiar from man's past.

Although in this way events cease to be brute facts and become intelligible patterns, and so more meaningful and more important, they also at times lose the searing impact of immediacy. As Faludy says about the fall of France, "Yet all this left me so completely untouched that I might have been listening to insignificant episodes of the Peloponnesian war."

