

The Journal Of Andrew Bihaly

Edited by Anthony Tuttle.
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By PAUL THEROUX

The eerie feeling one gets on reading this sad, self-lacerating journal of a lonely young man's cockroach's existence in a New York room, is that if he had not killed himself no publisher would have touched his book with a bargepole. Publication might have saved him. He felt he was a failure. An early entry goes: "Today for the first time in my life I smelled gas. For suicide. It does not smell bad." But in a world that hankers for proof of the truly tragic, only death convinces us of sincerity: we are willing to find magic in an obituary while we deny it to a life. That logic is made explicit in Thomas Hardy's story, "The Withered Arm," where a hangman's rope is sold in Dorchester by the inch.

Andrew Bihaly found writing "therapeutic," and after what seems to have been a number of unsuccessful bouts with psychiatrists he began confiding his undated experiences to a journal, which has just appeared, mysteriously "edited" (excisions are not marked) by Anthony Tuttle. Bihaly did this for two years. In the beginning he was working as a busboy in the Metropolitan Museum of Art restaurant. He was a broody, hard-working person, thin-skinned, easy to meet, and possessing a generosity that amounted almost to martyrdom.

In the process of describing the disappointments in his

work, he remembers his past, and slowly on the balance sheet of this journal his memory scourges him: he recalls his childhood in Budapest; in a monastery, Visegrad, where he was placed by his mother (who was put into several concentration camps) only to be tormented by the ambiguous menace of the Nazis; he recalls the uprooted existence he led after the war, a succession of cities and camps, until his arrival in the United States in 1950 at the age of 9. He was educated in Philadelphia (one of his school essays is reprinted here with grotesque irony, "What the Flag Means to Me"); he was in the Air Force; he went to Queens College for a while; he refers to a nervous breakdown, to plans for writing and photography. In its superficial details it is not an unusual story.

But there is more. His birth certificate was forged to prove he was not a Jew; his father was killed in Eichmann's death march; his mother, for reasons he does not disclose, kept apart from him at crucial periods, and he had a crippling dependency on her. So, again and again, we read sentences like these: "I am trying to be free of the vicious spasm of anxiety . . . whenever I remember that I am Jewish," ". . . I look up at a woman and, no matter how young she is . . . I feel she is my mother, she reminds me of my mother." "Can a Jewish refugee become a healthy lover?" "I need a doctor," "Who am I?" "What am I doing?" And there are fantasies: he dreams of having a harem, being craved by all the women he meets, being a writer, having expensive clothes, a fancy hi-fi set ("The thing for me is to get my teeth fixed, get a nice set of fashionable winter clothes."), glamour, happiness, money. He feared anonymity and failure.

His most acute depressions grip him when he is out of work. He loses his job at the

Paul Theroux's most recent book is the novel, "Saint Jack."

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restaurant and after looking fruitlessly for another rejects welfare and is reduced to begging. He contemplates suicide. Then he gets another job and is briefly happy, but develops symptoms of hysterical gagging, a choking like grief in his throat; he is fired again, and again he thinks of killing himself. His mother sends him a postcard from Portugal, and in the meantime he is receiving the creepy attentions of the thug upstairs, a dimwitted creature who supplies him with the marijuana he has learned to crave. Throughout the two-year period he meets and makes love to an astonishing number of women, all of whom bear some resemblance to him: Alma, Jolly, Sally, Mignone, Roselle, Mira, Kuky, Carol, Elsa, Ruth Patty, Clair, Pamela, and so on.

Toward the end of the book he tries other temporary jobs, but each ends badly and he is reduced to near-despair; the journal becomes hectic and scrappy, the episodes weirder:

"I almost committed suicide four days ago.

"And I let my mother visit me yesterday. She was asking me how am I. 'I am fine, healthy and happy,' I said." He asks his mother for a thousand dollars, and she begins to give it to him in installments.

Andrew Bihaly's journal is a casebook study in isolation, and there are phrases in it

that could only have come from a Queens College psychology course. The incredible thing is that all along he knew exact-up what was troubling him: "1) the pain of loneliness. 2) Longing for my mother. 3) The parallel of my childhood with today's situation." But he was unable to communicate this direct diagnosis to anyone near him. That is the saddest part of it. It is easy to say he was a casualty of the Nazis, the Vietnam war, New York's lower East Side of pretenders and part-timers—or the ludicrous abstraction his publishers call "the Aquarian Age."

But what of the rest of the truth? In 10 different places in this book Andrew Bihaly speaks of the impossibility of finding work, of the insensitivity of government agencies and of repeated failures to get medical attention when he needed and asked for it. He was a victim, like any Kafka hero, of the severest bureaucratic neglect. This excruciating, piteous journal is the record—one of the best I've ever read—of a disintegrating mind. But it is also an indictment of a society whose attitude toward child-rearing, labor and medicine is rooted in extortion. That we required Andrew Bihaly to kill himself with gas to assure publication and make his point is only greater evidence of how right he was and of how barbarous we are. ■

