

BIHALY ANDREW

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# A Death in the Family of Man

By Phillip Sawicki

Andrew Bihaly was a Hungarian-born Jewish American who spent his life in a quixotic search for an impregnable refuge from the brutality and loneliness of the 20th century. In September of 1968, at the age of 33, he committed suicide in his Manhattan tenement by inhaling stove gas through a rubber tube with a plastic bag tied to his head.

This journal is Andrew Bihaly's record of his last two years, his drifting from one mediocre job to another, his fleeting affairs with many women, his long relationship with a black drug dealer and swinger, his daydreams of a stable life. Perpetually hovering over everything else are his dark memories of his youth in Nazi-occupied Hungary.

TO KEEP THE 9-year-old boy out of German hands his mother, with the help of forged papers, sent him to a Catholic reform school in another city. Subsequently his father died in Nazi captivity, while his mother, a woman of remarkable toughness, survived the miseries of three concentration camps. After the war mother and son were reunited, and in 1950 they emigrated to this country.

But Andrew Bihaly never got over the multiple shocks of separation from his mother, his father's death and brutal treatment by the delinquents at the school. He had arrived there with a bag of candy, all of which the other boys immediately forced him to share. His later reward for this was to be forced by a teeming mob to eat something un-

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mentionable, something that made him vomit. From then on, it seems clear, this gentle-looking boy with dark eyes was a beaten person, a victim, a natural target for aggression.

What he wanted above all else were a woman who would never leave him and a world in which all people and all nations treated each other with unlimited benevolence and gentleness. Opposed to all wars and racial injustice, Andrew Bihaly felt allied to the "peace generation." He kept a heavy lid on his own aggressions, and the only creature he ever hurt physically during the period of this journal was his cat, an incident that caused him considerable guilt feelings.

BUT DESPITE his gentleness he could never hold onto a woman.



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With the help of the drug dealer, his upstairs neighbor, he learned the art of picking them up. Sex usually came soon afterwards. In exultation, Andrew would foresee a life-long love. Eventually, however, the woman would realize that her lover consciously opposed worldly success and would leave him for someone else. Only after much anguish and introspection did he begin to understand that few women are eager to play mother to a man old enough to be a husband.

Despising success, Andrew Bihaly nonetheless felt uncomfortable on the public dole and moved from one job to another, taking whatever he could get for whatever it paid. He didn't need much, as long as he had some marijuana to lift him out of his daily depression. It was much more helpful than the psychiatrists he visited.

In the last two months before his death he finally found a cause outside himself in the Free Store on Cooper Square, a place run by the city for youthful drifters. Andrew threw himself into making the store succeed, but after three weeks his pay stopped. The authorities said the funds had dried up. He continued to work, schlemiel that he was, and then he learned that the other workers were still being paid. It was the last straw. He'd always been pushed around.

The journal he left, discovered after his death and edited by Anthony Tuttle, is uneven in tone, occasionally repetitive, often awkward, sometimes vague. Yet it conveys, more and more convincingly as it proceeds, the true sufferings of a troubled child of our time. In an era swamped with displays of false emotion, it often speaks eloquently from the heart for the side that longs to believe it was possible to create a new Eden on earth without the apple or the snake. Such idealistic longings arise out of a mistaken or anti-historical view of human nature, in my view, but it isn't hard to understand why Andrew Bihaly wished so fervently to find a substitute for the womb.

Phillip Sawicki is working on a book about Polish immigrants.

