

Arnothy

1956

A Cellar In Budapest

I AM FIFTEEN AND I DON'T WANT
TO DIE. By Christine Arnothy. 124
pp. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$2.75.

By ANNE FREMANTLE

ONE man killed is a tragedy, one million, a statistic. This fact is admirably illustrated in Christine Arnothy's first book, written from notes scribbled in the underground cellar of the apartment house in Budapest where she and her parents, with assorted others, hid for three months during the siege by the Russians in 1944.

Christine and her parents occupied their own coal bin where they had salvaged two beds, a couch and a table. Others in this subterranean arc included the janitor and his wife; Ilus and her baby, deserted by her husband; a medical student and his aunt; a colonel's lady; a dying district attorney and his Swiss wife; and a Jew, who read Heine by the light of a cooking fat candle.

Then Pista arrived, Pista the deserter from the Hungarian Army, Pista the hero whose first action was to divide his bread and bacon into twelve parts, so everyone could have a bite; who risked his life to get sulfa drugs for the District Attorney and dodged the bombs upstairs to bring Christine her unfinished Balzac. She promptly set her hair on fire trying to read by the light of the cooking fat candle—an accident that enabled her to pass as a boy and escape violation when the Russians finally "liberated" Budapest.

THE book moves toward its climax when the Russians hunt down the last few German soldiers still hiding in Budapest. Christine and her friends find a wounded German soldier, bleeding to death, under the stairs. The medical student bandages him although the Russians have decreed death to anyone helping a German. The Russians kill the German and rape Ilus beside his still warm body. Three other Germans come by night to beg civilian outfits. "We acted on a common impulse," Christine writes. "The janitor brought out a suit. 'It belonged to my son,' he muttered." As for Mr. Radnai, the Jew who suffered most from the Germans, here's how the author describes his reaction to the three Germans: "Wearing his yellow star 'I am a Jew,' he said in a cold voice, 'My entire family was deported. But to prove human kindness still exists, I will let you get away.'" The Russians shot him.

This astonishing tale always rings true and it is not surprising that in the original French it won the *Prix des Vérités*. Christine Arnothy writes with compassion, economy and reticence. But would she write in English!—the style of her unnamed translator is pedestrian, the solemn, declamatory title cumbersome.

Mrs. Fremantle is the author of "Desert Calling," a religious biography.

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